

PART II

CHAPTER 17

I arrived at the meeting place in an old, rattling bus. I saw Vovka through the window, walking clumsily along the sidewalk, scratching the back of his head.

"Whassup!" he barked, and with all his might he put his fives in my palm, squeezing it tight.

"Hey, you blockhead! How's it going!?" I replied.

"You know, all day long at fucking work thinking about how to coin some money!" Vovka ruffled his hair. "Fucked my head off! No fucking clue!"

I laughed, and we wandered across the street at the green light. It was a beautiful, warm evening, already dark, and young people were actively flocking to the nightclubs. Everything was familiar and habitual, and it was this habitualness that made me happy. Habitually, Edik's white "seventh" was on the other side of the street. We crossed the street and Vovka habitually inquired about our progress with my father, once again calling us "bigwigs". For the umpteenth time I disagreed with him. We passed another traffic light, and Vovka started babbling again – he told me that "daddy" had bought a new jeep for two million. I was surprised, and Vovka, ruffling his hair again, said he wanted one for himself.

"Sure you do!" I laughed and patted my friend on the back.

"Oh-ho-ho!" Vovka exclaimed as he saw the crowd in front of him, eager to get into the club.

The guard I knew immediately took us inside, and in a few minutes we were drinking and smoking under the arch of the grotto. Vovka began to complain about "Petrovich," who quietly put money in his pocket without sharing it with Vovka.

"I'll give that dumbass the fuck up!" he continued, hurt. "Have you seen the chick that comes to Daddy in the big blue Peugeot?"

I have. The night went on as usual – we made our way to the dance floor, pumped full of alcohol, went outside a few times to get some fresh air, then hung out at the bar again. At the end of the night I was drunk. Vovka seemed to be as well. At three o'clock in the morning the music stopped and the silence immediately became oppressive. We went out and crossed the street. Edik was waiting for us at the hotel, as usual.

"That waitress was staring at you!" Vovka said unexpectedly and immediately started to nudge me, trying to encourage me to get to know her as soon as possible. I didn't deny it, I liked the girl and I wanted to meet her. Vovka was on a roll and continued to push.

So, am I staying with you?" I changed the subject.

"Fuck, Ramses, sure thing!" Vovka shrugged, took his hands out of his pockets and spread them apart. "I don't mind, the red couch is yours!"

We turned the corner. Edik's "seventh" was in the middle of a line of five cars. A minute later it started, and to the roar of the music it drove us through the city at night. I stayed at Vovka's; Saturday was coming, and I could sleep in until noon.

"Do you have any Citramon?" I said in the morning, without opening my eyes.

Vovka was already fumbling around in the kitchen, rattling the dishes. I opened my eyes with difficulty and looked around.

"Headache or what!?" there was a rumble from the kitchen in reply.

"Yeah, terribly splintering... What time is it?"

"Half past ten already!" Vovka barked in a military manner. "Get up now!"

The sun flooded the room with light and enveloping warmth through the windows. I got up and the sun-kissed carpet warmed my feet. I took a pill and went to the bathroom, and from there to the kitchen, where Vovka was having breakfast. I joined him. A day off. It's

spring outside. There was no hurry. My headache had eased noticeably, and I didn't feel like going home at all.

"How is your old man?" Vovka asked suddenly. "Still scolding you?"

"Yeah, fucking fighting on a regular basis," I said sluggishly. "He pisses me off. Always picking on all kinds of shit, this and that. I can't work with him anymore. I wish I could go somewhere else, but I can't give it all up. It's a good thing we quit retail. Did I tell you we quit retail?"

"Yeah, you said something like that," Vovka interjected between chewing sounds. "You mean, quit for good? Where will you put the goods then?"

"I don't know, we just sold the kiosk yesterday," I shrugged and told the whole story of the sale, which caused Vovka to burst out laughing with satisfaction.

Tea is a good thing! I used to cure myself with it all the time after drinking too much alcohol and smoking cigarettes. And this time, while sipping sweet tea, I gradually came to my senses.

"Fuuuck!!! What time is it!?!??" I almost screamed all of a sudden.

Vovka stared at me in surprise, then turned and looked over his shoulder at the clock built into the gas boiler: "Half past eleven, why?"

"Damn it, I forgot!" I jumped up and immediately sat down. "We have to be at 'Sasha' at three today! 'Sasha' is closing up! We have to pick up the goods and pay them off!"

"'Sasha' is closing up!?" Vovka was even more surprised. "And why is that!?"

"I don't know," I shrugged and began to chew my sandwich anxiously and drink my tea greedily. "I was surprised too. Sergey called and said they were closing."

"Is he the swarthy, handsome one?"

"Well, yeah, the stocky, swarthy one! Wait, do you know him!?"

"We bought goods from him once, I have been to his office a few times. He's all right, polite."

"Yeah, he seems like a nice guy," I finished my sandwich and put the cup down. "I'm going to get dressed. I have to call 'Sasha'!"

I rushed into the room, got dressed, grabbed my cell phone, and dialed the number from memory.

"Seryozha, hi, it's Roma!" I sat down on the couch. "We'll come over today, but closer to three o'clock, okay? We'll definitely be there! Yes, have the storekeepers prepare a return for us. Yes, I'll bring you some returns as well. Okay, bye, see you later!"

"Strange, why would 'Sasha' close up?" came from the kitchen.

"Yeah, I was surprised too, so unexpected, nice business, worked for so long, and then suddenly blam!" I said, returned to the kitchen, finished my tea in a few sips and added, "Okay, I'm out! Going out tonight!?"

"Damn it, Ramses, you bet!"

"Okay, I'll call you when I'm done, bye!"

I shoved my feet into my shoes and ran out the door.

An hour later, my father and I drove the "GAZelle" out of the parking lot.

"Oh, Vasily's here!" my father exclaimed.

"Who's Vasily?" I asked, pushing my thoughts aside.

"There he is!" my father nodded in the direction of the man walking toward the parking lot. I took a closer look. As far as I could tell, he was about medium height, stooped, with a mustache, a face like a baked apple, about sixty years old.

As we pulled out of the parking lot, we joined the flowing Saturday traffic and headed for the warehouse.

"So who's Vasily?" I asked again.

"That's the one I told you about, we served together."

"Maybe, I don't remember, you told me about a lot of people."

"He used to have a white 'Ford Transit'. He sold it and bought a 'GAZelle' too."

"What does he do anyway?"

"Freight transport. He used to haul other people's goods, now he hauls his own, fruits and vegetables."

"Ah-ha, he's the one who made money with the flowers last year, isn't he?" I vaguely remembered my father's story.

"Yes, that's him," my father grimaced. "He bragged to me back then that he made a thousand bucks on one trip. That's the way to do business, he said. He told me he had a friend who owned a flower shop, and she hired him to deliver flowers. And then he himself invested in flowers just before the holiday, bought them, brought them here, and sold them at three times the price."

"Cool! That's pretty good, thirty thousand rubles from one trip," I thought. "And what did you say he does now?"

"Fruits, vegetables. The early ones are coming now. Prices for early vegetables are always high, then they fall, when instead of greenhouse vegetables ordinary vegetables from the ground will go."

"Where does he sell them?"

"At the 'Water' market. That's where he stands and sells them from his car."

My father was talking about the city's main wholesale market, located near the reservoir in the center of town. Fruits and vegetables were brought there by trucks and sold from there to small wholesalers and retailers from the city markets.

"And how drastically do prices change?" I asked.

"Every day, and sometimes several times a day. One in the morning, another in the evening. If there are not enough tomatoes, for example, the price is high, and when a truckload of them arrives, that's it, the price drops."

"Well, yes, the truck has to sell out quickly."

"Yeah, the goods are perishable. Three days and it goes bad."

"Wow, that's fast. If you don't sell it, you end up with rotten tomatoes. Beautiful."

"Well, of course, not everything is so perishable. Potatoes, onions, they can last a long time."

"There's probably less of a markup, too."

"Naturally."

I thought about it and summarized: "It's risky. You can get into a lot of trouble."

"Of course you can. But you can also make money."

"I don't understand that kind of business, I couldn't stand the tension. You bring in the tomatoes and you have to sit there and clutch at your heart to see if someone will lower the price. Bullshit! I wouldn't do that. It's better to be like us, stable, without all these wild swings."

"I would do it! I suggested to Vasily, when we stopped selling beer, that we do it together, but he didn't want to. He turned up his nose and didn't say anything."

"You suggested it to him!?" I was surprised. "I don't remember that, you didn't tell me."

"I told you!" my father brushed me off. "But you won't listen, you're only interested in what you suggest, and you don't listen to others."

"Sure," I grimaced, not wanting to respond to the outburst.

"What, sure!? That's true!"

"Well, Vasya didn't listen to you much either..."

"Yes, that's exactly what you and Vasya are," my father strained to reply.

"Yeah, yeah..." I exhaled and turned to the window. The constant bickering with my mom and dad was already driving me crazy. I wanted to go somewhere else, do something different, see my parents once in a while, smile at them happily for a short while and then say goodbye. We spend too much time together.

After unloading the rest of the retail stuff in the warehouse and throwing the returnables in the back of the truck, we arrived at "Sasha" around two o'clock. The doors of the building were wide open. A small number of the company's employees were walking around in a pre-holiday mood. I didn't see any sadness on people's faces because of the closure, but everyone was chatting and laughing. A bonfire was burning on the lawn in front of the building, meat was being grilled, and chairs were arranged in a semicircle. I went into the office, did all the business things, and came back out and looked around. My father was smoking near the "GAZelle", and a guy and two girls were sitting by the fire. When I heard footsteps behind me, I turned around. The manager, Sergey, in a dark blue velour jacket over a dark t-shirt, black pants and black shoes, came out.

"That's it?" he said, chest out. "Are we square?"

"Yes, we are..." I nodded and said. "Is today the last day?"

"Well, yes," he muttered, putting his hands in his pockets and standing with his legs spread wide. "Monumental," I thought and continued the conversation that seemed to have started:

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't even know what to do. Davidych is closing the company, dissolving everyone, leaving only one store. That's it. He'll rent out the rest," Sergey spread his hands, stroked his short-cropped head, and added with a confused voice, "I might as well go back to the highway..."

"Like the wild '90s?" I grinned, figuring out the manager's age.

"Well, yeah," he put his hands back in his pockets and stared off into the distance with a sad look on his face.

"What year were you born?"

"Don't mind me..." Sergey said. "Nineteen seventy-two. I just drank fifty grams of cognac to relax, because the last few days have been so stressful. I'm washed out now."

"Five years older than me, I guess."

"Five years?"

"Yeah, nineteen seventy-nine..."

"Seryozha!" one of the girls by the bonfire called to him. "Come to us!"

"Just a minute, Vera, I'm coming!" he brushed her off.

"Listen, you were the exclusive representative of 'Aerosib' in our city, right?" I carefully began to probe the topic that interested me.

"Why in the city!?" Sergey pouted like a child. "In the whole region!"

"Wow! Really?"

"Of course! We had a good contract with the factory! We still have it!"

"What do you mean you still have it?"

"Well, the contract is with my company," Sergey spread his elbows and got even wider. "I have my own company, I made the contract for it, and 'Sasha' bought the goods from me."

"Wow! Cool!" I admired sincerely. "Well, and what now? If 'Sasha' closes down, who will sell 'Aerosib' in the city?"

"I don't know, it's all kind of vague," Sergey began to rub his face. "I'm taking two hundred and fifty boxes from 'Sasha', the other half was bought by 'Fluffy'."

I thought about it and said: "And why did they buy the other half?"

"Well, its owner, he and Davidych used to work together, and then he split off."

"Ah-ha, so that's it! I didn't know that. I worked there with the manager, but I haven't seen the owner."

"Why did you stop working?" Sergey looked at me and chewed his lip.

"No reason!" I brushed him off. "The manager turned out to be a jerk!"

Sergey giggled.

"Seryozha!" cried the girl again in a shrill falsetto. "Are you coming or what!?"

"Yes, Vera!" he snapped, carelessly brushing her off.

"And, what, you took these two hundred and fifty boxes of dichlorvos, and where and what?"

"Well, there are other little things besides dichlorvos. Davidych and I agreed that I would take the goods with a deferment for the summer. I'll sell the dichlorvos, and make some money for myself."

"And then what?"

"I'm telling you, I don't know!" Sergey jerked nervously. "Everything happened unexpectedly. Davidych didn't warn anyone that he was going to close 'Sasha'! He decided it himself. And he told us only shortly before the closure! Nobody expected it! Bam – we're closing!"

"Wow! I was surprised when I found out, too. And it turns out like this. Did the profits drop or were you working at a loss? Why did Davidych decide to close in such a hurry?"

"No, we worked well and the profits were regular. Davidych had his own thoughts, he said he was tired of it all, tired of watching everyone," Sergey lowered his voice, looked around. "The storekeepers have shortages, or the drunken loaders steal something."

"Oh, yeah," I agreed. "But why didn't he tell you?"

"Huh," Sergey brushed me off. "We've been having some problems lately. We used to be fine, but then things got tense. He told me to get my stuff out of the warehouse over the holidays, too."

"Where are you taking them?"

"I don't know yet. Maybe I'll give the dichlorvos to the customers right away for the money."

"And then, when you sell the goods, what?" I continued to question him.

"I don't know yet," Sergey rubbed his face with his hands again. "So tired these days. Everything was normal, and suddenly, bang, here you are. Think about what to do now."

"Look, we can work together. We can team up and keep selling. You have 'Aerosib', I have 'Luxchem', let's team up and go!" I said spontaneously.

Sergey looked at me and immediately looked off into the distance.

"You think?" he said after a barely noticeable pause and began to chew his lower lip.

"Well, what's there to think about?" I said, the thought growing in my head.

"Everything's already taken care of. We have a warehouse, we have customers, we have sales, we have good products."

"Do you have your own retail outlet?"

"No, we closed the last two outlets in the market yesterday, we sold the kiosk," I said, and immediately began to develop the idea further. "What do we need retail for?"

"I mean, what will you do with the barter goods?" Sergey was surprised. "We used to sell it in our stores and from the depot in bulk. How do you do that?"

"Oh, that makes sense. Classic scheme, all wholesalers work this way. And we came up with a no retail scheme, we sell to customers and that's it. No muss, no fuss with retail."

"Not bad," Sergey said, his lips drawn forward and the corners of his mouth turned down, not even trying to hide the admiration that permeated his astonishment. "What's the scheme?"

"Well, when we start working together, you'll find out."

"Come on, what kind of secret is that?"

"Well, you'll find out. Later."

Sergey was silent for a few moments, chewing his lower lip thoughtfully.

"You're pretty sure, aren't you?" he said.

"You mean work together? Yes! What's the big deal? We're already working, the sales are all set, and if we add goods like 'Aerosib', the volume will only increase. I don't see any obstacles. What are your doubts?"

"No, no!" Sergey brushed me off. "I'm just that kind of person, I need a little push, a little persuasion, and then I'll get to work."

My father got tired of smoking and pacing around the perimeter of the "GAZelle" and came over to us.

"Here, Dad, I suggested that Sergey work with us!" I nodded at the manager.

"Sergey," he held out his hand to my father.

"Anatoly Vasilievich," my father said with a handshake. Then I realized that during our work with "Sasha" Sergey had only glimpsed my father and they had never communicated, I was involved in everything. It was only now that they really got to know each other.

I told my father a few words about the company and the contract Sergey had.

"Hello," came the girl who had called Sergey to the bonfire, squeaking in a falsetto.

"My wife Vera," he introduced her.

A pretty, slender blonde in her thirties, about one hundred and seventy centimeters tall, with smooth features, a lively look, a small, neat mouth, and a little snub nose.

"Here, Vera, they offer to work together," Sergey said.

"And how exactly are we going to work together?" she wrinkled her forehead with curiosity in her eyes.

I repeated.

"Well, interesting!" Vera said thoughtfully and a little stretched. "Right, Seryozha?"

"And how exactly do you want to legally incorporate?" my father looked at me.

"How?" I was a little taken aback and immediately thought of a solution. "Let's start a company – fifty-fifty, we'll rewrite our contracts to it – they'll do theirs, we'll do ours, and go on."

"What's the point of starting a company!?" the manager shrugged. "I already have one, we can work with it!"

"We can do that," I agreed.

"We can do that," my father echoed at the same time.

"And you are the sole founder of your company?" I looked at Sergey.

"Yes, I am the sole founder, the general director and the chief accountant."

"General director, wow!" I smiled. "That sounds solid. Then, if we don't start a new company, we'll register half of yours in our name and we can start working together."

"What is the point of this? You know me, I'm an honest man, you seem to be too. I'm so used to it – we've agreed in half, clapped hands, and we can start working."

"Seryozha, no, the documents must be properly executed!" said my father categorically. "You know, today we have one kind of relationship, tomorrow we'll have another. Everything must be legally secured."

"Anyway," the manager's face twitched. "We don't need to discuss it yet. I have to look at all the options and choose the most interesting one."

"What do you mean?" I was surprised. "Has anyone else offered you a joint venture?"

"I have a partner now, we do some operations with him," he confirmed, relaxed. "One of the directors of 'Arbalest' made an offer. There's also a friend there. I've got about five options right now."

"Ah-ha," I said, a little confused. "I didn't know."

"Seryozha, think about it and let us know! Yes or no!" my father said with a little pressure in his voice.

"Well, I'll consider your offer!" Sergey immediately softened his tone. "It's interesting, I just need time to think about it."

"The May holidays are coming, the best time to think," my father said dryly.

I became a little nervous. The metallic tones in my father's voice made me tense, as if they would scare Sergey away, and the lucrative "Aerosib" contract would slip from our grasp. I said hastily: "Come on, Dad, what's this got to do with deadlines? Let Sergey think, there is time, we are not rushing him! He's got our phone number, he'll call us if anything. Isn't that right?"

I asked Sergey the last question. But his wife answered quickly and resonantly: "Well, yes, I think it's okay, right, Seryozha? We'll think about it and call you if anything!"

"Yes," he breathed out heavily and spread his hands. "Let's do it that way."

We said goodbye to the couple and left.

Once we were in the car, I told my father about the beginning of my conversation with Sergey. A patchwork of thoughts swirled in my head. As I shared them with him, I began to babble almost nonstop.

"Listen, this is where it's at! Come to think of it, 'Sasha' is closed, but Sergey has a contract with 'Aerosib'! We don't have to change anything, just order the goods and sell them! Just awesome! They don't even realize at the factory that they are shipping to new people because the contract is the same! There's a 60 day grace period! That's more than we have, and the goods are better advertised and more profitable!"

My father listened intently and steered.

"The main thing is that Sergey accepts the offer and doesn't go to someone else! Wow, several people have already made him an offer! Yeah, I hope that 'Aerosib' won't be snatched away from us. It's perfect for us, isn't it? It's exactly the kind of product we need. Aerosols! Super! This will at least double our volume, and I even think it'll definitely triple it. That's great! And if he doesn't agree to fifty-fifty, what are we going to do!?"

"Why wouldn't he?" my father said dryly.

"Why!?" I was taken aback. "He can decide that the offer is unequal, for example, offer sixty to forty in his favor!"

"Let him decide all he wants, we don't need it."

"And!? We'll refuse him!?"

"Well, what do you suggest? Agree?" my father said irritably. "Would you agree to work when he has sixty and you have forty?"

"No, I won't, of course not... It's either half or nothing."

"You see! Then why do you ask?"

"No reason, I'm just talking to you..."

We drove in silence for a minute.

"He has no offers," my father said calmly as he lit a cigarette. "He's lying."

"What makes you think that!?" I was surprised.

"If he had any offers, he would have told you right away. Not after you told him yours. Well, and the phrase about the highway indicates that he doesn't know what to do." I digested my father's argument and thought about it.

"And he didn't drink cognac for nothing, but for the same reason," my father added.

"Maybe you're right... Interesting. Well, then he'll agree. It would be cool!"

"Shall we go to the warehouse?" my father brought me out of my thoughts and into reality.

"Huh? No," I brushed it off. "Leave it in the back, we'll park the 'GAZelle' as it is."

"Will it stay like that for all the holidays?" my father was puzzled.

"Yes! What can possibly happen to this junk? We'll just cover it better, that's all."

Vovka and I spent all the holidays at the club. In the evenings, after the club, we would have tea and cheese at his house, and each time my mind would fall asleep in an alcoholic oblivion, but neither nicotine nor alcohol would take a tiny part of it. The beacon in the back of my brain had been pulsing in a steady rhythm since my last visit to "Sasha". Even when I was drunk, I knew exactly what that pulsing meant. A gut feeling. The beacon was working, pointing me in the right direction. I also dreamt of a shark. As a kid, I read that a shark can sense a drop of blood in a cubic kilometer of water. And my gut, catching a drop of commercial bait, gave the signal. I was sleeping drunk on the red broken couch at Vovka's, my brain had fallen into an abyss, but the beacon was pulsing, I felt like a great white shark slithering leisurely through the ocean. When I smelled the drop of blood, I turned and went for it.

"What do you think, will Sergey accept our offer?" I said in the morning on the balcony, sitting on the couch with a cup of tea. My father sat at the window and smoked. It was the middle of May. The sun filled the balcony with the warmth of summer, making me squint like a happy cat.

"He will," my father said, taking a drag. "Does he have a choice?"

"Well, I mean, he has other offers..."

"I told you, if they were better than ours, he wouldn't talk to us like this."

"Like this?"

"Interested," my father stubbed out the cigarette butt on the wall outside and flicked it down. "He was interested, I could see it in his eyes."

"That would be nice, wouldn't it?"

"Well, yeah," my father scratched his nose, the back of his head, and sat down next to me, but on the other side of the couch, in the shade. "His products are good, not like ours."

"That's true," I hummed.

"We basically have 'Luxchem' and that's it," my father said with a wave of his hand. "The way we sell it is not enough. It's enough to live on, but it's hard to develop with that kind of income. But 'Aerosib' is something! The volume can be very significant!"

There was a pause. I tried to mentally look into the future and see a large company whose starting point would be this possible merger.

"I wonder when he will call? Why don't we call ourselves?" I said.

"Don't do that! Why are you making a fuss again?" my father got a little irritated.

"Always in a hurry to go somewhere! Let him think! If he calls, he calls! And if he doesn't, fine! Come on, finish your tea and let's go! We've got goods to move today, remember?"

"Yes, we have to go," I exhaled. "This damn move, but it has to be done."

The question of renting the warehouse across from ours, which we had been denied at first, was suddenly resolved in a casual and mundane way. After the holidays, my father and I met the owners at the factory. I expressed my desire to move into the warehouse across the street and pay more money than we were paying. The word "money" turned out to be magic, and we immediately got the key.

The warehouse was rectangular. Two rows of brick columns supported the wooden rafters of the roof, which was covered with slate on the outside and boards on the inside. The columns divided the warehouse into three equal sections. In the middle of the central section, a single track ran from the gate into the interior of the warehouse and on to subsequent sections of the building. The concrete floor was cracked and half broken in places. In the back corner of the warehouse, there were piles of dusty wooden crates full of empty jars. After the previous one, this warehouse seemed like heaven. Over the course of a week, we

took time out of our work to fix it up. We took down the crooked gates and put up new ones. An electrician fixed the lights and installed a meter. The warehouse came to life.

We had barely finished the warehouse and even had time to unload another shipment from Krasnodar when Sergey called the next morning. My father answered the phone. Sergey asked if our offer was still on the table and got an affirmative answer. Everything inside me rejoiced.

"Are you driving?" my father clarified. "Oh, you sold your car. Good, then come to the 'Foster Home' stop, you know where that is? Great! Look, when you get there, cross the bridge to the other side. And stay there, we'll go to the warehouse and pick you up. All right, be there in an hour and a half. All right, that's it. It's a deal. See you."

When we turned onto the bridge, Sergey was already behind it, not alone, but with his wife.

I opened the door to the couple as soon as the car pulled to the side of the road.

"Good morning," Sergey shook my hand politely and immediately extended it to my father. "Anatoly Vasilievich, hello."

"Hi, Seryozha," he said calmly, following my brisk "Howdy!"

"Hello," the girl squeaked from behind her husband's broad shoulders.

I moved. Sergey sat down heavily next to me, larger than the seat. His wife slipped nimbly into his lap. The car started.

"My wife Vera," Sergey said.

"We already know each other, you introduced us!" I was overcome with euphoria.

"Really?" Sergey was surprised and sniffed his nose. "Wow, it must have slipped my mind. Well, that's okay, I introduced you to my wife again. Right, Verok?"

"Right, Seryozha," the 'Verka' was embarrassed, and laughed softly, with a lively and open laugh that revealed a row of perfectly straight teeth in a very charming smile.

The meeting left few memories. The gold chain around Sergey's neck, half a finger thick, made an impression. On his chest, instead of a cross, it was crowned with a golden icon the size of a matchbox. The chain attracted attention and added to the solidity of its owner.

When we arrived at the factory, we left the car at the gatehouse and walked to the warehouses. My father led the conversation with the guests, while I, still floating in a haze of euphoria, added a few sentences now and then. At one point, my father's raised tone brought me out of the rainbow state and I began to listen to the conversation.

"So how do you work?" Sergey said. "There is no office. Just a warehouse. You deliver goods to wholesalers and retailers, right?"

"Yes, like everyone else," my father replied. "We have our own established customer base."

"Well, that makes sense," Sergey said. "This is your product, but you barter with wholesalers, you don't have your own retailers, do you distribute it to other retailers?"

"Seryozha!" It was at this point my father raised his voice and looked at him sternly. "You've been told – when we merge, you'll find out everything! Why do you ask again!?"

My father's voice sounded with metallic tones of discontent.

"I was just asking," Sergey said conciliatorily, with a hint of surprise. "Later it is. It makes no difference to me."

"Well, if it doesn't make any difference, why bother asking!?" my father snapped.

The awkward pause didn't last long.

"Which of you two shall we register your share?" Sergey said.

My mind got stuck for a moment. The question caught me off guard. It also surprised my father, judging by the expression on his face. We looked at each other with open mouths

and blinking eyes. My father nodded, "Who's going to do it?" I shrugged and made a helpless gesture.

"Weeell... It doesn't really matter who," I finally said. "It could be him, it could be me. Who, Dad?"

"Do it in Romka's name," my father said with a wave of his hand. "You're about the same age, and Vera and I will be on standby."

"Okay. I don't really care. If you want, we can register it in your name."

"Don't, register it for you!" my father brushed me off unequivocally.

Sergey was silent and waited.

"Oh, and one more thing!" I said, quickly assessing the possible stumbling blocks to working together. "Seryoga, let's agree that we will not bring any more relatives into the company besides the four of us! Everyone else is just an employee. And even if someone has a dispute with someone else's relative, the other person will not interfere. For example, if I have a dispute with Vera, you don't interfere. Or if you have a disagreement with my father, you solve it yourselves, and I don't interfere. All right?"

After thinking about it, Sergey nodded, "Yeah, that's fine."

"It's a deal," I held out my hand, and Sergey shook it.

We said goodbye in good spirits and mutual assurance. Sergey and Vera left holding hands, while we had another order to load.

"Do you think he liked it?" I attacked my father immediately. "Would Sergey go along with the merger? And why are you so hard on him? He seems like a normal guy."

"Why are you defending him!?" my father snapped.

"I'm not defending him. It's just that he seems like a normal guy and you were a little hard on him."

"Why was I hard on him?" my father retorted. "He is cunning, your Seryozha. He was told he'd find out when we merged, and he's stubborn, he's still trying to find out."

"Well, maybe," I spread my hands, shut up, and continued carrying boxes.

That day we took the goods to "Arbalest". And there I got the feeling again, which I told my father after unloading, jumping into the cabin. I told him that Ilya's behavior had changed, that he had become drier and harsher in his communication – he reacted evasively to offers of new goods at first, then refused them; that the guy seemed to be holding something back – he always communicated strictly on business, no jokes as before – he signed the papers, gave them to me, and that was it.

"Well, we helped him with retail, so now he dislikes us," my father said calmly, throwing his cigarette out the window.

"How come???" I stared at him, not understanding the logic of what was being said.

"How come!?" my father grinned. "We helped him, didn't we!? Right!"

"Well, yes, we did. That's all right. In fact, he's supposed to treat us better now. We helped him!" I threw up my hands.

"Uh, no!" my father laughed quietly. "On the contrary. We are the enemy now."

"Why!???" My eyes popped out of their sockets, I even laughed. "Are you kidding me!???"

"I'm not, son," my father continued in the same tone. "Ilyukha is behaving as a man of his character should. He screwed up with the store, didn't he?"

My father looked at me with the satisfied look of someone who knew a simple truth and had the chance to explain it.

"Well, yes," my surprise was replaced by interest. "And?"

"He tried to open a store, which means that he is not satisfied with the position of an ordinary manager. It means that he has ambition and would like to be higher, to have his own

business. So he tried. That would have been fine, but we were unwilling witnesses to his failure. You know?"

"Okay, and?" I bit my lip, beginning to get a hazy understanding.

"If we hadn't known about his failure, he would have treated us the same way. Even though he would have been jealous. But he would have continued to be jealous of all the owners and suppliers like us. And now we're like a thorn in his side. Every time he sees you or me, we remind him of the time he asked for help, trembled with joy, and counted the money he received. We have witnessed his failure. It's a big blow to Ilyukha's ego. And he has an ego."

"Well, I see what you mean! But why should he dislike us!? I don't get it. For example, I'm an ambitious man. And if someone helped me, I would be grateful to that person... But to dislike him for helping me, hmm, no, that's bullshit!"

"That's not bullshit!" my father got a little angry. "You have to be a very strong man inside to be grateful to someone for helping you, and Ilyukha is not that kind of man. He is a quiet, cheapish crook. He sits at his desk in the office and thinks about how he can cheat the office and make money. But he won't make it, so he'll be a manager until he's old. He just changes offices. Because he has a yellow streak in him."

"Hmm!" I thought about it. "Maybe, maybe... You're probably right, and not probably, but right. What will happen to us now?"

"Nothing, I think. He'll just continue to play dirty tricks on us, that's all. He won't do anything serious. He doesn't need to. But he'll keep communication to a minimum, that's for sure."

I exhaled in disappointment. And the disappointment came from the realization that what my father had said was probably true. Just that simple, wrong fact of life.

CHAPTER 18

Sergey appeared at the beginning of June. He called during breakfast.

"Yes, hello, I'm listening!" my father coughed. "Yes, I'm listening! Oh, it's you, Seryozha, hello."

Holding the phone to his ear, he slowly walked out onto the balcony. I followed.

"Well, I understand you, Seryozha," my father finally said, scratching the tip of his nose thoughtfully. "So you have decided to work with us? We? Yes, of course. Well, we made you an offer, so we're going to work together! Otherwise, why all this talk!"

My father paused, listened, and occasionally said "uh-huh" and "well, yes".

"Well, now that you're being sent out, you can bring your goods to our warehouse if you want to work together. That makes sense. When do you want to move it?"

Sitting on the balcony couch with my back to my father, I looked out into the yard and listened.

"We're going to the warehouse now. Okay, we'll wait for you. Yeah, be there in a couple of hours. We'll unload you. Deal. All right. Bye," my father pressed the button on the phone.

"What, he wants to bring his goods already? We haven't done the paperwork yet, have we!?" I turned around and said sharply.

"We'll do it, what's the problem?" my father said calmly.

"It's just not in the right order," I shrugged. "We should have drawn up the documents and started working by now. It's been a month! He may have other things to do there, though."

When we arrived at the warehouse, we began loading. Soon we heard the sound of an engine from the gatehouse, and a "ZIL" truck with a flatbed and an iron container in the back rolled up to the warehouse.

"Sergey is here," I said.

"Well and good," replied my father, carrying the boxes into the 'GAZelle'.

"Good afternoon," a square silhouette in shorts, an A-shirt and flip-flops appeared at the entrance.

"Hey, Seryoga!" I blurted out, and we shook hands.

"Hello, Anatoly Vasilievich," he said politely, approaching my father in a dignified manner and shaking his hand, almost as if at a formal reception.

"Hi, Seryozha," my father said casually.

"Loading?" Sergey asked.

"Yes, almost done!" I said happily. "What did you bring?"

"All my goods, Anatoly Vasilievich and I talked this morning and decided I'd better bring them to you," Sergey said, wiping the sweat from his forehead and temples with the back of his hand. "Dichlorvos, air fresheners, basically 'Aerosib', and some salt. And I grabbed a couple of showcases, I thought maybe we could use them here."

"That's right, Seryoga! Well done! Bring everything, we'll figure it out!" I laughed, pleased with the housewifery of our future companion. "Just a minute, we'll finish here and you can drive up!"

"Let me help you, it will be faster," he said, and in a moment he was there, pointing to the boxes and saying, "These? How many? Ten?", when he heard my "Uh-huh", he grabbed one, took it to the back of the "GAZelle", came back and grabbed the next one. He was done in a minute.

"That's it, Dad, pull away," I said. "Seryoga, come up, we'll unload you."

"Maybe I'll take the goods and you unload here yourself?" suggested my father.

"That's a good idea!" I said, "You go ahead, Dad, and we'll unload."

"Shall I drive up?" Sergey asked as soon as the "GAZelle" drove off with a grunt.

I nodded. He walked towards the "ZIL". I hummed: Sergey's walk made me laugh. Broad shoulders, short legs and an overweight build. He walked, often shuffling his legs, and his arms, which seemed short because of the fullness of his body, dangled like rags in the rhythm of his steps. The truck pulled up to the warehouse. Sergey, sniffing and with obvious difficulty, clumsily climbed into the back and opened the container doors.

"Why did you bring the pallets?" I wondered. "We have plenty of them here."

"Well, I didn't know that. There's only three of them here," Sergey said, adding with a chuckle. "Common fund! That's my contribution to the common fund!"

"All right!" I smiled, feeling more and more sympathetic towards him.

"Cool guy, that Seryoga!" I thought to myself as we worked. "It all worked out so well – we got the goods we wanted, and we got such a wonderful, kind, cheerful, open-minded partner! My old man is always unhappy about everything. Even now he is angry. What has Seryoga done to him? He asked for the second time about our work scheme. So what? He could have answered in a normal way, saying, "You'll find out later". No, he had to insult a good man he didn't know. I think we're going to work well with Seryoga. We're going to have a great partner.

I was glad that my time of reluctance to work with my father was over. I was so tired of his lectures, his moralizing, and his endless stories about how I should and shouldn't live that I was ready to leave everything and go over the hills and far away. I was so sick and tired of it all. I didn't want to see my father at all. The stuffiness around me was suffocating. And so I rushed with all my strength towards a new turn in my work, like a diver who rushes up

from the depths, feeling that the oxygen is running out and that a breath of air is the reward for his patience.

"Let's take down the showcases first!" Sergey interrupted my thoughts.

"Damn, we have nowhere to put our own," I nodded in the direction of the previous warehouse.

"The common fund, they'll go to the common fund too!" Sergey cackled and smiled.

The new warehouse was almost empty, and we took the showcases to the farthest corner.

"You work with 'Arbalest', right?" Sergey said.

"Yes, everyone works with 'Arbalest', I think," I replied. "You did, didn't you?"

"Yes, we bartered with them for a good volume. Do you work with 'Mongoose' as well?"

"We do. You worked with them too, didn't you?"

"Uh-huh!" said Sergey.

"So you work with all the wholesalers here?" Sergey continued.

"Yes, like everyone else, we work with some and some not," I said evasively.

Sergey chewed his bottom lip, wanted to say something, but exhaled thoughtfully and just said: "Okay, dichlorvos, here are two hundred and fifty boxes, where to?"

I dragged the empty pallet to the truck and said quickly: "Here!"

It took us about forty minutes to unload three pallets. Sergey was drenched in sweat. His forehead, his temples, the folds of his neck. He was breathing heavily, like a man unaccustomed to long and regular physical exertion. Despite the heat, I was just warming up, barely sweating.

Next came the salts – thick boxes of fifteen kilograms.

When Sergey finished with them, he exhaled heavily, straightened up, and put his hand on his lower back.

"Tired?" I muttered.

"No, my back," he grimaced harder and looked at me. "I threw my back out once, so I'm trying to take care of it."

I sympathized with him, told him that my father's back was also ruined, and immediately encouraged him that we should join forces, increase the business turnover, and immediately hire a storekeeper and a loader.

"You made good money with 'Sasha', right?" I asked afterwards.

"Yes, Davidych would pay well. Not everybody though. Usually he paid everybody okay, but he paid me really well. I was on good terms with him. At that time I was building up 'Sasha'. I found suppliers, signed contracts, drove around the cities, and I got sales all over town."

I admired what he said, because my father and I got an active and experienced partner.

"Do you want to know how much Davidych paid me?" Sergey slurred.

"How much?"

"Forty thousand a month."

"Wow!" I opened my mouth in surprise and whistled.

"Well, he officially paid me twenty and gave me another twenty so the others wouldn't know. Otherwise, if the others in 'Sasha' had found out, they would have made such a fuss!"

"You bet they would," I said.

The amount Sergey mentioned was staggering. Ten thousand was considered a good average wage in the city; twenty was a comfortable wage at which there might already be a surplus.

"Yeah, I see what you mean. I would have been upset too if the company had closed down so abruptly!" I said, encouraging him. "Well, it's okay, we'll try to earn more!"

"Never mind," Sergey brushed it off. "If we make at least fifteen thousand a month, I'll be happy!"

We had barely unloaded when my father returned, looked around the warehouse, and lit a cigarette.

"You got a cigarette?" I said.

"Do you smoke too?" Sergey was surprised.

"Yes, everyone here smokes. Even my mother," I said sourly. "We're going to quit. And someone smokes one after the other, right, Dad?"

My father gave me a hurt look, turned away, and slurred over his shoulder:

"I'll quit smoking faster than you, you'll see."

"We'll see!" I said excitedly and added to Sergey, "Don't you smoke?"

"No, I don't, I smoked when I was young. I started when I was sixteen, and I stopped when I was twenty."

"Wow, great," I was impressed. "I should quit this shit too, my stomach hurts too much..."

"Yeah, I remember I was the only one in my group to quit. Everyone else kept smoking, and I told myself that I would quit, and I did," Sergey added. "What's wrong with your stomach?"

"Gastritis, I guess, I don't know, it just hurts sometimes," I brushed it off. "We eat any old how, we're on wheels all day long. My father used to have gastritis, so I guess I inherited it."

"Well, are we going to load or what!?" my father interrupted.

"Yes," I shuddered. "Let's load up, we're all relaxed here."

"Well, what should I do? Help you or what?" Sergey threw up his hands.

"I think you can go," my father said. "Why should you help us? You brought your goods, now it's just a matter of papers. We can load it ourselves."

"I was just thinking, it's like we're already together," Sergey said with a puzzled look on his face. "We can already start selling all the goods through the company."

"Seryozha!" my father stared at him, clenching his jaw. "But the documents are not ready yet! What are you talking about? Let's draw up everything first, and then we'll start working together!"

"Anatoly Vasilievich, I called the organization that registered my company, they had some kind of delay, they said they could not accept the documents now, in two weeks, they said I can bring them. So I thought, why waste two weeks? We can already start working! Why lose money?"

"We are working, Seryoga," I blurted out. "Our process is not dependent on the date of the merger. If you can't do it now, fine, we'll do it in two weeks. It's no big deal. We'll still work the same way. And you, suit yourself."

"Okay, I get it," he said disappointedly. "You and Anatoly Vasilievich are people of principle and have everything strictly in order."

"And what did you expect, Seryozha!?" my father got angry. "What's the point of all this talk. First the documents, then the work. And not the other way around, as you suggest!"

"All right, all right, Anatoly Vasilievich, I get it!" Sergey said humbly. "I will call them tomorrow to find out how it is, and I will let you know."

"Now we are talking!" my father said and turned to me. "What are we loading?"

I showed him, and we started loading. Sergey hesitated uncomfortably beside us, came closer and began to help, awkwardly handing boxes from the pallet to me and my father. The awkwardness of the situation forced me to continue talking to Sergey on the first topic that came up – I asked him where he lived, heard the answer – not on the way – but I offered him a ride anyway.

"Will we give him a ride to the market, Dad?" I said.

"We will," he snapped in a metallic tone, not stopping to load the goods.

Half an hour later, we were done. As I closed the gate of the warehouse, I was the last to enter the "GAZelle," and immediately my shoulders met the square torso that took up almost two-thirds of the seat.

"Seryoga, move!" I said.

"Oh, yes," he moved, sniffed his nose, wiped the sweat from his brow for the umpteenth time, and put his hand on the panel in front of him to keep his heavy body from the bumps in the road.

As we passed the gatehouse, we left behind the woman as well who stood guard there. The fat woman was smoking and watching our "GAZelle" with a tenacious look through old-fashioned big round glasses with noticeable dioptries. She looked about forty years old.

"Who is this woman? Does she work here?" Sergey asked.

I told him that there are several janitors here, they work in shifts, they don't get paid, but the janitors collect a bribe from the cars parked at the factory, and that's how they live.

The "GAZelle" crossed the intersection with a strenuous squeaking of the frame and drove out onto the asphalt.

"It's strange that you've been selling 'Luxchem' on the market for so many years, but no one has ever taken it away from you," Sergey said suddenly, as if he was expressing a thought that was bothering him.

"What do you mean, strange!?" I was surprised. "Why should it be taken away from us!? We sell our goods, others sell theirs. We do not interfere in their goods, they – in ours. We simply have a good relationship with everyone."

"Treat other people the way you want to be treated, Seryozha!" my father said, without taking his eyes off the road.

"Well, yes," Sergey said after a noticeable pause, as if surprised. "You have really good relations with everyone. It's interesting."

Our conversation with Sergey turned into a regular chat and did not stick in my mind at all. At some point my father joined in and I heard the end of Sergey's sentence: "Anatoly Vasilievich, your barter goods, how do you sell them after?"

"Seryozha!!!" my father suddenly turned red, the veins in his neck swelled. "I'm telling you for the third time, we will not discuss this subject until the documents are drawn up!!!"

The car rolled briskly down the roundabout, past the huge warehouses of "WholeSale".

"Why do you keep asking – what and how!!!" my father slapped his hand on the dashboard right in front of Sergey's nose. "How stubborn you are!!! You were told – no!!! No means no!!! Which part of it don't you understand!!!"

I mentally shrank into a ball. A slow, creeping, horrible thought crawled through my brain: "What the hell are you doing!? He's about to retreat, and that's it – goodbye 'Aerosib'!"

"Anatoly Vasilievich, why are you yelling at me?" Sergey said quietly. "I'm not shouting at you, am I?"

"I have my reasons!!!" my father stammered, coughing, blood half dripping from his face. "I'm not yelling, I'm explaining to you that you shouldn't be so stubborn! You were told once – after signing the documents! What more do you want!? No, you keep trying to find out where we are taking our goods! What's the point of all this!?"

My father coughed harder. I sat quiet as a mouse, waiting every second for Sergey to say something like, "That's it, let's get it over with! There will be no merger!"

But to my delight and no less surprise, nothing of the sort happened. Sergey, as before, behaved in a non-confrontational, gentle and compliant manner.

"I'm not wheedling out, as you might think," he said, showing surprise, incomprehension, even a slight insult. "I already see you and Roma as my partners in the business. In fact, we've already merged, we've decided to work together, and I've already delivered the goods to your warehouse, haven't I?"

"Seryozha!" my father almost calmed down. "Don't bullshit me! You can take the goods in and out if you want to. You know that yourself. And verbal oaths and assurances are worthless. When the paperwork is done, we'll work together. Until then, we're not. And let's not talk about it again."

"Well, if that's the case, okay," Sergey got sad and pouted.

We drove on in an uncomfortable silence for a minute. And again I broke it with the same purpose – just so that I wouldn't lose hope, I told Sergey that we could find another law firm if the one he had called couldn't process the documents quickly. Grasping the renewed dialog, Sergey immediately agreed, fell silent, and a minute later sniffed his nose and said: "Would you stop right there, please, Anatoly Vasilievich?"

The "GAZelle" changed lanes and stopped at the curb. I jumped out and let Sergey out.

"That's it! Call us as soon as you get any news!" I said and shook his hand firmly.

"Goodbye, Anatoly Vasilievich," Sergey said, pulling his hand toward my father.

"Bye, Seryozha," he replied dryly and with a discreet handshake.

Sergey turned and walked away along the moving cars. I ducked into the cabin and looked at his broad back, his arms dangling in the rhythm of his steps. We moved, lined up to the left, and drove back. I wanted to rebuke my father again for being too harsh, even aggressive, but I dared not, looking at his face. I just said: "Yeah, you did a good job on him."

"He shouldn't have sniffed it out!" my father snapped.

We rode in silence for a minute, when my father suddenly said, out of thoughtfulness: "Seryozha is a cunning fellow! Such a quiet and discreet way of snooping around and finding out everything."

I didn't argue. I had a similar thought, but it was invisible under a layer of others. I was fixated on the idea of the merger, and no event could disturb my desire to take the step that seemed so important and the only right thing to do.

The "GAZelle" rolled briskly halfway down the road, and we turned off the roundabout to "WholeSale". I jumped out of the car at the gatehouse, went into the office, marked the waybill, left the building and hurried to the warehouses. When I saw Alexey Semyonovich coming towards me, I immediately broke into a smile. The man aroused only positive emotions in me. As always, he wore a cap, walked with a crooked, extinguished cigarette between his teeth, and smiled mischievously.

We greeted each other warmly. The expediter driver once again defined office female workers and the size of their butts, and then asked me seriously how my father and I were doing. In euphoria, I told him everything as it was – that we were starting a company, joining forces with a man he knew, in general – we were consolidating!

"Wow, that's news! Congratulations, Roma!" the expediter shook my hand firmly. "And who are you merging with? Who is he!?"

"Alexey Semyonovich, you know him, Sergey from 'Sasha'!" I said. "'Sasha' closed down, you know, but the goods remained, so we decided to merge with him and continue working!"

"Oh, Seryozha, I know him..." the expediter said, thought for a while, lifted his cap and scratched the back of his head. "I know him, the swarthy one, I know Seryozha... Then good luck to you, Roma... It's a good business... Grow and get bigger! Make a lot of money!"

"Thank you, Alexey Semyonovich!" I shook his hand emotionally and hurried on.

"Ramses, do you want to hear the news?" Vovka made an expression of intrigue.
"Shoot."

The two of us walked across the "Pelican" premises from the office to the warehouse. I carried the waybill and the unloading permit, Vovka followed, escaping once again from the boredom of the office.

"Petrovich was kicked the fuck out by Daddy!" Vovka blurted out, looking up at me with his bulging eyes and smiling at me with a deliberately retarded grin.

"Are you serious!?" I was surprised.

"Yeah, totally kicked him the fuck out!" Vovka brushed me off happily and pulled up his jeans. His stomach was in the way. Puffing, Vovka unfastened his hands and the jeans fell back down.

"Why did he do that?"

"Guess! Guess who tipped Daddy off!?" Vovka took a step forward, put his hand on my chest, squinted mischievously, and smiled bloodthirsty.

"Did you shit on Petrovich!?" I said, knowing the answer in advance, but wanting to sweeten Vovka's ego. It worked.

"I diiiiid!!!" he grinned contentedly.

"Who would have any doubt," I said, approaching the 'GAZelle'.

With his hands under his hips, my father sat in the driver's seat, staring straight ahead without blinking. "Like a statue," I thought. After I handed him the papers, I went into the warehouse.

"You wanna know what I am now!?" Vovka was hanging around.

"You're a parasite, that's what you are!" I summarized in a friendly way.

"Hee-hee-hee!" he laughed. "No, I don't mean that! I'm in Petrovich's place now, the commercial director! So watch out, all deliveries are now strictly through me! I'm dealing with you, suppliers! You're going to toe the line! You'll put all the money right here!"

Vovka tugged at his jeans pocket. I looked at him cautiously and ironically. There is a grain of truth in every joke. Vovka's jokes contained mostly truth.

"Come on, Ramses, I was only joking!" he backpedaled. "I have a special respect for you!"

During the unloading, Vovka hung around the warehouse with his arms wide spread as if he owned the place, chattering incessantly and playing commander to the storekeepers. Finally we came out again.

"What's up, bigwigs, are you done? Going home?" Vovka put his shoe, down at heel, on the wheel of the 'GAZelle'.

"Yes, that's all for today, I'm already hungry," I nodded and grinned. "Going out tonight?"

"You bet your butt, Ramses! You ask such stupid questions!"

"At nine in front of the hotel?"

"At eight!" Vovka said.

"The evening is expected to be long?" I laughed.

When we met at the appointed time, we reached the avenue in ten minutes. It was summer, June. The weather was amazing. As we maneuvered through the stream of people, we turned our heads back and forth.

"Wow, what a shape!" I hissed loudly into Vovka's ear and punched him in the ribs.

Ahead of us walked a girl in a sleeveless white tank top, a mid-thigh denim skirt, white sneakers on her bare feet, and a bag over her shoulder. There was something subtly familiar about the way she moved. I looked closer. She was about one hundred and sixty centimeters tall, her ponytail of blond hair pulled back, and she was slender but shapely. The

girl moved easily. Every movement emphasized her femininity. I became interested. We sped up.

It was her! The waitress from "Clear Skies"!

That's why her movements seemed familiar to me. I was confused, almost stumbling, but I forced myself to say a banal "Hello!"

"Hello," the girl said playfully, her eyes brightening instantly.

My eyes automatically slid down to her breasts and I forgot what I was going to say next. Vovka grunted and awkwardly pulled up his pants. She watched our confusion for a few seconds with a deep look in her green eyes, and when she understood everything, she laughed out loud. I looked at her as if mesmerized. Her laughter made her even more beautiful. I came to my senses and began to ask the stupidest questions that my mind was capable of at that moment. Vovka mumbled something, too. Finally, I got to the question about the girl's name.

"Rita," she said with a relieved, soft laugh.

"Roma," I introduced myself.

"Vladimir," Vovka held out his hand gallantly.

"Pleased to meet you!" Rita put her small hand in his.

We walked next to each other for a few dozen meters. I was completely embarrassed, but deciding that it was enough for the first conversation, I hurriedly said goodbye to the girl and pulled Vovka with me in the opposite direction. Rita laughed, waved at us, and walked on. When we were far enough away, I turned and noticed the new confidence in the girl's movements.

The rest of the evening passed in a normal way. At two in the morning Vovka and I left the club in a state of drunkenness. For a few seconds I breathed the air that was not stuffy because of the heat and the crowd, took out my cigarettes and handed them to Vovka. He shook his head and said that he was "fucking sick of it" and needed to quit smoking. But he immediately took a cigarette out of the pack and lit it. I also lit a cigarette and told him that we had to quit this bad habit after all.

"Yeah, we gotta quit, Ramses. It's so fucking disgusting! Let's go!" Vovka waved his hand. "Call that jerk Edik, tell him to wait for us."

"No answer," I said after a few rings. "Strange."

"He's screwing another passenger somewhere in the bushes," Vovka said, laughing. "He's skinny, but his dick is probably knee-long."

I laughed too. We went to the hotel. There, without meeting Edik, we sat down with another "picker-upper" who said that Edik was taking his final exams and that a construction worker with a diploma would not be moonlighting after them. The guy offered his services and I wrote down his number.

Sergey called me on Monday, June 13 of the following week. He said that everything was sort of settled at that law firm and that we could even submit the documents tomorrow.

On Wednesday, Sergey and I, both in T-shirts and shorts, found ourselves in the office of the law firm. I was still in a state of euphoria. Sergey looked distant, barely noticed my joy, and was sluggish in the dialog. Everything went quickly – Sergey answered the lawyer's questions by saying that he would sell half of his share in the company for the minimum amount of five thousand rubles. Then he took out a folder with documents and handed it to the girl. She looked at me, and I confirmed that I would buy the share. The next thing was a formality: give me your passports, sign here, stamp here, and pay the fee.

"The documents will be ready in about a week," the girl summarized, smiling sweetly. "We'll call you."

After the routine "thank you," we both left the office.

"Congratulations!" I smiled and shook Sergey's hand. "We are partners now!"

"The same to you," he shook my hand lazily, sighed and rubbed the bag. "Well, let's go, shall we?"

I nodded. We went outside, exchanged general phrases, and my father walked by the "GAZelle" with a cigarette. When he saw us, he was surprised and said: "That's it? So soon?"

"Why should it be long?" Sergey muttered. "They will make changes and in a week, they said, we will get the documents. So we can start working now."

I offered to spend a week choosing and preparing the office. My father agreed.

"Aren't we going to start working together tomorrow?" Sergey was surprised.

My father said it would just be working together, because we don't have an office, we'll have to choose from the premises of the office building, and probably make minimal repairs.

"And what about the goods!?" Sergey said.

"What about them? Standing in the warehouse, what will happen to them? As soon as we solve all the organizational problems, we'll start working. In the meantime, we have to sell our goods."

"What do you mean!?! I don't get it!" Upon hearing my father's answer, Sergey became alarmed. "So you will sell your goods and I will not sell mine, is that it?"

I told him that we had no claim on the goods he had brought, that he could sell them himself and keep the profit for himself, and that all the new supplies would go to the common business.

"Well, that doesn't seem right," Sergey was confused.

To make him feel better, I set a date and said that we would work separately until the first of July, and then together.

I looked at Sergey who was hesitating.

"We'll have a lot to do before the first of July, Seryoga, you'll see!" I added, saying that in addition to the office issue, we would have to hire a storekeeper and a loader, and me and my father would have to sell the rest of the retail stuff and finish the move from the old warehouse to the new one. "And you probably have some things to do, you said you were running some operations there."

"I don't seem to have anything like that," Sergey said.

"Well, then do something on your own or just rest," my father summed up.

"How much retail do you have?" Sergey asked, saying that his mother works as a saleswoman for the owner of the retail outlets in the market, and he could offer him our goods.

That kind of help would come in handy.

"Well, all right. I'll talk to him and let you know what's what. Anyway, shall we stay in touch or what?" Sergey hurried to end our conversation.

"Why in touch?" my father was surprised. "And the office? What's the delay? We have to solve the problem with the office! Come to the factory tomorrow morning, we'll look for premises."

Sergey thought for a second, then said sourly:

"And what kind of shared taxi goes here?"

I named it and immediately asked: "And you don't have a car?"

"No, I don't have a car yet, I sold my 'Toyota'. I'm thinking of going to the auto market this weekend to look at some cars. In the meantime, I'll walk."

The next morning, after walking around the administration building with one of the factory owners, we chose an office – a room on the first floor about seven meters square. The adjoining room for the workers was even smaller, because the only barred window looked

like a prison window, and I immediately nicknamed it "the kennel" because it was so cramped.

"Yeah, it's pretty cramped," my father said, his head up, staring at the peeling ceiling of the future office. "Just a little renovation and we can get to work."

"So?" I nodded at Sergey. "What do you think?"

"Well..." he brushed me off reluctantly. "There are no other options."

"No," I confirmed.

"Then let's settle here," Sergey grimaced.

He rejected the option of repairing the office ourselves. There was a team of workers in the building next door, and we immediately hired them for three thousand.

We didn't see Sergey for a few days, we were doing our own things – getting the door to the office, moving some of the goods from the old warehouse to the new one, and working on the delivery.

The repairs in the office turned out to be exactly three thousand – a carelessly whitewashed ceiling, haphazardly glued wallpaper, paint-stained windows with dusty panes, a thick brownish-red floor, and a new unpainted door without handles or locks. The three of us entered the room and looked around.

"There's only one socket," I said. "It's not enough. We could use another one."

"Why not enough?" Sergey wondered.

I explained. My father supported me. Brushing it off, Sergey agreed.

"We also have to make the lock on the door!" said my father.

"Oh, yes! The lock, that's right!" I perked up and looked around the room again.

"Tomorrow morning we'll take the tools, buy a lock on the way and put it in, right, Dad?"

"We will," he mumbled grudgingly.

"Is that it?" Sergey asked. "I don't think there's anything else to do today."

"Yes, it looks like that's all for today. Well!" I looked at him. "See you tomorrow then."

We went outside, my father and I went to the warehouse, and Sergey went to the bus stop.

The next morning, when my father and I arrived at the factory, Sergey was already walking around the front yard of the office building, his face pensive, his hands behind his back.

"Now we'll put the lock on, we bought it!" I shook his hand and showed him the bundle in my hand.

The three of us walked into the office.

"Look, Dad, I should take the door off, right?" I said as soon as we were inside.

"Of course you should take it off," he replied sharply. "Not in the mood," I realized, and I put my toe under the door, and it came off the hinges easily.

"Let me hold it and you start poking," I suggested to my father.

Sergey stood next to us. After a few minutes, when the slot for the lock was hollowed out by a third, he said: "Are we going to make the socket today?"

"You can start now," my father said, not taking his eyes off the work.

I stood with the door between my legs, holding it with my hands.

"Me!?" Sergey was surprised.

"Well, you can call your father," my father froze in his work and looked at Sergey over his glasses. "I think you two can do it faster."

"Why call my father!?" he was more surprised.

"Well, I'm making the lock! This one is helping me!" my father pointed his chisel at me. "We make the lock, you make the socket! It will be a joint effort! If you don't want to invite your father, do it yourself. Will you manage by yourself?"

I understood my father's position and even agreed with him. But his obvious conflictuality was confusing. My father stared at Sergey over his glasses, waiting for an answer.

"No, I can't do it myself, I don't know much about electricity," he mumbled.

"If you can't do it yourself, call your father!" my father snapped. "He knows about electricity, I hope! It's not hard, it's just one socket."

"Not hard!?" Sergey got nervous. "There's no room for a socket, do we have to make a new one!?"

"Well, you'll make a new one, what's the big deal!?" my father said and continued to work.

I was silent, watching them both, nervously sensing the tension in the air.

"Let me poke a little," I suggested, hoping to lower the temperature somehow.

"What are you going to poke here!?" my father snapped, staring at me.

"Well, I'm going to deepen the groove, come on."

"Here! Poke!" my father roughly handed me the chisel and hammer, scratched his finger under his nose, adjusted his glasses, and stared again at Sergey, who grimaced unhappily.

"Let's go, Seryoga, to the warehouse, let's get a table and a chair," I said when the door was ready, taking him away from the ripening conflict. Sergey agreed in silence.

We walked halfway before he said with a sigh:

"Oh, dear... Anatoly Vasilievich has quite a temper..."

"Yes, my father's character is difficult," I nodded and added. "I'll give you that!"

After getting a table and chair from the old warehouse, we went back.

On Friday morning, June 24, we were with Sergey again in the office of the law firm, signed the documents, and the folder with them went into Sergey's bag.

"Well, should I have them or what?" he said.

"Yes, of course," I thought. "Leave them at home, what's the difference! Let you have it!"

From that moment on, there were officially two owners with equal shares in the company.

CHAPTER 19

"Wanna hear the news!?" I started as soon as I crossed the threshold of Vovka's apartment.

"Shoot!" Vovka nodded, looked around with sleep creases on his face, and said, "Want some tea?"

"Yes!" I flopped down on a wobbly chair in the kitchen, lit a cigarette and offered one to my friend.

"No, I don't!" Vovka shook his head, put the kettle on and opened the fridge.

"That's it, are you done?" I looked at him with a grin. "Are you sure you're not smoking?"

Vovka swore, put a sausage and a piece of cheese on the table, and said he had quit smoking.

"I haven't smoked for a week!" he jerked his crooked index finger and started to make sandwiches, then he barked, "What's the damn news!?! You promised me news!"

"We and Sergey from 'Sasha' have merged! We formed a joint company."

"Why would you and him merge!?" Vovka said, pouring boiling water into cups.

I told him, adding at the end, "I think his product will make more money than my father's and mine. I think our sales would increase three times for sure. Anyway, we'll see."

"Mmm!" Vovka mumbled, mouth full. "Well, that's a fucking good idea!" he chewed, and after thinking for a while he added seriously, "Good deal, Ramses! It should work out!"

"Are you even going to the club?" I said, looking at the two huge sandwiches in front of Vovka and the third one disappearing into his stomach.

"Let me fucking eat! I'm hungry as a hunter!" Vovka resisted, looked at me and immediately sneered. "You're going to see Ritka today, aren't you?"

"Maybe I am," I said with deliberate indifference and smiled contentedly.

I did see Rita that night. Despite the commotion around me, I tried to stay close to her and communicate with her in some way. The girl was working, bustling back and forth like a bee, waiting on tables. And every time we managed to exchange a word, her eyes lit up. That night it was as if the rest of reality had faded away for me. I wanted to believe I was spending the evening with my girlfriend.

"Wow, the socket's done!" I exclaimed, somewhat surprised.

"Indeed! Seryonka did his best!" my father said with a barely perceptible sneer in his voice as he followed me into the office on Monday morning. Sergey wasn't there yet. I didn't understand my father's attitude towards him. "If he didn't like Sergey as a person, why was it necessary to merge at all? Going to merge and at the same time clearly conflicted in personal communication. Why? Nice and polite guy. I didn't notice any clearly bad traits in Sergey. Yes, there was a moment of behavior associated with delayed execution of the company documents. But that's okay. He was also getting used to us. We are basically strangers to him. And then it's hard for him to understand us". So, having explained Sergey's behavior to myself, I got a pretty coherent internal picture of his perception.

My father's dislike for Sergey arose immediately, but after a while I clearly understood that his attacks were not random, but systematic. It was strange that Sergey did not react to them. He stayed within the bounds of silent politeness or defensive innocence. Sergey's unresponsiveness surprisingly forced me to accept his side. And my mature conflict with my father lent itself to the situation at hand in the best possible way. I unconsciously took Sergey's side, perceiving him as a victim of my father's difficult character, as I felt myself to be.

"Well?" I looked around. "The office is ready. We can set up the office equipment and work, right?"

"Yes, we can move in," my father agreed.

We left the office and drove to the warehouse. After half an hour, Sergey squeezed through the gap between the side of the "GAZelle" and the opening of the warehouse gate. He shook our hands politely, looked around and said: "Loading?"

"Yeah, well, while you were gone, we decided to load up so we wouldn't waste any time," I said.

"How much longer are you going to sell your goods?" Sergey said with a complaint in his voice. "I think I've implemented all your conditions, signed all the documents, made Roma a co-founder, but you're still doing the same thing. Selling your own goods, making money."

"Seryoga, as we agreed," I said. "Until the first of July! After that, we'll deliver from the company's name and register the rest of the goods with it. What are you worried about?"

"What do you mean? You're going to sell everything before the first of July! Look at the lots you are loading!"

"We'll sell it and bring more! You said that as if it were the last goods!"

"Seryozha!" began my father, "We told you everything in advance, so why do you keep asking the same questions!? We said from the first of July, that means from the first of July! There's nothing to discuss!"

"Anatoly Vasilievich, I got you!" Sergey parried. "Just don't start! Roma explained everything to me, I got it! From the first of July it is!"

"Well, if you got it, fine," said my father, and continued to carry goods in the "GAZelle".

Sergey stayed there, and as soon as I resumed my work, he said:

"Well, what am I supposed to do while you're here doing your business?"

The question puzzled me. I am so used to making such decisions on my own that at first I was confused, then, after thinking about it, I said that we need to solve the issue of office equipment and other such things. Sergey said that he had a computer, he took it from "Sasha". I said that I had the printer and went to the old warehouse, I had to get some boxes from there. I opened the lock and the gate.

"Are you going to move all this?" Sergey's voice sounded behind me as he came in behind me and carefully inspected the warehouse.

"Yes, it's already leftovers," I said without turning around and picking at the goods.

"Are you going to move them all? And the shelves?"

"No, not the shelves! They're made here on the spot, there's no point in moving them."

I took the boxes I wanted and carried them to the exit.

"Let me help you," Sergey said, taking one of the boxes.

"That's it now!" I closed the board and looked at my father. "There are only iron racks, showcases, pallets underneath, and the return from retail. So we can pick a day and move everything at once if you want!"

"Well, if we have a free day, we'll move it," my father said, wiping the sweat from his forehead.

"Roma and I could move some things now, like the showcases," Sergey suggested, and my father and I stared at him at once. "Anatoly Vasilievich, you could deliver the goods and we'll move everything in the meantime."

"I'm in, it's a good idea!" I answered the silent question in my father's eyes, glad to stay in the ringing silence of the factory, accompanied only by the crackling of grasshoppers in the hot grass, instead of shaking in the "GAZelle" and scurrying around the warehouses. And my growing sympathy for Sergey and the already chronic fatigue of my father's company also influenced my decision.

"Well, stay!" my father exhaled. "I'm off."

"So what's your work scheme that you didn't want to tell me before the merger?" Sergey said once we were alone in the old warehouse.

"Aah! Ha!" I laughed briefly. "Yeah, that was fun. Intriguing, eh, Seryoga!"

"Well, not intriguing, just curious, what is it that you are so keen to hide!?" Sergey said, as if there was even a hint of resentment in his voice.

I offered to carry the showcases first. We carried the first two on our shoulders, panting, noticing that it was heavy, and then carried the next ones one by one.

"So what's the scheme?" said Sergey, barely catching his breath.

"Seryoga, it's very simple..." I began, taking the showcase and lifting it. "Did you work with food wholesalers in 'Sasha'?"

"What wholesalers?"

"Well, which food wholesalers do you know?"

"I know where they are, but I don't remember their names," Sergey said, describing the location of two depots, the ones in the cinemas on the left bank.

"They closed a long time ago," I brushed him off.

"Really?" Sergey chewed his lip. "Well, I didn't know."

"Do you know of any others?" I continued to inquire, picking up another showcase.

Not knowing the name, Sergey spoke of "Mercury". I confirmed.

"And what others?"

"Wait, give me a minute," Sergey gasped.

"And what other depots do you know about?" I repeated as soon as we had brought the showcase.

"Romych, I don't remember their names! I know where they are!"

We silently took the next showcase.

"Do you know where 'Peresvet' is?" I said as we walked back.

"No, I don't," Sergey gave up, wiped the drops of sweat that appeared on his forehead, and suddenly asked, "Listen, what are those pipes up there under the roof in the warehouse?"

"What pipes?" I didn't understand.

Heating pipes ran around the perimeter of the old warehouse at waist level. Next to them, two pipes about three centimeters in diameter dangled in the air below the ceiling on the left wall.

"Those pipes!" Sergey pointed at them.

"Fuck if I know!" I shrugged. "Nothing's worked here for a long time."

"Are you using foul language!?" Sergey smiled, and seemed to me to be surprised in a pretentious, sanctimonious way.

"Well, yeah! What's the big deal? Everybody does it. I don't swear in front of my father, you know."

"Well, not everybody. I don't swear, for example."

"Oh, really!?" I was surprised. "And you never did!?"

"Well, I used to swear when I was young. But not anymore, I haven't cursed for a long time, I try to watch my language."

"Cool!" I felt respect. "I didn't swear before either, but then I started. But when I met Vovka, it was like every other word was 'fuck!'"

"Who is Vovka!?" Sergey perked up.

"There's a piece of work here! My buddy! When you meet him, you'll start swearing too!"

I laughed.

"No," Sergey cackled. "It's not good to swear. I've got children after all."

"Let's carry the last showcase," I said, taking it by my side.

We left the warehouse with our burdens.

"How many kids do you have, two?" I said.

"Yes, two," Sergey replied, walking behind me. "Lilka, four years old, and Lyonka, one year old."

"Great! Two children already! I'm not married yet."

"Do you have a girlfriend?"

"I just met a girl, but I don't know if I have one yet," I remembered Rita.

After taking the showcase, we went back.

"Look, since you don't need the shelves anymore, why don't you give them to me?" Sergey said as soon as we got back to the old warehouse. "I would take them to the dacha for firewood."

"I don't know," I shrugged, thinking. "Technically, we don't need them at all, but we'll have to ask my father. If he's for it, you can have them."

Sergey said that he would cut the pipes and take them for the fence of the dacha – new ones are expensive and cannot be bought – he would dismantle the shelves and take

everything out on Friday and pay my father for the delivery – money for my father and firewood for him for the winter.

"Well, you'll have to deal with my father when he gets back!" I brushed off the strange and incomprehensible topic of conversation. I had always recognized the economic qualities of people as a good and necessary trait in life. But for some reason, Sergey's actions did not seem to me like thriftiness, but rather like pettiness. I shrugged my shoulders, forgot about the conversation, remembered about work, said: "Come on, let's carry the pallets."

"So what's with the food wholesalers and what's-its-name 'Peresvet'?" Sergey said as we moved everything out of the old warehouse. "Is that a depot too?"

I nodded and said that "Peresvet" was bigger than "Mercury" and was on the left bank, ten minutes away from "Sasha", and that's where I took the dichlorvos I bought from Sergey.

"I thought you said you were selling it to a regional customer somewhere," he said.

"There was no customer, Seryoga!" I smiled contentedly, suddenly feeling like a mischievous child who had gone unnoticed in his shenanigans, happy to report them, and pleased with the reaction of the screwed-up party. "We used to buy dichlorvos from you and unload them in half an hour at 'Peresvet', they were sold in three or four days. Too bad you ran out early, we would have had time to make a few more trips with them."

With his eyes bent on the ground, Sergey listened intently. We stood in the cool of the new warehouse.

"By the way, my father and I were going to work with dichlorvos this year. And then, as if on command, 'Sasha' died, and we had a lucky meeting with you. And you have a contract with 'Aerosib'!"

Sergey was silent, looking at the ground and chewing his lip.

"We have a simple scheme. You understand – we sell barter goods through the food depots. We don't need retail and a bunch of small customers. And those depots eat a lot of goods. We don't even have enough barter goods, so your dichlorvos will come in handy. We're going to have to increase our sales a lot. At least I hope so."

Sergey was silent.

"So, Seryoga, I think it's about time we merged! We're lucky!"

"Yes," he said thoughtfully. "Lucky you."

"Come on!" I said, giving Sergey a friendly nudge on the shoulder. "Everything will be fine! We'll make good money, you'll see! So we are all lucky."

My father came back.

"I brought you something to eat," he said as he got out of the car with a bag.

"No, I'm fine, thanks!" Sergey brushed it off. "I have to go home soon."

I had lunch for two. All the work was done and we drove home.

"Will you remember to talk to Anatoly Vasilievich about the racks and pipes?" Sergey gently reminded me as the "GAZelle" slowed down at the fork in the road.

I nodded. We said goodbye.

"What about the racks?" my father asked as we drove off.

I told him.

"Let him see if he wants to," my father said dryly. "It doesn't concern me."

The whole week passed in hustle and bustle. On Wednesday we took the rest of the goods to one of the outlets in the market, the one where Sergey's mother worked. It was there that I saw her for the first and only time. She was a plump, short woman in her sixties, with skin as dark as her son's, the same soft, sweet features, and faded, life-weary eyes. When you see women like that, you know they were very attractive when they were young.

"Sergey looks like his mother," my father said as soon as we were alone in the cabin.

"Or maybe he looks like his father?" I suggested. "We didn't see his father, did we?"

"I don't think so," my father said. "He looks too much like his mother, a copy."

While we were driving and selling our goods, Sergey was sweating in the old warehouse. On Friday, July 1, after our last trip, I went to see him. Sergey was sitting on the top shelf of a rack, seeing a pipe that was dangling from the movement of the saw.

"Saw them, Shura, they're made out of gold!" I joked with a famous phrase and laughed.

Sergey cackled awkwardly, gasped, stamped his tired legs, and went on.

I said we should look for a storekeeper and a loader. Sergey disagreed, saying that the storekeeper would be enough, and if necessary we would hire a loader. I agreed.

"Are we going to work for the company next week?" Sergey suddenly said reproachfully. "You sold out already? Can we start working?"

"Seryoga, as agreed!" I let the insult pass my ears. "We told you – since the beginning of July, that means since the beginning of July! Today is Friday anyway, so we'll start on Monday!"

On Saturday my father took the racks and pipes to Sergey without me. Sergey called in the morning and said that he was with his younger brother to help him.

"Why are you going?" my father asked me. "There won't be much room, and the two of them will be loading and unloading everything. I won't even touch anything."

"Are you even getting paid?" I asked.

"We made a deal for five hundred rubles," my father reluctantly brushed it aside.

"Never mind."

"Well, at least that!" I said, realizing the symbolism of the amount.

My father returned about three hours later.

"How did it go?" I met him at the door.

"How did what go?" my father sneered, puffing up from the heat.

"Did you do it?"

"I did."

"And where is his dacha?"

"Over there..." my father waved his hand north. "Ten kilometers towards Moscow."

"Hmm, it's kind of inconvenient. They live on the left bank, but the dacha is behind the right bank. It's at the opposite end, it takes at least an hour to drive across town every time. Did he and his brother load and unload it themselves?"

"Yes, they did it themselves," said my father, his face still red and dripping with sweat. "They unloaded it quickly. By the way, his brother's name is Romka, just like yours."

"Wow, that's good!" I exclaimed, following my father into the room.

"Such an interesting guy!" my father said, raising his eyebrows in surprise.

"Who, the brother?"

"Yes, he is inquisitive, sociable and well-read! We had such a nice talk with him!" my father said and took a cigarette. I went to get mine and returned to my father. He was already sitting on the balcony in his underwear, wiping the sweat from his belly and smoking.

"Does his brother look like Seryoga?"

"Yes, he does," my father nodded. "He's the same build, except he's not so fat, he's normal. And his face looks the same, only smaller and with glasses and... he was, well... kind of modest. So polite! He greeted me normally and in general, I could tell right away that he was a nice, open guy."

"What makes you think he's well-read?"

"You know," my father said, slapping his thigh, "we got to talking to him about books as we drove along. And he happened to read this and that, and all good, serious books. And he sensed that I was well-read too, so we talked all the way!"

"And Sergey?"

"What about Sergey?" my father raised his eyebrows and blew smoke upward. "Nah, he's not like that! He remained silent the whole time, staring indifferently out of the window. As far as I could tell, he wasn't interested."

"Is it a nice dacha? Do they have a house there?"

"An ordinary dacha! There's a house, like a chicken coop, small and made somehow crooked, any old how."

"And how big is the property? Is there a fence? A vegetable garden? What else is there?"

"Well, as far as I know, there are two plots of six hundred square meters next to each other, just joined together, that's all. Well, there's some planting, but not much. The fence is made of junk..."

"Anyway, nothing special..."

"Yes, nothing special, just a normal pensioner's dacha," my father exhaled smoke.

"Why pensioner?"

"There was an old lady, as I understood it, the mother of Sergey's wife, his mother-in-law. Maybe it was her dacha. It looks like it," my father said, flicking a cigarette out the window.

I had hardly finished smoking when the phone rang. Vovka. In the evening we partied and drank again, I even tried to get Vovka to smoke. But he was too stubborn and I gave up.

At 9:02 on Monday morning, the phone rang as soon as I opened my eyes.

"Come over at eleven," I told the applicant for the storekeeper's job.

An hour later, when I was in the parking lot, I heard my father cursing again. He got behind the wheel of the "GAZelle", turned the key, and it wouldn't start.

"Fuck," my father muttered. I looked at him. Red with rage and clenched teeth, my father was staring into the dashboard as if he wanted to burn it with his gaze. "Wow," I wondered.

My father turned the ignition key again and the starter came to life, but the engine was silent.

"Fuck!" my father barked, jumping out of the cabin and getting under the hood.

Knowing that it was better not to touch my father in his condition, I looked at my watch – 10:15.

After a few minutes, I decided to take the shared taxi.

"Yes, go ahead. The man will be waiting," my father agreed, and I left.

At five minutes to eleven, I met a man – about forty years old, medium height, wearing a brown jacket, cream-colored shoes and a tie – who was pacing back and forth with obvious excitement.

"Please follow me," I invited the guest.

The man followed, showing every sign of reverence and diligence. The office greeted us with the smell of freshly painted floors, whitewash, and wallpaper glue. There was a table and chair in the room. After seating my guest, I took a stool from the room across the hall and began our conversation.

"I'm for the storekeeper's position," said the man I could see better now. My gaze was immediately drawn to the neat parting of his close-cropped black hair. I remembered the type of person who looked like that and realized, "He drinks".

"Good," I nodded. "Are you familiar with the working conditions?"

"Yes!" the man twitched, and without a pause he enunciated: "It says in the paper that the salary is eight thousand, five days a week from nine to eighteen!"

"Yes, that's right," I shuddered slightly and watched the guest's fleeing gaze. "Such empty eyes, as if shrouded from within, glassy gray," I thought, and began to tell the man about our company and the job waiting for him. Then I asked for his passport. The guest made a fuss, dug into the pockets of his unusual jacket, took out a document and placed it in my hand with an unnaturally stiff movement. Then, just as fidgetily, he pulled out his employment record book. The man's hands were shaking. "Married, son of sixteen," I continued to study the passport, reading aloud his last name, first name, and patronymic.

"Yes! It's me!" the man jerked again as if stung.

His reaction started to make me laugh.

"How are you with alcohol, do you smoke?" I said.

"I smoke, like everyone else," the guest nodded and smiled nervously, revealing some still-living teeth in a deplorable state, mixed with metal bridges for the gold.

I kept looking into the man's eyes.

"As for alcohol?" he fidgeted in his chair, his eyes searching for salvation in the corners of the room and under the baseboard. "I drink sometimes on weekends... But like everyone else! Sometimes!"

I looked back at the passport and felt a wave of relief wash over my guest.

After a few more minutes of conversation, I told the man that I would discuss his candidacy with a business partner and that I would call him in the evening. With a nod of agreement, the guest began scratching on a piece of paper with a pen. I watched with interest as the hand, unaccustomed to using a pen, painfully wrote out six numbers with stiff fingers.

After saying goodbye to the guest, I had time to smoke a cigarette outside before Sergey and Vera arrived in a taxi with the computer.

"Oh, now we have a stool too!?" Vera exclaimed as soon as she entered the office.

"Yes, we are well-heeled now!" I nodded and told them about the interview.

"Really?" Sergey exclaimed. "And the man? Was he all right?"

"An ordinary man," I said, looking critically at the computer again and expressing my doubts: "Seryoga, the computer is gross! Are you sure it works?"

"Well, I don't know, it worked in 'Sasha' when I picked it up!" he threw up his hands and sulked. "Can you put it together and connect everything here?"

"Of course I can!" I said, surprised. "What is there to put together? All the plugs are different, specially made for fools, so it's impossible to mix up the wires!"

"I just don't know much about computers," Sergey mumbled.

From that moment on, our office came alive. Vera immediately found a cloth somewhere, ran to the second floor for water, and quickly wiped the dust off all the inconspicuous office furniture. I started assembling the computer. Sergey hung around. As soon as I was done, Vera sat down at the desk, turned on the computer, and a minute later announced: "Everything works, everything is fine!" Then she took my papers from the windowsill and began entering the product balances into the program. Her fingers ran over familiar key combinations.

Three people in a small room – I immediately felt cramped, I wanted some fresh air and a cigarette. I went out to the front yard, called "Arbalest" and got an order. My father arrived. Just in time. I took the printer from the "GAZelle", carried it to the office, connected it to the computer, and the first waybill of the company came out of the printer.

"We need a second desk," my father said as he entered the office and looked around.

"Yes, we've been thinking about that too!" Vera said before the others.

"Shall we start loading?" I showed my father the waybill. "What happened to the car?"

"The igniter burned out!" he brushed me off. "They make such crap..."

Everyone went outside. My father drove the "GAZelle" to the warehouse and the rest of us walked. I removed the lock, opened the gate, and the "GAZelle" drove back to the warehouse and fell silent.

"Look, well, before we started working, just about everyone got together," Sergey said, "We should decide on the salaries..."

"Oh yeah! That's right!" I was surprised and agreed. "Let's decide."

There was a hesitation. I looked at Sergey and Vera, and they looked at me. My father sat in the cabin.

"Well, I think you and I would be okay with fifteen each," I began, remembering Sergey's words about that amount. "We'll start with the minimum and see how it goes. If we start making good money, we'll increase it. Okay? What do you say?"

"Yes, fifteen is fine," he agreed immediately. "And how much should we give Vera? You two decide together, it's just that I'm an interested party."

Vera looked at me carefully, and I immediately sensed her inner tension.

"How much do depot managers get paid now?" I turned to Sergey.

"Somewhere between seven and twelve thousand," he said immediately.

"Well, somewhere between seven and ten," Vera said with a wince.

"Well, probably," Sergey threw up his hands, looked sternly at his wife, and added. "It's just that in our 'Sasha' girls used to get twelve!"

"Okay, I get it! Let's start with the minimum and then we'll see, okay?" I looked Vera right in the eye. "Vera, is eight okay to start with?"

"It's okay," she said, blushing slightly, like a person who was used to accepting decisions about her person immediately and without negotiation, as long as they were reasonable.

"I think ten would be fine," Sergey said. "But since we have an agreement, I won't interfere with your and Vera's decision."

"Seryozha!" the door of the "GAZelle" slammed, I turned around, my father came to us, and looking at Sergey, he said with pressure: "Are you going to pay me or what!?"

In his movements and facial expressions I could feel the restrained dissatisfaction and irritation.

"Anatoly Vasilievich, what salary would you like?" said Sergey. "Because we haven't really discussed the amount yet."

I remained silent and let them decide between themselves.

"Seryozha, I think fifteen thousand would be fine," my father said. "The drivers with their own 'GAZelles' are priced like that now."

"That's a bit too much, Anatoly Vasilievich," Sergey grimaced. "I think ten thousand is a pretty normal salary."

"Sergey, buy a newspaper and see how much a driver with his own 'GAZelle' costs," my father got angry in the face and added with pressure, "Have you looked at the newspapers with vacancies? Do you even know what the prices for a 'GAZelle' are now!?"

Sergey was silent, looking at my father warily and grudgingly, chewing his lower lip.

"And I do!" my father continued. "Fifteen thousand a month costs a driver with a 'GAZelle'. Without a car – eight! So you won't find such a driver for ten thousand."

"Anatoly Vasilievich, of course, I do not know," said Sergey, without contradiction, still softly, even childishly confused, his face showing incomprehension of the reason for my father's tone and harsh position. "You see, you've already studied the matter and I haven't. Let's see, maybe you're right and maybe I'm right. I believe you, Anatoly Vasilievich, you have no reason to lie. I know that you're a competent man. I just think it's expensive, fifteen thousand. But ten thousand is just right."

Suddenly there was a dead end in my mind. Knowing my father's pedantic and meticulous nature, I was sure that the amount was adequate. Sergey's words sounded logical, but the excuses he used to deny my father fifteen thousand felt empty and far-fetched. Doubts flickered in my head, making me want to intervene, but my father put a stop to it all with one fell swoop.

"You know what, Seryozha!" he clenched his jaw. "You should find another driver for ten thousand! And I'll see how you do it! I'm not going to beaver away for you for that money! Got it!?"

At that moment, I must have looked like Vera, who was standing next to me, watching what was happening with incomprehension and extreme surprise frozen on her face.

"That's it!" my father raised his index finger. "I told you! Don't count on me! Work on your own as you wish! I'm not your donkey to bust a gut for peanuts!"

My father got into the "GAZelle", slammed the door as hard as he could, started the car, and drove away.

"What was that?" Vera interrupted the pause.

"Yeah, strange," I forced myself to say.

"Why is Anatoly Vasilievich so nervous?" Vera added, looking at me, and I at her, and then at Sergey, who remained silent.

It was like a weight was lifted from my shoulders. I felt unspeakably relieved, as if something had happened that was the best thing that could have happened at that moment. I no longer had to smooth the edges between my father and Sergey, to be in a constant state of nervous tension. Now all I had to do was work. And to do it with people who were agreeable, cheerful and sincere, as I had seen Sergey and Vera in a short time. It was as if my hands were free. All the time I wished for one thing: success in a business that was so difficult to start and carefully nurtured. I knew my father wanted the same. For the sake of an important common goal, I put up with his temper, and he put up with mine. But my father's rude demarche suddenly jeopardized our common cause. A swarm of thoughts raced through my mind: "Why did he end it so abruptly? He didn't even try to defend his position." I didn't understand. The move seemed stupid to me. Even if the subject of negotiation didn't look pleasant, it still had to be negotiated. "Just like that, slam the door and leave." It was not the first time that a sharp complication of the situation triggered my inner mechanism – I did not despair, did not lose heart, but gathered my will and thoughts into a monolith and coldly searched for a way out. That's what I did at that moment, immediately pulling myself together and calmly saying:

"Well, on our own it is!"

Sergey and Vera came out of their stupor.

"Seryoga, we'll have to advertise for a full-time driver with his own 'GAZelle'," I said, and went into the warehouse.

"Do you think Anatoly Vasilievich meant what he said?" he asked cautiously.

"Who knows," I shrugged and put a lock on the gate. "I'll find out tonight."

"If your father's coming back tomorrow, why place an ad?" Vera remarked reasonably.

"Let's go!" I waved my hand at both of them. "If my father changes his mind, we'll take down the ad. We have work to do! We can't just sit around, can we? The orders will be coming soon, we have to transport them."

In the evening, my father and I had a short dialog, the meaning of which can be summed up in just two sentences.

"Dad, why did you leave?" I asked an embarrassed question.

"I told you to work alone with your Seryozha," my father said dryly, sitting on the balcony with a cigarette, looking out into the yard without even turning around.

Maybe I should have, but I was not good at persuasion. I was used to taking people's words literally and not looking for hidden meanings in them. And I didn't feel like it. I was terribly tired of my father. And I took his move as my deserved deliverance.

I called the only man on the ad and told him to come to work the next day and take over the warehouse.

Everything that happens, happens for the best, right?

CHAPTER 20

From the next day, my work consumed me, and I returned to my father's situation only when something reminded me of him. My habits had changed – riding in the comfortable seat of the "GAZelle" had been replaced by jolting around in the uncomfortable and rude "Pazik" buses.

"Man, how do people ride these buses to work every day?" I said in amazement to Sergey and Vera in the first days of our work together.

The topic was lively. Sergey said that my half-hour commute was bearable, but he and his wife buckled across town in a shared taxi for at least an hour.

"Yeah, it takes us about an hour or an hour and ten to get there," Vera confirmed.

"Why did you sell your 'Toyota'?" I asked Sergey.

"You know!" he sighed. "I had to sell it to buy back the goods from Davidych, and basically to start my own business. I don't know yet, it seems like I need a car, but you know, it's not quite clear what's what yet. What if I need money?"

"You won't need money, you'll see!" I brushed it off confidently as I stood in the office with my back to the wall next to the front door. The lack of furniture showed. The same day my father left, we found a second desk – we brought it with Sergey from one of the rooms in the building and put it across from the first one. Vera sat at the computer, and Sergey and I took turns sitting on a stool at the second desk. The third table didn't fit into the room, so we settled for a chair, which we later placed against the wall by the door.

"You think?" Sergey said with interest in his eyes.

"Of course I do!" I said beyond a shadow of a doubt. "We have a big deferral on the contracts, we easily make a profit with other people's money without investing our own, you'll see! So you can buy a car and not bother!"

"Well, I can buy a car," Sergey chewed his lip. "There's money left over, just in case. What if it doesn't work out, like you said. If anything, you have money, right?"

"Of course I do!" I nodded. "You don't have to worry about that. You don't need it. Well, if you really need it, well, we'll add half! No problem."

"Well, how much do you have? What if you don't have enough?" he continued.

"I have enough, believe me!" I brushed him off and grinned. "Don't worry."

"I don't... It's just, what if you say you have money and it's not there? That's what I mean, okay?"

"I have money," I nodded. "I do."

It became quiet. Vera clicked the mouse. Sergey crossed his arms over his chest and put them on his stomach, crumpled his lips with trembling fingers.

"We should probably buy some chairs after all, shouldn't we, guys?" said Vera.

"Yes, Vera," I nodded and said that as soon as we get the first money we will buy chairs and replace the computer because this one is terribly old and slow and a piece of shit.

"Well," Sergey sniffed his nose. "I don't know much about computers. But if you do and you say this one is a piece of shof, we'll buy a new one."

It made me cringe. But not at the deliberate distortion of the word, but at the tone of the sentence. It was as if Sergey took my assessment of the computer personally – with resentment and dissatisfaction. These feelings flew through me and were forgotten, my head was fully occupied with the work.

"Did you advertise for a driver?" I remembered.

"Yes, he called me at home yesterday, he will start work tomorrow morning," Sergey said, spreading his hands. "As we agreed, fifteen thousand a month... Right?"

"Yes, that's right," I let out a lump in my chest, feeling anger towards my father.

The day passed in the warehouse inventory. Communication with the storekeeper Arseny immediately and easily turned to a first-name basis. He became Senya to us, and we changed from Roman Anatolievich and Sergey Mikhailovich to Roma and Sergey. The official tension was gone, giving way to a pure working mood. When we finished with the warehouse and let Senya go, the three of us walked to the bus stop and went home. The day passed so positively in the company of Sergey and Vera that I remembered the peculiarities of my relationship with my parents only after I crossed the threshold of the apartment and immediately turned sullen.

The next morning at 8:10 a.m. I was awakened from my sleep by a phone call. A man had called to apply for a job as a driver. After making an appointment with him for ten, I went to take a shower.

"Son, would you like some fried eggs?" my mother suddenly suggested.

I agreed. As I ate the eggs, my mother sat across the table trying to communicate. Why had she suddenly changed after years of boycotting me and my father? How was I supposed to communicate with my father now? Time saved me from suddenly arising questions – I had no time to think about it all – the prospect of the new business gave me new strength. After a quick breakfast, I left the apartment in a T-shirt, shorts, and a bag on my shoulder.

A blue "GAZelle" with a cover stood at the entrance to the factory, visible from afar.

"Hello! Are you here for the ad?" I said as I jerked the door open.

The driver – a man in his forties, stocky with a round belly and the eyes of a pug – perked up, wiped his face with his rough palm from the morning slumber, and said: "Yes."

We chatted on the spot. I heard confused answers to the standard questions. Peter Ivanovich had a wife and two children. He lived in a village on the left bank of the city, even farther away than Sergey and Vera. I wondered aloud if he could commute so far every day to work for us. The man nodded excitedly and waved his hands. "What an old car," I remarked, glancing at the painted rusty seams of the body, the worn canvas and the greasy interior of the "GAZelle". I looked at the driver again – old sandals, socks, brown pants with a ripped seam at the bottom of the pocket – the clothes looked cheap and worn. Only the light pinstriped shirt was obviously fresh and pressed.

"Can you start tomorrow?"

"No problem!" the driver threw up his hands and hunched his shoulders against his already short neck.

"Good, we already have orders, we have to deliver the goods, be here tomorrow at nine o'clock."

We shook hands and parted.

Ten minutes later Sergey and Vera arrived at the office. I told them the news, that the problem with the driver was solved and that he would come to work tomorrow. "Uh-huh!" said Sergey, looked at the stool – it was occupied, stood with his back to the wall and kicked his leg.

"Vera, we have to do a waybill now," I added. "The order came."

Vera rushed to the computer, turned it on, and stared at me in executive expectation. After dictating the order, I turned back to Sergey:

"Senya won't be at work today, but tomorrow he'll start loading Petya. And we will have to call everyone and tell them that we are now working from the new company. And we need new price lists."

"I'll make the price lists!" said Vera, and, remembering, she added, "Oh, Roma! You two have to decide about the signatures in the bank!"

"What about them?" I said.

"Oh, yes! Well done, Verok, for reminding me!" Sergey was excited. "We have to go there and write a statement – whether we will have two signatures on the documents or one. And we even have to find out who you and Vera will be assigned to in the company!"

"Are you the only one registered in the company now? No one else?" I clarified.

"Yes, I am," Sergey looked at his wife. "The accountant hasn't registered anyone else?"

"I don't know, Seryozha," Vera shook her head.

"All right, we'll take care of it! We have to call her, Vera, don't forget!" Sergey mumbled and said to me: "In short, we have to decide what positions you two will be appointed to, got it?"

"Yes, I got it," I nodded and thought about it. "I don't know. You're listed as director..."

"General director," Sergey corrected.

"What difference does it make?" I smiled.

"Well, if there is a general director, then there may be other directors as well! And if there is only one director, then there is only one deputy director."

"Then I'll be a deputy director general, okay?"

"And Vera?"

"Well, Vera is a manager!" I blurted out the simplest thing.

"Well, okay," Sergey mumbled and looked at his wife. She agreed with a modest and barely visible movement of her eyebrows.

"And according to the charter, the general director is elected every three years, right?" I said.

"Well, yes," Sergey replied.

I started to look at the dates and found out that the company was started in December 2002, which meant that the term of the general director would end in six months. A thought occurred to me, and I suggested that we change positions every three years.

"So you're going to be the general director in December, right?" he said.

"Not necessarily," I said, suggesting that we not count Sergey's current term, but start with the next one; it turned out that my turn was three and a half years away.

"Well... Let's do it that way," Sergey agreed.

"As for the bank, Vera, – let's pick a day and meet there. It won't take long, will it?"

"No, it won't take long," she said. "You both just write a statement, that's all."

"Agreed," I nodded and went into my bag. "I'm going for a smoke!"

"You smoke!?" Vera was surprised.

"You know," I said. "I do. I have to quit. And you, like Seryoga, don't smoke, do you?"

"No, she doesn't," he answered for his wife.

"I don't," said Vera, wrinkling her nose and adding, "Well... Sometimes!"

When I got outside, I sat down on a two-finger-thick pipe that fenced off the front yard and immediately sagged under me like a rope. Sergey came out next.

"It's nice here, quiet!" he looked around, stretched and yawned. "Just like the dacha. I don't smoke, but when I'm at the dacha or on vacation, I can treat myself to a cigar with a glass of brandy. It's so relaxing! Sitting in a chair in the evening before sunset, in the fresh air, sipping a brandy and a cigar!"

"Cigars?" I was surprised. "No way!? Really!?"

"Yeah, what's the big deal!? Do you know how nice it is to smoke a good cigar?" Sergey said and clasped his hands behind his head. "I have to offer it to you sometime."

"I don't know, I've never smoked cigars," I shrugged and listened to the silence around me.

"Do you work with 'Fort'?" Sergey brought me out of my trance.

Giving a shake to my memory, I remembered a retail store with that name. Sergey told me that the owner of that store had opened a wholesale depot, and that he, Sergey, was his friend – they drank together at company events. I nodded respectfully. Sergey added that he even danced with "Katyukha," the depot manager, so he was her friend, too.

"I thought you were working with 'Fort'," Sergey said when he heard my answer. "We have to go there for sure. It's a good depot."

I agreed, and immediately, feeling a growing respect for Sergey, I said that it was good that he knew the owner of the depot, with him we would quickly solve problems with supplies.

"Oh! I know everyone in town who does chemistry!" Sergey stuck out his chest. Actually, he always walked like that, cockerel-like, chest out, shoulders back, unlike me, who always slouched. "I know all the directors at 'Arbalest'!"

Sergey brushed me off carelessly, as if the conversation was not worth discussing – everything had been taken care of long ago. My commercial instinct reacted immediately, I nodded excitedly and said that getting a protégé in the person of one of the directors of "Arbalest" is a strong move, because Ilyukha takes only three items from us, but if he takes more...

"Who's Ilyukha?"

"The manager we worked with. A slime ball. At first we seemed to work well, but now the volumes are slowly decreasing, or so it seems to me, but they are not growing. He doesn't take new things and turns up his nose at them. There's another manager there, he doesn't care about anything. We should communicate with him, we would have reached an agreement. But this Ilyusha, he always gets in the way more than anyone else, there's no fucking way to talk to his neighbor! He's all hustler now. When I came to 'Arbalest', I remember he was a nerd who sat on a chair and kept his mouth shut. And now – he's a bit above himself."

"Gah-gah-gah!" Sergey laughed loudly, his hands at his sides and his head thrown back. "I'll talk to the right people there, we don't need this Ilyukha, we'll solve it without him. Who else did you work with?"

We started going through all the more or less prominent wholesalers in town.

"Temp'? No, I don't know them, we haven't worked with them," I said, "'Sphere'? Near 'Peresvet'? Wow! That's not far... No, we didn't, we'll have to go there too... 'Sphere' is as big as 'Arbalest'!? Wow! We'll definitely have to go there!"

"At 'Pelican' you say your friend Vovka works in procurement? And Senya at 'Mercury'?" it was Sergey's turn to get previously unavailable information and to be surprised. "Vovka gets five percent and Senya three? Isn't that too much? How much!? Did you add twenty-five percent to 'Luxchem'!? ... How's that!? And everyone bought? It used to be forty!? Wow, you made a lot of money. Well, you had it all worked out pretty well."

I told the secrets of my father's and my business like a magician, pulling rabbits out of a hat, and Sergey marveled. I could see him trying to hold back, but he couldn't. Emotions overwhelmed him and betrayed him. And I liked that.

"Let's go to the office!" I broke into a smile. "I'll tell you much more! You see, how interesting, and you had doubts whether to merge or not!"

"No, I had no doubts, especially about you..."

I pushed open the door to the office.

"Seryozha!" Vera's falsetto cut through the air, something I was still getting used to. "There's this guy who called you... you know, with whom you... Well, about breath fresheners... you know."

"Uh-huh..." Sergey said, wiping his forehead and exhaling heavily. "I got it. He called, right?"

The monochrome flip phone lay on the table. Vera silently moved it away from her to the edge of the table in the direction of her husband.

"There's an acquaintance here," Sergey began, looking at me, choosing his words, "He and I did some business together before we merged. We bought another batch of breath fresheners in April, you know, the kind you spray in your mouth..."

"Oh, I see," I nodded.

"And now we've teamed up with you, and he's calling me, and now we have to do something about these fresheners..."

"Well, call him, settle the question," I simply suggested.

"You think?" Sergey chewed his lip.

"What's there to think?" I was surprised. "There's a case you started, you have to finish it, that's all."

"Well, yes... I'd better," Sergey said, took the phone with visibly trembling fingers and called. "Hello! You called?... Uh-huh, hi, yes... Well, I don't know, yes, we have to decide somehow, uh-huh... You want to meet? Do you have a car?... He wants to meet, is it okay if he comes here?"

Sergey looked at me.

"Let him come, what's the problem?" I shrugged and spread my hands.

Half an hour later the caller arrived at the factory entrance.

"Let's go together," Sergey suggested.

A bespectacled man in his thirties, about my height, paced nervously by the gatehouse.

"Hi," he said, running his eyes through the thick dioptries of his glasses.

"Minus three or so," I estimated, and followed Sergey to shake the guest's wet, big, but unwillingly soft hand. Such a handshake always disgusted me. Flaccid hands belong to inactive people. Too strong a handshake belongs either to people who are stupid and energetic, or to authoritarian people, which indicates the inflexibility of the mind. I remembered my father, who always shook hands strongly, which made me feel uncomfortable with the handshake, reflexively I always wanted to get out my hand immediately. Sergey's handshake was normal.

"I can't reach you, you're not answering your phone," the four-eyed continued. "The goods are in my garage, I have to do something with them. There's money invested."

"My wife has been keeping the phone lately, she hasn't told me about your calls," Sergey said. "I can't seem to get a new one. I have a business with my partner, we started a wholesale business. We decided to work for ourselves. We'll get a little more established, and then I'll buy myself a phone."

The guy gave me a quick glance. I studied him – tall, broad in the shoulders, but slouchy and sluggish. The four-eyed was clearly anything but athletic. He had a large head

with a bald spot in the middle. Light, sparse, soft hair, sticky with sweat, sprawled all over it. The clothes were cheap, the pants didn't fit well, and the white shirt had a ridiculous ornament on it. The guy had no taste in clothes, and probably no taste in anything.

"Jerk," I decided, feeling disgust for the four-eyed.

"What are we going to do about the breath fresheners?" he asked, not missing the point. "How are we going to sell them? We could just divide it up and each of us could sell half of it."

"No, why? We agreed to do it together, we have to sell everything in one batch. Otherwise, we'll start pushing our halves on the market. What's the point of that?"

"Well, how then!?" the four-eyed got nervous. "I call you, you don't answer, you disappear somewhere! Come on, let's think about how to sell the goods."

"Well, I can't give you an answer right now, I have to think," Sergey chewed his lip, "let's talk on the phone tonight and decide, okay?"

"Well, let's do it tonight," he hesitated. "Shall I call you or shall you?"

"It makes no difference! I can do it, you can do it! Let's talk at eight, okay?"

The four-eyed understood everything, looked again at my clearly disinclined expression, and hurriedly said goodbye. After ducking into the cool shade of the building, Sergey and I went to the office.

"Are you going to sell those fresheners with him?" I was surprised and added that I would take my half and sell it myself, it's better that way. Sergey thought about it and said:

"Well, let's say I take my half, and then what? How will I sell it?"

It turned out to be the sum of eight thousand and the volume of goods the size of a washing machine. I opened the office door, stepped inside, and brushed it off:

"Seryoga, there's nothing to talk about! We have a half-empty warehouse of two hundred and fifty meters, bring your fresheners and put them there, and don't rack your brains! We'll sell them through our company, you can keep the money, and that's all!"

"Hmm, well, you're probably right," Sergey said, sat down on the stool, took a pen from the table and began to squeeze and twist it, taking the cap off and putting it on again and again. In the moment of relaxation, his fingers trembled. "I'll call him tonight and tell him I'm taking my half?"

"Sure! Don't worry about it! We'll sell it!" I brushed him off again.

"Roma, I've already made a preliminary price list," Vera said, looking at me, then at Sergey, choosing, but not being able to choose. "Seryozha, here, look."

She handed several sheets to her husband, who turned them in his hands and sniffed his nose.

"I used Roma's leftovers to set the buying and selling prices," Vera added, looking at me questioningly, and I blinked in agreement. Noticing my reaction, Sergey said: "Well, if that's the case, we need to price our goods now." I blinked again. After some hesitation, Sergey announced the markups and discounts that "Sasha" was selling and offered to do the same. Fifteen percent? "Not enough," I said. Sergey suggested twenty.

"Not like that," I shook my head, "it's not about the markup. We need to get into the market."

Sergey and Vera looked at me questioningly.

"For example, what is the price of dichlorvos at 'Arbalest'?" I said.

"Well, I don't know off the top of my head, I'd have to look at their price lists," Sergey shrugged.

"We don't need price lists!" I waved him off and, after listing the prices of the most sellable items, said: "Vera, what's the percentage markup of our dichlorvos on these prices?"

Sergey's wife's fingers tapped the calculator buttons and froze.

"Forty-seven percent!" Vera said.

"There!" I raised my index finger.

"Is that the kind of markup we're going to make!?" Sergey stared at me dazedly.

"Then we won't sell anything!"

"Wait, don't make a fuss!" I smiled. "What's the maximum discount 'Arbalest' has?"

"Well, seven percent, I guess," Sergey blinked often and began to squeeze his pen harder.

"Exactly, seven!" I nodded. "Vera, deduct seven percent! How much is it?"

She immediately said the number with excitement.

"There! And we'll make the maximum discount..." I narrowed my eyes for a second.

"Let's say eight percent. We'll give one percent more. Everything should look realistic."

Sergey looked at me and remained silent. Vera was obviously waiting for an order.

"Vera, count!" I nodded, and her fingers tapped the buttons again.

"Before the sale, the markup was 36.71%, and with a maximum discount of 8% – 25.78%!"

"There, fucking great!" I concluded. "I think we should sell dichlorvos that way."

I fell silent. Sergey chewed his lip.

"Well, I don't know if we can sell at these prices..." he began carefully.

"We can! The main thing is to get into the market, the rest is easy as fucking pie. If the price is a little lower than the main competitor, then there's nothing else to think about. Too low a price scares away customers, they think the product at that price is shit. Let's try it that way. If it doesn't work, we can always lower the price. It's hard to lower the price, but you can always raise it."

"Well, okay, let's do it like you said," Sergey said.

"Then I'll bring the price of 'Arbalest' tomorrow and we'll do everything, right, Vera?"

I smiled.

"Yes, Roma," she said and added, "but we still have salts..."

"Salts, salts..." I turned the word around in my head. "Look, I haven't worked with them at all, what kind of product is this? Who buys it? How did you sell it?"

Sergey was about to open his mouth when Vera said that the salts were bought by pharmacies.

"Vera, will you slow up a bit?" Sergey snapped at her and looked at me. "Mostly pharmacies take the salts, but we also had a retail chain for intercity sales."

"How do they sell in general? When is the season?" I said.

"In the summer they hardly sell, almost none," Vera wrinkled her nose, "and when it's cold..."

"Vera, why do you always interfere!?" Sergey angrily threw his pen on the table.

"Seryozha, I'm not allowed to say a word now, or what!?" she squeaked thinner than usual, blushing.

"Honey, would you sit down and take care of the prices?" Sergey changed his tone to conciliatory and waved his hand in the direction of the printed papers. "Romka and I will discuss everything ourselves."

"Maybe I want to discuss it too!" Vera stared at her husband from under her eyebrows.

"Well, discuss it if you want!" Sergey lowered his intensity and smiled at her.

"Discuss."

"I will!" Vera laughed, and her anger disappeared with it.

"Okay," I said. "The salts are not very current, as I understand it. We'll deal with them later. Let's figure out what to do this week first."

At nine o'clock the next morning I handed the storekeeper the first waybill.

"Here, Senya, take it! Load Petya. And then there will be a second run today. If it's hard, Sergey and I can help you load it."

The storekeeper categorically waved his hands, said that he and the driver will load everything themselves. Petya supported him. Sergey, wrinkling, brushed my words aside, said:

"They'll load it themselves! We have work to do at the office, let's go!"

On the way to the office, I found myself thinking that only the protests of three people could stop me from my reflex to load the goods! And yet my status had changed. Later, with the passage of time, that reflex came back to me less and less. And each time I forced myself not to do it. "Everyone has to do his work," I told myself. Sergey, on the other hand, after his initial bursts of physical activity, quickly settled into the role of a manager. He no longer showed any desire for physical work, and when he did participate in it, again on my initiative, he tried to finish it as soon as possible under various pretexts. In a way I envied this quality of Sergey's, and I even thanked him mentally for suppressing my impulses to do everything with my own hands.

I arrived at work on Friday at nine o'clock. I put the key in the lock of the door – it was open. I went into the office. Vera was gone. Sergey was sitting at the other desk, reading the newspaper.

"Vera will be here later today," he said. "We had no one to entrust the children to, she will wait for my father from the night shift, leave them with him and come. She'll also stop by the pharmacies about the salts."

"Oh! That's a good one!" I was glad and stayed on my feet, putting my back against the wall by the door out of habit.

"I stopped by 'Fort' yesterday, as we had planned," Sergey sniffed his nose again, rolled up the newspaper and crossed his arms over his chest. "You know. I talked to Katyukha. They've made quite a splash there! New warehouses, a big sales hall, a two-story office building! I talked to her, she said she agreed to take our goods for sale, showed our price list, said we could basically bring everything, payments they make once a week, on Thursdays."

"Great! Let's make the waybill, Petya will be here at ten, we'll load him up and go!"

"Yes, we can make the waybill," Sergey nodded.

"Fuck, the computer's not on yet!" I stared at the dead screen.

"Yes, we should turn it on and do the waybill," Sergey sighed.

"Why didn't you turn on the computer!?" I was surprised. "You should have done it a long time ago!"

"I was thinking about waiting for you to make a decision together, and I was absorbed in the newspaper," Sergey stood up and began to go through the sheets of paper lying on Vera's table.

"Ah," I nodded. "Well, come on, turn on the computer, Seryoga, let's do the waybill quickly!"

"Maybe you type and I'll dictate?" he froze.

"I've never worked in your program!" I threw up my hands, walked over to the stool and sat down. "You're the one who knows it well. Go ahead, turn it on!"

"Uh-huh..." Sergey said hesitantly. "Well, okay."

When he sat down at the computer, he looked absent-mindedly at the monitor, the keyboard, and touched the mouse. I picked up the newspaper and stared at it. Sergey leaned under the table and started fiddling with the system unit with his fingers. Impatiently I put the newspaper aside, jumped up and in two steps was beside Sergey, looked under the desk and said: "What are you doing there!?"

"Just a moment, uh-huh," he said in a squeaky voice.

Sergey's fingers crawled around the system unit, pressing every place that looked like a button, all the way past the standard power button.

"Doesn't he know how to turn on a computer or what?" I wondered, immediately dismissing the thought as absurd and saying impatiently: "Seryoga, what are you doing in there!?"

"How... how does it turn on?" he panted, still fumbling. "I think I forgot."

"Let me turn it on!" I said, and as Sergey straightened up, I quickly reached down and poked my finger where it should be. The computer came to life. Then I pressed the button on the screen.

"Can you take it from here?" I said.

"Yes, I can," he sniffed his nose in confusion. "I just forgot how it's turned on."

This incident aroused my curiosity, and I decided to continue watching Sergey. All the time, while the computer was making senile electronic noises while booting up, he had his hand on the mouse, moving it with trembling fingers, pretending to be busy.

"Looks like he really knows nothing about computers," I thought to myself, seeing the confused look on my partner's face and remembering how inept Sergey had been with it back at "Sasha".

"Did you start the waybill?" I said as soon as the computer stopped rattling and creaking.

"Not yet... Here..." Sergey jerked the mouse. "Yes, a really slow computer."

The storekeeper came in. He opened the office door a little, looked through the crack, said hello.

"Hi, Senya!" I said cheerfully.

"Yes, Senya, hi," Sergey murmured without taking his eyes off the monitor.

"Well, if you need me, I'll be at my place," the storekeeper said and went to his "kennel".

"What is it now?" I looked at Sergey.

"Well, I can't find where Vera's program is."

My cell phone rang. Petya. He said he was going to be late because of a small breakdown. The call had barely ended when Senya's head popped back into the office: "What, did Petya have a breakdown?"

"He did, but he said he'd be here at noon. So there will still be loading today, Senya," I nodded at the head, which said, "Uh-huh, I see," and disappeared again.

"Damned audibility here," I said in a half-whisper to Sergey.

"Yeah, he can hear everything," he pursed his lips. "The walls are thin."

I tapped the wall behind me with my knuckles.

"You called me?" the head immediately poked through the door.

"No, Senya. I just wanted to know what the wall between us is made of," I said.

As soon as the head said "Uh-huh, I see" again and disappeared, Sergey and I looked at each other and burst out laughing. We began to choke, which only made us laugh harder.

"So what's up with the program?" I said, barely out of the fun.

"Yeah, just a minute!" Sergey forced himself out, wiping the corners of his eyes.

"Tears came out. Do tears come out when you laugh?"

"Nope," I shook my head, grinning from ear to ear.

"And I have them all the time, especially when I laugh a lot," Sergey said, blinking and sniffing a few times, he calmed down, exhaled. "Oh man, Senya!"

I couldn't stand it any longer, got up from my stool and walked over to Sergey:

"What's up with the program!?"

He immediately grabbed the mouse and focused on the monitor.

"Well, it looks like this one!?" I said from memory. "Click it."
Sergey moved the arrow to the icon. He clicked once, his fingers trembled, he clicked again.

"No, Seryoga! Double click, two in a row!"

"Yeah, I know... Right..." he fussed and clicked it at the third try.

"Oh! Yes, that's it! Come on, start a waybill!" I rejoiced, and as soon as the program ran, I sat down on the stool and picked up the price list.

Sergey huffed and puffed for another five minutes. I waited patiently.

"That's it, come on, what shall we type?" he finally said.

The next half hour felt like a year – I called up the item, price and amount, while Sergey typed slowly and carefully, checking the monitor after each click. I watched his trembling fingers and managed to read half of the newspaper. Finally, I heard a woman's footsteps in the corridor.

"Oh, Vera, hurry!" I burst out. "Come on in! We're helpless here without you!"

"What? Did you miss me, boys?" The floral scent of perfume was followed by a whiff of the positive life in the office. "What happened here?"

"Vera, sit down," Sergey muttered and made way for his wife.

She hung her bag on the chair, sat down, and immediately ran her eyes over the monitor.

"So, what's this waybill? Oh, I see... No, it's not like that... Seryozha, you could put a discount on it and that's it... And you've got the wrong place for the contracting agent... Well, okay, I'll fix it..."

Vera's fingers fluttered over the keyboard, and in half a minute everything was done.

"Shall I print it?" she looked at me and her husband.

"Yes, Vera, print it," Sergey sighed, standing against the wall and chewing his lip in confusion.

The printer whistled and produced a sheet. Sergey took it and stamped it.

"We should get a second seal," I suggested.

"What for?" Sergey frowned.

"It's for waybills and documents, we'll write 'for documents' on it," I said. "That's handy. The main seal is for contracts, and the second one is for current papers."

"Yeah, okay," Sergey nodded. "Let's do it."

"Will there be more waybills?" Vera looked at both of us.

"Yes, Vera, 'Mercury' has to be done," I said.

Poke, poke, poke – lightning movements of her fingers and the answer, "All right, I'm ready!"

Five minutes and the waybill is ready. Sergey picked up the seal again and said:

"We need to buy a stapler! By the way, I have a stationery set at home. Left over from my last job, I'll bring it over."

"Great," I nodded. "I'm going for a smoke. So what's with the pharmacies, Vera?"

Outside I sat down on the fence again. Vera and Sergey came out next.

"How quiet it is here!" exclaimed Vera.

"Yes, Verok, it's a quiet place, and I'm beginning to like it, too," Sergey said.

Vera made a deal with the largest pharmacy chain in town and said there were other smaller chains she would talk to next week. Sergey reminded her of the out-of-town client. He put his hands behind his back and paced the path.

"We need to make a contract with them," I said.

"Just for the salts?" Sergey turned theatrically and looked at me playfully.

At times, he displayed a childlike and direct demeanor that I liked. Sergey casually explained that he was friends with a manager from another city, that "Sasha" bartered with

this company, that they have a lot of goods and their prices are two or three percent better than "Arbalest".

"Great! Well, you'll call them then, won't you?" I said.

"Yes, I will, no problem," Sergey nodded as he continued down the path.

Petya arrived. He started to apologize, but after getting the waybills for loading, he left with Senya for the warehouse. All three of us returned to the office.

"What are you doing on Saturday?" Sergey said.

"Is that tomorrow? I don't know, I'll probably sleep it off after the party at the club!" I said, and when I realized that was exactly what was going to happen, I laughed.

"Why are you laughing all the time!?" Sergey was pretentiously indignant at my serenity, holding back a smile with his bitten lip. There was a hint of envy in his emotion.

"No reason," I shrugged and continued to chuckle.

"You and Vovan are going there tonight, aren't you?"

"Sure we are!" I said, laughing again.

CHAPTER 21

"Can I wait for you after work?" I murmured to Rita over the din of the club.

"What's that for?" she beamed and smiled.

"We could go for a walk and talk," I shrugged.

"And what about Vovchik? The poor guy is already going nuts!" Rita laughed.

We were standing at the big counter, just half an hour before closing time. I turned and saw Vovka's sour face. It was understandable. While I was chatting with Rita, Vovka was sipping one "screwdriver" after another and pretending to be happy.

"I'm not!" Vovka barked. "I'm fine! Look what chicks are passing by!"

"But why are they passing by, eh, Vova?" Rita teased him.

"Let them pass, I don't mind!" he brushed her off. "Let them work up an appetite first!"

"Uh-huh! Well, I see!" Rita laughed almost silently, looked at me with blooming, shining eyes, took the tray and disappeared into the crowded club.

When the club closed, Vovka and I were already outside waiting for her.

"Do you want to walk around a bit or go home?" I asked Vovka out of inner unease. I realized that he would have to hang about in the night because of my vibes.

"Let's go for a walk!" he rubbed his face tiredly with both hands and ruffled his hair.

"What the fuck am I supposed to do at home? Tomorrow is Saturday. I'll sleep it off. Here she comes, beautiful!"

I turned around. She was almost the last to leave. She pushed the door from the inside, feigned carelessness, noticed us through the glass, stepped out, and pretended to decide which way to go. I smiled. Despite the twelve-hour workday, the girl looked fresh. A light ankle-length beige skirt, a tight white tank top, hair pulled back in a short ponytail, tanned sloping shoulders, bottomless pupils of dark green eyes, a light blush on her cheeks, plump lips, and no makeup. She looked good at that moment!

We walked along the avenue, then got in a taxi and went to Rita's house. There, in the nearest park, we sat on a bench for an hour. Sleep was creeping into my head, but I chased it away with hot coffee from the 24-hour kiosk. Vovka was tired too – he was quiet and obviously wanted to sleep. The conversation was lagging. Rita smoked a few cigarettes and we walked her home.

"Soon it will be dawn," I thought in the taxi with my half-asleep brain, looked to the east and closed my eyes. The car drove smoothly. In a moment it shook on the potholes near

Vovka's house. I struggled to open my eyes, got out of the car on autopilot and followed Vovka, staggered, ducked into the entrance hall, made it into the apartment and collapsed on the couch.

"Fuck, are you still fucking asleep!?" Vovka yelled from the kitchen when I woke up.

It was 1:00 in the afternoon. I didn't want to get up, but my aching stomach chased away the remnants of sleep.

"Already chewing, aren't you?" I muttered as I sat up on the couch.

"Yeaaaah!" Vovka bellowed. "Get up! I'm going to the market, will you come with me?"

I did. Vovka bought a pair of jeans and I bought a pair of light linen pants with a pattern down the left thigh and the number "77" in the middle.

"Hey, do you recognize me?" I heard in my cell phone in the morning when I put it to my ear.

"Yes, I do," I said despite the unfamiliar number on the screen. "Hi, Seryoga."

"Aha, it's me! I'm calling from home... What are you doing now, are you busy?"

"No, I'm not. What's up?"

"I'm going to the car market to see what's what, if you want you can come over and we can walk around and look together."

"You want to buy a car?"

"Well, I just want to take a look, ask the price. So what, should I wait for you?"

An hour and a half later, at noon, I was already at the car market.

"Did you and Vovan hang out yesterday?" Sergey said after the handshake, smiling benignly with only his lips. His eyes were hidden behind sunglasses. Brown glasses with a golden rim fit his face remarkably well. They matched his brown skin perfectly, as if they had been made to measure, and gave his face a monolithic importance that was reinforced by the chain around his neck. With these external attributes, Sergey's fullness played differently – he was no longer seen as a bloated guy, but as a serious, self-confident, slightly haughty solid body and not just a young man. Shorts, a tank top and flip-flops simplified the image, but it was easy to decide that he was just on vacation.

"No, not yesterday," I hummed, feeling the rush of joy at seeing my partner. "The day before yesterday... Yeah, we partied until five in the morning..."

"Good for you!" Sergey splashed his hands. "I envy you, you remind me of my youth! Me and my friends used to spend days in pubs, discos and dachas, just like you and Vovka. And now it's all about family and children."

We walked leisurely along the rows of cars.

"What kind of car do you want and for how much?" I asked, so I would know which cars to look at.

"I don't know yet!" Sergey exhaled. "I can buy one for three hundred thousand, or even five hundred, but you and Anatoly Vasilievich won't tell me about the money. I don't know whether I can count on them or not if we urgently need to put money into the company."

"Don't worry, Seryoga!" I brushed him off. "I already told you, we have money! I don't think we'll have to invest in the company at all, we'll just use other people's money... but if anything, my father and I have the money! So you can buy a car without any worries."

Sergey stopped in front of the "Opel Omega".

"Nice car!" I said, looking at the swift contours.

"Just for you. Black, leather interior. Take it!" Sergey suddenly said, the glasses staring at me, and I felt a stubborn and studying gaze behind them. "There's money, just for you and Vovan to pick up women, they're addicted to good cars now."

The "Opel" cost half a million. I said I couldn't buy it now, I'd buy it when I earned it, and I'd better put the money I had into sales when we needed it.

"Well, as you wish!" Sergey turned and walked on, I followed him.

"Buy it yourself! You liked the car after all!" I said.

"Nah, I don't need such a car," Sergey answered and added carelessly, "Or maybe I will."

"Here, what do you think?" I nodded at the cherry "Toyota" for two hundred and eighty thousand.

"Seven years old?" said Sergey, grimacing.

"It's like you said – up to three hundred thousand and eight years..." I said.

"Avensis?" Sergey grimaced more. "The color is lousy, no. Let's go."

After spending half an hour at the car market and finding out that the "Avensis" was the best option, we left. The other cars were either more expensive or older.

"Right, not much choice," Sergey muttered. "One of my acquaintances told me that a doctor he knows is selling a '98 'Mazda' for three hundred thousand. He says it's perfect, garage-kept, seventy thousand kilometers on it. I'll probably check it out."

"You should, if the car is worth it, then the price is okay," I agreed.

"Maybe I'll flaunt?" Sergey said, raising his glasses, which once again fit perfectly on his overdeveloped eyebrows. "Maybe I'll buy that black 'Opel', huh?"

"Well..." I shrugged, not understanding the "flaunting" argument and finding it strange. "You can flaunt if you want."

Noticing my confusion, Sergey added, "Or you disapprove?"

"How can I approve or disapprove!? That's for you to decide. I can only give my opinion. I like the car. I just don't understand the word 'flaunt'..."

I shrugged again.

"No! That's just me... just saying!" Sergey said quickly.

"Here! Look what I've got!" Sergey said with a sense of importance as soon as he and his wife arrived at the office on Monday, put a black briefcase on the table, took out a stand for a set of stationery, and placed it on the table. "To the common fund! Remember! I brought it to the common fund!"

"Did he snatch it from 'Sasha'?" I thought.

"Look!" Sergey next took out a pair of pens, a pencil, an eraser, and a pencil sharpener. "See that? More to the common fund!"

Watching the scene, Vera squeezed into her seat and laughed. Sergey smiled, clearly letting me know that this action was a joke, but his eyes looked too persistently into mine, as if checking. I had a subtle sense of the seriousness of what was happening.

"Seryoga..." I began with a snuffle.

"Yes, I understand that you brought the printer," he interrupted me, still theatrical and pretentious. "But I also brought the computer and the monitor. And now I brought something else! So, Roman, you also have to put something else into the common fund!"

"Seryoga," I smiled, but inwardly decided to seriously back up the calculations. "First of all, my printer cost eight thousand when I bought it, and now it's worth about five thousand, based on the residual value. The computer you brought is old and junk, and with a monitor it's worth two thousand at most. But even if we consider these investments equal, there's a cart in the warehouse that was bought for eight hundred and eighty, if I remember correctly. They really don't cost less than five. The cost of the junk you brought is about twenty rubles. So you still have to bring something to the common fund..." I emphasized the words "common fund," which bored my ears with their criminal origins, "about five thousand more. So you still have to carry and carry. Go for it! Second..."

"Come on, I was just kidding, heh-heh!" he sniffed his nose and clicked the lock on his briefcase. "I just found what was left of 'Sasha' at home and brought it."

"Good briefcase," I said.

"Yes!" Sergey agreed and put it in the corner of the room. "I bought it in 'Sasha' a year ago. Man, how hard it is to get around town in a shared taxi, Roman, you'd be surprised!"

"Well, yes, it's much closer for me," I nodded sympathetically.

"After this dacha, I got up, I seemed to sleep well, but in the morning I was already exhausted! So..." Sergey sniffed his nose again and ran his hands over his face, as if he was still chasing away the morning slumber. "What have we got today, Romych?"

"One run for sure..." I started, and then Sergey's cell phone buzzed and fidgeted on the table. Sergey picked it up, looked at the screen and said unhappily:

"Fuck, it's this one calling... Yes? Hi. Are you there? I'll be right out."

Vera rounded her eyes and stared at her husband.

"Seryoga, did you start swearing?" I chuckled.

"Well, it came out," he threw up his hands and met his wife's gaze. "Vera, come on! It just came out! It happens, yes."

"Who is there?" I said.

"The guy with the breath fresheners, he brought my half," Sergey snorted, getting a little nervous. "Well, Romych, I'll unload my goods at our warehouse?"

"Yeah, sure!" I shrugged. "We already talked about it."

"Aha, then I'll go to the warehouse," Sergey said and walked out.

After about ten minutes I got bored, so I followed him, wanting to walk around and have a smoke. Halfway I met Sergey.

"Is that all?" I said.

"Yes, we unloaded with Senya at the corner, at the end of the warehouse," Sergey brushed me off.

We walked back to the office.

"Why did you get mixed up with him?" I said. "It's obvious he's an asshole."

"Really?" Sergey looked at me in surprise, and he even slowed down.

"Of course it is! What a jerk. I looked at him for five minutes when I met him, and that was enough for me."

"Well, apparently you see things in people, but I don't. That's why everyone has always screwed me over. Whenever I start a business with someone, they're sure to screw me over," Sergey sighed heavily.

"Really!?" now I slowed down and was surprised. "What do you mean, how is that possible!? What, not a single good and decent person have you met?"

"Well, no!" he threw up his hands as if to say "believe it or not". "I've been disappointed in people for a long time. Everyone betrays, cheats. If we hadn't met, I wouldn't have teamed up with anyone, I would have started working on my own."

"It is even strange... You seem to be okay, and I don't understand why everyone betrayed you. No, well, we had cases too, the same 'Luxchem' cheated us with 'Homeland', that 'Fluffy'... but those are one-offs... What, everyone screwed you over!?"

"Everyone!" said Sergey emotionally. "Whoever I start working with, everyone does. Davidych, for example, at first we had a great relationship with him. And then, you know, he started to shift things around... get the goods out faster; I'll give you the goods, I won't give you the goods. Somehow I believed you... I'm just a very gullible person and it keeps coming back to me. I don't know who to trust anymore. You're the only decent one. I could not work with your father, but with you, you see, it was easy to find common ground, we got along right away."

"No, my dad's okay, he just has a hard personality, a pain in the neck. I had a hard time working with him myself. We have been fighting and arguing with him all the time lately."

"Really!?"

"Yes! Really! We had some serious fights! I was about to give up everything so I wouldn't have to work with him. It was just luck, somehow we made it to the merger with you. I'm even, you know, to be honest, I'm glad he's gone. Somehow it's easier without him. Although I understand that it's not really good..."

"He left himself all of a sudden!"

"Yes, he did..."

We walked a few meters in silence, crushing chunks of old asphalt with our flip-flops.

"Anatoly Vasilievich is very... very meticulous. He goes over and over every nook and cranny. You can't change his mind. Either he doesn't trust me, or he's used to not trusting anyone. I always work on trust. That's why everybody always screws me over."

"Well, maybe what my father says is true. Do the paperwork right. Maybe you wouldn't have gotten screwed before if you'd done everything right, not just the words."

"Well, maybe."

We went to the office.

"Don't fret, Seryoga!" I said and gave him a reassuring pat on the back. "I won't screw you over!"

"I don't..." Sergey said thoughtfully, with a slight sadness in his eyes.

I wanted to cheer up my companion, such a great guy. For the umpteenth time, I told myself that I was lucky to have a good, decent man as a partner. Suddenly I wished that our business with him would work out, that we would finally be able to create something strong and worthwhile. I even felt a pang of frustration in my chest – why does life beat good people like Sergey? Why? Did he deserve it? But he didn't. So why?

I patted Sergey warmly on the shoulder again and we entered the building.

During the second week of July we managed to do a lot of things. We transferred contracts with clients to the company and concluded new contracts with former clients of "Sasha". The largest pharmacy chains in the city began to work with us. On Wednesday Sergey was absent. We stayed alone in the office with Vera – we did the routine work and prepared the selling prices of salts. I was more and more convinced of Vera's efficiency. She didn't need to be told anything twice. Everything was done clearly and on time. Whenever there was a question, Vera would get to the point immediately, which impressed me greatly.

From my conversation with Vera I learned that we had only one competitor for salts: salts from Moscow, which was much more expensive, and that "Sasha" made the usual 15-20 percent markup, from which there were also discounts. I suggested that we set our prices a little lower than the competitor's and see how the customers reacted.

The short, neatly manicured fingers flitted over the buttons of the calculator.

"Roma, here..." Vera fluttered her hands in confusion. "It comes out different... Fifty percent markup, or sixty, or even a hundred and six... It depends..."

"Awesome!" I nodded, almost muttering the usual "fucking great!" I was embarrassed to swear in front of Sergey's wife and tried to control myself.

"Are we going to do such a markup?" she asked in surprise.

"Yes!" I decided after thinking for a while. "We'll squeeze as much as we can out of it."

We made the markup different: the cheapest salts had more, the most expensive had less, and the cheapest had a ninety percent markup.

"That's just fucking great!" I couldn't help myself.

"Isn't it too much?" Vera rounded her eyes.

"There are no cheaper salts than this anyway!" I threw up my hands.

"I still think it's too much!" Vera shook her head.

"It's not, Vera! It's a cheap product! If you put a normal markup on it, the road will eat up all the profit! It's silly to sell goods that are expensive and require little storage space and effort to transport and unload, and cheap goods that are heavy and take up a lot of space, by the same percentage."

"Well, I don't know..." Sergey's wife continued to hesitate.

"Vera, don't worry! We can always lower the price. Say, some kind of promotion or price reduction at the manufacturer. Fuck, we'll find a reason! But I think these prices are okay. We'll make a price list, send it to the pharmacies and see how they react. If they bite, it's okay. If not, we'll lower the prices. There's no harm in trying!"

"You think?" she hesitated. "No, it's a bit too much, Roma."

"Fuck, Vera, it's not!" I flushed with anger at her indecision. "We got a good price! You'll see! Just do what I told you and we'll see, okay!?"

"Okay," her face suddenly fell, became serious, she stared at the monitor, furrowed her brow and eagerly tapped on the keyboard.

We sat in uncomfortable silence for five minutes.

"Listen, Vera," I remembered. "Tomorrow is my birthday. I'm thinking of getting a table at the cafe in the center on Friday night. What do you say?"

"It's your birthday?" Vera smiled. "And how old will you be?"

"Twenty-eight," I grinned.

"A big boy!"

"Right," I said with an ambivalent feeling. "Well, are you and Seryoga coming?"

"Yes, I think we are!"

When I got home from work, I fried some eggs. I had barely eaten them and was starting my tea when the cell phone that was on the kitchen table next to me rang.

"Yes, Seryoga, hi," I said casually.

"Did you tell my wife to fuck off!!!???" he shouted hysterically and threateningly.

I was taken aback and fell into a stupor for a few seconds.

"When have I ever said that???" I was confused and unable to comprehend anything.

"You told her to fuck off at work today!! That's what she told me!" the screaming continued.

"I didn't tell her that," I said confused, remembering the day before. "Oh! I just said 'fuck' in conversation, I guess! Well, just cursed, as usual. I just said 'fuck'. Not to her, just like that. We were discussing something and I said, 'Fuck, Vera...' and then I went on. So I didn't tell her to fuck off, I just swore."

"Oh!" I heard a heavy sniffing in the phone. "Well, as you say! Because Vera said you told her so!"

"No, Seryoga," I said calmly and without understanding the essence of the conversation. "Well, why would I say something like that to Vera? Am I a fool or what? Come to think of it! What for?"

"Well, yes..." Sergey continued to sniff into the phone, at a loss. "Okay, bye."

"Bye," I said, having already lost my interlocutor, and shrugged. "Hm. Blimey..."

I spent the next half hour trying to make sense of the dialog, but nothing came of it. No matter which way I went, I was always at a logical dead end.

"Why would he think I told her that? It's stupid to think that. Do I look like the kind of man who would tell someone else's wife to fuck off? How could he think that? It wouldn't even occur to me. That's a strange accusation. By the way, yes. An accusation. And so aggressive. I don't understand it. It's as if his wife had been told that before. That's ridiculous.

Vera is good too. Made up some bullshit. Just out of the blue. And most importantly, she didn't ask me, she told him in secret. Fucking ridiculous."

The next morning, I arrived at work at nine o'clock sharp. Senya showed up next. Sergey entered the office at 9:30. We exchanged tense looks with him.

"Vera would not be here today. We had no one to leave the kids with, so she stayed home with them. Is that all right?" Sergey looked at me tenaciously.

"Sure," I shrugged. "It's not like you would leave the kids alone or drag them all the way out here."

There was silence, uncomfortable seconds passed. Sergey uttered an insignificant phrase, and I replied dryly. There was a brief dialog between us. Then it was quiet again.

The remnants of yesterday's telephone conversation floated around in me until Sergey made me laugh with some trivial story. At two in the afternoon, Petya returned from his first trip and rolled into the warehouse to load.

"Listen," Sergey sniffed his nose. "Maybe I'll go with Petya now, he'll take me to the 'Fort', I'll get the money, and then he can drive me home. We've done all the work for the day anyway. You can leave early too. What's the point of sitting here?"

I agreed. Sergey started to pack, grabbed his briefcase.

"Listen, when I get the money, how are we going to keep the cash?" he looked at me and put the briefcase on the table. "Will you keep it? Me? Or both of us? How?"

The question puzzled me.

"Seryoga, I don't know," I said. "Well, let's split the cash. Evenly. Since we're equal partners, so be it."

"And who will go and get the money, me or you?"

"What's the difference? Whoever, me or you. We'll just keep it equal, that's all. We should have some kind of notebook and let Vera keep track of the cash coming in and going out."

"Well, yeah, fine!" Sergey exhaled and held out his hand to me. "Okay, I'm off."

I shook his hand. Sergey went out.

In about twenty minutes I closed the office and went to the bus stop. The rest was as usual: I met Vovka at the hotel, and as soon as it got dark, we ducked into "Clear Skies".

The fight on the dance floor started around midnight. We stood in the grotto and heard the commotion in the club. Some of the visitors rushed away, others froze on the spot, and others, like me and Vovka, were drawn to the dance floor.

There was a guy with short blond hair, medium build, about one hundred and seventy centimeters tall, yelling something aggressively in the taller guy's face and occasionally hitting him. He was assisted by his less aggressive partner. With his head buried in his shoulders and his hands in his face, the guy backed away. He was with friends and a girl. Who, recoiling, looked paralyzed at what was happening. The guy's friends cowardly huddled together. But at one point, one of them stepped forward and waved his hand at the tow-haired man. This only made him angrier. With two punches, the tow-haired man drove the daredevil back to his friends, and they huddled even tighter. The tow-haired man's partner rushed forward, and the two of them began to beat the unsupported guy.

I rarely interfered in such squabbles, knowing that the security would show up in a minute or two. But this time, my sense of justice urged me forward. I stepped from the ramp with the tables onto the dance floor and began to separate the fighters, trying to stand between the attackers and the guy. Vovka kept up. Stunned, the tow-haired one retreated to the empty center of the dance floor. I spread my arms and called for an end to the fight. The tow-haired one moved toward me.

"What the fuck!?" I didn't hear the words, I read his lips.

The music rumbled on through the strobe lights. The tow-haired one twitched and punched me sharply in the nose with his forehead. I flinched, my nose tingling. Vovka moved to the guy's side, and he glared at Vovka. That was enough, I threw myself at the tow-haired guy, grabbed him by the neck and pulled him down. The guy's strong muscles struggled, but he bent under my weight and opened his back, which Vovka immediately piled on top of. The tangle of three shifted to the far wall and rested against the rise of the mini-scene. The tow-haired one collapsed onto it, and I let go of his neck, pinning his head with one hand and starting to punch him in the ribs and stomach with the other. Vovka hit him too. Again, my upbringing played against me – I deliberately hit him at half strength, just wishing the tow-haired guy would calm down. And he did. I loosened my grip, and the guy jerked, broke free, and sprinted out into the grotto. I looked around. Vovka and I were standing in one corner, and the crowd had spread out in the others. The tow-haired man's partner had disappeared. The music continued, the lights pulsed. The injured guy and girl mingled with the crowd. I exhaled and relaxed. The incident seemed to be over.

"Strange, no security for so long," I thought to myself, it seemed like at least ten minutes had passed. Vovka and I headed for the exit. I was a few steps away from the archway that led to the grotto when a lanky figure ducked down and blocked the passage. I could only make out a silhouette against the light. The tow-haired one reached out from behind the lanky man and pointed his finger at me, past Vovka, and screamed hysterically: "There he is!!! There he is!!!"

The silhouette moved forward. "Fuck, two meters tall, no less," I said in my head. I took a step back and leaned my back against a wooden pillar. To the right of it was the fenced-off part of the ramp with tables, to the left was the path to the half-empty dance floor. Stepping back without losing sight of the silhouette, I found myself on the dance floor. With outstretched arms, the lanky one followed me. The crowd on the floor pushed back against the walls. In the flickering light, I could see the lanky man. He looked wiry. The music kept rumbling. The back of my brain was still thinking that this was all just an unfortunate misunderstanding, and that if I told the lanky one what really happened, he would understand and leave me alone. I looked to my right – there was Vovka, about three meters away, waiting.

"That's it! Enough!" I yelled, holding my arms out in front of me.

Something hit me hard on the left temple. I staggered back, realizing I'd missed a punch. My head buzzed, but I steadied myself and kept my wits about me. Vovka leapt at the lanky man from the side and grabbed his left arm. I immediately grabbed his right arm and pulled him toward me, and the lanky one took a few steps and collapsed sideways on the floor against the wall. I put my hand over his head and grabbed his arm with my other hand. Vovka sat on his legs. The lanky one couldn't even move.

"Lie the fuck down!!!" I yelled, resisting the urge to keep fighting. "Down!!!"

I kicked the lanky one in the head, he slammed it to the floor and collapsed. The dance floor went quiet. I looked around and poked Vovka in the side. He understood everything. We got off the lanky one, he moved sluggishly and remained lying there.

The security guards showed up just as we were leaving the dance floor. They didn't stop us. After passing the grotto, we headed for the exit. A police patrol came down to the club. We routinely missed the two policemen and walked out into the street. A police cruiser was parked in front of the club and the tow-haired guy was sitting in it, indignant. Mingling with the crowd, we passed the car and ended up behind it.

"Your temple is cracked and bleeding," Vovka said.

"How bad is it?"

"Well, pretty bad," said Vovka. "It's a little swollen and there's a cut."

"Listen, would you go to the bartender and ask him for some ice, huh?"

"Well," Vovka hesitated a little and added, "Okay," and staggered into the club.

When I was alone, I stepped away and into the shadows. My head was buzzing, my body was shaking, my brain was nauseous and dizzy. "Is it a concussion or something?" I thought, angry at myself, at the innate pacifism that blocked my aggression, at the sense of justice that prevented me from hitting people when they were helpless or unable to fight back. "Next time, hit first... yeah, that's what life is about... You either hit first or you get hit in the face... you have to give up alcohol... and cigarettes too... you have to quit... it's all shit... Roma, you're starting to look like a piece of shit". Suddenly a wave of self-pity came over me, caused by a feeling of utter worthlessness in my life. I felt like crying. But immediately my self-pity was crushed by anger and hatred. Self-hatred for my weakness.

"Fuck," I said out loud.

CHAPTER 22

"Happy birthday, son," my mother said as she woke me up at eight in the morning.

"Thanks Mom," I nodded half asleep and sat up on the bed.

"Oh! What happened to your eye!? What a bruise!!" My mother instinctively drew her hands to my eye.

"Vovka and I had a fight at the club with some idiots," I said, twisting, getting up and going to the bathroom.

My eye was barely swollen. I looked at myself in the bathroom mirror. There was a blue streak from my temple down under my eye and across my upper eyelid. The rest of my face looked normal.

"Yeah..." I exhaled and turned on the shower.

I have long realized that if a person does something with love and desire, it will come out good and beautiful. But if you don't want to do it, it will come out badly. So it is with food. As long as I can remember, my mother always cooked well. But as soon as she and my father started fighting, it became impossible to eat my mother's cooking. I had forgotten how good it used to taste when she cooked with passion. But that morning it all came back. I devoured cutlets and spaghetti.

"I love watching you eat," my mother said as she sat across from me with her head resting on her hand. It was like she came to life. I looked into my mother's eyes. They were shining again, not completely, but still. Their dullness was a thing of the past. My mother smiled. It was shy and awkward, as if she'd learned how to do it again.

"Is it good, son?"

"Yes, Mom, very good!" I nodded, mouth full, and swallowed my breakfast quickly.

"Eat, eat, take your time. What's your hurry?"

My father entered the kitchen sleepily. He turned awkwardly, touched the kettle, pulled his hand away. He made himself some coffee and, coughing and unable to hide his embarrassment, forced himself to say: "Happy birthday."

"Thanks, Dad," I nodded, watching him from under my eyebrows.

My father scratched his nose, looked around, and walked away, coughing.

"How are you and that guy getting along at work?" my mother said.

"We're fine, Mom, working! Everything's fine, lots of work."

"It's good that there is a lot of work."

"Yes, Mom, it is," I nodded, shoved the last bite into my mouth, drank my tea, grabbed my bag and phone, picked up my flip-flops with my feet, and rushed out the door.

"Oh!!!" exclaimed Vera as soon as I entered the office.

"Damn it, Roman!" Sergey was startled and then laughed, resting his forehead on his hand.

"What happened to you!?" said Vera, and I told them about the fight, describing everything in small and seemingly ridiculous details. Petya arrived and immediately drove off to load.

"Well, let's go to the warehouse, take a walk!" Sergey suggested with a smile, and once we were outside together, he added impatiently: "What a fight you had there!?"

I began to tell the story again. Sergey listened, humming and interjecting questions like "Well, and you?", "And then what?", "What about them?". When we reached the warehouse and saw the loading in full swing, we went back. We talked about the same thing.

"It's just that you haven't developed the habit of taking a stance right away. I've been boxing for five years, so it's automatic," Sergey said and got into a very closed boxing stance – he pressed his elbows to his body, put his shoulders together as best he could, clenched his fists and hid his face between them.

"I got a withers because of it too!" He added, patting himself on the neck. "See what withers I have!"

Sergey rounded his shoulders even more, scowled and looked rather ridiculous. I was puzzled by his statement, because the only thing I saw was the usual fatty growth that often forms in that place in people who are overweight.

"Seryoga, to hell with the withers! It was a fight! It happened quickly. Bang, and I got hit in the temple! Vovka jumped on the big one, we knocked him down... What to do with him next? A few kicks to the head, that's all... I just hold back... It's for the best, the police came later, otherwise they would have caught us for sure."

"Yeah, I was told, why are you jumping around, fidgeting?" Sergey jumped on his feet in a stance. "You kick him in the nuts and go!"

"There you go... I told you the same thing..." I nodded. "You used to box, didn't you?"

"Oh, come on!" Sergey even seemed offended. "I've been doing it for five years! From the age of seventeen to twenty-two. And I performed at competitions."

"Wow, cool!" I said respectfully, surprised.

"But when Verok and the family came along, I gave it up. Yeah! I was really good at boxing! Were you ever into sports?"

"Me? Just a little bit of everything. I tried boxing once in the seventh grade, spent two months there, then I did two sparring sessions. I beat up one guy, the other guy beat me up, and I quit!" I laughed, remembering my childhood. "I worked out for a couple of years, I even did karate for a year, can you imagine? I worked out in the army too, and then that was it – I started smoking, drinking... I've got to quit this crap... I'm getting kind of decrepit."

"Oh, come on! You're doing fine! I was like that before I got married. I even envy you that you can go out with your Vovan, hang out somewhere, rock out with the chicks! I'd love to be in your place, but it's all over now – the wife, the kids. So have fun, Roman, while you can! When you get married, that's it!"

We went to the office.

"Oh! I got the money yesterday!" Sergey was excited and reached for his briefcase.

"Yeah, that's right!" I remembered. "Our first money in 'Fort!'"

"Good!" Vera sang along, smiling. "How much have you got, Seryozha?"

"Yes, Vera, write it down!" Sergey said, putting the briefcase on the table and taking out a bundle of money in thousands, tied up with a rubber band. "I got twenty-two thousand."

He removed the rubber band and began to count the money with shaky hands, one clutching the bundle awkwardly, the other pulling out the green bills with his fingers and slowly placing them on the table. It became clear that these hands had never handled bundles of money before.

"Let me show you how to count them, Seryoga!" I said, grabbing the bills, tying a rubber band around them, placing the bundle between the middle fingers of one hand, breaking the bundle in half with my thumb, and beginning to flip one bill toward me, picking it up with the fingers of the other hand and bending it back. "One, two, three, four, five..."

The bills flickered and rattled like a counting machine.

"Eight, nine, twenty..." I counted aloud in a whisper, "twenty-two, that's right!"

Sergey and Vera watched in fascination. I threw the bundle on the table.

"Where did you learn that?" Sergey said, his eyes shining with admiration.

"I learned it from some guys, our neighbors at the last depot, selling sugar!" I grinned, remembering it with pleasure. "Funny guys. One was an intellectual. The other is good for nothing! Four times in jail, you know!"

Sergey's eyes lit up even more, but now with interest.

"Boys!" Vera squeaked. "You're disturbing me! I am working."

"Then let's go outside and you tell me about it!" Sergey said impatiently.

We went out. I lit a cigarette and began to walk along the path. Sergey cautiously sat down on the sagging pipe and turned all ears, chewing his lip in anticipation.

"Once, I remember, Yura, well, the one who was in prison... bought a ton of salt from someone, well, to sell, of course," I remembered the incident and immediately laughed.

"Stop laughing!" Sergey shouted impatiently, smiling. "Come on, tell me! I see you laughing and I start to laugh too! Giggling like idiots!"

"We are idiots!" I waved away, stifling a laugh. "We're running a business in an abandoned factory while everyone else is sitting in offices... So I don't know why they bought that ton of salt! The sugar was selling well, maybe they decided to trade salt too, I don't know, but the guys, the loaders, were fucking sick of carrying it into the warehouse. It's salty, it's not sugar! And they were running around, all itching, swearing! And Yura, as I remember, the next morning he drove up in his 'Benz', got out and greeted us. And we loaded beer into our 'second'..."

"Did you sell beer!?" Sergey was surprised.

"Yeah, didn't I tell you?" I was also surprised.

"No, you didn't," Sergey looked down and started to pick stones with his sandals.

"Well, never mind... So I understand that Yura got the salt, but they didn't give him the documents... He stood in front of the warehouse and started calling: 'Hello, I bought salt from you yesterday... Remember? Yes, they brought it, everything is fine. But there were no documents with the salt. Why didn't you give me any certificates? What do you mean, no certificates!?'"

I pretended to be Yura with my arms outstretched threateningly and a cell phone to my ear.

"So what!? I don't give a fuck that you don't have certificates for the fucking salt! You think I bought it from you to pickle fucking tomatoes? I want the certificates today! Got it!? Or I'll come over there and fuck you!"

"Ga-ga-ga-ga!" Sergey laughed, throwing his head back. "So? Did they bring the certificates?"

"They came in an hour! It took an hour to get there from the left bank. They must be scared shitless! You didn't see Yura! And his face! Bold as brass!"

We stayed outside for a few minutes, trying to come to our senses from laughing. The summer weather was so beautiful that we didn't want to go into the office.

We left the office and parted ways at five and met at the cafe at eight. I was in a festive mood, so I dressed up accordingly – a pair of pants with a number on the hip, a black tank top, and a light white and black jacket, all covered with motorcycle brand patches. Dressed like that and with a blue left eye, I stood at the entrance of the cafe and greeted the

guests. Everyone had come. The last to arrive were Sergey and Vera. When I saw them, I felt sad. Vera wore a light jacket and skirt. Sergey came in black pants, a dark shirt and a dark blue jacket, the same as I had seen him in "Sasha". It wasn't the clothes, the couple didn't look elegant. Sergey, in fact, was on the verge of tastelessness. The main thing was that they looked like a couple. A real one. "Wow, they really look alike," I remarked. Sergey radiated importance and confidence. Vera glowed with happiness. And they were holding hands. I thought of Rita – I'd invited her, too, but she was working that day.

The evening was trivial: drinks, snacks, standard congratulations, hackneyed speeches and symbolic gifts. Sergey gave me a cigar. I put it in my mouth and clenched it between my teeth. Vovka took a picture. It was a funny picture of me with a cigar in my teeth and a bruised eye, sitting among plates of food and bottles of alcohol.

At eleven it was over and Vovka and I went to "Clear Skies".

"Hi!" I said cheerfully as soon as I got to the bar.

"Oh, where did you have so much fun?" Rita was surprised and tried not to laugh.

"Here! Where else? Vovka and I got into a fight with some assholes!" I smiled.

And again I spent the whole evening at the bar, talking to Rita by fits and starts. Everything was somehow normal, but I didn't understand how to develop a relationship with her. The girl worked nights, we only saw each other at the club and rarely after. Suddenly I realized that Rita was okay with that.

"Shall I wait for you after work?" I said half an hour before the club closed.

"How about Sunday?" Rita said, wrinkling her nose and curling her lips a little.

"All right, Sunday it is," I shrugged.

The next night I waited for her outside the club. Vovka was nearby. Rita came out, and after we took a cab, we went to the park near her house again. We sat on a bench for about an hour. Rita drank two alcoholic cocktails and got a little tipsy. I, on the other hand, was sober and wanted to sleep. Vovka cheered up as much as he could, but he also dozed off.

"What are you doing, going to sleep!?" Rita said reproachfully, took a thin cigarette from her purse, lit it and added, "Weaklings!"

I objected, saying that it's the middle of the night and that I and Vovka have to work in the morning.

"No, I don't want to sleep yet!" Vovka fussed. "We can sit here for a while."

"I see," Rita said, her lips curling as she took the last sip from the second bottle and threw it in the trash. "It's all clear..."

I offered to take Vovka home and then go for a walk together.

"Well... whatever, don't mind me!" she said with disappointment in her voice.

The picker-upper we knew drove up five minutes later.

Vovka sat in the front seat. The car started.

"Did you have fun?" the driver said, looking at me in the mirror.

"We didn't have enough!" Rita said, sliding forward on the seat and bending her knees.

"What's stopping you?" the driver smiled.

"The men want to sleep!" Rita looked at me defiantly.

Vovka, who was sitting with his eyes closed, immediately perked up, turned around and shouted out:

"Nah, I'm not asleep! It's just you assholes who want to get rid of me! Traitors!"

Rita smiled and I chuckled weakly. The car was quiet again.

"Eh, boys, stay awake!!" Rita shouted suddenly, jerking on the seat.

"We're not sleeping, Rita, we're not," I said, fighting against sleep.

"Where are my flowers!!!!?" the girl suddenly said petulantly and kicked the driver's seat so hard with her knee that he turned around staggering.

I wanted to answer, but two sentences stuck in my head – one apologetic and one rude. They were on my tongue for a split second, not yielding to each other. Vovka helped me out, he said:

"Rita! What flowers!?! It's almost four in the morning! You'll get flowers, next time we'll buy them for sure!"

"I want them now!!!" she shouted, and the driver felt another punch in the back.

At that moment, for the first time, I mentally distanced myself from Rita, sluggishly thinking "fool of a woman". She continued to behave like a brat, but I turned away and looked out the window.

After sending Vovka to bed, we returned to the same park and sat on the same bench. The fresh air dulled the desire for sleep for a while. Rita lit a cigarette. We talked with her for about half an hour. Rita was capricious the whole conversation, and I made feeble excuses.

"You're so boring, Roman!" She let out a puff of smoke and curled her lips sideways. "Not a chance to walk with you, nor to have any fun."

"Rita, it's five in the morning..." I said looking at the dawn that was breaking, "What walks? I want to sleep now. We'll go for a walk next time. I'm all for it, you know. We'll meet during the day when you have a day off."

Rita looked at me, took a drag, and turned away.

"Why are you dressed like that?" She broke the silence after a minute.

"What do you mean, like that!?" I was astonished and looked at myself.

"Stupid, Roma!" She looked at me reproachfully.

"And what's stupid about my clothes!?! Normal T-shirt, pants, boots..."

I was dressed like I was on the night of my birthday party, only without my jacket.

"These aren't normal pants, Roma," Rita said reproachfully. "What kind of print is that!?! How old are you? Kids go around with pictures like that on their clothes. Those shoes are just awful."

I looked at the shoes, they were cool! Shoes with pointed toes were coming into fashion, and the fashion for square toes was coming to an end. I didn't care about fashion! The boots looked classy, the lines and seams balanced on the edge of roughness. Black patent leather. Massive high heel. Big stitching on the edge of the square toe. Combined with a sleeveless tank top and linen pants, the boots created a masculine look. It was out of fashion, but what was the point of looking like most people? To signify the dullness? No, I don't think so. But in that moment, like any man in love, I doubted myself and let my guard down.

"Regular pants," I muttered. "I like them."

"Exactly! It's no good that you like them!" Rita said reproachfully.

"Then what should I wear?" I looked at her.

"Oh, Roma, we should go to the market together and buy you some normal clothes, not these!" Rita looked down at my pants and grinned. "I want you to look like a decent guy and I wouldn't be ashamed of you."

I was terribly sleepy, and my relationship with Rita was clearly not working, so I swallowed the insulting jab about shamelessness and just said: "Okay, well, next week, when you have a day off, we'll go to the market... Come on, I'll walk you home!"

Rita exhaled in disappointment, picked up her purse and walked away in a deliberately vulgar manner. I suppressed my anger, which I didn't know why, and followed her.

"Well, Roooooman!?" Rita said on the steps of the doorway. "Bye?"

"Bye," I grinned and kissed her on the lips. Rita kissed me back lazily and without warmth.

After a couple of hours of sleep, I came to work with red eyes, an aching stomach, and a head that wasn't thinking straight. When I came to my senses around noon, I said:

"We need to buy three chairs here and get the cabinet from the warehouse."

"Why do we need three chairs when we already have two?" Sergey was surprised.

I said that the existing chair and stool were no good, it was not comfortable to sit on them. And we should not even buy chairs, but normal office chairs.

"The chair is fine. Vera sits on it, right, Verok? And the stool, you sit on it, isn't it comfortable?" Sergey, who was standing by the door, looked at the stool under me.

"Is it!? I don't feel comfortable!" I objected, not understanding the reason for Sergey's stubbornness. "If you're comfortable, then let the stool be yours and I'll buy a normal chair! Agreed!?"

"Seryozha," Vera said, grinning a little, "the chair is really not very good."

"Well, all right, let's buy some chairs!" He twitched nervously and crossed his arms over his chest. "We'll get the money on Thursday and buy them."

"Seryozha, maybe it's better to pay by bank transfer?" his wife asked him cautiously.

"All right, Vera, we'll buy them by bank transfer!" Sergey brushed her off.

"Then we have to register signatures," Vera added reproachfully. "Actually, we should have done that a long time ago!"

"Fuck, these signatures!" Sergey covered his face with his hands and slowly brought them down to his mouth. "Are the documents ready at the bank or what do we have to do?"

"You just get together with Roma and write an application and fill out the necessary forms and that's it," Vera said at once.

"Ok, next week we will go to the bank," Sergey looked at me. "Right, Roman?"

I nodded.

The next day, Tuesday, I came to work first. Senya showed up and Petya arrived, they had time to load the "GAZelle" and send Petya on his run, but Sergey and Vera were still missing. No sooner had I thought about the call than a dark ginger car pulled up under the office window in the front yard. Sergey got out. He slammed the driver's door shut with a sweeping motion, took his briefcase out of the trunk, stuck out his chest and lifted his chin, and walked into the office. Vera followed him out of the car. "Bought the 'Mazda' after all?" I thought as the door to the office swung open and Sergey's satisfied face was in front of me. Vera came in after him with bright eyes.

"You bought a car?" I smiled.

"Yeees!" Vera said smiling.

Sergey froze in the middle of the room, staring at me intently through his glasses. The muscles in his face twitched, his lips wanted to curl into a satisfied smile, but he held himself back.

I congratulated my partner on his purchase, shook his hand, and added:

"Well, let's go outside so you can start bragging!"

In the bright light of the July morning, the car shimmered and played with its reddish hue.

"Six hundred and twenty-sixth!" I looked at the plates and walked around the "Mazda". The previous owner had obviously taken good care of the car. The interior looked new.

"What year is it, ninety-eight?" I looked at Sergey.

"Yes, ninety-eight," he nodded and looked at me carefully.

"Well, for a seven year old, that is just perfect condition!" I exclaimed.

We were in and out of the car for another five minutes, I had a smoke, and then we went back to the office.

"Listen, you should call that inter-city friend of yours, huh?" I remembered.

"Yeah, I should," Sergey nodded. "I'll call her first thing tomorrow morning."

The next day I arrived at work at eleven o'clock. After passing the "Mazda" parked in front of the building, I went in and greeted my partner in the office.

"Hi, Romych," he muttered, lifting his head from his hands and resting his elbows on the table.

"Isn't Vera here!?"

"She should be here soon."

"So, what's up? Did you call inter-city?" I plopped down on the chair in front of me.

"No, I haven't called yet," Sergey said.

"Why not!?" I stared at him.

The door opened and Vera walked in. I vacated her chair and stood by the cabinet.

"Hello, boys!" said Vera, bringing with her a charge of liveliness and joy, and a light scent of citrus perfume. "What are you up to?"

"Never mind," said Sergey and began to rearrange the papers on the table.

"Seryoga, are you going to call your friend or what?" I said.

"Roman, why are you pestering me!?" He winced and stared at me irritably. "Do you know how many things I did while you were gone? Nineteen!"

Sergey paused, as if analyzing the effect, and seeing the bewilderment on my face, held out a sheet of paper and muttered: "Here! Look!"

I took it. The entire sheet was scribbled in lines of typed letters, point by point and slightly spaced out. I ran my eyes over them at random. "7. Called 'WholeSale' 11. Faxed to 'Fort' 3. Prepared the waybill for 'Fort' 17. Replaced the paper in the fax machine. 9. Took an order from 'Temp' 1. Bought printer paper on the way."

"Why are you showing me this piece of paper!?" I looked at Sergey. "You are not an employee to make such reports. You drew them for Davidych, so he could see what a good worker you are. What do I need them for? You're the owner now. You're in Davidych's place. You work for yourself. As they say, you reap what you sow! So, whether you write or not that you 'put a piece of paper in the fax machine, picked up the phone three times and pressed the buttons seven times', the profit will not appear. Sold a product – made money! Didn't sell it – didn't make money! That's the truth! I don't need this bureaucracy, there are only two of us here! So don't surprise me with 'nineteen things done', because I could start doing that too, but there's no point, there's work to be done."

I put the sheet on the table in front of Sergey with a chuckle. He was silent, his lips twisted and pushed out resentfully. I could even feel his resentment, which Sergey tried to leave unspoken. The room was tense for a while.

On Thursday morning, I met Sergey at the bank and executed the documents with two signatures, which made them legitimate. Sergey was constantly wiping the non-existent sweat from his forehead, his fingers were shaking, and he drew some sloppy signatures on the papers. The pen didn't obey, as if it had accidentally appeared in Sergey's thick fingers.

When we were done at the bank, we went to the office. There, as soon as we stepped inside and Sergey's ass touched the stool, I dictated:

"Seryoga, go ahead, call your friend!"

"Yes, Roman, wait!" he reacted nervously.

The next few minutes were spent on current affairs. Noticing that Sergey was in no hurry to make the call, I reminded him again. Sighing heavily and nervously twisting the pen between his fingers, Sergey said in a sad voice, "Yes, I have to call her," and dialed the right number on the fax machine.

"Hello, yes, hi!" he said into the receiver. "Yes, aha, it's me, Seryoga, remember? Aha, yes, Davidych closed 'Sasha'... I didn't expect it myself. We were just working and then... Aha... Me? I work for myself now... Yes... My own company... Aha, yes, thank you... Heh-heh... Yes, it's the same... I was just calling to talk to you about work... Maybe I can offer you something..."

While listening to the dialog, I suddenly realized that I was watching Sergey more. It came out by itself. Sergey was wiggling his feet under the table, twisting the pen in his hands, touching something on the table all the time, chewing his lips incessantly. As if he had never negotiated like this before. But he had. So he said. Sergey's excessive nervousness was conspicuous and contradicted his image. But the conversation went well. The woman agreed to barter and said she would make the first order. And soon we got it.

On Friday we bought chairs, and the office became even more cramped. After placing the chair between the door and the cabinet, I sat in it, crossed my legs, and said: "Now that's more like it!"

Saturday I met Rita and went to the market. My whole gut was against it, but I was determined to kill the day with what I thought was a useless activity. We wandered the aisles for two hours. Rita went first, and I waddled sullenly behind, trying to feign interest. The girl chose beige linen pants and a similar synthetic shirt with short sleeves and a zipper. The synthetic felt heavy and uncomfortable on my body as I tried it on. I paid for my purchase.

"See, you look so good!" Rita said, pleased with me.

"Yeah, I do," I said.

"You should wear this, like a normal guy, not that junk!"

At home, after trying on the new clothes in the mirror, I tried to convince myself that it wasn't so bad, but it was. My gut was clearly resisting the change. The irritation I'd been feeling for a long time suddenly turned into dissatisfaction with Rita. I was angry with her for everything. For what had happened, and even more for the fact that it hadn't worked out. Our relationship was stuck at the first contradiction. I decided to overcome it that very evening – I put on the clothes I had bought and went downtown. After a walk with Vovka, we went to "Clear Skies", had a drink, and at two in the morning we found ourselves in front of Vovka's house.

"Motherfucker!!!" Vovka shouted, sticking the key in the locked front door.

"It won't open?" I was surprised.

Vovka shouted again and explained that the "motherfucker" was an old man from the first floor who, in his opinion, had locked the door and deliberately turned the latch so that the key could not be opened from the outside.

After recovering from our astonishment, we decided to knock on the old man's windows and walked around the house. It was so dark in there, and we could barely make out the features of the impenetrable front yard, that we immediately gave up the idea, went back to the front door, and began knocking on all the windows. A curtain twitched in one, and that was it.

"Motherfuckers!" Vovka barked.

A few meters above the door was a stairwell window between the first and second floors. Narrow as a loophole, the window was about thirty centimeters high and a meter and a half wide. One meter below the window there was a piece of pipe sticking out of the wall from which a light fixture had once hung. I offered to put out the glass, crawl into the entrance, and open the door from the inside.

"Fuck, Ramses, that's an idea! But how do we get on it?" Vovka said, staring at the piece of pipe and the bare walls of the house. We needed some kind of footing.

"Let's have a look!" I suggested, and we wandered around the yard in almost total darkness.

The thing we were looking for was in the trash – a bulky box that looked like an ancient trunk from a fairy tale, only it wasn't wrought iron, so it was light. We picked it up by the handles and dragged it to the entrance. Standing on it, I easily reached the pipe. Standing on it, I took out the window bars in a minute and put out the glass. It was time to get inside. I looked at myself.

"Maybe you can get in, Vova?" I said. "My clothes are white, I'll get dirty for sure!"

Vovka agreed. I jumped down. Grunting, Vovka climbed up and stuck his head in the window.

"Fuck, Ramses, I can't get through!" he said with his belly stuck in the opening.

We changed places. I climbed through the window like a snake, went down to the front door, fumbled for the diagonal nut, turned it, and let Vovka in. As he stomped up the stairs to his apartment, he cursed and swore at the old man, promising to "piss on the door and shit under it."

I got my clothes dirty after all.

"We'll do the laundry, Ramses! What a problem! Take off your stuff!" said Vovka.

In the silence of the night, with the sound of the washing machine, we were in the kitchen and had dinner – sausage, cheese, tea. We talked about my relationship with Rita. I said we had a stupid relationship and it didn't seem to be going anywhere. Vovka began to reassure me, saying that the relationship was normal, but that the girl's job and her young age were spoiling it.

"She's very young!" Vovka scratched his belly. "Mush for brains! But she's nice, and she doesn't seem to be stupid! You should do it... with her... And everything will work out! You'll see!"

"You're such a chump!" I said, and we both laughed.

When I got home the next day, I took off the clothes Rita wanted me to buy, threw them in the closet, and never wore them again.

CHAPTER 23

Tension remained in the air at home. Since my father's withdrawal, my mother had become less aggressive. But the changes in her behavior were unstable. At completely unpredictable moments, my mother would erupt in hate, curse my father and me, retreat to her room, and lock herself in. There she would sleep with a blanket over her head, occasionally tossing and turning on the couch, which creaked so badly that I considered replacing it. My relationship with my father was not clear. To my surprise, one day he tried to blame me for my neutrality in his fight with Sergey. I could not tell my father that one of the reasons was that I was tired of his company. The other reason was no less important, and it was easy for me to say.

"Dad, we had an agreement, you know that very well!" I said once I was with him on the balcony. "I couldn't interfere in your argument as a person of interest!"

"That's a very comfortable position you're in!" my father said, smoking a cigarette.

"What position!?" I was indignant. "This is what we agreed with him in front of you and Vera! By the way, when I solved the salary problem with Vera, he did not interfere. I don't understand what you're accusing me of?"

"Nothing, never mind," my father nodded and continued to look out into the yard, sitting on the edge of the couch with his back to me. That was how we had originally sat – me

sideways on one edge and him in front with his back to me. Neither of us wanted to make eye contact with the other. Even though I hadn't acted against my father at that moment, there was a sense of guilt. And, unpleasantly, my father was fueling it.

"I just think that since we are a family, we should always support each other! In everything! That's what family is," he said, half turning around and holding up his index finger. "Mind you, I always support you! Even when you're wrong! And you never support me!"

"When have you ever supported me when I was wrong!?" I was surprised by my father's thought.

"Always!" he snapped and turned away again.

"Ah-ha! Well, always, I see!" I nodded, knowing that this conversation would not bring our positions any closer. "You left on your own, no one sent you away."

"What do you mean, no one sent me away? Your Seryozha told me directly that fifteen thousand was too much for such a job!" My father turned around.

"And? So what!?" I looked at him almost directly. "So he said! And you could have said that it was just right! Who stopped you from defending your point of view!? You could have suggested, for example, to open the newspapers, to see the same jobs and how much they offer..."

My father was silent, and I could see the confusion in his eyes.

"All the more reason you were right!" I nailed him. "And he knew that fifteen thousand was just right for this job! We hired Petya for this money. Why did you say you didn't want to work with us, slammed the door and left!? We stood there with our mouths open. Personally I was very surprised. We had to hire the first person we could find! Good thing it was Petya. And now you're sitting here blaming me for everything. That's not very nice."

"Well, I see!" said my father harshly, with a flicker of anger in his eyes, took a last drag, threw the cigarette out, slapped his hand on the window sill, and stood up. "Everything's always nice with you, I suppose! Well done, son, keep working!"

He patted me unkindly and heavily on the shoulder and walked from the balcony into the room.

The conversation left me at a loss. On the one hand, I knew for a fact that I had never tried to harm my father with my actions. On the other hand, I felt a guilt, an instinctive, relational guilt. It was based on the fact that my father had been hurt and I had not. And it was that difference in position that caused it. And third, without trying to understand my motives, my father blamed me for what had happened. And the more he pushed, the more I resisted.

This situation lasted until the end of the summer. By August my father had collected all the money from the customers for the goods delivered before the merger with Sergey. It was our joint money, his and mine – about half a million rubles.

"Wow," I was surprised to see Sergey and Vera in the office in the morning, coming in with piles of sheets in their hands. "What are all these tons of paper!?"

"They were just lying around the house!" Sergey said, throwing the sheets on the table, adding that they had been brought "to the common fund" to print "leftovers and reports" on the back.

"What reports?" I said.

"Well, reports!" Sergey sat down in a chair by the door, moved to the table and began to sort through the papers he had brought with him. "Didn't you and Anatoly Vasilievich make reports? You know, profits, turnover, how much money you made during the month? Reports!?"

I said we didn't. What for? The program I used to work in would give me all this data at the push of a button. The program they had brought from "Sasha" did the same thing: it generated a summary table of sales and profits. Vera showed it to me and I immediately appreciated the simplicity and information value of the table.

"Oh! Great!" I said. "Vera, could you print me one at the end of the month?"

"Do you want me to do reports for you?" she squeaked.

"What kind of reports are you talking about!?" Again I was surprised, smiled and looked at Sergey.

"Vera, show him!" he said. "Otherwise we'll be here for half an hour explaining it to Romka."

The reports turned out to be an ordinary spreadsheet on several sheets with a summary. In fact, they were duplicates of the program table, only they were made manually.

"So you enter the data from the program and documents here and then summarize the results, right?" I figured it out.

"Yes, I enter the amounts of invoices and other things in the rows, and the total of the rows and columns in the spreadsheet is automatically summed up," Vera said.

"Vera used to make such reports for Davidych in 'Sasha'," Sergey said, and I immediately agreed with Vera that she would make such reports to me at the end of each month.

"Oh, here!" Sergey took some sheets out of the papers he had brought and handed them to me.

"Yeah, I get it," I nodded.

Sergey took a ruler from his office kit, put it to one of the lines on the sheet of an old report, grinned, and looking at me, said: "And Davidych, come to think of it, that's how he checked the amounts in the lines and columns by hand on the calculator himself!"

"Why!?" I was surprised. "He didn't trust you!?"

"Well... I don't know..." Sergey smiled mischievously and shrugged his shoulders.

"Nonsense!" I grinned.

"Well..." Sergey looked me in the eyes and, still smiling, said, "So he did... He also closed 'Sasha' without saying a word to anyone... You see..."

"Well, that's his problem!" I shrugged my shoulders in disgust at the very idea of such an existence, in constant distrust and suspicion of everyone and everything around me.

For the next ten minutes I helped Sergey with the sheets, picking out only those with scribbles on one side. The trash can waited for the rest. As soon as we were done, Sergey stood up and started tearing up the unwanted sheets.

"Why are you doing this?" I wondered as I watched him take several sheets, tear them in half, and put them together. Fold them in half again. Three or four times.

"That's how my hands rest! You've never torn anything!?"

"No..." I shrugged. "Well, I have... But I never thought about my hands."

"The fingers relax," Sergey said, spreading his fingers. "I don't know, but that's how it is with me."

I took a thicker pack. And listening to the sensations in my hands, I tore it in half. It was no big deal. I put the halves together and tore it with difficulty.

"Take less," Sergey said, watching me, "so you can tear it easily."

I took five sheets. The sensations changed. My fingers tore the sheets with hardly any effort, and in the moment of relaxation I really got a pleasant backward feeling.

"So?" Sergey said, grinning.

"Not bad... nice," I said with a smirk.

We spent the next twenty minutes tearing up the sheets and talking occasionally.

"Stupid hole!" I said grudgingly, standing in the warehouse and looking at the floor. "I'll be damned! In the most inappropriate place!"

Our stockpile was growing rapidly along with the sales, and two-thirds of the warehouse was already densely occupied by rows of pallets of goods. At the far end of the warehouse there was an empty corner, the way to which was blocked between the column and the narrow gauge by a hole one meter in radius and twenty centimeters deep. Senya blinked and stared at it guiltily. Sergey, heading for the exit, stopped in the middle of the warehouse and returned.

"Well, yes, it's uncomfortable," he said, standing next to it and putting his hands in his shorts pockets. "Senya, put something over it so the cart can pass..."

"Put?" The storekeeper scratched the back of his head in confusion. "What is there to put over it?"

"Senya, think of something," Sergey muttered and wanted to go out again. "Throw in some bricks or something..."

"Seryoga, what bricks!?" I was surprised. "The cart with the pallet won't go over them, it will stop here. The pit has to be filled with... cement or something like that... concrete..."

"Well, we'll fill it if we have to!" he threw up his hands.

Feeling my partner's indifference to the problem and being irritated by it, I said that we should buy a bag of cement, make some mortar and fill the hole with it. Sergey looked at it with such strong aversion that I left in silence, not wanting to increase the resulting negativity.

"To hell with this pit! Is it urgent or what?" Sergey caught up with me on the way out of the warehouse.

"Seryoga, what's it got to do with whether it's urgent or not? It's in the way!" I was surprised. "It's blocking the corner of the warehouse! We could put twenty pallets there. All we have to do is fill it up. It's one bag of cement and an hour's work. What's the problem!?"

Sergey didn't answer. After a few steps he started a dialog on another topic.

By the end of July, we had sold almost all the aerosols Sergey had brought. This surprised him and cheered him up. Outwardly, Sergey tried to act calm, but his excited eyes gave him away. Sergey called the factory and ordered a new batch. The conversation on the phone was almost exactly like the intercity call – the same uncertain tone and shaky voice, nervous twitching of the feet, chewing of the lips, and shaking hands touching various objects from the phone cord to paper clips. Hmm, strange, because the sales director of "Aerosib" was presented to me by Sergey almost as a crony.

"Fuck!" Sergey swore, pointing his finger at the fax buttons and getting confused while dialing the number. "We need to put the phone numbers of the people we call all the time into the fax memory! We did it in 'Sasha', very convenient! Just press the button and it dials itself!"

He looked at me and nodded at the fax machine.

"Yeah, that's a good idea," I said. "Because we push buttons all the time. Can you do it? Because I have no idea how it works."

"There are instructions!" Sergey jerked his head toward the cabinet. "We can read them, see what's what and how it's done!"

"Yeah," I nodded, took some sheets from the table, sat down in a chair next to the cabinet and studied them. Sergey fidgeted in his chair and then, after a while, started dialing again. I have no idea where the idea came from, I was amused and curious at the same time – would he make the settings himself or not? My gut told me no.

Sergey never touched the fax settings for the rest of the day. My intuition told me that he was waiting for me to do it.

We left the factory premises at ten to six o'clock. After passing the gatehouse, the "Mazda" turned left and drove along the dirt road toward the crossing. We were barely halfway across the road when the semaphore jingled and flashed its red lights, and the crossing gates came down on either side. As we approached, we stopped.

"Well, maybe she should start getting the kids ready?" Sergey looked to his right at his wife and turned off the engine.

"Isn't it too early?" Vera thought about it and then said, "Actually, it's all right! Until we get there, why waste time, right?"

"Well, yeah," Sergey muttered. "Call her, then..."

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"To the dacha," Sergey waved his hand and hit the gearshift.

"Hello, Dad, hi, how are the kids?" Vera said into the phone.

"We're staying at the dacha all summer..." Sergey added, sitting half turned towards me.

"Okay? Not being naughty?" Vera laughed into the phone. "Lyonya is!? What a brat! Tell him Mom and Dad are coming... Yeah, get the kids ready, Dad..."

"Why do you live there?" I was surprised, remembering the distance between their dacha and their home address. "On second thought... Maybe you are closer to work to drive from the dacha!"

"Well, about forty minutes..." Vera said into the phone. "Well, bye, we'll be there soon."

"Yeah, it's closer to drive here..." Sergey started to answer, but Vera, who had put the phone in her purse, turned to me and said with emotion: "Roma, it's just too hot at home!"

"Hot? What do you mean?" I didn't understand.

An electric train of a dozen cars crawled across the crossing. The locomotive dragged them lazily, smoking soot into the sky to the muffled sound of "doo-doo-doo". The "Mazda" started.

"We live on the ninth floor..." Vera explained, "just under the roof...and all three windows face the sunny side..."

"Ooh!" I realized.

"Yes! And we have unbearable heat in the summer, forty degrees in the apartment and nowhere to hide, everything burns out, the children suffer..."

"Vera, that's enough! Let's go!" Sergey grudgingly cut her off as soon as the semaphores stopped flashing red and the barriers went up. Vera shut up and sat up straight.

We shook it all the way to the paved road, finally got on it, and sped up.

"How many square meters of land do you have?" I asked, looking out the window.

"Twelve ares," Sergey said, looking at me in the mirror.

"Roma, there are two plots there," said Vera, "ours and my mother's, they are the same, we just put them together and we got one."

"Great idea!" I nodded. "It's a big plot, you can build a good house and still have a lot of space..."

"Yes, we have a house there..." Sergey said.

"Yeah, my father told me," I nodded, "he said that there's a little house there..."

"Yeah... It's so-so..." Vera started.

"It's a normal house, Vera!" Sergey interrupted. "It has everything... A room and a kitchen... We don't need a big one now... You know what my mother-in-law thinks... I would have started building a house a long time ago..."

"What do you mean?" I said. "What is it with you and your mother-in-law?"

"She's a mean woman, that's her character!" Sergey said irritably. "We fight with her all the time! Only Verok gets along with her. I practically don't talk to her..."

"Roma, there are two plots..." Vera joined the conversation again. "One is my mother's, registered in her name... And the other is ours..."

"And we tell her, let's merge the plots!" Sergey continued, looking at me in the mirror and actively gesturing with his hand in the air. "Let's register them as one, or not even as one! Let her register her own plot under Vera's name if she doesn't want it registered under mine! Or the children! And then I will start to build a normal big house, well, as it should be!"

Sergey looked at me and I said: "And? What does she say?"

"She doesn't want to!" Sergey retorted.

"Why doesn't she want to!?" I was surprised. "What does it matter to her? Well, she could register the land under your name and that's it, it would be common!"

"Well, what do I know?" Sergey continued just as emotionally. "She's afraid!"

"What is she afraid of?" I still didn't understand.

"She and Seryozha just don't like each other, that's all!" Vera interjected.

"Why wouldn't I like her!?" Sergey stared at his wife. "I said – register the land to Vera, so you can continue to live in the dacha when and as long as you want! We will continue to feed you!" Sergey turned to me. "She just lives there almost all year round, well, except in winter! And she thinks that as soon as we register the land to us, we'll kick her out of the dacha and not let her in! Got it?!"

Sergey quickly looked at the road and stared at me again, but through the mirror.

"It's just insane!" I raised my eyebrows in surprise. "She's strange..."

I didn't pursue the idea, realizing that the conversation was about Vera's mother.

"Well, that's how she is!" Sergey sighed. "Put a pin in our heads!"

"Pin, pin... interesting word..." the thought went through my head.

"I was going to get the money from 'Fort' in the morning and then come here," Sergey said as he walked into the office. "But they, you know, they made the payments from twelve o'clock on. I have to go back in the evening!"

"Hi, Roma!" Vera came in next.

"Hi, Vera. Well, let's go in the evening then," I said understandingly.

"No, I'll do it myself!" Sergey brushed me off. "No need for you to go! First to one end of town, then to the other! Verok and I will go home and we'll stop by on the way!"

"Aren't you going to the dacha later?" I hesitated.

Sergey froze for a few seconds and then said:

"We have to go home first anyway! So it doesn't make any difference..."

He threw up his hands, demonstrating his lack of choice. And I agreed, saying:

"Well, okay... I just wanted to go to 'Fort'. See what's what..."

"Why would you waste your time?" Sergey said with concern in his voice.

"Okay!" I brushed him off and leaned back in my chair. "Some other time..."

The next morning, Friday, when Sergey arrived at the office, he took four bundles of money out of his briefcase, showed them to me happily, and said: "Here! I got it yesterday at 'Fort'!" Then he flopped down in his wife's chair, holding a couple of bundles in each hand, looked over his desk and added:

"Vera's not coming in today, is that all right?"

"All right," I said. "I don't think there's any work for her today, is there?"

"Well, no, there is no emergency, and Lyonka got sick... cold..." Sergey said and took a notebook from the desk. "I left Vera at home... with your permission, of course."

He glanced at me, then flipped through the notebook and wrote down the amount he had received.

"How much did you get in 'Fort'?" I said, watching as the pen reluctantly obeyed my partner's stiff fingers.

"Forty-two thousand!" he said excitedly. "Dichlorvos is totally sold out!"

Putting the notebook in the desk, Sergey looked at the money lying on the desk and hesitated for a second.

"So... Forty-two, huh? Twenty-one each..." he said, taking the rubber band off the first bundle and starting to count the money the way I had shown him. Sergey tried, but his hands didn't obey – the bills twisted between his fingers, and didn't stay in the right position. With his thumb, Sergey slowly and with difficulty tried to bend back another note, but it didn't work, it would pop back up capriciously, making him nervous. I watched. Sergey got angry and started to bend the bills in the usual way, which slowed down the counting.

"Let me count it!" I said, holding out my hand to pick up all the bundles.

My fingers habitually snapped the first bundle in half, and the bills flickered in my hands. Three minutes of rustling bills in complete silence, and I was done, putting the last bundle aside.

"That's right! Forty!"

"Yeah," Sergey exhaled sadly and showed me the rest. "And there's... two more..."

"Did you write it down?"

"Yes, I did – twenty-one each..." Sergey showed me the notebook and I looked at it, knowing that Vera would come and check everything and do it right.

In the evening Vovka and I showed up at "Clear Skies". Rita was working. I tried to pay attention to her, but the hustle and bustle made it difficult, and the girl was in a nervous mood. Mine, too, was creeping down, and Vovka and I were pigging out on "screwdriver". When the club closed, I was so pissed off that I took Vovka under my arm and dragged him to the exit.

"What about Ritka!?" he stared at me. "Aren't we going to wait for her?"

"No, we are not! I've already said goodbye to her," I forced myself to say, remembering the girl's dissatisfied look. Rita and I had a silent fight that night.

I spent the night at Vovka's, and when I came home I found myself in a scandal. My mother cursed my father on all that was holy, he answered at first quietly, then loudly, then he got tired and wandered around the apartment looking for shelter, muttering to himself "full of a woman". I arrived at the center two hours before Vovka, and at ten we ducked into the club. "Hi," Rita said to me with an annoyed look on her face, and said a deliberately friendly hello to Vovka. I got angry and dragged him out for a drink. We were accompanied by a "club friend" I rarely saw. The guy was sloppy. His clothes were always wrinkled, as if he had slept in them. His intelligence was completely outweighed by his rude behavior. At first I was annoyed by his presence, later, after drinking, I forgot about the guy. Rita's disgruntled grin, which had been meant for me all evening, caused aggression, and instead of appeasement, anger flowed through my veins along with the alcohol. I was thinking about my relationship with Rita. It didn't work. We were different, like parallel universes. We were looking at each other through an intangible separating film, we liked each other, but we couldn't connect. And the realization made me angry. Alcohol helped again – I drank too much and didn't care anymore. The slovenly friend was glued to us all evening. He smoked and drank a lot and ended up getting drunker than me, which made him completely unbearable.

How it happened that Rita agreed to go to Vovka's apartment after work, I don't know. I must have persuaded her. I couldn't get away from the guy, and after the club closed, the three of us waited for her outside. My patience was wearing thin. After unsuccessfully trying

to get rid of the smoking and swinging drunk, I had a strong desire to pull this guy aside and punch him in the face. Rita came out and gave us an indifferent look. I began to call the taxi driver. And while I was on the phone, my acquaintance managed to bring a smile to Rita's face with his incoherent ramblings. She listened to him with her eyes wide open and laughed. I hinted several times that we were leaving without him – no reaction. And as soon as the taxi pulled up, the guy boldly climbed into the back seat. "Fuck, what an idiot!" I thought, but Vovka didn't resist his presence, and I didn't make a scandal.

Once in Vovka's apartment, I wanted to sleep. But it wasn't to be – after he had settled down in the kitchen, my acquaintance demanded to continue the evening. To my surprise, Rita was for it. Vovka didn't mind either. To calm my irritation, I decided to have a drink. Vovka turned on the boombox on the fridge. The guy immediately started dancing, pulling everyone's hands to join in. Noise, commotion. Rita took a sip of whisky and started to dance. Vovka began to tell me something, trying to overpower the music. My head began to swell. Convincing him to go to bed had no effect. After an hour the guy calmed down, I poured myself a third glass of whiskey and coke and began to sip it sluggishly. Slow music began to play. The guy pulled the giggling Rita over to him and started spinning her around in a sleepy dance in the middle of the kitchen. "Stupid girl," I said in my drunken head. There was no way to break up the couple without causing a scandal.

"I'm going to bed," Vovka muttered, stunned, and staggered into his room.

"Me too," I muttered angrily and followed him.

Vovka gave me the double bed and lay down on the couch. Almost immediately the couple settled down as well. Rita lay down beside me. The guy, on Vovka's advice, took apart the armchair bed and, without undressing, fell on his back and fell asleep immediately. It became quiet. Vovka was already asleep. I hugged Rita, she didn't react. I tried to kiss her, Rita twitched her shoulder and mumbled irritably. I got angry, rolled onto my back and thought again about our relationship. It was dawn. I looked at my phone screen – six in the morning. From then on everything was a blur. I began to kiss Rita on the neck, on the lips. She resisted, but weakly. She responded to the kiss on the lips, but also weakly. This weakness infuriated me and I exploded inside. I fell on top of Rita and began to caress her with my hands. She didn't resist, she remained unresponsive, responding only with her lips. I became quite aroused with anger and pulled down Rita's panties. She sluggishly rested her hand against mine. I boldly threw her hand away and pulled her panties down. The girl didn't resist, just tensed her legs a little. I pushed them apart confidently, but Rita only turned her head to the side. If she had protested, I would have stopped immediately. But Rita was idly silent. I ran my hand over her crotch, there was no excitement. I didn't care. I wanted her after a period of inarticulate communication, and I wanted to bring the relationship to something, knowing that after this we would either break up or move on. Tired of the uncertainty, I forced my way into the girl. Rita remained unconcerned, still looking to the side. I began to move rhythmically. Suddenly, two tears rolled from the girl's eyes onto the pillow. I was shocked. Without finishing what I had started, I lay down next to her and gently put her legs together.

"You're some kind of freak," Rita whispered, cutting me to the heart with these words.

I put my arms around her. Rita didn't pull away, but she turned to the other side. I looked around the room. Vovka was asleep, or pretending to be. The guy was sniffing in his pillow. I hugged Rita as gently as I could and closed my eyes. I couldn't sleep. I spent the next six hours in a half-dream, occasionally regaining consciousness, burned by Rita's words. She was asleep too, or pretending to be. Hard hours. Time was as scarce as tears. Around noon, Vovka hissed and woke up. I got up as well, I didn't have the strength to endure this torture of time. The guy kept sniffing. Rita started to get ready to go home. She refused the offer of tea or coffee, quickly washed her face and wanted to leave, but I managed to

convince her to wait for a taxi. Doomed, Rita sat down on the bed. Vovka, as if he understood the awkwardness of the moment, ate breakfast and sniffed quietly in the kitchen. At one o'clock a taxi arrived. I started to wake up the guy, but he didn't want to do anything, he mooded and shook me off. I vented my anger – I pulled him to the floor and pushed him out the door. By the time I got the guy out, Rita was already in the back seat of the cab. I pushed the guy into the front seat and slammed the door. Rita looked at me from the car. Not daring to kiss her, I just raised my hand awkwardly. Rita smirked and said quietly, "Bye." I turned and stepped into the hallway with a sigh of relief and walked up the stairs, even though I wanted to run.

Shaking in the shared taxi, I tried to make sense of what had happened. Every time I found an acceptable explanation for my actions, the phrase "you're some kind of freak" popped into my head, making me cringe and feel terribly ashamed. I stayed home all day, replaying over and over what had happened. And it wasn't even about the rape or the attempted rape, it felt much more serious than that. What I realized was that my behavior that night had changed and taken on a kind of slippery slope. A warning sounded in my head. It was ringing for the first time, but I didn't miss the sign, I paid attention to it.

"Let's go get some cement!" I kicked the chair under Sergey.

"What cement?" he stared at me.

"To fill the hole in the warehouse!" I was surprised, looked at Vera and back. "Have you forgotten?"

"Oh... The hole..." Sergey scratched his neck and sighed heavily. "Yes, the hole needs to be filled."

"Let's go!" I kicked his chair again, smiled and stood up.

After we got into the "Mazda", we drove out of the factory. Sergey's right hand was on the steering wheel, and when I noticed that he was not wearing a wedding ring, I asked him about it. Sergey pulled out the chain under his shirt – he showed me the ring hanging near the icon. I asked about the chain – Sergey said it was gold and had been given to him for his birthday by some friends he had in his youth. Our dialog went back in time. I learned that as a kid Sergey hung out in the neighborhood where Vovka now lives. That's where he met Vera.

"Why were you hanging out there?" I said. "Did you live there before?"

"No, it's just that almost all my friends were from there, so I dwelled there. And Vera, she lived there with my mother-in-law... her mother and her brother. My mother-in-law still lives there with Vanyok."

It turns out that Vera has a brother who is three years younger than her.

"What does her brother do?"

"Nothing, he drinks... I don't mean drinks like hell, but... He goes to work, gets a job, works a few months, starts drinking, they kick him out... so, you know, nothing... So he spends the whole summer at the dacha, where his mother cooks and pours for him... She pours for him herself, got it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, Vanyok wants a drink in the morning, and she pours him moonshine so he doesn't have to go anywhere. Vanyok drinks and sleeps..."

"Why is she getting him drunk? He's going to drink himself to death!" I was indignant.

"Well, that's my point..." Sergey looked at me through his glasses. "My mother-in-law is like that, she is a very mean woman, she has a bad temper, it was about time I took Verok away from her, otherwise she would have become like her..."

The car hit the pavement and immediately responded to the accelerator.

"Vera has a great character!" I said. "She's good! And beautiful, and she already has two children and works... So you're lucky with your wife, Seryoga!" And remembering the not yet started and already crumbling relationship with Rita, I sighed and added: "Yes, well done you and Vera! Two children already! And I still... I guess I'll end up old and won't be able to have children, I'll have to adopt one... There are people out there! Adopt children... I couldn't... though... But I still have a lot of respect for them – they are strong people, real people!"

"Come on Roman, why are you worried?" Sergey brushed me off. "What's your age? You have plenty of time! If it wasn't for Verok, I wouldn't have gotten married at all... So you'd better not get married... I even envy you. Free, with money..."

"What money is that?" I hummed. "Stop it!"

"Come on! You have your own business, part owner of a company..."

After passing the church, we turned left into a narrow alley of houses. In front of us was a platform and an open garage. We drove up to it.

"And Verok, yes, she's a good girl," Sergey said. "Gave birth to two children after all..."

"Two kids, and she's not even thirty..." I supported him.

"She'll be thirty-one this month," Sergey corrected me and got out of the car.

I got out on my side. The bag of cement went into the open trunk, the salesman got the money and we were back in the "Mazda" and drove off. Continuing the conversation, I said that Vera was still young and if they wanted, they could have a third child. Sergey was sad and said that after the second birth Vera had something wrong with her back, so there was no way to have the third.

"Two is good anyway!" I said immediately, wanting to support my partner.

After thinking for a few seconds, he decided that if the business went well, he and Vera would raise the children and then adopt a third! I was surprised by what he said. Sergey's personality immediately grew in my eyes, overshadowing the small unpleasant features of his character. The idea that I was really lucky to have such a partner grew in me to the point of mild euphoria. Sergey appeared before me in the form of a strong and noble man. I froze and stared at him in admiration.

"Yes, Roman, that's the kind of business partner you have!" Sergey said contentedly, looking at me and catching my reaction. "I can do a lot of things, you just don't know..."

We returned to the factory. Sergey backed the car up to the warehouse gate, got out, lifted the trunk lid and called: "Senya! Take it!"

The storekeeper ran frantically and began to pull the sack out. It wouldn't budge, he couldn't hold it in his hands, they slipped on the kraft paper, and the sack lay motionless.

"Take the other side," I said, and we both carried the sack to the hole.

Sergey stood up beside me, playing with the car keys in his hand.

I was thinking aloud about what I needed to make the mortar. A container – a wheelbarrow that my father and I had was in the corner of the warehouse. A shovel – the storekeeper rushed over and brought it.

"I'm going to get some sand," I said, putting the shovel in the wheelbarrow. "We need to get some water, too."

"There's a faucet at the gatehouse," Sergey said.

"Senya, ask for a bucket and bring some water, will you?" I said, taking the wheelbarrow.

"Yes, all right!" he bustled around and left the warehouse with quick steps.

"Seryoga, prepare the pit, remove the excess from there," I said.

"But how can I do that?" He threw up his hands. "You took the shovel..."

"Never mind!" I brushed him off and went to get some sand from the drift at the breach in the fence.

After putting a few shovels in the wheelbarrow, I started back. Senya came hurrying out of the gatehouse with a bucket of water. We went into the warehouse with him. Sergey was pacing around the hole, a sack of cement beside him. I stopped for a second, wanted to say something to Sergey, but I changed my mind, wheeled the cart to the pit and started working: I raked the excess out of the pit, cut a hole in the bag with a knife and began to throw the cement into the cart. The storekeeper ran out for water again, and in ten minutes we had a wheelbarrow full of mortar. All the time Sergey was standing next to me, contemplatively. I poured the rest of the water over the edges of the hole, wetting them.

"Pour some over here," Sergey said, pointing with his finger.

Senya hung around, eager to help. But there was only one man for the job. I did everything myself – I poured cement into the hole and carefully leveled the surface with a board.

"Does this look okay?" I looked at them both.

"It's great!" Senya splashed his hands.

"Yeah, it's okay," Sergey nodded and pouted.

"That's it, Senya, let it dry!" I said and stood up. "Just wash the wheelbarrow out of the cement, or it will dry up. Anatoly Vasilievich will scold me, the wheelbarrow is his."

"I'll do it, Roma, don't worry!" The storekeeper rushed to do the job.

"Shall we go?" I looked at Sergey and headed for the exit.

"Yes, let's go, because we still have our own work to do in the office," he said, and we left.

CHAPTER 24

"Let's go to 'Pelican!'" Sergey suddenly jumped out of his chair.

I agreed. All the work was done, no new things were expected that day, and it didn't seem interesting to the three of us to sit in a small room for a few hours.

"If anything, we'll be in touch!" Sergey looked at his wife. "Call Romka."

As he got behind the wheel of the "Mazda," he put on his glasses with a practiced move, deftly slipped the key into the ignition, theatrically turned his head and looked at me through the glasses, his lips barely twitching in a smile, and said: "Let's go!?"

"Yes!" I nodded, feeling that Sergey's joy at owning a car had not yet dissolved into the routine of life, but continued to invigorate him, manifesting itself in every movement. It gave his posture and gait a serene importance and displaced his restlessness. I could feel Sergey's state of mind. He wanted my participation in his joy. I didn't refuse, and from time to time I admired the car sincerely. Sergey would immerse himself in bliss and beam with satisfaction. I felt that participatory admiration was in demand, like oxygen, in all quantities. And this need drove him to make spontaneous trips with me everywhere on unimportant occasions. A week earlier, Sergey had encouraged me to come to my house to pick up a document that was not urgent. I could have brought it the next day. But Sergey insisted. And while I was going to the apartment, he started pacing near the "Mazda" that was parked in the driveway, waiting for me. My father saw us arrive and I found him smoking on the balcony. After asking, "Is this the car Sergey bought?" and getting an answer, he stood up straight and froze, looking at the "Mazda". As if sensing his interest, Sergey turned around, glanced at the balcony through his glasses, and continued walking around the site. On his way back, his face lit up, his lips twitched contentedly. I suddenly had a hunch that the real purpose of the trip was just to show off.

"I'm going to say hello to Vovka!" I said when we arrived at "Pelican".

"All right!" Sergey said admonishingly, opened his door, stretched out his leg, put his hands behind his head and relaxed.

After getting a few sheets of paper from the sales room and studying the sales, I staggered toward the office building. Vovka's yelling could be heard in the hallway. I looked into the office – several people were discussing the trade in a lively manner. I went outside and a minute later Vovka jumped out.

"What's up, bigwig, sales are booming, money is flowing?" he barked, staring at me.

Tearing myself away from the papers, I looked at my friend and smiled.

"I knooow!" Vovka said. "They are flowing! I saw your leftovers! You bring us more and more goods, you get fat! Make money, bigwigs!"

The blue "Peugeot" appeared at the entrance to the depot, drove half the distance to us, and froze. Staring at the car, we froze as well. A brunette got out.

"Wow!" I put all my thoughts into one sound.

"Wooow!!!" Vovka roared. "A juicy broad! Daddy knows who to credit!"

The brunette entered the building of the old depot office and our brains came to their senses.

"Do you think he's... crediting her?" I giggled.

"Hee-hee-hee!!!" Vovka smacked his lips. "I'd credit a woman like that a few times myself!"

Still staring at the car, I remained silent.

"Well, where did you park!?" said Vovka impatiently. "You came with that, what's his name... Seryoga!? What were you driving!? Your father is not with you now, is he?"

"No, he's not," I said, feeling a pang of conscience. "Seryoga's 'Mazda'. There it is, where we used to park..."

I stumbled over the word "we," which reminded me of "us," me and my father. Already in the past.

"Come on, let's go see what kind of 'Mazda' you bought!" Vovka barked.

We went. We passed the "Peugeot" and turned into a narrow entrance. A car came towards us. We stopped and leaned against the wall. The car slowed down as we approached the entrance. The driver was Vovka's former boss.

Bzzz – the driver's door window slid down.

"Hi," he said to me, leaning back on the headrest with confidence.

"Hello," I said, a little taken aback.

"How are you? Is everything all right?" He added friendly and obviously formal.

"Yes, everything is fine," I blurted out confusedly, thinking of Vovka.

"Well, okay," Petrovich said, looking at Vovka and adding, "All right, bye."

While I was muttering back either "bye" or "goodbye," the "Alfa Romeo" drove away.

I looked at Vovka, he was standing there with his face red to the roots of his hair.

"Hey, what is he doing here!? Didn't you say he got kicked out of 'Pelican'!?"

"Petrovich works for that chick at the 'Peugeot', she's in charge of frozen chicken legs!" Vovka said irritated and went quickly to the gates of the depot.

"Reeeally!?" I caught up with him and pulled his elbow. "Wow! I didn't know! How did he get there!?"

"She has branches all over town, and Petrovich works as a wholesale manager at one of them."

"Wow! I wonder if he's mad at you, if he knows you got him kicked out."

"I don't give a fuck, Ramses! Whether he knows it or not! He's a fuckin' faggot who takes money all by himself and doesn't share it with anyone!"

We walked out of the gate. Sergey strutted around the "Mazda" with his hands behind his back.

"Did you buy this!?" Vovka barked when we were a few meters away.

Sergey turned and walked slowly towards us, around the hood.

"Hiya!" Vovka said in response to Sergey's greeting, shaking his hand vigorously, glancing at him and staring at the car. "Well, not bad! She's all right!"

As if offering to take a look at the car, Sergey gently stepped aside, and Vovka's cell phone on his belt rang. After a short conversation on the phone, he turned somber and said: "Okay, Ramses, I'm leaving! Work's fucked me up! It's a nice car! I'll call you later," he said and staggered back to the depot.

Rita was going to the sea on Friday. Wanting to dissolve the residue of the previous events, I called her and arranged to meet her on Thursday evening. Guilty as I was, I bought a heavy bouquet of flowers from the florist and went to the summer café, accompanied by Vovka. Rita was already sitting at one of the tables with two of her friends. The meeting was quick and uneventful. Rita responded to my "hi" with a sly grin, a raised eyebrow, and a sarcastic look at the bouquet I immediately handed her. The girl twirled it in her hand and put it carelessly on the table. My spirits fell, Vovka frowned, and Rita's friends giggled. There was no trace of the desire to make things work. Resisting the urge not to leave immediately, I treated Rita to a cocktail and ordered the same for myself and Vovka. The conversation didn't work. Rita kept a cool distance with a bored look on her face. After I finished my cocktail, I wished her a nice vacation and told her I would call her.

"Okay," the girl said wearily, raising her eyebrows again.

I said goodbye in a hurry, and Vovka followed me out.

"Fuck, Ritka is so grumpy..." he said.

"We're not going to make it," I said, calm on the outside but seething on the inside.

"Let her go, I'll call her a few times and that's it. She doesn't care, and I'm not a horse to pull us forward on my own."

Vovka was silent and I burst out.

"She's fucking twisting her face! Fucking sitting there!" I said angrily.

"Come on, Ramses... She's young, that's why she's acting..."

"I don't give a fuck! That's her problem!" I cut him off and came back to reality – we were on our way to the club – my mood lifted. "We're going to the 'Skies' tonight, right, Vovan?"

"Fuck, Ramses! Of course we are!" He grinned at me. "What the fuck kind of question is that? I'm going on vacation tomorrow! When if not today?"

"You're going out with Vovan tonight as usual, aren't you?" Sergey said towards the end of Friday as he sat at his office desk aimlessly flipping through papers.

I shook my head negatively and added sourly that Vovka was going on vacation.

"Go out with a girl," Vera suggested, looking away from the monitor.

I shook my head again – the girl had gone south.

"We had a fight with her anyway!" I added, chuckling.

"Nice one, Roman!" Sergey giggled after me.

Vera was sympathetically silent.

"I'll meet someone else," I brushed it off. "There are other fish in the sea."

"Why can't you go out without Vovan?" Sergey said. "You might as well meet the new broad!"

Vera gave her husband a displeased look, the word "broad" clearly hurt her ears.

"Of course I can! He and I ain't one-egg brothers! It's just kind of boring on my own..." I thought about it and decided, "I'll probably go alone tonight... I don't want to stay at home!"

"Exactly!" Vera supported me. "Go as long as you're not married, otherwise it's over."

"That's right, Roman, go! Otherwise you'll end up with two kids like me and that's it, finished..."

Vera glanced at her husband petulantly again. I got up and went to the bathroom, and when I came back, I found Sergey doing the usual thing – poking his fingers into the fax buttons, dialing a number.

"Who are you calling?" I asked with a hidden thought swirling in my head.

"WholeSale," he muttered.

I remembered Sergey's wish – to enter frequent numbers into the fax memory, and smiled to myself – he never did. Sergey kept poking at the fax machine, but he still didn't make his job any easier. Why not?

"Seryoga, just put the numbers in the memory!" I said. "Why suffer every time?"

"Yes, Roman, I'm gonna have to," he exhaled heavily and picked up the phone.

"Let me, I'll set it up!" I said as soon as Sergey was done talking on the phone.

"Yes, Roman, please!" He immediately jumped up from his chair in relief.

We swapped places. Holding back a smile, I entered a dozen numbers into the memory of the speed dial buttons in a few minutes using the manual.

"Go ahead, take your furniture and get the fuck out of here, asshole!" My mother's words hit my ears as I crossed the threshold of the apartment. "How you've fucked me up already, if you only knew! You and your son, two assholes! Running around with your money! Fucking businessmen! Others have already bought cars and done a hundred renovations in their apartments, but we're still living in cowsheds! Sleeping on junk! Miser!"

I froze at the entrance. My mother was pacing from room to room, and my father was on the balcony.

"Why are you fighting?" I said as my mother passed by.

"Oh, you weren't asked, for fuck's sake! Shut the fuck up!" She waved me off and said over her shoulder, "As much of an asshole as your daddy!"

I clenched my teeth, boiling inside, and went to the bathroom in silence.

"Right..." I said there, shaking my head.

I couldn't remember any other life. I guess we must have lived differently once. And then all this started: yelling, cursing, insulting, swearing. And what was frightening was that there was no end in sight for such a life. "I have to get out of this house or I'll rot here," I thought, and I went out of the bathroom. My mother was approaching my father for another attack. I cautiously went into the kitchen and started to heat soup on the stove. My mother's voice came from the balcony. The same. I sat down at the table to eat.

"Fucking asshole!" my mother came into the kitchen, her face twisted in anger. "You nagged the life out of me, bitch! Why the fuck did I marry you!? We broke up twice! But yes, the devil dared me to come back to you! I thought, well, he's good, he's decent, he doesn't drink, he's smart!"

My mother fell silent and rummaged mechanically and aimlessly through the kitchen drawers, slamming each one with hatred, then picked up matches from the windowsill and glared at me.

"What are you looking at!?" She barked and walked out of the kitchen. "I'm so fucking sick of both of you! I wish I'd never seen you again! You sucked the life out of me!"

My mother rummaged through my father's clothes in the hallway, pulled out a pack of cigarettes, took two, shoved the pack back, and went into her room, slamming the door loudly.

After I ate, I went to see my father. If you hit a spot long enough, it becomes numb and insensitive. After worrying about it at first, I became more relaxed about my mother's behavior and accepted it as a given. "When I buy an apartment, I'll move out of here and forget all this and be the happiest person in the world," I thought, imagining myself lying on the couch in an empty new apartment, listening to the endless silence. Only a miracle could save me. "I'll have my own place when I'm thirty!" I repeated to myself, gritting my teeth and stepping out onto the balcony.

My father sat with his chest on the windowsill, watching the summer life of the yard. "Hey, have you collected all our money yet?" I said, sitting down on the couch at the edge.

"Yes, almost all of it," my father said, turning to me and rubbing his face with his hands as if he were sleepy. "Twenty thousand left in a few depots, and that's it."

"Do you keep it in your savings book at the bank?"

My father nodded and yawned.

"How much is there now?"

"Six hundred and twenty or thirty or so, I'll have to look it up..."

"Never mind... It's already clear," I waved my hand. "Well, not bad!"

We fell silent. My mother walked out onto the balcony, turned around, glared at both of us, and then, gritting her teeth, walked out belligerently.

"Look, maybe we really should get new beds?" I said. "Mom's right, you know. She sleeps on a piece of junk, and we have old stuff, too. Let's get new ones?"

"Maybe we will," my father replied.

There was a pause and I was about to leave when my father said: "I saw Vasily today..."

I didn't immediately realize who he was talking about. My father reminded me, adding that when they met, he bragged to him that he had bought his son an apartment. Not just bought, but cleverly sold a forty-four-meter one-bedroom apartment and bought a sixty-meter two-bedroom apartment. The house where he bought the apartment was being built at the end of our street by an unknown company, it was their first construction site. It was still under construction.

"It's like a miracle," I reacted to the news.

"He's greedy, that Vasya!" my father said.

"It's suspicious. He can get into trouble with his greed. He gives away money like that and he won't even see the apartment! Well, that's his problem..."

It could happen. New companies would often appear, start building apartment buildings, build two or three stories to be safe, collect money during that time, and disappear. The duped buyers were left to walk along the fence of the empty site and stare dejectedly at the unfinished hulk of the building.

"Were you in the army?" Sergey asked as we walked out of the warehouse on another day. It was a pleasant early-August heat. We waddled lazily toward the office, me in rubber flip-flops and Sergey in sandals. We were both wearing shorts and sleeveless shirts.

"Of course I was!" I was surprised by the question. There were a lot of guys who dodged the draft, but I never asked myself that question. A healthy guy who hadn't been in the army wasn't a man to me. The weak and sickly were another matter.

"Everything as it should be – boots, machine gun, guard duty, forced marches!" I added cheerfully.

"I was on guard duty too," Sergey said immediately.

"Where? In the army?"

"No, not in the army. We had special courses at school that selected the best before the draft who would like to serve, I immediately enrolled in the paratroopers."

"Wow!" I was amazed. "Seryoga, the paratrooper!"

"You shouldn't laugh!" He pouted a little. "We got serious training there. I even have a certificate that says I did three parachute jumps!"

"Wow!" I was more surprised, struck by another fact of my partner's life. "You were a parachutist! Really cool!"

"It was serious!" Sergey chuckled contentedly.

"Yeah, cool!" I shook my head, feeling even more respect for him. "No, I didn't have that kind of training. Well, I worked out for a few years before the army, that's all."

"Yeah, I went to the gym too," Sergey added. "When I was in boxing class."

"How much did you bench press?" I asked, then answered myself: "At eighteen I did one hundred and five. I took third place in my troop's competition..."

"Well, I did about the same, maybe a little more," Sergey said carelessly. "About a hundred and ten or a hundred and fifteen, that's about it."

"Did they teach you how to disassemble a machine gun?"

"I'm telling you, we had everything there!" Sergey said, a little irritated. "Well, what do you think, if you're a paratrooper!"

I burst into a nagging nerd and started asking questions: "How long did it take you to disassemble and assemble it? What was your standard? Actually, what was the standard, do you know?"

"Well, I don't really remember..." Sergey started. "We didn't do it against the clock..."

"Not against the clock is not interesting!" I brushed off. "Forty seconds is the standard! I disassembled and assembled it in twenty seconds! And without any fuss! You just have to know the little tricks... For example, you know how to get a ramrod fast!?"

I looked at Sergey, who was listening to my speech with a sour face and obvious disinterest.

"How did you take the ramrod out?" without getting an answer, I couldn't stop myself.

"How did I take it out?" Sergey twitched nervously. "I just took it out! And that's all!"

"Nah, too long!" I smiled smugly, getting a chance to trump knowledge. "You hit it with the palm of your hand from the bottom up! And the ramrod jumps out of the holder, then you just take it out and that's it... If you pull it like you did, it'll take at least three seconds, or even five seconds, and you'll tear your fingers off... but like this! It just pops out! It takes one second..."

We walked up to the office building and dove into its coolness.

I called Rita twice. And on the first call I understood everything. The girl communicated dryly, her one-word sentences sounded reluctant. I wished her a good rest and said goodbye. The second time, a week later and for nothing, the conversation was even shorter. "Hello-Bye." There were touches of happiness in Rita's voice that I didn't attach any significance to at the time.

For some reason, the last conversation I had with Sergey had been running through my mind for a few days. It was as if my brain was looking for inconsistencies in his words. And it found one. A hunch flew through my brain, and when we walked from the warehouse to the office, I attacked Sergey with a lot of questions.

"So you were on guard duty before the loyalty oath?"

"Well, yes, I told you, we had pre-military training there, basic military training," he answered carelessly, with the same slight irritation in his voice.

My partner's nervousness surprised me, but I put it down to my meticulousness.

"Wait! Basic military training is before the oath, it's already in the unit, but you haven't taken the oath yet, but they've already given you the uniform and they've already started bullying you!?" I half-questioned, at the same time searching my memory and looking at Sergey intently.

"So," he muttered expectantly.

"So it turns out you were not in the unit, but in the school, and already on guard with a machine gun or what?" I clarified.

"Well... Well, yes, with a machine gun," Sergey muttered again.

"How could you go on guard duty with a machine gun before taking the oath!?" I stared at him. "They don't let you hold a gun at all until you've taken the oath. Well, they might let you shoot with the instructor, but they wouldn't let you take someone else's machine gun!" I snapped.

"No, I mean, it wasn't like a machine gun, it was like... like a real one... but made of wood..."

"A wooden one!?" I almost laughed.

"Well, yes, a wooden one..." Sergey said reluctantly.

"Why did you tell me it was real!?" I was surprised and threw up my hands. "It wasn't the basic military training, but some childish outpost, like a pioneer camp! And I thought..."

We walked on in silence, fortunately the office was nearby. The pause was awkward, as if I had caught Sergey in a small lie. And I had caught him by accident, just wanting to get to the details of the vaguely described story. By the end of the day the embarrassment was gone, but it left a cloudy spot in my mind. And as is my nature, I began to rummage through it. The first thing that emerged from the blur was the scene of pouring cement into the hole in the warehouse. After turning it over in my mind, I suddenly realized that Sergey had done nothing during the work. Senya and I were responsible for the hole, Sergey was just present. The scene crept back to the spot and left me brooding.

"Did you sell all your goods or not?" I clarified, sitting in the office and looking at the sales. Sergey's goods were gone from the warehouse, and since they were in the depots, they appeared in the company's report as a debt to him. The amount was insignificant, and I decided to settle the matter immediately.

"Well, almost... A little leftover from air fresheners and such, a little something... Why?"

"Vera, write off the amount!" I said. "Seryoga will take it out of the common fund, and that's it! Right, Seryoga?"

I looked at my partner. As if he couldn't keep up with the thought, he said after a pause: "Well, we could do that..." Tapping the keys, Vera said: "That's it, done!"

Sergey sluggishly reached into his briefcase, pulled out a bundle of money and looked at his wife:

"How much is there, Vera? Eight...?"

She said the amount again.

"Well, I have no change, how can I take these kopecks?" Sergey protested.

"Well, take eight seven hundred and fifty! Then return the difference!" I offered. "See how great it turned out – you got your goods through the company, took the money from the common fund, and that's all! Otherwise, you would have had to suffer and deliver the goods yourself and then run to collect the money!"

Sergey listened to me carefully, counted the money, put it in the other pocket of his briefcase, zipped it up and said:

"Vera, I have to buy a purse, it's already uncomfortable."

After lunch, a car with a lot of barter goods rolled into the warehouse, and we decided to help Senya unload it. The three of us formed a living chain – Sergey near the car, me and Senya near the empty pallets. The driver handed over the boxes from the back of the car. We started quickly. Boxes flashed in my hands, piled up on the pallets. Sergey, standing under the morning and already hot sun, quickly began to sweat profusely and to limp.

"Wait, let's slow down a little!" he said, out of breath.

"What is it, Seryoga? The leg?" I said.

"Yup... It hurts," Sergey grimaced and looked down.

"If anything, we can switch places!" I suggested, not tired at all.

"Nah, that's not necessary," he brushed me off and added, "Senya, let's swap with you!"

Senya rushed to the car, Sergey staggered into the warehouse.

"Come on, give it to me," he said, wiping the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand.

We were done in about twenty minutes. Now there were columns of boxes to the right of the warehouse entrance. They were two meters high and stretched up to the wall.

"Done!?" said Sergey, holding his hand to his lower back.

"Yes!" shouted Senya. "That's it, Seryozha!"

Limping, Sergey headed for the exit. When I caught up with him, I asked: "What's wrong with your leg?"

"My heel broke," he grimaced, waddling.

"What do you mean, broke?"

Sergey stood up and turned his foot around – there was a three-centimeter crack in the skin.

"Geez!" I was stunned, I had never seen anything like that before. "Does it hurt a lot?"

"Like hell," Sergey grimaced and waddled off again. "You ain't seen nothing yet. Last summer they both burst at the same time, one so bad that a pencil could fit in it a centimeter." I imagined the scene and shuddered.

"Yeah, Roman, this shit happens every summer! God put a pin in me! Here!" Sergey made a movement, poking the air upward with his index finger, as if he were putting an invisible knife under someone's ribs. "And this ichthyosis too..."

"What ichthyosis???" I asked, hearing the word for the first time.

"There..." Sergey paused and pointed a finger down. "See the netting on the skin..."

I leaned forward and examined his foot. The fine combs that covered the skin above the arch made it look like the cracked surface of a waterless desert.

"Ah-ha..." I said, still not understanding. "And what is that?"

"The skin dries out quickly and becomes like this. It lacks water. I have to wash often to keep it moist. In the summer the dust gets in and it itches. I didn't even get into the army because of ichthyosis..." Sergey explained.

"So you weren't in the army!?" I stared at him in surprise, convinced from Sergey's previous stories that he had served in the army.

"They wouldn't let me, I tell you!" My partner grinned sacrificially. "You think I'm not upset!? I prepared so much and the doctors ruined it. I even begged them, but they wouldn't let me."

"Ah-ha..." I said confusedly and fell silent.

"We could also sell poisons!" Sergey said the next day, chewing his lip, sitting in a chair against the wall with his arms crossed and, as if on cue, kicking his legs.

"What poisons?" I broke off from the waybill.

"Well, poisons... From rats, mice, rodents of all kinds!" He explained, tensing and uttering: "Isect... isecti... isectin... isecticides!"

I smiled inwardly. Obviously not knowing how to pronounce the word, Sergey said it confusedly, as if he wanted to skip the word quickly to hide his ignorance.

"Insecticides?" I said.

"Yes, isecticides," he glided over the word again and added, "There's a manufacturer in the south, I worked with him at 'Sasha', delivered in spring and fall."

We quickly discussed all the details of the prospectus and by the end of the day we had the manufacturer's price list and the terms of cooperation in our hands. The last sheet of the price list, which was struggling to come out of the fax machine, got stuck in the middle due to a broken connection.

"We have to get the Internet, it's retarded to get prices by fax!" I said.

Vera supported me and at the same time suggested installing an Internet bank where you could sign payments remotely and not have to go to the bank every time. She added:

"It's also cheaper. Now we pay a thousand a month for the service, and it will be five hundred."

"Oh! It's cheaper!" Sergey perked up. "Of course, we have to get it."

Sergey and I jumped out of the office in a cheerful mood and jumped into the "Mazda".

"We've made a good start, haven't we?" I blurted out excitedly.

"What do you mean?" Sergey put on his glasses and started the car.

"We started working without any money! We took goods from all the postponed orders and started spinning them, transferring money between suppliers!" I waved my hands emotionally.

"Aha, that..." Sergey looked down the road as we passed the factory gate and rolled toward the crossing. "Well, we didn't start out of nowhere! We knew each other a little before, so we decided to team up. We chose each other, it's not just a shot in the dark. I chose you, you chose me. What did you choose me for?"

"What do you mean?" I didn't understand, looking out the window at the landscape of summer heat.

"What did you like about me?" Sergey exclaimed.

The question stuck in my mind. The word "like" and the image of Sergey, a man, didn't stick, floating apart in my head. Perplexed, I turned to my partner and said:

"What do you mean, like!?"

"Well! Like! What did you like about me? What qualities!?! Funny..."

"How can you start a business with a man because he's funny!?" I interrupted. "I never thought of you in the like/dislike category! I was after the goods! My father and I were in desperate need of a new product. We wanted to get into the aerosol business. We didn't just buy them from you. We tried them and decided to look for a manufacturer, and then 'Sasha' collapsed, and here it is – 'Aerosib'! I immediately told my father, 'We have to get 'Aerosib', and he agreed. Then I met you and talked to you. You happened to have this exclusive contract... We thought about it and decided that we could merge! 'Aerosib' is a big piece! We didn't want to miss it..."

When I finished, I stared out the window again. We drove the remaining meters to the crossing in silence. Surprised by the silence, I looked at Sergey. He was driving and chewing

his lip. His eyes were hidden behind his glasses. As soon as we reached the crossing, it rang its bells, flashed its red semaphores and lowered the barrier. We stopped. I hummed.

"What?" Sergey said.

"No reason... I just remembered..." I hummed again. "Women never cease to amaze me!"

The next minute Sergey heard the story of my trip to the market with Rita and the girl's opinion that I was dressed wrong.

"Roman, well, she's right," he said. "Would you go out with a chick whose clothes suck?"

"Fuck, Seryoga, my clothes don't suck! I just don't dress the way she wants me to!"

"I mean, you're right... I didn't put it that way... She thinks so. You actually dress okay, you have taste, but it's so, so special, and she likes that there were white pants, white shoes, not those pegs of yours. Well, she's like that... chicks, who the hell knows what they want?!"

A shunting locomotive crawled across the crossing into the city.

"I used to try to look good before Verok," my partner continued. "I always came to a date in a jacket with a flower and a choker!"

"What choker!?" I was surprised.

"Well, a tie!" Sergey imitated a tie worn from the neck down with his hand.

"It's a funny name," I chuckled, "I've never heard it before."

The crossing opened. An elderly woman in a yellow vest came out of the cabin with a flag in her hand, held it up in front of her, and stood frozen. We passed by.

"I pictured you in a jacket with a flower on it..." I smiled.

"Why are you laughing?" Sergey smiled too. "What times we had in the past! The nineties! The devastation! I used to deliver concrete to construction sites in a 'ZIL' truck..."

It turned out that when he was eighteen, Sergey worked for about six months in a building and construction department, getting little pay, but moonlighting and managing to buy an imported jacket that cost...

"Like a mo-onth's wa-age-es!" he spelled it out for effect, and after a pause he continued. "I remember the first time. I was driving the 'ZIL' to the mortar station for loading, it was filling up with concrete, I was standing on the side smoking... A woman came up, I knew she was a forewoman from the neighboring construction site... She said: 'Would you like to make some money?' I look around, I'm scared, it's the first time I've been offered something like that. I don't know anything, I've been working for about a week... I'm standing there shaking and I'm like, 'Sure...' She said, 'Well, don't take the mortar there, but here...' She gave me the address... I went, dumped the concrete on some private property, they gave me the money... I counted it, almost a month's salary... and I bought a jacket...then I drove a few more times – it was okay. I got money, bought sneakers, started smoking imported cigarettes... 'Camel', 'Marlboro'..."

I looked out of the window and listened with interest, but Sergey suddenly stopped talking.

"Why did you leave?" I looked at him.

"I drove the 'ZIL' once, I don't remember where, but with a full body, carrying concrete somewhere..." Sergey began, choosing his words carefully. "I stopped at a traffic light, turned off the engine and put on the handbrake, but it didn't hold... and the road was going uphill... and the 'ZIL' rolled backwards... I heard some yelling behind me, started it, was about to put the first one in to move it forward... and there's this hand in the window! Pop!"

Sergey acted out what he said, ducked his hand from the window to the keys in the ignition, said smiling: "And pulled the keys out of the ignition! I didn't even have time to realize it..."

"Did you hit someone behind you!?" I guessed.

"Yes. It was the hand of the 'Zaporozhets' driver who was behind me at the traffic light! He told me later that he was honking at me when the 'ZIL' moved, and when he understood that I couldn't hear him, he ran towards the cabin... but he didn't make it in time anyway."

"So how badly did you hit the 'Zaporozhets'?" I clarified, feeling the laughter coming on.

"Hit it... I ran over it and flattened its front half like a tin can... I was loaded with... c-o-n-c-r-e-t-e!!!"

We both laughed out loud. Sergey choked on his laughter, but it broke through. I choked in the same way and let out short chuckles. Almost calming down, Sergey looked at me and burst out laughing again. Thin trickles ran down his cheeks from under his glasses.

"Roman, damn it!" Sergey said after taking a breath, taking off his glasses and wiping away his tears.

"What Roman!? You crushed the 'Zaporozhets' like a can, not me!" I said, and Sergey immediately burst out laughing again. I followed him.

After about three minutes we got tired of laughing.

"Whew!" Sergey caught his breath and sniffed his nose.

"Well, I'll be damned!" I exhaled. "'ZIL'... with concrete... over 'Zaporozhets'..."

And we started laughing again.

As we pulled up to the 'Fort' gatehouse, we barely had time to put on our serious expressions. The guard looked at the two stiff faces, made a note in the visitor's book, gave us a pass, pushed a button, and the barrier went up.

"They've settled in nicely here!" I said as we parked and got out of the car. "It's a big place! And the buildings are new..."

"Yeah," Sergey said. "And three years ago they sat in a small shop..."

We split up – I went to the salesroom, and Sergey went to the office to get the money.

"Well, go and see Katyukha, then..." I adopted Sergey's way of addressing the depot manager in a buddy-buddy way. "Talk about salts and poisons, okay?"

"Yes, I will!" Sergey waved the car keys carelessly and walked into the office.

I was in the salesroom for about twenty minutes before Sergey showed up and handed me two sheets of paper with our remaining goods from the depot. I quickly scanned the lines – sales were increasing week by week. The smell of money sent an endorphin rush through my brain.

"The dichlorvos are all sold!" Sergey said, breathing loudly. "We urgently need to get more while the weather is good! And we're running out of dichlorvos, the cheapest! Fuck! What are we going to do?"

By that time, all manufacturers had switched to alcohol-filled cylinders, and only "Aerosib", as an anachronism, produced a line of kerosene-based dichlorvos. It smelled terrible when sprayed, but because of the price, it sold five times more than all the other "Aerosib" dichlorvos combined. And we had the highest mark-up on it.

"Let's order..." I answered my partner's questioning look.

He stammered sluggishly – he said it might rain in a week, the fall would start, and then sales of dichlorvos would drop immediately.

"So? Do we stop working with 'Aerosib'?" I smiled.

"Well, no, we don't..."

I suggested not to take too much, to order carefully.

"What, we buy back the dichlorvos if there are any left over from the summer, right?" I nodded and said that there would probably be a price increase at the factory by the new season. Sergey confirmed that there would be a ten percent increase.

"Well, you see, we'll make another twenty percent just on the revaluation of the goods!"

"Yeah... Right," Sergey exhaled. "So we decided, let's order?"

"Sure!" I smiled and patted my partner on the shoulder. "Let's go."

On the way back, our conversation about women, the jacket and the choker resumed.

"So, Roman, you should always look good in front of chicks!" Sergey said.

"Otherwise, if I look like the driver of a 'ZIL', they won't put it out," I looked at him and grinned. "It's just that I look norma..."

"You said it right! I always looked great! By the time the chicks found out I was working as a 'ZIL' driver, I had already managed to bone them," Sergey said as if to sum it up.

I wondered. Well, I understood what was said, but the word "bone" made me shiver inside. It sounded cynical. Calculating.

"Weren't you eighteen at the time?" I asked for some reason.

"Yeah, about that," Sergey waved his hand and put it back on the lever.

"Eighteen years old," I thought and remembered my adulthood, when I hadn't even had my first sex yet.

CHAPTER 25

On Friday, August 19, I came to work wearing light blue jeans, black shoes, and a black sleeveless t-shirt. I was carrying a briefcase.

"Wow! Well, Roman, you're a handsome man!" exclaimed Vera as I entered the office.

"Why are you all dressed up?" my partner stared at me.

"What do you mean, why?" I retorted, pushed the briefcase in the niche of the cabinet to Sergey's briefcase, and sat down by the door. "You said yourself I should always look good, so I do!"

Sergey shook his head, smiled, put his elbow on the table and continued to study the paper in front of him, resting his forehead in the palm of his hand. After a moment he said:

"Anyway... I have a rough idea of what to order, what do you think?"

I took the sheet handed to me and ran my eyes over it.

"Well, okay," I nodded. "Go ahead, order it! Let it be so."

"This is the amount of dichlorvos we order?" Sergey clarified.

"Well, sure, we've already decided, haven't we?" I threw up my hands.

"Well, I thought I'd clarify, just in case! What if you didn't understand something in the order?"

"I understand everything, call your friend, otherwise we'll be without goods in two weeks!"

After faxing the order, we received word from the south in the afternoon that the first batch of insecticide had been shipped, that the truck was on its way, and that it would be passing through our town that night.

"So how are we going to pick it up?" Sergey looked at me.

The goods were to be reloaded on the highway. I wondered.

"We just have to decide what to do!" Sergey added impatiently, wiggling his butt on the chair as if dancing.

"Yes, I hear you," I nodded, "maybe we should ask Petya? Let's pay him, that's all."

"I've already talked to him," Sergey said hurriedly, as if waiting for that sentence. "He can't, he's going to his dacha somewhere for the weekend, I don't know..."

"That's too bad..." I said. "We could ask my father... for a fee, of course..."

"Would Anatoly Vasilievich agree?" Sergey was immediately interested.

"I don't know, I can call and ask him..." I shrugged.

"Well, is he busy?" My partner looked at me carefully.

"I don't know, unlikely... He's probably at home..." I shrugged again.

"What is Anatoly Vasilievich doing these days?" said Sergey.

"You know," I shrugged, "he collects debts for our goods. Maybe something else, I'm not really interested in asking him about it..."

"Well, maybe he works every day from morning till night, carries some goods, tired, lies down to rest, and here we are with our garbage?" Sergey said with care.

"No, I don't think he does anything like that," I said.

"Oh, well, if that's the case, find out!" Sergey kindly threw up his hands. "If Anatoly Vasilievich agrees, that would be great! We will certainly pay him!"

I called my father. In a short, dry dialog, he agreed to help us.

We finished work at five. Sergey drove the car through the center, and half an hour later I found myself in the office of the Internet provider. After filling out the necessary paperwork and receiving assurances from the company employee that we would be connected to the network next week, I went outside. The end of the work week, the center of the city, the summer heat of about thirty degrees – it was a perfect evening. I could feel the relaxed Friday vibe in the people walking leisurely. I went to the kiosk and bought an ice cream. I didn't want to go home. I lifted my head, squinted my eyes, and looked up at the sky. "You're some kind of freak," I heard in my head. I became somber and shook my head, trying to shake off the delusion, and walked across the street to the square. Thoughts of my failed relationship with Rita popped into my head. For the umpteenth time, I tried to figure out what I had done wrong, but I couldn't find the answer. I knew it wasn't all smooth sailing, but I didn't understand what I had done wrong. I just wanted to turn a bad page in my life and start a new one. "Now I'm going to sit on the bench and look at the girls passing by, and I'm going to meet one I like," I decided.

She showed up about fifteen minutes later. The girl approached from the same direction I'd come. A brunette, about one hundred and seventy centimeters tall, blue eyes, face and chest lightly freckled. A dress of many thin red threads, like a fisherman's net, encircled her figure, accentuating her C-size breasts in every line. The girl in red walked past me with a polished walk, hips swaying like in a movie. I jumped up as if stung. She smirked subtly at my reaction. The black stiletto heels and the red pedicure and manicure completed the image of a Latin American samba dancer. The girl walked stately, carrying herself with obvious dignity. "Probably a dancer," I summarized, trying to calm the galloping thought: "Now those are boobs!"

The girl crossed the street, looking both ways and scanning me again out of the corner of her eye. I slowly followed her and caught up with her around the corner of the next house.

"Miss, may I introduce myself?" I said the phrase, worn out by all generations of men, in a mundane way.

"You may..." the girl stammered, stopped and smiled again.

"I like you very much, my name is Roma, and you?"

"Lilya," the girl said with a slight speech impediment on the "l".

Making a tremendous effort to look into the girl's eyes and not down the neckline of her dress, I suggested we meet that evening. The eyes! I was even afraid of them. The color of blue steel. In contrast to the raven black hair, they made an indelible impression.

"I can't today, I'm going to a shaping class at the fitness club," the brunette said.

I offered to write down my phone number. The girl agreed. Taking the phone out of her purse and raising it to chest level, she said: "Ready."

I said my number. For some reason, I thought the girl was not going to write it down, just pretend. But she was, her finger movements matching the digits of my number.

"Where were you looking at just now?" the girl said suddenly as she finished and looked me straight in the eye with curiosity.

"At your hand... To see if you were writing down my number or pretending to..."

"Ah-ha..." she said nonchalantly. "And I thought you were looking at my breasts."

Surprised, I shrugged and said: "No, I wasn't."

She didn't believe me, I could tell. And she was even disappointed in my answer with a series of quick, barely perceptible facial movements. She put the phone back in her purse.

"Call me, see you, take care!" I smiled and walked back.

I didn't turn around, but my heart rejoiced! I remembered the color of the girl's eyes and shuddered again. But the big breasts, the snow-white smile, the red, puffy lips overshadowed everything, even the flecks. The image of Rita appeared in my mind. I grimaced, chased it away and started thinking about Lilya. Strangely, I wasn't worried if she would call me or not. I didn't even care. And when a guy doesn't care, girls sense it and always call.

I breezed home, ignored another stream of profanity from my mother, took a shower, grabbed a quick bite to eat, discussed the details of the night trip with my father, and arrived at "Clear Skies" around ten. Rita was already back from vacation and working. I saw her and she saw me. We both understood everything just by looking at each other.

"Hey, Rita," I said cheerfully, understanding the reason for my mood.

"Hi," she grimaced, as if she'd seen something uninteresting, and put the maximum amount of disappointment in her eyes. She succeeded. It made me laugh, though.

"How was your vacation?" I said in a friendly way.

"Wonderful!" Rita said satisfied.

"That's good," I smiled and said the main thing. "So? Are we done?"

"Yes, we are," Rita said as casually as possible. "Sorry, I have no time, I have to work."

"All right, I won't keep you any longer," I nodded, "all the best, good luck."

"Likewise," she muttered and disappeared into the crowd with the tray.

And then I felt incredibly relieved. My feelings for Rita died, I didn't care about her anymore, and I went to the bar in the grotto. Sergey called just before midnight – the car with the goods was coming to town. I called my father, and an hour later I dived into that so familiar cabin. My father and I arrived at the loading point on the country road when the truck and the "Mazda" were already there. It took about twenty minutes to get the goods into the "GAZelle" and everyone left in a hurry.

Lilya called me Saturday afternoon. We had a nice little chat and I suggested that we meet in the evening and go bowling. The girl agreed.

Being five minutes late for our first date and walking at a brisk pace, I turned the corner and almost hit Lilya from behind. The girl was walking with a friend and turned around at the sound of my footsteps. Her face showed displeasure.

"Hi, Lilya!" I said a little out of breath. "Sorry I'm a little late."

Ignoring the apology and greeting, Lilya introduced her friend.

"Good evening!" I replied and added, "Well, shall we go bowling?"

"Yes, let's go," Lilya said and nodded.

The nearest club was booked up, so we went to another one. I sneaked a glance at my new acquaintance. With her hair pulled back in a ponytail and almost no makeup, she didn't look so spectacular. A yellow t-shirt with long sleeves. A black flared skirt below her knees, embroidered with beads and sequins, reeked of something old-fashioned. The black shoes only reinforced my feeling – the heavy, low-heeled shoes seemed to have been brought back from the 1950s. "Tasteless," I thought to myself.

After passing the park, we crossed the avenue and ended up in a small bowling alley with six lanes and one free lane.

"Are we staying?" I looked at Lilya.

"Yeah, this will do," she waved her hand ceremoniously.

I liked the girl, so I was nervous and kept looking at her and smiling. When she changed her shoes, Lilya looked at me a few times and gave me a wry grin.

"Well? Let's start!/? Ready?!" I said, rubbing my hands.

"We've actually been ready for a long time," Lilya said dramatically.

The evening began. During the game I kept looking at Lilya. She didn't seem to be very interested in me. Sometimes our eyes met and then Lilya had the same smirk on her face. Lilya responded to my sentences, but mechanically and without interest, not letting the dialog stop her from throwing another ball. We played two games, had some cocktails and went outside. Lilya maintained a stately, slightly aloof demeanor. I even liked it, I wanted to overcome the distance between us and get closer in anticipation. The evening ended with a short walk. After that, the picker-upper I knew drove everyone home. Lilya lived in the old part of town, where the hillside was densely populated with private houses. The road took us down to the reservoir, getting worse, narrower and more winding. The asphalt ended, then gravel, and the last hundred meters of the descent turned out to be two dirt ruts. "What a shithole," I thought.

"Stop here!" Lilya ordered from the back seat.

I got out first, like a doorman, opened the door and held out my hand. Her cold hand with thin fingers lay in it. The first touch of our hands. Always interesting. Whether you like it or not. My mind immediately formed an opinion, I was surprised, but I let the reaction pass me by. I led Lilya from the car along the rain-washed path to the end of the street, to a one-story wooden house. Five meters from the gate we stopped and exchanged a series of hackneyed phrases: "Thanks for the evening," "I'll call you tomorrow," "Bye." Lilya raised her hand and waved with her fingers. I turned and walked to the car.

Before I fell asleep I thought about Lilya. I liked her. Not that I fell in love with her. But the strong affection I felt was enough to develop a more serious feeling. I attributed the coolness of the first date to the presence of her friend and decided to spend the next meeting with her alone. I was thinking more and more about a serious relationship and a family. The misfire with Rita didn't diminish my passion. So I decided to take this new chance with all the responsibility and seriousness I could muster.

Vovka returned from vacation. I didn't want my friend to be forgotten because of my new girlfriend, so I took him on our next date. On the way, Vovka bombarded me with questions about the girl, but when he saw Lilya, he mumbled and fussed. The evening began with a walk along the avenue. I talked about myself, and the girl talked about herself. Vovka pushed us and added his dirty jokes and soldier humor. Lilya responded with a sensual smile and fluttering of her long eyelashes. My mentioning of my business, along with Vovka's enthusiastic assent and the inevitable "bigwig", brought an interested look of favor on Lilya's face. She immediately mentioned her older brother, who, she said, was also in business and very successful. Lilya turned out to be a doctor. She worked in Moscow, and literally the day before we met, she came to visit her parents for a two-week vacation. I was upset: in a couple

of weeks she would be back in Moscow and goodbye to our relationship! But remembering my serious attitude, I immediately pushed away defeatist thoughts. Lilya boasted – she graduated from the medical academy with honors, studied better than anyone else in graduate school, and through many connections got a place in a Moscow hospital. She grew in my eyes to be an intelligent and educated girl, pouring over the story in medical terms. At midnight, after a visit to a café, we were back on the avenue for a walk, and the picker-upper took us again along the familiar route. I walked Lilya to the gate, wanted to kiss her on the cheek, but didn't dare. As if she had read my thoughts, Lilya smiled again. We said goodbye.

As soon as I got back into the taxi, Vovka jumped up in the back seat like a baboon and screamed in my ear: "Fuck, Ramses, fucking awesome broad!"

The next two weeks flashed through my mind in a merry-go-round I had never experienced before. Barely surviving the workday, I flew to meet Lilya. A walk, a café, another walk, another café or club. And so every night until two or three in the morning. Vovka hung out with us. In the morning I woke up at eight and half asleep I dragged myself to work. Other events receded into the background, and only fragments of them entered my consciousness. At first the money flowed out of my pocket unnoticed, but then it flowed as if through a sieve.

"Roman, have you been on the racket or something?" Sergey said, pushing his eyebrows together with a smile when I offered to take part of my salary early.

"Well..." I joked, "I have this new mistress, I have to keep her entertained!"

"Is she any beautiful!?" Sergey crossed his arms on his chest, chewed his lip in anticipation of an answer, and immediately said to his wife: "Vera, write off five thousand rubles from me and Roman's payroll!"

"You already took it all in August!" she stared at her husband.

"Then write it off in September," I said. "We'll just take the money early..."

"All right, as you say!" Vera threw up her hands.

"Vera, write it off, will you?" Sergey waved his hand hastily. "Romka is in need. He has love there, you see. We can't leave him without money."

Sergey laughed and Vera smiled understandingly and took out her notebook.

"Make it seven thousand each," I told her. "Seryoga, let's take seven, or I won't have enough."

"What kind of woman is that?" He raised his eyebrows again, put his hand in his briefcase and began to count the money. "Are you taking it from your half?"

"Yes, from my half!" I nodded. "Great woman! A doctor! Works in Moscow!"

"Oh! Well, I see!" Sergey said, putting the amount in the other pocket of the briefcase.

The days flew by. Cafes, bowling alleys, billiards, clubs. Lilya smiled benevolently at me, kept up the conversation and expressed her firm and decisive opinion on every topic.

"Do you have a cell phone, Lilya?" I asked her on the third day of our acquaintance. "I always call you at home. But what if you're not at home..."

"It's okay, call me at home," she brushed me off. "I don't turn on my cell phone here, or they'll call me from work and bother me..."

On the fifth day I called Lilya again. When I heard a man's "hello" on the phone, I said hello and asked if I could speak to the girl.

"Lilechka?" The man said in a soft and calm voice. "Just a moment."

"Hello, yes?" I heard a familiar voice on the phone.

"Hi, Lilya!" I said. "Is that your dad who just picked up the phone?"

"Hi, yes, my dad, why?" Lilya tensed.

"No, nothing, he sounds like a nice guy!" I exclaimed.

"Oh, well, yes, my dad is nice," the girl said mechanically.

We quickly arranged to meet tonight, and I forgot about her father for a few days, until the phone call with Lilya's mother.

"Hello? Yes?" I heard a metallic, rough woman's voice on the phone.

I instinctively pulled my ear back and shrank inward – a cold rush came over me.

"Hello, may I speak to Lilya, please?" I said.

The receiver on the other end slammed against the table and the footsteps faded away.

"Yes?" said Lilya's panting voice a minute later.

A couple of hours later, she and I met and strolled through the quiet streets of downtown. Vovka was on duty at the depot that day, and he didn't get off until nine at night.

"Your mother is such a serious woman," I delicately expressed my ambivalent impression of the day's call. "She sounded like a commander."

"What do you mean, serious?" Lilya looked at me intensely with her completely blue eyes that I still had to get used to, tossed a lock of hair back from her face, and quietly added: "Yes, my mother is a strict character."

"Yeah, I've noticed that," I said with a grin, "and your dad, on the other hand, seemed very gentle to me."

"My dad is just very well-mannered and intelligent, he's a very good doctor," Lilya said. "Everybody loves him at the hospital, all the staff. My dad is very fond of my mom."

As if from memory, a smile appeared on Lilya's face, and suddenly the girl became emotional, as if coming to life, and continued: "Can you imagine, once at work a woman confessed her love to him, and he brought her and introduced her to my mother and said that he loved my mother very much and that they could not have anything. So funny! Can you believe that? That's how much he loves her!"

"Well, yeah," I reacted to the ambiguous story, "your dad is wonderful..."

At ten o'clock Vovka came running to us like a scalded cat. The three of us chose a cozy café and stayed there until midnight. A call to the picker-upper, and me and Lilya were back at the gate of her house. I reached out to touch her cheek. Lilya turned her face slightly. I almost pecked her ear with my lips and went to the car. The aftertaste of the date was mixed, I didn't want to go home and soon Vovka and I showed up at "Clear Skies". The evening was in full swing. I found Rita as usual with my eyes. She noticed me right away, running between the tables with a tray. I endured the girl's indifferent gaze, nodded hello and passed by.

"Ritka's looking at you!" Vovka grinned as soon as we occupied the arch in the grotto.

"I don't give a fuck!" I muttered. "Let her look, it's her problem."

The next night I borrowed five thousand from Vovka and we blew it at once in a cafe and some clubs. The total attention of the two guys made Lilya glow. In the last club, she scolded the waitress for her sloppy service. Lilya looked at the girl so haughtily that I felt uncomfortable. The waitress blushed and made a fuss about us. I was in a bad mood, but I didn't show it. Vovka flew into a rage – he yelled and told Lilya all sorts of stories about work and hunting. That night I felt tired for the first time, and at three in the morning I felt weak and tripped out.

In the morning I could barely open my eyes. I got up mechanically, took a shower, fried some eggs, ate them, drank some tea, and drove to work. My stomach hurt a little more than usual from the alcohol. My heart was pounding. My head felt heavy, like it was filled with lead.

"Seryoga, let's take another ten grand," I suggested in the middle of the day, as soon as we were done with our daily business. "Since I borrowed from Vovka, I have to pay him back."

"Roman went all out!" Vera smiled.

"Come on..." I brushed off, not having the strength to justify myself.

"It's okay, Romych!" Sergey encouraged me and immediately put his hand into his briefcase. "How much did you say we should take?"

"Ten each, because I owe Vovka a nickel, I have to give it to him," I muttered.

"When is your Lilya leaving for Moscow?" said Sergey.

"In a week... I think..." I mumbled again.

"Well, nickel is not enough for a week!" Sergey said firmly. "Maybe we'll take fifteen each? Look, we have money, we can take it..."

I thought about it. The proposal seemed reasonable.

"Yeah, let's take fifteen each!" I waved my hand doomily.

"Vera, write off fifteen thousand each, we can't leave Romka penniless with such a woman, can we?" Sergey smiled at me, counted fifteen thousand and put it in a separate pocket of the briefcase.

Fifteen grand ran out on Wednesday, the last day of summer. And Sergey and I, in his words, "dived back into the common fund".

On Friday I called Lilya and was repeatedly greeted by her mother's metallic voice.

"Lilya!? Yes, sure!" She barked into the phone and shouted: "Lilya! It's for you!"

The evening was fun as usual. The three of us walked around, changed places, danced, and finally decided to have a barbecue tomorrow. After supporting Vovka's idea, Lilya shouted "Hurrah, hurrah, hurrah!" and clapped her hands like a little girl.

I arrived at Vovka's house at ten o'clock on Saturday morning. He was already busy packing a bag that was lying on the floor in the middle of the room, as if he were going on a hike.

"Did you get everything?" I checked.

"Yeah, I fucking got everything! There's two kilos of meat in there! I prepared it yesterday!"

"Let me give you a hand. What else do we have to put in?" I offered.

"I think that's about it! We'll buy cucumbers, tomatoes, some greens and that's it!"

Vovka exhaled and looked around the bag.

"Did you get skewers?" I said.

"Yes! I did! They're down there!" Vovka brushed off.

Half an hour later, we were already downtown at the meeting place. Lilya was running late.

"Fuck!!!" Vovka suddenly barked.

"What!?" I stared at my friend, fumbling with the bottom of the bag.

"I left the skewers at home!!!" He said, blushing from the effort.

"Fuck, Vova, what the hell!? Where are we going to get them now!?" I said and started to look around.

We were standing at the main entrance of a large hypermarket.

"There must be some here!" I said, pulling the bag and Vovka with me. "Let's go look!"

We wandered around the store for a while, looking for the right department, until I stumbled upon a counter with an "Information" sign. A girl was sitting behind the counter. I dragged the bag and Vovka to the counter. A tall brunette of pleasant appearance in her twenties, with straight black hair below her shoulders, smiled at us kindly, got a little confused, and in response to my question about the skewers said that she had only been working here for the second day.

"All right, it's okay, we'll find it ourselves!" I muttered. "Let's go, Vova, let's look for it!"

The counter was almost as high as Vovka, only his head stuck out. Vovka looked at me, at the girl, and began to blink in confusion. I pulled him away by the bag. Vovka absent-mindedly grabbed the handle at his side and followed me sluggishly, muttering "girl".

"Girl what?" I said as we walked away from the counter.

"The girl is pretty," Vovka mumbled.

"Oh yeah! She's all right!" I supported him, but after dragging him a few steps, I realized. "Do you like her!?"

"Yes, she's pretty... Very pretty," Vovka was embarrassed, blushed and stared at the ground.

"Then why are you stalling!?" I hummed. "Don't sweat it! Go get her phone number!"

I looked in the direction of the counter. The girl smiled shyly at us. Vovka hesitated.

"Vova, go ahead, for fuck's sake! We still need to buy skewers and Lilya will be here soon!" I snapped at my friend and pushed him towards the counter. "Get her phone number, tell her you'll call her later!"

He took a chance and staggered over to the counter as if he were about to be executed. I thought only of the skewers, turning my head and running my eyes over the department signs, trying to figure out which one was the right one.

"That's it," Vovka's voice echoed behind me, "I got it."

I turned around and he was beaming with happiness.

"Well, that's good! Otherwise, you'd be standing there for another hundred years! Let's go, there's a section over there, there might be some skewers!" I grabbed the bag, but Vovka grabbed the handle from his side and dragged me along. "What's her name anyway?"

"Lera," he said cheerfully, discreetly correcting himself, "Valeria."

We bought skewers, waited for Lilya and took a taxi to the country side of the park. There, in the woods, we found a place with logs and an old fireplace, where we settled down.

The evening was a success. The campfire was lit, the barbecue was cooked and eaten. Vovka made a fuss, chatted more than usual and was courteous to Lilya. She graciously accepted his efforts, laughed at all his jokes and affectionately called him "Vovchik". I fell into a deep thought for a while – summer was over, Lilya would be gone, winter would come and I would have to deal with my private life again. When darkness fell, I didn't notice. The fire burned out. It suddenly got cooler, the darkness closed in around us, and the voices of the people in the park fell silent. It was ten to ten. It was time to make tracks.

We extinguished the fire and the darkness became pitch black.

"How are we going to get out of here?" said Lilya reasonably. "I can't see a thing."

"We'll think of something!" I said cheerfully, took off my shirt, wrapped it around a stick, poured the rest of the liquid to light the fire and ordered: "Vovan, light it!"

He held up his lighter, the torch flashed and drove the darkness five meters around.

"Wow!!!" roared Vovka. "That's more like it, Ramses! Smart thinking!"

"Awesome!" Lilya chirped, clapping her hands enthusiastically.

"Follow me! Time to hit the road!" I said solemnly, like in children's movies about pirates, and we walked single file through the forest.

After a few minutes we came out of the woods. The park was nearly deserted. A dozen latecomers like us were crowding the exit of the park at the trailhead. I felt cold. Goosebumps ran down my bare torso.

"Are you cold?" Vovka grinned.

"No, I'm fine," I lied. "We should call a taxi..."

Vovka did it. Lilya sat down on the bench, crossed her legs and shivered, her T-shirt no longer protecting her from the September chill. I took Vovka's jacket and threw it over the girl's shoulders.

"Thank you," she said, smiling and looking down at the ground.

I crouched down in front of Lilya, took her ankle and slowly ran my hand up, freezing just below the knee.

"Tomorrow you'll be gone, and that's it..." I said, feeling my face widen into a guilty, embarrassed smile.

"Well, I'll be back..." Lilya said, grinning, lifting her head and starting to stare at the passing cars behind me.

I looked at the girl and two contradictory feelings were fighting in my head. On the one hand I liked Lilya, she was striking and that attracted me. On the other hand, the bell was ringing in my head. I tried not to notice the disturbing sound that echoed in the moments I deliberately ignored. A chill ran through my body and I shivered and looked at Lilya again. Her blue eyes looked everywhere but at me. The bell in my head rang and I clenched my teeth – it went silent. I felt sick at heart. I turned away from Lilya and stared at the street. The bell in my head rang again, and angrily I mentally crumpled it up and threw it away.

A taxi pulled up. Lilya and I sat in the back, Vovka in the front. Immediately I felt warm, the goosebumps on my skin disappeared and I warmed up. My anger disappeared with the coolness. I turned to Lilya, smiled and took her hand. The girl smirked and I forgot all my worries.

When we said goodbye at her house at three o'clock in the morning, Lilya offered me her cheek as a courtesy. I became bolder and pressed my lips against hers. Lilya blushed and smirked.

"I'll call you..." I bleated.

"Why call, just text me," the girl practically suggested.

My phone didn't support text messaging, but Lilya solved everything – she offered me to buy a second phone with text messaging and I agreed. We said goodbye, and on Sunday, September 4th, I bought the cheapest phone I could find, so that it would only be able to send texts and make calls.

"How fast, well done," Lilya said and then added sadly, "And I'm leaving today."

"Shall I come to the station to see you off?" I said hurriedly.

"What for!?" Lilya was surprised with a tone that immediately became that of her mother. "Don't! My family will see me off. My mom and dad and my brother and his wife. Why would you do that?"

"Why would you do that?" It repeated twice in my head, and it was like a sobering experience.

"Really? Well, okay," I mumbled. "Bye. Have a safe journey!"

"Yeah, bye, I'll be hearing from you!" I heard a routine sentence, and then she added poetically: "And thanks for the wonderful vacation!"

But I couldn't hear those words anymore. The resentment came from within and crushed my fervor like a wave of water crushing a flame.

That same day, my father and I bought two couches and a bed for my mother.

"Why did you buy me this bed!?" my mother screamed as we put the purchases together in her room. "I don't like it! Get it the fuck out of here!"

"You don't like it!? Why didn't you come with us and choose the one you like!?" my father couldn't take it anymore and yelled. "Why the fuck have you been lying here like a deck for five years!!! Letting your hair grow!!! Like a scarecrow! Get a haircut! Clean yourself up! Clean up your room! Made a pigsty! Knee deep in filth! You were offered to come with us and choose a bed! You didn't want to! Then sleep on what we bought!"

My father left my mother's room, slamming the door violently and whispering desperately:

"Oh, fudge, what a stupid woman..."

I stopped understanding my mother at all. The surrealism in the family had reached its peak. My father was right – my mother had sunk to a point beyond which there was no return to normal life. For days on end, she would lie on the bed in her room under the covers and sleep. Or she would stay awake and watch her small television, which seemed to run 24 hours a day.

I woke up from my delusion on Monday.

"Your fiancée has left, hasn't she?" Vera looked at my long face and felt sorry for me.

"Yes, she's gone," I muttered, shivering in the chair by the door.

Sergey took his eyes off the papers and looked at me carefully.

"How are you now?" Vera said with a touch of sympathy.

"Here," I took the new phone out of my pocket, "I'll text and call her."

"How much money did you spend with her?" said Sergey.

"I have no idea..." I was surprised by the question and shrugged. "I didn't count, I took it from the common fund, count it yourself, how much is there, I don't know..."

"Listen, Verok," Sergey looked at his wife. "I think we should buy me a phone, you and I use only one. It is uncomfortable. And you can keep this one."

"Buy it if you need it," she smirked.

"You should buy one for Vera too!" I interrupted. "Because this one is already junk, the screen is still black and white. Even my shit has a color screen! It costs pocket change – three thousand!"

The computer suddenly clattered with a distinctive sound, as if it were puffing up from exertion.

"By the way, we can buy a computer, we were going to!" I remembered.

"Yes, we could buy a computer," Vera gently supported me.

"Vera, not could, we definitely should!" I cut her off. "Why are you sitting at that crap, it already doesn't work, it creaks, smokes, it's about to die! If the drive fails, all the information will be lost, you'll have to restore all the invoices again!"

"If the computer breaks down, will the information be lost?" Sergey was worried.

"It depends on how it breaks!" I shrugged. "If the hard disk is gone, that's it, deep shit!"

Sergey thought about it, sighed and said reluctantly:

"Yes, we have to buy a new computer, this one is too old..."

"Let's go to the warehouse, Seryoga!" I said, slapping my hands on the armrests of my chair. "Because the salts are coming soon, we have to decide on the place for them."

"Roman, tell me!" Sergey began as soon as we were outside. "We're bringing in salts now, we've brought in poisons, 'Aerosib' is coming, we're going to buy the leftovers from them..."

"So what's up?" I said, walking briskly.

"Do we have the money for all this? Well, do you have the money in case we have to pay for all this stuff?"

"We'll manage just fine, Seryoga. We won't need the money, you'll see!"

"God forbid if we do. But what if..."

"Seryoga, there is no 'if' - we are doing well! Everything we bring in sells well! There are no loose ends! You're worrying for nothing, with sales and margins like this, we can easily cover any delays in payment out of the profits! Even if we're a week or two late, I think they'll wait, no big deal!"

"Romych, I'm all for it, if it's what you say! But if..."

"Seryoga, I have money, really!" I smiled and gave him a friendly pat on the shoulder.

"Well, if you say so, I'm not worried. It's just that I... Don't tell Vera, she doesn't know... I've got a bank account and stocks, three hundred thousand in it! So if we need it, I can take it out and put it in here. If you have about the same amount... then I'm cool."

"Seryoga, don't worry so much! There is money! I won't lie to you! It's okay!"

"Well, at least not less!?" said my partner and smiled.

"More, Seryoga, more!" I patted him on the shoulder again and we went into the warehouse.

Our sales were growing rapidly, the warehouse was already three-quarters full, and we had to decide what and where to move to make room for the new goods.

"Senya, you got it!" Sergey said, putting his hands at his sides and his foot on the pallet. "You prepare the place for the salts, and then 'Aerosib' will come."

"Yes, Seryozha, of course, I'll do everything!" He almost jumped to attention.

I smiled, the storekeeper's behavior was amusing.

"Senya, listen, can you manage on your own?" I asked, realizing that with the appearance of new goods, one worker in the warehouse would not be enough. The storekeeper's answer confirmed my thoughts – soon a loader would be needed.

"Do you have a friend or acquaintance in mind?" I asked.

"Yes, I have one..." Senya grinned.

"Well, okay, we'll decide that later!" Sergey waved impatiently, tired of listening, took his foot off the pallet and walked pretentiously to the exit.

"Yes, we'll decide later," I agreed and followed him.

"Romych, you just don't think that..." Sergey continued the conversation as we passed the corner of the warehouse. "I, for one, can take the money out tomorrow and invest it in the business, I have it... And you answer as if you and Anatoly Vasilievich don't even have it, or you just don't have the guts to answer? I just don't get it..."

I even hummed in amazement.

"Seryoga, what does guts have to do with it?" I shrugged and spread my hands. "Some childish definition. That's what you said! Surprised me! I don't know about you, but I don't measure these things in the category of having or not having guts..."

I was silent, and Sergey walked thoughtfully beside me. My heartburn, which had been bothering me since the morning, intensified and made me cringe. I took a bottle of water from the water pump and spent the rest of the day taking small sips. I barely made it to the end of the workday, trying to make the heartburn go away. On the way to the dacha, Sergey and Vera gave me a ride. When I got out of the "Mazda", I ran to a drugstore, bought some pills and mineral water, took them, and hobbled home after relaxing a bit. I spent the rest of the day sluggish – the heartburn was gone, but my stomach was twisting. The alcohol I had drunk while out with Lilya had taken its toll on my health, and I was preparing for a week of struggling with my stomach. For some reason, Sergey's words about wasted money came to my mind, and I, who had never done anything like this before, counted the expenses and was unpleasantly surprised. In two weeks, two months' salary had gone to Lilya. The feeling that my money and, more importantly, my efforts had been wasted crept up from somewhere in the back of my mind and settled in my head with a malicious grin.

CHAPTER 26

"Hi, Lilya! How are you? Miss you already." I typed my first text message.

"Hi. I'm fine, working. Miss you." My phone beeped back.

"Do you think we're doing all right?" Sergey looked at me attentively.

It was noon on Tuesday. We walked from the office to the car.

"Yes, we are," I nodded and got in. "Why did you ask?"

"No reason! To get your opinion!" Sergey started the car, put on his glasses, and the "Mazda" rolled up to the gate. "I think so too! I've analyzed the situation, we're off to a good start, we're going steady!"

We passed the gatehouse. The janitor with glasses, standing on the threshold with a cigarette, looked at us indifferently. The "Mazda" began to rock monotonously on the dirt road.

"Well, what do you think?" Sergey continued. "How do we go on, will there be development or are we already at the maximum?"

"No, what maximum!?" I said. "We have room to grow, we still don't use 'Aerosib' to its full potential. Poison has appeared. Salts, I think, will also sell well. The most important thing is that we have caught all the big pharmacy chains, and they will do the job! But it's about three years, I think!"

"What do you mean, three years?" Sergey looked in my direction more quickly than usual.

"Well, in three years we will be cornered!" I explained relaxed.

"Why is that?" Again my partner threw a few nervous glances in my direction.

"We raised the prices a lot! In 'Sasha' everything was sold at a standard percentage, everyone knew it, got used to it. And now we've set new prices. They are good, we have entered the market. The first year none of the wholesalers will bother, they know that our company is the successor of 'Sasha', you're here, everything is fine. In the second year everything will be fine too, because we have an exclusive contract with 'Aerosib'. But someone will start to feel our goods for the sake of interest, will see the high markup and will start to sell them too. Then we'll have to lower the price, and our super profits will shrink to the usual..."

While telling all this, I looked at the landscape outside the window on the right. Sergey was silent. I looked at him. My partner was staring ahead, chewing his lip in confusion. I looked at Sergey again; he was sitting behind the wheel in a subtly unnatural position, as if he were shrinking and looking frightened. I felt his fear in my skin. As soon as I turned away, the feeling was gone. For a minute we rolled toward the intersection in complete silence. As we passed it, I pulled my new cell phone out of my pocket.

"You're still in touch with Lilya, aren't you?" Sergey looked at the phone.

"Well, she just left! Of course we're in touch!" I said.

"Well, you never know, maybe you just had some fun and broke up!"

"No, everything is as it should be, we keep in touch!"

Sergey looked at me, smiled and shook his head: "Roman the sentimentalist..."

The "Mazda" crawled from the dirt road onto the asphalt and immediately accelerated.

With the Internet connection, we switched to electronic banking. In the past, Sergey and Vera often drove to the bank in the morning and made all payments and transactions there. Now everything is done in the office. It became much more convenient.

"Romych, do you know how to play billiards?" said Sergey suddenly, crossing his legs, his ankle on his knee. His foot got stuck with the heel and almost jumped back, his stomach was in the way. But Sergey picked it up with his hand and pulled it towards him, exhaled, leaned back in the chair and clasped his hands behind his head.

"Why?" I was surprised. "Well... I can play a little. It's been a long time since I played... And you?"

"I play well!" Sergey said flatly. "I just thought we could play because I haven't played for a long time and I don't have anyone to play with. Nobody I know knows how to

play. They can, but you know... just messing around like everyone else... You're good, aren't you?"

"I'm okay," I shrugged, and then I dove into my memories. A few years ago, I started trying to play billiards, real billiards, where the ball goes in the hole flush. In the first game, when I was desperately losing and trying to make at least one ball, I hit so hard and angrily that I smashed my knuckles against the table, but all for nothing. Russian billiards is a smart game, it does not tolerate stupid violence, and it lends itself only to calculation and coolness. And once I accidentally hit the ball correctly and immediately realized the whole point of the game. For the next two years, I enthusiastically raced balls on every billiard table in town. My level grew to a solid middle level, and once I even won the game with a smash that started and ended with nine balls in the pockets instead of eight. Later I cooled down, but the skills remained, only dulled by time.

"Well, maybe we'll play then!?" my partner smiled mischievously. "Tonight..."

"Well... I think we could..." I agreed, realizing that my evening was free.

"Where are normal tables? You know, probably. Hang out with Vovan in all the pubs in town, you know everything – who is who and what is what!" Sergey cackled.

I thought about it and mentioned an entertainment complex in the city center with a big billiard room.

"Well, then we'll go there," Sergey decided. "You don't have to take the money! We can pay from the common fund, we'll spend time together anyway, you and me!"

"Why are you two going together!?" Vera said in a playfully indignant voice. "Maybe I want to go too!?"

"Romych, you know..." Sergey turned to me, feigning desperation. "Should we take her with us? I think it's okay if Verok comes with us? She'll sit there in the corner on the sofa, well, even if she drinks a glass of juice, the company won't get poorer, will it? If you don't mind, of course."

"No, Seryoga! Why should I mind? What a thing to say! We'll take Vera with us, of course!"

"And as for the money..." Sergey continued. "Well, I think when Verok writes off the amount, she will write that it is for the company, the rest, right, Romych?"

"Yes, that's fine," I nodded.

We arrived at seven o'clock. Half of the tables were empty, there were few visitors, and the silence in the billiard room had an immediately relaxing effect.

"Can we smoke here?" Sergey asked the manager.

"Yes, of course you can. But you are not allowed to hold a cigarette above the table, so as not to accidentally spoil the cloth," she said politely.

"I have cigars!" Sergey said nonchalantly.

"If there's no ashtray on the table, tell the waitress to bring one."

"I see..." Sergey muttered, pursing his lips. I looked at him and, perhaps for the first time, saw the image of my partner in a meaningful way. Sergey was clearly trying to look important and significant. The carelessness in communication, the emphasis on the cigars, the constant fumbling with the car keys, the dark glasses that were not taken off in the room, the tilted chin – the image was contrived and radiated affectation and falsehood. This fakeness caught my eye and imprinted the sensation in my memory.

We chose a table closer to the billiard table. Vera modestly sat down on the sofa. I took the same one opposite. The waitress came over and took our order – juice, mineral water and three salads. Vera went to the bathroom. After rummaging through the rack of pool cues, Sergey pulled one out, approached me and smiled.

"Why are you smiling?" I said, and I couldn't help smiling back.

Sergey took the menu, opened it and pretended to read. He looked at me. Suddenly he leaned the menu to his face, like ladies in the movies do with a fan, coquettishly leaving only the eyes. Sergey froze, gave me a mischievous look and smiled.

"Seryoga, what a fool!" I laughed, averting my eyes and shaking my head. If my partner had been a girl, I would have interpreted such a gesture as flirting. But in front of me was my business partner, a man, a father of two children. Sergey fooled around and did it very skillfully. A subtle sense of emotion, the ability to make you laugh, to bring you to a state of joy and euphoria with a barely perceptible movement, gesture, word, quick mimic – all this was in Sergey, and he would automatically win everyone's favor. I looked at my partner, he was already standing absolutely serious. I burst out laughing again.

"Let's go play!" Sergey said cheerfully. "Stop laughing!"

I stood up. Vera came back. The waitress brought our order. I chose a cue, rolled it across the table – the cue didn't "play". I nodded to myself with satisfaction.

"Why did you do that?" Sergey asked me.

"I wanted to make sure it wasn't crooked!" I said.

"Aha!" Sergey said and put the balls into a triangle. "Well, Romych, are you ready?"

"I'm always ready!" I smiled and hit the pyramid hard, the balls flew across the table and froze. "Come on, Seryoga, start!"

I went back to the table. Vera smiled. Not wanting to miss the moment of the first shot, I took a sip of water. Sergey didn't know how to set up his support hand, the distance from it to the ball was badly chosen, the cue wandered and was set up at the wrong angle. The cue wobbled, the ball jerked, rolled towards the pocket and hit the cushions far from the pocket. Sergey straightened up with a serious look, came to the table, took out a cigar from his shirt pocket and smoked, let the smoke rise with a serious look, sipped juice from a glass and looked at me with a challenge.

"Come on, Romych, bring it on!"

"Oh! Cigar! Seryoga, you surprised me!" I exclaimed and lit a cigarette.

"I like to smoke a cigar sometimes!" said Sergey. "At the dacha, you know how good it is to sit on a chair in front of the fire in the evening, drink cognac and smoke a cigar!"

"Tastefully said!" I nodded, smiled at the repeated "cigar" message and, leaving the cigarette in the ashtray, went to the billiard table.

I tried it on and hit it. The ball went in tight, twitched in the pocket and flew out again.

"I haven't played in a while... my accuracy has gone... it's okay, I'll get better as the game goes on..."

The first game wasn't smooth. I hit difficult balls on purpose, just to get a feel for the cue. Sergey walked around the table for a long time before each shot, puffed on his cigar, looked around, tried it on, then walked around again. Vera sat in her place, almost without touching her food and drink. Towards the end of the game, I caught up with Sergey, tied the score, but still lost by one ball.

"Eight to seven, Seryoga! You got it!" I said and added: "I demand a rematch!"

Sergey started the second game and lost 2 to 8. His swagger subsided.

"Well!" I exhaled. "And a third one to find the winner!"

"Maybe that's enough?" Sergey said, demonstrating his fatigue and loss of interest in billiards with all his movements. "We've already played two games, my hands are tired."

"Seryoga!" I exclaimed in surprise. "We need a third! Come on, one more and we're done!"

I started collecting balls. Sergey sluggishly began to help me, made a martyr's face and said, "Well, if you want, let's do it."

I started the game. Sergey immediately made it clear that he was playing reluctantly – he was hitting almost without aiming. His mood was transferred to me – I started to miss a lot

and won the third game 8 to 5. As soon as I put the winning ball in the pocket, Sergey put the cue on the table and went to the table.

"How did you play?" Vera asked me when I came to the table later.

"Two to one! Seryoga won the first game, and then I won two!" I reported cheerfully, sitting down on the sofa and looking at my partner. He started to chew his salad with obvious displeasure.

"But Seryoga plays well! I had to sweat with him!" I added.

He didn't react. The rest of the evening was subdued, and soon we left the place.

"Roman, do you bowl?" Sergey said a week later in the office.

"Well, not really..." I thought about it. "I can play, of course... why?"

"We could go bowling, have some fun! Like last time. I always liked it – working together, resting together, like a big family, common business, common interests, everything is friendly, based on trust... I like it very much!"

I didn't answer, some strange thought came into my head and distracted me.

"You can take Vovan with you if you want!" Sergey continued. "Verok and I and you two, we'll play some games together!"

"Yeah, I guess we can..." I said, feeling no desire to play.

"What are you going to do in the evening anyway? You're going to sit at home! We'd better have some fun... It's time we had our own company ethics! We're a company after all! And all respectable companies organize company parties for their employees! So let's have one for ourselves!"

I hummed. I didn't feel like bowling. And I didn't feel like anything else. But the prospect of spending the evening at home didn't appeal to me either. Sergey's voice broke my sluggishness once again.

"Let's go, Romych! You don't need to take the money! Vera will write it off from the common fund, like last time! I'll pay from my half, and then we'll calculate and balance the money..."

I agreed.

We were again in the same complex, but already on the second floor in the bowling alley. Vovka arrived. The machine put out the pins, and the game began.

A strange feeling stayed with me all evening, as if I were still at work. The tension in the air made it hard to relax. The balls were knocking down pins, everyone was cheering, congratulating the lucky ones. But there was no real fun. Vovka laughed stiffly. Vera, as always, supported us politely and delicately. Sergey? His apathetic face and dull look told me that fun was a burden. So why insist on it? The general uneasiness shone more and more clearly through the masks of merriment. We were tormented for an hour and a half and then went outside.

"You and Vovan are going to 'Clear Skies', aren't you?" Sergey looked at me, hiding his attentive gaze behind his sunglasses, and approached the 'Mazda'.

"I don't know," I shrugged and looked conspiratorially at Vovka. "Which way the cat jumps!"

"I see!" Sergey grinned.

After shaking hands and saying goodbye, the "Mazda" dashed out of the club's parking lot to the left onto the roadway, leaving Vovka and me behind.

"To the 'Skies'?" I broke into a smile and looked at my friend.

"Fuck, Ramses, sure as shit!" he shouted with joy.

We walked briskly out of the parking lot and turned right into the park. It was a leisurely fifteen minute walk to the club.

"The cat jumps all right!!! Right, Vovan!?" I suddenly shouted, childishly jumping on my friend from behind like a horse.

The summer heat was gone. September was dry and warm. After Lilya's departure, my stomach ached for a week, but by pouring mineral water into it and filling it with pills, I managed to bring back a shaky sense of comfort. Vovka had almost disappeared, having gone over to his new friend Lera. I saw him three times in one month.

"How do you like the girl?" I asked him, standing in the grotto with a glass of "screwdriver".

"A great bride – two flats!" Vovka barked, his eyes flashing greedily.

I got a twitch, but I played along, smirking:

"Then get fucking married if she's such a good bride!"

"There you go! Hee-hee-hee!" Vovka laughed. "I should fucking think about it!"

I started showing up at "Clear Skies" less often, going there only on weekends. The chaos in the club had reached its peak – fights, drunk customers lying in the corners, pissed and vomited toilets had become the norm. The eyes of the regulars were filled with fatigue and apathy. I could feel the need for change in my skin. Only short text messages lightened my loneliness. Lilya and I texted every day. When I was in the club, I would take a double "screwdriver", step aside, smoke, and, almost ignoring the music and the fun, devote myself entirely to texting.

"Hey, Lilya. What are you doing?"

"Hey. Was in the shower, about to go to bed. What are you doing?"

"Walking around town, went to 'Clear Skies'. Boring. You're not here. :)"

"I miss you too. Maybe I'll come visit you soon."

"Wow! Cool! When?"

"November holidays."

"Not soon. It's a month and a half away."

"Hi," a familiar voice came over the thunder of the music.

I looked up. Everyone was having a good time, and people were passing me all the time.

"Hi," I nodded to Polina, the pimply waitress. She slipped past me to the dance floor with an order and immediately returned with the words, "Why are you standing all alone, bored?"

"I'm not bored," I lied.

"Ritka's not working today," Polina said.

"I don't care," I shrugged. "We're not going out."

"Oh, really!? Why?" the girl was surprised, but playing badly, she obviously knew.

"No reason," I waved my hands, "it just didn't work out, we decided to call it quits."

"Before or after her trip to the sea?" Polina said and immediately added, as if she realized, "Oh, forgive me if I interfere!"

I answered as it was – in fact, we broke up before the trip, and the conversation took place after.

"Ah-ha, I see... Did she tell you anything about her vacation?"

"What do you mean? What should she have told me?"

Polina was nervously silent.

"She didn't say anything," I said.

"Well..." the girl hesitated and looked around conspiratorially. "She had... she... well, she had an affair with a local guy there!"

"Hu-huh!" I grinned, and having heard the platitude, I relaxed. "Well, whatever! We were clear before the trip."

Polina was slightly disappointed by the lack of effect.

"Well..." she hesitated awkwardly and surprised. "Don't you care at all?"

"I don't care at all," I hummed. "Polina, you won't believe this – I couldn't care less!"

She stood there and looked at me with her mouth open.

"That's why she's not at work!" the girl added. "She went to see him!"

"Let her go!" I smiled. "Maybe they'll fall in love there and everything will work out!"

"Do you really feel the way you say!?"

"I do!" I nodded. "Rita and I are done. I hope she didn't waste her time with this guy, I wish her love and all the best! You can tell her that!"

Polina looked at me uncomprehendingly. And I looked at the pimples that covered half of her face and wondered what it was like for her, a girl, to live with them.

"Ah-ha, well, okay, I'll go!" she huffed. "I have customers."

We said goodbye. My mood had soured. I went outside and immediately felt my stomach ache. When I sobered up, it hurt more and more. I smoked a cigarette. The cigarette dulled the feelings for a while. I inhaled the night air and walked toward the hotel.

At the end of September, a container of salts arrived. Three of us unloaded it: the storekeeper Senya, me and Sergey. The heavy boxes made my arms ache almost immediately. We carried them and passed them to each other, but my arms only hurt more.

"Roman, throw slower!" Sergey shouted, barely catching another box from me. "My hands hurt!"

"Well, sorry, Seryoga," I waved my hands, feeling embarrassed and guilty. "I didn't know your hands hurt! When did you manage to hurt them!? You didn't tell me before."

"Well, who cares if I didn't!" He pursed his lips in annoyance and placed the box on the pallet. "While boxing..."

We worked in silence for a while. I felt awkward, and Sergey continued to sulk. Senya was silent. We unloaded the goods in two hours with breaks.

"Senya, you probably already need an assistant, a loader, right?" I looked around the warehouse. "We already have a lot of goods, the warehouse is almost full..."

"Yes, that would be nice..." He grinned awkwardly and shifted from foot to foot. "Actually, I'm fine, but... yeah, you could add a man..."

"You think?" Sergey sniffed his nose and looked at me.

"What is there to think, Seryoga? One man, well, with Petya it's all unrealistic! Especially now that we have a double turnover of goods because of barter... It's a hell of a lot of work! We need a loader!"

Sergey didn't say anything.

I began to pester the storekeeper – does he have a friend who does not drink and steal and whom we could hire? Senya thought about it, scratched his chin, smiled mischievously and said that he had such a friend – he knew him since childhood, they grew up in the same neighborhood.

"Well, is he okay!?" Sergey said with pressure, looking at him importantly.

"Not boozing?" I clarified.

"Well, I don't know if he does... like everyone else!" Senya hesitated, snapping his fingers on his neck under his cheekbone. "He drinks on weekends, but in general... he doesn't booze much!"

"All right," I said and left the warehouse, "you'll work for the next month, and if it's hard for you, you'll call him..."

"Senya, get things in order here, will you?" Sergey added and followed me out.

As I stepped outside, I looked around the factory. Summer was over. Fall was about to turn from a warm season to a chilly gray. The air was getting colder by the day. The white clouds were turning gray, only to turn leaden in November. The feeling of carelessness and lightness left with the summer. In its place was a feeling of despondency, stagnation and desolation. The abandoned territory of the factory only intensified it.

"Hi!" Sergey shook my hand as he entered the office on Monday, September 26th, tiredly putting his briefcase in its usual place and sitting down by the door.

"Hi!" Vera, who came in next, smiled and squeaked. "What's new here?"

Without waiting for an answer, she slipped behind the computer and started working.

"So, the order for the salts came from the pharmacy..." said Vera when she got the email. "Boys, we are almost out of salts on the leftovers!"

To everyone's surprise, the container of salts was sold out within a week.

"Yeah, we distributed them fast!" I said. "Is there enough for this order?"

"It is," Vera waved her fingers and fluttered them on the keyboard.

"Listen Seryoga, we need to order more salts!" I stared at my partner who was sitting in the chair as if in prostration.

"Roman, wait! My head's not thinking straight, I'm exhausted..."

"Why are you exhausted? It's only Monday!" I snorted in surprise.

"Roman, you're the one without a family, but I have two kids! You try to spend the whole weekend at the dacha with two kids, and I'm looking at you!" Sergey spread his hands.

"What, you're still living at the dacha?" I stared at both of them.

"Oh, we live at the dacha for a long time!" said Vera. "Until the first frost, well, until the middle of October for sure! What's there to do in the city? Now we are only at the dacha on weekends, and all week in the city, of course!"

"Aa-ha, well, then it's okay..." I said. "Is your cabin warm there?"

"Yes, it's fine there, a cast-iron stove, we heat the house quickly with wood..." Vera continued. "We have a small house – a kitchenette and a small room, that's all..."

"Why don't we have a cup of tea?" Sergey suggested.

"Oh, we could!" I supported him. "But we have no sugar, no brew, nothing..."

"I brought cups!" Sergey smiled and took two cups out of his briefcase.

"So this is for you and Vera..." I said.

"Well, drink from mine, what's the difference... shit, we didn't buy any sugar! Vera!" Sergey looked at his wife. "I told you, when we pass the market, remind me to buy sugar!"

Vera remained silent, looked at her husband and stared at the monitor.

We had to go to the market. Soon Sergey and I returned with a package of sugar cubes. My partner began to conjure up two cups, but Vera immediately refused.

"Drink from mine, I don't want it yet, I'll drink it later," she told me.

I threw three lumps of sugar into the cup and began to sip the hot tea.

"Ouch!" holding the cup in the air, Sergey suddenly screamed, immediately put it down on the table and grabbed his hand. "Fuck!"

"What is it, Seryoga?" I was surprised.

"My hand, damn it!" He grumbled in his chair, rubbing his wrist. "These salts! I told you my hands hurt... So they got sore again, because I've been carrying these boxes..."

"And they still hurt!? We unloaded them a week ago."

"Shit, Roman!" Sergey got angry. "If your hands were hurt, you wouldn't be talking like that!"

"Well, I don't know..." I shrugged and looked at Vera. "I'm used to unloading, I don't have any pain. It's you, of course, who's not used to it, you could wear out your hands..."

"Why should I be unused to it?" Sergey became more agitated. "Or do you think that I didn't carry boxes in 'Sasha'? Yes, I did! Loaded and unloaded!"

"Seryoga, I'm not arguing, it's just that you worked as a manager, and you had storekeepers and loaders, while my father and I had no one! We carried everything ourselves! That's why I said I'm more used to this kind of work than you are, that's all... I didn't mean it like that."

Sergey took a piece of sugar, dipped it into the tea, chewed off the soft rim, carefully took the cup in his hand and with a smacking of his thick lips sucked the hot liquid into his mouth.

The new order for salts was three times larger than the first. When Sergey realized the volume, he hesitated, but I said that since there was a demand for the goods, we should take it and sell as much as was needed. Sergey agreed.

"Romych, I propose that we celebrate the end of the month and the successful start of the salts trade!" he suddenly said on Friday, the last day of September.

We sat in the office and drank tea. Vera in her seat, me at the desk, Sergey at the door.

"How?" I leaned back in my chair.

"Let's go somewhere, as usual, the whole company – me, you and Vera – have some fun together!" Sergey said. "Take Vovan again, if you don't want to be bored..."

"I'm not bored without him!" I smiled.

"Well, I just meant that you can invite him if you want. We won't be poor if he comes at the company's expense. And Vera will write it off later, as usual, from the common fund!"

I thought about it. I remembered the last time we went bowling. Suddenly I felt clearly that I didn't want to have such "fun". There was something empty and unnecessary in such "fun" together. There was no fun in it. And I realized that I didn't want to see Sergey and Vera outside of work – I didn't want to interfere with the categories of work and rest. And the money factor appeared. Before, when I was working with my father, I didn't think much about it. My father kept the books. Now it's just me. "Money should be earned, not squandered," was the attitude in my head. I felt that if Sergey and I were as careful and thrifty as my father had been, we could make good money. Not the crumbs my father and I had scraped together, but a lot more money. I saw this opportunity and was determined not to miss it.

"Seryoga, I don't feel like it, to be honest..." I said gently.

"Why!?" he was surprised, freezing with a lump of sugar in his hand.

"I don't know, it's not really my thing... company parties..." I shrugged. "I'm not used to it, my father and I didn't have company parties, we worked without a break..."

"Well, we worked at 'Sasha' too, we didn't lounge there!" Sergey parried. "And Davidych was a good man in this respect, he arranged for us to go out of town on holidays and some parties in the office and in cafes..."

As he listed, Sergey shook a lump of sugar in the air as if conducting.

"I'm not saying you've been idle... I'm saying I'm not used to this... We were just working, that's all. And now, all of a sudden, we're doing things: bowling alleys, billiards..."

When I finished, I stared at Sergey, and he stared at me. There was a pause.

"You had a paid leave at 'Sasha' every year, didn't you?" I continued.

"Well... of course I did!" Sergey was surprised, chewing sugar and sipping from his cup. "Everyone had one! We go to the sea with Verok every summer! I don't know how it will be this year, maybe we'll go, maybe not..."

"You see – every year! And I've never gone anywhere. In fact, I haven't had a time off in seven years. I don't mean that I'm tired, but that I'm used to this kind of regime."

"Oh, well, if so..." Sergey was confused, put the rest of the sugar on the shelf next to the cup and spread his hands. "Well, if that's the case, then we don't have to organize anything like that! I didn't know you didn't like it, you should have told me right away! Then no company parties, we'll rest separately! You and your Vovan, and Verok and me!"

"Seryoga, it's not 'my' Vovan! And it's not about 'separate', just this format is not for me, that's all..." I spread my hands.

"Roman..." Sergey said, leaning forward and putting his hands in the armrests of the chair. "I'm not forcing you... yes – yes, no – no it is! And don't pick on words like that. You're becoming just like Anatoly Vasilievich!"

"Well, he's my father, like father, like son. You look like your father, I look like mine..."

"No, Seryozhka looks more like his mother!" said Vera, looking warmly at her husband.

"Vera, I mean the character..." I nodded. "On the outside, yes, Sergey looks like his mother, I've seen her, but I haven't seen his father..."

"He doesn't look like his father at all!" Vera added. "Uncle Misha, he's so... tall, gaunt... and Seryozhka... he's so..."

Vera stammered, unable to find the words.

"Yes," Sergey chuckled, catching his wife's hesitation, "and Seryozhka is so..."

"Seryozha!" Vera smiled. "That's not what I wanted to say..."

"I understand, Vera!" He said, resting his elbows on the chair, crossed his fingers, tapped his foot nervously, and exhaled sadly: "Right, God didn't give me any height, no, He didn't..."

On the third of October, Monday, Senya brought Kholodov to us, a stooped old man of medium height with sunken brown eyes, a large hooked nose, and a slurred, mumbling speech because half his teeth were missing. "Kholod," Senya called him behind his back, had a doomed look and an indifferent gaze. He was stationed in Senya's den. When I found out that Kholodov and Senya were the same age, I almost choked on my tea. He looked seventy. It was clear that alcohol was to blame. We realized that for five thousand a month we couldn't find anyone better – Kholodov was hired.

CHAPTER 27

"Hey, Lilya! What are you doing? Are you at work?"

"Hi. Yeah, working, busy day. Lots of patients. How are you?"

"I'm okay. At work too. Miss you. Looking forward to November :)"

"I miss you too. Say hi to Vovchik for me! :)"

It was as if Vovka had disappeared. I saw him even less often, only when I came to the "Pelican" to get money. "Pelican" was the only place where Sergey didn't get money. He went to all the other depots alone, and sometimes we went together. When we arrived at "Pelican", we were always separated – Sergey stayed in the car and I went to get the money.

"Have you seen your Vovan?" Sergey said on Thursday, October 6, as I got back into the "Mazda" and handed him two sheets of leftover goods.

"Yes, I have," I nodded.

"How is he?" Sergey murmured, studying the papers.

"He's fine, working, all over in his relationship!" I hummed cheerfully, hardly imagining Vovka as a romantic.

"Wow, really!?" Sergey was deliberately surprised. "Did Vovan get a girlfriend!?"

"Yes!" I smiled harder. "He met a girl when we went to the barbecue."

I told him the details of that day.

"Who do you go clubbing with now?" Sergey looked at me.

"I have no one! I can go alone. There are plenty of people I know there without Vovka..."

I spent Friday and Saturday night at "Skies". When I went down to the club on Friday, I immediately made eye contact with Rita. She looked past me and turned away. I made my way to the bar and as I approached I said hello and walked past her. I ordered a double "screwdriver" from the bartender, lit a cigarette and smirked at my own thoughts. This kind of female reaction always surprised me. If a girl chooses one of two guys, can't she at least treat the other one neutrally and politely? Why all the posturing? Maybe girls don't like it when a rejected guy doesn't hang around suffering, but walks around with a satisfied face, like I did that night.

"Hey, Lilya :) What are you doing? Not sleeping?"

"Hey. No, not yet. Sitting in a cafe with colleagues. Celebrating a birthday. How are you doing?"

"I'm fine. Went to the bar for a few hours. Then home."

"Why did you go there? To meet girls? :)"

"No. Just bored. You're not around. I miss you."

"Don't miss me. I'll see you soon."

"It's too long, a whole month. I want to hear your voice. Can I call you?"

"Let's do it later. It's not convenient now."

"Okay."

"In an hour."

"Okay."

The "screwdriver" was out. My stomach hurt. I already knew what to do – I repeated the order, immediately pulled half of it through the straw and smoked again. The mixture of alcohol and nicotine dulled the pain. I leaned against the wall of the grotto and sipped my cocktail, looking at everyone on the dance floor. The crowd in this place had changed. A few years ago it was students and more or less decent older people. Now I saw different people. The old ones were still there, but they were few and far between. Half-criminal looking young men and girls of the same low class crowded the club. Bald-headed or short-cropped guys swore incessantly, drank the cheapest beer and glasses of vodka without appetizers, looked around with dull eyes, chewed cigarettes and disappeared into the darkness of the dance floor. They soon returned for another round of vodka. After pouring a glass into their mouths, they wiped themselves with their sleeves or the backs of their hands, looked around with an aggressive look, and, shoving those who got in their way, went back to the dance floor with loping steps. These guys always finished off with beer, which they drank greedily and in large gulps, making their eyes blurry to the point of complete dumbness. Their companions, manically holding a cigarette or a plastic glass of beer, swore loudly and laughed defiantly. The lightness and cheerfulness of the place had been replaced by the stale air of despondency and hopelessness. Those who were striving upward in life were replaced by their peers who were rolling downward. In my mind, I suddenly realized that this whole club life was starting to slip away from me. I went to the bathroom. A clogged sink, one of two inoperable urinals, and the only occupied stall with belching sounds coming from it. The bathroom was full of drunken rabble. Strange, I had never noticed it before. Now, as if I'd

been pulled out of the veil for a moment, I saw it. It was stuffy. I wanted fresh air. I went to the exit, pushed open the heavy door, and sucked in a lungful of fresh air. Its coolness penetrated my sweatshirt, touched my naked body and made me shiver. I stepped back to the street, lit a cigarette, turned to the entrance of the club, saw a girl and was stunned. She was about one hundred and sixty centimeters tall, a dyed blonde with a mop of curly hair down to her shoulder blades, and she was standing at the side of the entrance with a guy. He was sitting with his knees around her thighs. The girl was dressed in all light colors – a thin white sweater with a collar, tight beige breeches, and white stiletto shoes. The girl's barely dark skin contrasted with the white, creating a striking effect. I stared at the girl for about ten minutes before I realized that her figure was perfect. Absolutely perfect proportions! I scanned her from the bottom to the top for the hundredth time: beautiful feet with a high instep; well-defined calves; neat thighs covered with breeches leading to a perfectly round and firm bottom; flat stomach with a narrow waist; finely carved hands with healthy, strong nails and manicure without nail polish. The masterpiece was completed by perfect C-sized breasts. The girl laughed at the guy's remark, ruffled her hair with her hand, and I saw her face. Flawless, neat features. Big blue eyes, wide dark eyebrows, straight middle nose, full wide lips that revealed perfectly straight teeth when she smiled. And no makeup! Shuffling from foot to foot, the girl took a few steps away from the guy, came back and gently embraced his head. How fluidly she moved!

"Oh my God! Did you really create her!? Unbelievable!"

The girl was so different from the people around her that it was as if they didn't exist. What was she doing here? The place didn't fit her image. Like a swan in a henhouse. I looked at the guy. Tall, slim, handsome blond. They looked great together. A burning sense of longing spilled over my chest, a wild desire to finally have a real relationship. With a lump in my throat, I turned away from the couple and stared absentmindedly at the passing cars. The feelings that came over me combined with Lilya's image and intensified. I pulled out my cell phone.

"Do you want me to come over?"

"What do you mean? When?"

"Let me call you."

"Okay."

I called. I mumbled into the phone that I missed her and suggested that I come to Moscow to see her, go for a walk, go to the movies.

"A bit unexpected," Lilya said thoughtfully. "And how would you like to come, for how long? I live in a dormitory and cannot accommodate you..."

"Lilya, what does that have to do with it!?" I was surprised and offended by such a thought. "I'm not going because of that. I want to see you. I'll come, we'll go for a walk, I'll leave in the evening. That's all."

Lilya said that she would probably be free next weekend and would even meet me at the station. I replied happily.

The couple stopped hugging. The guy took her hand and they walked leisurely away from the club.

At my exclamation Lilya remarked that we would discuss the meeting closer to the weekend and asked if I was still at the club.

"No, I'm outside, on my way home..."

"Why? No interesting girls out there?" Lilya teased me.

"Lilya, I wasn't looking for girls there..." I shrugged, perplexed.

"I was just kidding. Okay, I'm going to sleep. Send you a kiss, darling. Bye."

"Bye, Lilya. A big kiss from me. Good night."

I ended the call halfway to the hotel. It was almost midnight. The familiar car was parked in the usual spot. I greeted the driver.

"Why are you so early!?" He stared at me.

"No reason, I was bored there... I guess I'm getting old," I laughed silently.

"Shall I drive you?"

"No, I think I'd better walk," I shook my head, said goodbye and walked down the street.

I walked three stops and got into one of the last shared taxis.

It was unclear how to continue my relationship with my father. An almost imperceptible wall of estrangement had appeared between us, and our relationship became strained and neutral. Our communication was minimized. I turned the situation around in my mind, looking for an acceptable way out for both of us. On the one hand, I didn't feel guilty about my father's leaving. On the other hand, he expressed his view of what had happened: I had not supported my father in the dispute with Sergey when he "kicked him out". My father insisted that "Sergey kicked him out" and that I "did not take a father's position as a son should". Each time I parried his argument by reminding him of the pre-merger agreement. The response was always silence. I felt in my gut that my father considered me a traitor. Not feeling guilty, but wanting to help my father out of the situation, I decided to talk to him. Early October 2005 was warm. On Saturday afternoon, my father was smoking as usual on the balcony, with his chest resting on the sill of the open window.

"Dad, listen..." I went to the balcony, sat down on the couch and lit a cigarette.

My father half turned and turned away again.

"Since you and Seryoga didn't get along..." I tried to find the words, "maybe you could do something on your own? I mean, we have the money. And I don't think we'll have a problem with the warehouse. If you need it, you can rent some of ours. It won't cost you much. I'd offer it to you for free, but since I'm not the only one in the company, Seryoga will probably be against it, but at the same price per meter that we pay, no problem."

My father finished, threw a cigarette butt from the balcony, exhaled the smoke, turned around, looked at me with a stern, penetrating look, and said dryly: "I will, don't worry."

"I'm not worried..." I mumbled. "It's up to you, of course, to do what's best for you. I just thought there might be opportunities for you to work. You can take our money and work. I'll help you with whatever you need. All right?"

My father nodded a few times, made a hissing sound, said coldly, "Okay," and turned away.

Communication didn't work. Inside me, anger replaced guilt. I gritted my teeth, got up, and walked out. The cold wall of alienation I'd built in my desire to help my father was the same wall I'd built in mine. The urge to help faded on its own. I felt that my father wouldn't change his position. What did he want from me? Repentance? For what? For his own behavior? It's convenient to blame someone else. Even if I had a part in what happened, it was only a part. So why make me the whole culprit? My father's denial of any part of what happened made me angry. "Hurt people get the short end of the stick," I thought harshly, drank some tea with a piece of bread in the kitchen, and left the house.

An hour later I was in the club. I ordered a double "screwdriver" and stayed at the bar. The evening was boring. By midnight "Clear Skies" was almost full, but my mood didn't improve. My stomach hurt. I drowned the pain with alcohol and went outside. The moping continued. I smoked and went home. I didn't want to stay at the club, I didn't want to go home, I didn't want to take a cab. I didn't want to go anywhere. I walked, and the measured work of my feet was a relief. I wanted to walk and think. My head was in chaos, and only a

clear rhythm of steps helped me to organize my thoughts. The super-successful relationship with Sergey had almost led to the breaking off of relations with my father. One relationship that didn't work out was compensated by the acquaintance with Lilya. The pictures in my head were flying in a row and merged into a kaleidoscope: my father, my mother, Sergey, Vera, Vovka, Rita, Lilya and the blonde in white. I walked until I was tired. In the middle of the way I caught a "picker-upper" and soon I was home.

Sunday. It was uncomfortable at home. My mother still lounged in her room, coming out occasionally as needed. My father kept a silent psychological distance. Vovka didn't call, Lilya didn't write. I slept as much as I could and, after a late breakfast, sat down to play a computer game to kill some time.

"Ramsees!" Vovka called me out of the blue. "What are you doing!? Howdy! Come for a walk with us!"

Rejoicing at my friend's call, I didn't need to convince myself, and around six in the evening I met the newly-made couple in the center.

"Hi," Lera said in a humble and friendly voice.

"Whassup, bigwig!" Vovka pushed his rough hand into my palm and hugged me, grunting with joy. "How are you doing? Business is booming!? Getting fucking rich!? I missed you, Ramses, you won't believe it!"

"Why shouldn't I believe you?" I smiled and looked at Lera. "I do!"

The three of us walked leisurely down the street. Vovka immediately started asking questions. I said that everything was fine: the business was moving and growing, my partner Sergey seemed to be a normal guy – he brought a lot of new goods to the company.

"In general, it was not in vain that we teamed up with him!" I summarized.

"How is Anatoly Vasilievich, your old man, how is he?" Vovka immediately became serious.

"Well, he's doing something, driving, I guess..." I began, realizing that I really had no idea what my father did. "We don't talk much now, we're in a tense situation..."

"Yeah, your old man is a serious man!" Vovka scratched the back of his head.

"Well, how are things with you?" I changed the subject.

"Well, we're going out!" Vovka nodded to Lera, who chuckled, and Vovka, pleased with himself, immediately pulled up his pants, stuck out his chest and gave the girl a playfully stern look. "I'm thinking of getting her a job at 'Pelican' in the accounting department. Will you come?"

"I will," she laughed softly.

At ten o'clock at the movie theater, we parted ways.

"Where are you going now?" Vovka squinted. "To that shitty place, I bet!"

"Oh, wow! It's already shitty! A month ago it was the best, and now it's shitty!"

"No, I don't mean that!" Vovka got confused, fidgeted, grabbed my hand, shook it, let go and grabbed the girl's waist. "All right! Bye!"

"Bye," Lera said, laughing, and Vovka, shuffling along the tiles of the avenue, pulled her behind him.

"Bye..." I said softly, looking after the departing couple, my gaze moving to the left to the traffic light. The yellow color on it changed to green. I crossed the street and went down to the club. I made the usual order, smoked a cigarette and stayed at the bar.

Second double "screwdriver", third. I wasn't in the mood, and the vodka didn't affect me. I stayed almost sober. There was a feeling that I was confused or going the wrong way or doing the wrong thing. I didn't understand the meaning, I was just groggy from the anxiety I felt. Or the alcohol. I forcefully drained the glass in two gulps and walked away sullenly.

"I bought them this weekend just to give you a treat," Sergey said on Monday, putting the briefcase, which I called a "suitcase" because of its ability to swell to twice its size, on the table. "I smoked a few myself yesterday at the dacha with cognac!"

Two thin cigars appeared from the "suitcase". I was surprised and confused.

"Do you want one?" Sergey said with a smile. "Have you ever smoked cigars?"

"Damn, Seryoga, you've done it! You brought cigars!" I shouted, took the offered cigar, put it to my nose and leaned back in the chair at the table.

Vera, who had come in after her husband, sat down at her workplace, started her computer and smiled sympathetically as she looked at us.

"I quit smoking a long time ago, but sometimes I indulge in cigars!" Sergey said, shoving his briefcase into the cupboard and, with a cigar in his hand, plopping down in the chair by the door. "Do you know what a pleasure it is to sit by the fire in the evening with a cigar and a glass of cognac, sipping cognac and then a cigar, so that the smoke mixes with the taste of the cognac in your mouth!"

After hearing the "mantra" about cigars, cognac, evening, and bonfires for the umpteenth time, I raised my eyebrows in surprise and said: "Seryoga, to be honest, I don't understand, what's the point of smoking them!? There are cigarettes, you at least inhale them, and this... you don't inhale when you smoke cigars, do you?"

"Well, no, not inhaling, that's why I smoke them! It's not an addiction, just a pleasure!" Sergey said, looked at me conspiratorially and added. "Shall we smoke?"

"Well, I guess we can," I shrugged, took a lighter out of my pocket, lit my cigar, and handed the lighter to my partner.

I took a drag, the sour taste filling my mouth.

"How was it?" Sergey took a drag too, blew the smoke up and looked at me triumphantly.

"Fuck knows, Seryoga! It's not clear yet, it doesn't go to my head, it tastes good..."

"Boys, you should smoke outside..." Vera said.

"Yes, right!" I got excited. "Sorry, Vera! Come on, Seryoga, let's go outside!"

We went outside. It was a warm and dry fall, the ground was covered with yellow leaves. I carefully sat down on a sagging iron fence, and it creaked.

"Look, it's going to break," Sergey smiled.

"I'm being careful, it seems to be holding," I put all my weight on the pipe. "Although I'm heavy..."

"How much do you weigh?" Sergey puffed on his cigar and staggered down the path.

"I don't know, I haven't weighed myself in a long time, somewhere between ninety-five and ninety-six kilos," I shrugged, spitting out the unfamiliar taste of the cigar, and automatically asked, "And you?"

"Ninety-one or ninety-two," Sergey twirled his hand in the air. "Something like that... And when I started boxing, I was seventy-five, imagine! Now I've put on some weight, of course!"

"You have, big time!" I chuckled and nodded at my partner's belly, hanging over his belt and visible even with his shirt over his pants.

"Are you less than that!?" Sergey retorted.

"Well..." I thought about it, calculated. "About the same, but we are different heights. Ten centimeters difference! But you have broader shoulders, I don't know where my weight is..."

"The weight also gives you a stronger punch!" Sergey turned the dialog to the level of boxing.

"Well, of course!" I nodded. "One thing is a hundred kilograms, you can knock someone down with one punch, and another – seventy or even sixty... You'd be too tired to swing your arms..."

"Come on, just one punch," Sergey resisted for some reason.

"Well, what's the matter?" I was surprised. "You went to boxing! I don't know, a hundred kilograms is serious! When the punch is set, they hit like a rail."

"No," Sergey shook his head and sniffed his nose. "I liked my weight! I had a punch and moved well..."

He let out a puff of smoke and started down the path again, reaching the end of it and turning around. I blew smoke as well.

"Well?" Sergey nodded at my cigar.

"Fuck knows," I said, laughing. "For me it's better to smoke regular cigarettes, 'cause I don't understand if I'm smoking or not..."

"I like it," Sergey said, smoking even harder.

The dialog froze.

I smoked the cigar and didn't know what I was doing. The smoke seemed to be there, but it didn't do anything but make my mouth feel sour and stuffy. I spat, tasted the palate with my tongue and spat again. Sergey smoked with dignity, obviously making the act a ritual. Suddenly he hesitated, as if deciding whether to speak or not, hesitated for a few seconds, looked at me carefully and, having made up his mind, said: "There is another manufacturer, we worked with them at 'Sasha'..."

"What manufacturer?" I immediately gave him my full attention.

Sergey told me about a company in Moscow that made cheap perfume. He said that this product was selling well and that the wholesale depots in the city didn't have it.

"I think maybe we should get some and try to sell them. What do you think?"

"Well, if it sells well, there's nothing to think about – we should take it and bring it in!" Sergey said that they bought the goods in cash, and the manufacturer would probably not give us a delay in payment.

"No way! We have to negotiate! What, just in advance?" I waved my hand with my cigar and coughed. "We'll try to negotiate the standard terms-half payment in advance and the rest with a delay of thirty days. On such terms we can work..."

The door to the building opened and Vera stepped outside.

"The 'WholeSale' called, they increased the order, so I redid the waybill," she came up to us and held out the document. "Petya's loading now, right? Here, give it to him..."

"Let's go!" I nodded to Sergey, stood up and took the papers. Having an excuse to finish my stupid occupation, I threw my cigar on the ground, crushed it with my shoe and headed for the warehouse.

"You should know that toilet water is a high-money item, and it only sells well during the holidays, and the rest of the time it sells poorly," Sergey said, catching up with me.

"And how much better does it sell during the holidays?"

"It sells like crazy! Well, in 'Sasha' it was like that, and how in other depots, I don't know," Sergey spread his hands and waved them briskly. Because of the difference in height, I stepped wider and less often, and he couldn't keep up, walking with a little shuffle that made his stomach and shoulders bounce rhythmically.

"Everyone sells everything the same way!" I waved away.

"Well, yeah," Sergey sighed.

"How much better does it sell!? Two, three times!?" I said.

"No, more, five times more!" Sergey stuck out his lips.

"Fucking hell! Fucking awesome! Damn, Seryoga, then we don't even have to fucking think about it, we have to bring it in and sell it!" I started, filling the speech with expletives. "Fuck, that must be a lot of dough, right?!"

"As a matter of fact, yes!" he pouted even more, adding, "And if we order the first batch and it's not sold out in thirty days, what are we going to do? We've already bought a lot of salt, ten tons, and we've started selling poison... it's all our money!"

Sergey pronounced the word "money" with a strong local accent. I was almost used to it and didn't notice it, but when the accent sounded excessive, it cut my ears.

"So what?" I was surprised, like an impertinent gambler who is discouraged from making a fat bet. "Seryoga, don't worry, we'll get out of this! They'll wait a little, if not, we'll pay, others will wait! Fuck, Seryoga, we don't have to think about that now! We'll bring the goods, start selling, then we'll see! The only thing is, we have to talk to everyone first. If at least two big companies agree to take it, then we should bring it in! Otherwise, someone will definitely bring the goods! You'll see! If 'Fort' and 'WholeSale' agree..."

We immediately went through all the depots and wholesalers where we wanted to put the perfumes, and it turned out that we had acquaintances or connections everywhere.

"It's more important to get good terms from the manufacturer, Seryoga!" I summarized.

"Well, yes, everything seems to be going smoothly," he nodded, thought about it and said: "Listen, if suddenly... I'm just guessing... if we need the money, can you get it? I just don't know how much you have, you don't tell me. Although I'm not greedy, I see we're doing well and I can get my own for the sake of it and invest in the company for you and myself if you can't or don't have it! Just tell me the truth so I know for sure! And money is no problem..."

I wondered. It wasn't the first time Sergey had asked me if I had a stash of money. He had even said that he had a bank account and some stocks totaling three hundred thousand. That statement had been a boast, which I had let pass and joked about. Now the question came up again. I took it to mean that he wanted to be on the safe side in case we didn't sell quickly. Caution is a good quality when it is not excessive. But there was a hesitation in Sergey's question that irritated me a bit. That's how I took his question about my having money.

"... I have five hundred thousand in the bank! Roman, if you don't have it, I'll do a good deed for you, take the money out and invest it! I'll support you! The main thing for me is that the company develops!" Sergey continued.

I shuddered. It sounded even more like bragging, but it was also an outright lie. I couldn't stand lying! I had put up with it the last time, but this time I couldn't help myself and let my sarcasm out.

"Seryoga, what kind of bank do you have, where a month ago you had three hundred thousand, and now it's already five hundred!?" I chuckled. "Where they pay such wild interest rates! I'll take my money there right now! Huh!? What kind of bank is this?"

My partner fell silent. The dialog was cut off. In an awkward pause, we approached the warehouse.

"Seenya!" I called, entering the warehouse first. "Here, a new waybill..."

Five minutes later, after leaving the warehouse, we walked in silence to the office. The aftertaste of Sergey's boasting did not make me want to talk. The pause dragged on. Sergey interrupted it by resuming his story about boxing and his youth in general. I listened halfheartedly. I was not interested in the subject, but Sergey's monologue broke the silence and allowed me to think about my own thoughts.

"Let's stop here!" Sergey nodded towards the shopping mall on the right. We drove the "Mazda" from "Mercury". Negotiations with Senya Stepanov, the director of the depot, about toilet water had failed. It turned out that Senya had already taken similar goods from an acquaintance of his. This acquaintance gave Senya a lot of money, and they were both happy. This acquaintance also supplied "Pelican" with toilet water. So Vovka also spread his hands and refused to take ours. All the other big customers agreed.

"All right!" I said in a sour mood after the outcome of the negotiations.

At the shopping center, Sergey bought a cell phone. But first he asked me to show him mine, found out its price – three thousand – and then began to study the display.

"This one seems pretty good," Sergey said, then added, "And this one is okay..."

"Expensive!" I was surprised. "Ten grand! What the hell do you need a ten grand phone for?"

"Well, maybe I like it!" he looked at me defiantly.

"Well, if you like it, take it!" I spread my hands and stepped aside.

For a few minutes I heard Sergey sniffing behind me.

"That's a good one, too," came from behind me, and I turned and walked over.

"Yeah, it's okay," I nodded and looked at the price tag – "7,600".

"I like this one too," Sergey pressed his lip.

I shifted my gaze – "5,200".

"Which one do you like better?" My partner looked at me.

"They both seem okay," I shrugged. "You'd have to touch them, turn them in your hands."

For the next five minutes, Sergey twirled the two phones in his hands and listened to the salesman's obsessive fables about the benefits of each. I hung around and was frankly bored.

"Well, which one do you like better?" Sergey turned to me again.

"I don't know... They have the same functionality. I'd take the cheaper one..."

"Okay, yeah, I'll take this one," my partner decided, waved his hand at the salesman, went into his briefcase, took out his money, counted it, and said: "Romych, listen, is it okay if I dive into the common fund? Because I'm a thousand short and I'll pay it back from my salary!"

"It's okay," I shrugged, "there's accounting, you'll put it back later and that's all."

"Yes, I'll do it as soon as I get my salary!" Sergey huffed, shoved his hand into the other compartment of his briefcase, and with trembling fingers counted out the missing amount from the bundle.

On Friday, all excited, I got on the train and went to Moscow. To see Lilya.

I lay on the top shelf and thought about my relationship with her. All I realized was that our relationship was different from my previous ones. For the first time I decided to be conscious and tried to build it not with feelings but with logic – to create a strict blueprint in my mind instead of shaping the relationship with expression. And Lilya was different. Posture, presence of manners, good education, hereditary belonging to a profession. I saw in her what is called, in a word, a breed. I had never paid much attention to such things before. I thought that no matter where a person was born or what kind of education they received, the main thing was that they turned out to be good. I denied the influence of the environment on human development, believing that the most important thing is the seed in each of us, and the rest will come. When I realized my mistake, I decided to start from the other end – to start with the wrapper and look for the grain inside.

At 8 in the morning on Saturday, October 15, I stepped onto the platform of Paveletsky Station and walked toward the main building. Winter was approaching in

Moscow, the air already tingling my face with cold. A light frost held the puddles on the asphalt in a web of ice. "About zero degrees," I thought, looking up at the clear, cloudless sky and realizing that it was going to be quite a day. Soon I saw Lilya, standing at the beginning of the platform in a light brown coat, black boots and holding a black purse in front of her with both hands in black leather gloves. I smiled. Lilya noticed me and smiled back. I walked over and awkwardly pressed my lips to her cheek. Lilya looked at me with her unusually light blue eyes, fluttered her eyelashes, smiled and looked down.

"Hi, Lilya!" I said and took the girl's hand. My heart beat with joy.

"Hi!" the girl replied, a beautiful smile of plump lips in bright red lipstick lighting up her face. "How was your trip?"

"Good trip, fast! I fell asleep and woke up in Moscow... and here you are! Let's go?"

Lilya nodded, took me under her arm, and we walked to the subway.

"How is Vovchik?" She looked at me carefully, elegantly tossing back a strand of perfect hair. "I missed you terribly!"

We spent the day together. We walked around the center, drank coffee and ate in various cafes. It was getting warmer outside. By noon the sun had warmed the air by ten degrees, and I, again feeling a rush of happiness and forgetting all my doubts, began to enjoy meeting Lilya.

"I'm kind of idle today..." She said, walking nicely beside me.

We came to a park without a single tree and paved with stone slabs.

"That is the buzzword in Moscow right now! Idle. You know?" Lilya glanced at me, continuing to measure every step with precision, tapping her stilettos elegantly.

"No, I didn't know that," I shrugged and looked for a free bench at the end of the park.

"Listen Lilya, why did you break up with that deputy?" I asked suddenly, reviving Lilya's story about her previous relationship.

"He behaved in an unmanly way," she said after a second delay, nervously waving her hand away from someone or something invisible.

"How do you mean?"

"Well, I thought we were starting a relationship..." the girl became more nervous, reluctantly squeezing the words out of her mouth. "I believed him. We almost started living together. And then he disappeared without explaining anything..."

I tactfully didn't broach the subject. At the same time, I remembered how Lilya had talked about these relationships in a pompous and breathy way a month before.

"You have to deal with people in your own circle," she said at the time. "I'm selective in my relationships, and I don't date just anyone. I recently ended a year-long relationship. He was a deputy. And now I know exactly what real men are like. After that, a self-respecting girl is not going to date just anyone..."

We walked over to the bench. I leaned over and ran my hand along the wooden slats.

"Dirty..." I looked at my fingers. "Sit like this!"

I held out my hand to Lilya. I supported her, and she climbed onto the bench, sat on its back, and put her feet on the dusty slats. Our eyes met. I looked down. Lilya's hands, already gloveless, were in her lap over her coat. I took them in mine. I wrapped my palms around the cold, thin fingers and smiled. Lilya smiled awkwardly and tensed in return. I listened to my feelings. Inside everything was quiet. Alarmed, I squeezed her hands tighter. Lilya smirked aloofly, with the shadow of a beautiful woman's self-confidence in her irresistibility, and averted her eyes to the left. I suddenly realized that I felt nothing for Lilya. The anxiety was gone and my chest felt empty. I unclenched my fingers and looked down. Lilya's hands were in my palms. They weren't pretty. I squeezed them again, instinctively chasing away the last thought. But then the next one came – I didn't like touching her hands. Unattractive fingers with fancy red nail polish staring at me. In my mind, a physiological barrier was growing

between us. I looked up. Lilya looked at me indifferently and condescendingly. She allowed me to be with her. This simple thought suddenly penetrated me. She allowed me to accompany her on her walks, she allowed me to come to her. She allowed me to hold her hands. All this Lilya allowed me, hiding the boredom of being with me behind a formal, polite smile. I slowly released my palms from hers, smiled strained, and shoved my hands into my pockets. The day was fading and the hours that had flown before were now frozen.

I shivered. Either from the chill or my epiphany. My practically built relationship was coming apart at the seams. The truth I had been hiding from myself was coming out – I didn't love Lilya and she didn't love me.

The second half of the day we walked around the malls. We walked down the long gallery of "Okhotny Ryad" station and went into a perfume store.

"What do you think of this perfume?" Lilya chose one of the bottles of men's toilet water.

"Not bad, I like it," I said automatically and a little tired, I wanted to go home.

"I like it too," she smiled. "It will suit you."

I nodded absent-mindedly and walked out into the common hallway, Lilya joining me a minute later. Walking with a girl in a shopping mall is not the best thing for a man's psyche. Lilya walked ahead of me, looking at the departments, at the expensive women's clothes. I walked behind her with a polite face and no mood.

"How's work in general?" I said, breaking the long silence.

"Well, it could be better..." Lilya waved her hand pretentiously. "The patients are so greedy now, just misers! They practically don't give me any money, can you imagine! So funny! Do they think I'll treat them for free?!"

"What do you mean?" I didn't understand. "I thought you had a military hospital there..."

"So?" Lilya gave me a slightly contemptuous look, as if I had said something incredibly stupid. "Those who want good treatment always pay there. I used to have such good patients, even some generals were lying there, always giving me money. Do you think I bought these boots with my salary!?"

Lilya hummed and put one foot aside. I looked down, ignorant of women's clothing, and could only say absentmindedly, "How much do they cost anyway?"

"Ten thousand!" Lilya said indignantly.

"Wow!" I was surprised.

"My salary is only eight," she added. "It's not even enough to eat in Moscow. It's good that there's this man now, a general. I give him treatments at home, and he pays me two thousand for each one..."

"That's pretty good, a second salary a month," I nodded.

"Yes, the only normal patient left," Lilya said, nervously tucking back a strand of her hair. "And these... misers! You can't expect any money from them! Well, the way they pay, the treatment they get! I'm no Mother Teresa for them!"

"What about the Hippocratic Oath?" I blurted out.

"What oath!? I live in a dormitory, in a nine meter room, next to the toilet, I get these damn kopecks, and I still have to take some kind of oath! Don't be stupid!" Lilya looked at me like an idiot.

Time slowed down even more. In the evening we were both tired. We went to another cafe. I immediately sat down on a chair and my legs started to buzz. Lilya sat across from me.

"What time is your train?" She said.

"Eight thirty," I said tiredly and leaned back in my chair.

"Soon," Lilya fluttered her eyelashes and modestly lowered her eyes.

"Yes, it is..."

A minute's pause.

"I would invite you to my place, but..." Lilya started.

"No, Lilya!" I brushed her off. "I didn't come here to spend the night, I just missed you and wanted to see you. If there is a possibility to accommodate me – fine, no – no. I have no demands, don't worry about it! I'll take the train and go home! It's all right."

"It's so cramped in there. One bed, a fridge, and that's it."

"Lilya!" I looked into the girl's eyes. "Don't worry about it! It's okay!"

"All right!" She cheered up immediately. "I'm so glad you're so understanding!"

We left the cafe and said goodbye. I kissed Lilya on the lips or cheek and went to the train. I was almost late. I jumped into the vestibule of my car and the train started immediately.

"I should have kept you overnight after all."

I saw the pinging text message and almost laughed as I typed a reply.

"Lilya, everything is great. Don't think about it. Thanks for the day. Kisses."

"Every game can be played by two," I thought and sent the message.

On Monday, Sergey's friends came to our office.

"Yes, hello?" he said into the phone. "Aha! It's you?... Yes, at work!... Aha! Come over! Yes! ... Aha! Aha! Aha, come on, come in right now! Yes!"

"Who's that?" Vera was surprised when her husband finished.

"It's Melyokha and his wife!" Sergey sniffed his nose, leaned back in his chair, crossed his legs and twitched one. "They're coming here... to visit us!"

"Who's 'Melyokha'?" I frowned theatrically, copying Sergey's habit.

"My neighbor!" He waved it off.

"His last name is Melyokhin, so we call him Melyokha," Vera explained with a smile. Soon there was a knock at the door.

"Yes!" Sergey shouted loudly and jumped up from his chair. "Come in!"

The door opened and a couple entered the room. A slim, handsome brunet, about one hundred and ninety centimeters tall, with short, black, slicked-back hair – a very distinguished looking guy in his early thirties. And an unassuming, unattractive, short, overweight brunette with a shapeless figure. The contrast between the guy and the girl was immediately striking.

"Who's here?" Sergey jumped up jokingly, and the couple laughed.

The guests greeted Sergey first, then me and Vera, and then looked around.

"Well, how are you settling in here?" the girl said excitedly.

"Business is booming, Seryoga!?" the brunet added, looking around the tables. "I can see that it is!"

"Yes! Working, little by little!" my partner stomped on the spot with undisguised satisfaction at the effect, and began to stroke the back of his head with the palm of his hand.

"A little space you have here..." Melyokha's wife expressed a common thought.

"Yes, Dasha, there isn't much room," Vera said. "You can't even sit down here. Sorry!"

"Oh, come on!" She waved her hands. "It's okay! We won't be long."

"We barely found you!" Melyokha blurted.

"Riiight!" Sergey choked, blushing with embarrassment for some reason. "It's quite a long way here! But the rent is cheap and there's nobody here! It's great here in the summer!"

"Yes! It's really nice here in the summer," Vera added. "So quiet."

I remained silent, shifting my gaze between the chattering foursome with seeming interest. In reality, I wasn't really interested. The only thing was that, looking at the guests, I

could not accept the idea that this handsome guy and a completely uninteresting ugly girl were husband and wife. How and why!? I even imagined them in bed and immediately shuddered.

"Nah, I couldn't. Not even drunk as shit, I couldn't," I let my eyes wander over them.

The joy and chatter continued for about ten minutes. The neighbors had time to discuss all the affairs of life – children, kindergartens, dachas and cars. As soon as the euphoria subsided, everyone became bored and ordinary. The guests hurriedly said goodbye and left.

CHAPTER 28

Sergey brought cigars to the office again. I accepted the offer of a smoke and we went outside. And immediately, shivering from the cold, we came back.

"Ugh! To hell with it!" I fell into the chair at the table with a smoldering cigar in my hand.

"Is it cold?" Vera smiled. "Frozen?"

"Yes! It's not May! Ooh!" Sergey sat down in the chair by the door with a cigar.

"Are you going to smoke here?" Vera asked.

"Yes, Vera, we are! It's so damn cold out there!" I nodded.

For the next ten minutes we diligently smoked cigars. Vera tolerated it tactfully, waving the smoke away and blinking frequently. When I was halfway through the cigar, I lifted my head. The blue smoke hung from the ceiling, covering everything there. Soon it began to settle and descend to the level of the tables. I immediately felt the lack of oxygen. My eyes were tingling, as was my nose. I rubbed them, coughed, and tears streamed from my eyes.

"Fuck, Seryoga, I can't breathe, open the door!" I almost cried.

Sergey laughed in a bass voice, grabbed the knob and opened the door. I couldn't stand it and jumped out into the hallway. Still laughing, Sergey came out next and started rubbing his eyes.

"Ah, stinging too?" I said. "Fuck them, these cigars! Vera, are you alive in there?"

Sergey's wife calmly came out of the room, smiled, looked at us as if we were misbehaving children, and said: "I am, Roma. What will happen to me..."

I went outside. Sergey followed me, cackling. After throwing out our cigars and getting some air, we returned to the room. The smoke was almost gone.

"Seryoga, leave the door open," I said, returning to the chair at the table.

The woman from the gatehouse came into the room after us with the mail.

"What is this letter? From whom?" I asked.

"From St. Petersburg, Roma. Waybills," Vera said. "Stamp it and give it back to them..."

Holding the papers in the air, Vera held them out to her husband questioningly.

"Vera, stamp them and put them in an envelope, we'll mail them on our way home!" Sergey waved, wrinkled his nose, crossed his arms over his chest, sniffed, crossed his legs and began to turn slightly in his chair.

"Seryozha!" Vera said with a dissatisfied face, tapped the stamp on the papers several times and handed them to her husband. "Done! Here! Sign!"

"Here Verok!" Sergey giggled. "How meticulous you are! You should have sent it like this!"

He rolled up his chair to the table and signed the waybills, finished, handed the sheets back to his wife, and added with a smile:

"Here! Done! Happy? Everything okay now?"

"I am!" Vera didn't keep a serious expression on her face, smiled and took the papers.

"It's all good now!"

"That's the kind of wife I have, Roman!" Sergey rolled over again. "She won't miss anything!"

"That's good, Seryoga!" I exclaimed. "I wish everyone had such a wife!"

"Did you hear that, Verok?" he said playfully. "You're a good wife, it turns out!"

Vera immediately tensed up, became serious, gave her husband a stern, questioning and surprised look, and muttered, staring at the monitor, "Do you still have doubts?"

There was an awkward pause in the room, and I tactfully buried my nose in a piece of paper.

"Come on, Verok!" Sergey waved carelessly and relaxed into a smile. "I'm just kidding, you know..."

"And how long has this Melyokha been married to this, what's-her-name, Dasha?" I asked Vera on Friday.

Sergey had left on business, and we were alone in the office drinking tea.

"Just a minute! Shall I give you the reports for October at the end of the month?"

"Of course," I said, smacking my lips, having adopted Sergey's habit of drinking tea with a piece of sugar.

Vera clicked her mouse and said, without taking her eyes off the screen, "I don't know exactly when they got married, Roma! A long time ago. They already have a big daughter, five years old."

"And how did they meet anyway?" I was still curious. "I couldn't say they were a couple. He's a tall, handsome guy. And she... well, she's not pretty."

Vera looked at me thoughtfully and began to choose her words:

"Yes, Dasha, she looks... well, yes, not a beauty..."

"Vera," I lowered my voice conspiratorially. "Let's face it, she's ugly."

Vera looked at me with understanding, but held back her smile. Having captured in her the struggle of objectivity with female solidarity and etiquette, I smiled and continued: "No figure at all, like a barrel.... I didn't see any genius either..."

Vera held back, but she was already smiling.

"And Melyokha is tall, slim, handsome, cheerful!" I insisted. "Vera, how did they get married? Shotgun marriage?"

"No, I don't think so!" she waved me off. "Well, somehow, like this... they got married."

"You don't think so?" I grinned.

"Well, I don't know exactly..." Vera smiled and fidgeted. "But I don't think so."

Soon everything came to light. Melyokha came from an ordinary family, Dasha from a wealthy one, her father held an important position in the city administration and supervised land issues. "Kept man," I mentally summarized. Vera stopped ennobling the couple's relationship and moved on to frankness.

"I must be a fool, but I don't understand how people can get married for reasons other than love!" I said. "Well, I can still understand it, if he is handsome and smart, so is she... Although, if both are smart, it's not a family without love, it's just a cohabitation. But it's okay, I can still understand it – two personalities got together and are living. But if it's like this... I'm looking at it from a man's point of view..."

Vera was in current things, listening to me, casting attentive glances.

"But she's ugly, Vera! How can he sleep with her? Or is he in love with her?"

"Oh, what love, Roma!?" Vera waved away. "You understood everything yourself. She likes him, of course! And he... You know, when he gets drunk, he talks about sex all the time!"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, we visit each other a lot. The kids are friends with each other. So we hang out together, you know, in social gatherings. When he drinks, he starts talking about the same thing..."

"The tongue always turns to the aching tooth!" I uttered a hackneyed phrase.

"I suppose so!" Vera smiled.

"What does he do for a living?" I asked after a minute.

"Well, he has his own company, he cleans sewers or something. I don't know for sure."

"Strange! He earns money by himself, but he got married in a strange way..."

"Himself, no way!" Vera snorted. "Dashka's father arranged everything for him!"

"Really!?" I raised my eyebrows.

"Really!" Vera mocked me.

There was a momentary pause. I fumbled with the papers on the table.

"I don't understand men who settle down like this and don't care who they live with as long as it's nice and comfortable," I said, imagining the couple again. "How can he sleep with her!? Fuck, I don't understand!... Although, maybe she's magical in bed..."

"Aha, magical!" Vera smiled demurely. "So magical that when he drinks, he pesters all the men with the question – do their wives give them blowjobs or not?"

"What!?" I stared at Vera and laughed softly. "Does he really?"

She gave me an affirmative look and blushed.

"Why does he ask that!?" I wondered.

"Well, I don't know!" Vera shrugged and laughed. "Apparently he misses it!"

I laughed. Vera blushed even more. Our dialogue came to a sticky point.

Remembering that I was not talking to some random girl in a pub, but to the wife of my business partner, I decided to choose my words carefully.

"Oh yeah!" I hummed, "You're right!"

Vera stared at the monitor, hiding her embarrassment.

"Did Seryoga tell you that?" I smiled, barely holding back my laughter.

Vera looked at me affirmatively, and then she realized:

"Look, you just don't tell him that I told you here!"

"No, Vera! Why should I set you up? This is between you and me."

There was another pause.

"Poor Melyokha, how long has he been married, five, six years?" I looked at Vera. "I wonder how he hasn't gone crazy! Actually, I understand him..."

"Dashka once asked me the same thing..." Vera interrupted her work. "Once we were sitting in a group and she came up to me and asked, 'Do you give head?'"

Stunned by such candor, I froze and looked at the door.

"What did you say?" I squeezed out.

"Well, what did I say – that I do, of course," Vera said.

My cheeks and ears immediately caught fire and I felt ashamed and embarrassed.

Sergey defused the situation. The door opened, he came in, and the office returned to routine.

For the rest of the day, images flashed spontaneously in my head – Melyokha running back and forth with an erect penis, begging everyone to give him a blowjob; his wife squeamishly twisting his penis in her hands; Vera giving her husband a blowjob, shrugging her shoulders guiltily and saying, "I do, of course".

And only sleep interrupted this stupid merry-go-round.

I finally got used to the fact that I didn't have to work physically. But I still felt that fact almost like magic. All I did at work was paperwork and phone calls. Goods were received and shipped by the storekeeper, the loader helped him, the driver drove the goods to the customers. Accustomed to working efficiently, I did my part of the job quickly. By three o'clock every day, everything was done. I spent the rest of my working hours talking to Vera and Sergey. I finally realized that the company was lucky to have Vera as an employee. She worked like a machine. Any work Vera took on was done quickly and with perfect quality. Sergey would spend the longest time doing his part of the work. He would start slowly, as if reluctantly, and always involve his wife, even for small things. She would react like lightning – she would stop her work, quickly do her husband's errand, and then return to her own tasks. I liked being at work. The alternative – the apartment with my depressed mother and resentful father – did not appeal to me. At the same time, the better things went for me, the worse the rest turned out. And the contrast was growing at an alarming rate. In addition, the mood was soured by the autumnal gloom and the shrinking daylight hours. By the end of October, the sun was setting at six, and twilight began at five. During the day I would suppress my nervous state with work, and in the evening, without spending a minute at home, I would run into the drunken crowd of the club. I would wander the dark streets of the city like a loner, drowning my nerves in vodka and juice. Vovka didn't call. Lilya... what about Lilya? The relationship didn't work. When I realized this, for some reason I kept writing to her and calling her. My stomach hurt from nerves. Dulled by alcohol and cigarettes, it subsided, but during the day the pain returned and became stronger. I would go to work in a crouch and pour mineral water on the pain. In the evening I would increase the dose of vodka and the pain would subside, but not completely. I started drinking anesthetic gel and swallowing pills again. My stomach hovered on the thin edge of a slight permanent malaise.

To our surprise and joy, the first batch of perfume from Moscow was sold out quickly, in two weeks.

On Saturday I didn't go to the club, but stayed home to kill the evening playing a computer game. My father was smoking on the balcony. The TV in his room was on, and there was a boxing match on. Two big "heavyweights" were hitting each other for eight rounds. It was after ten on the clock. I sat on the couch and watched the fight. It was almost even. But one boxer, who had better technique, was methodically pummeling the other with long-range punches. The second boxer looked stronger and healthier, but moved worse, and he paid for it. The result of the fight was clear to me – the first one, if he didn't do anything stupid, would win on points, or put the slow one down in a round or two.

"Watching boxing?" came a text from Sergey.

"Yes, I am." I sent.

The phone rang immediately.

"You are watching, aren't you?" Sergey said impatiently.

"Yes, I'm watching... two big assholes fighting..." I said looking at the screen.

"Well, what do you think, who do you think will win the fight?" Sergey asked excitedly.

"What is there to think? This one will win, will shoot until the end and will win..."

"You think?"

"Well, yes..."

"We're sitting here with guys, making bets! Melyokhin here, like you, says this one will win, but I'm not sure yet!"

"Let's see, there are only a couple of rounds left..."

"You don't think he'll jump?"

"There's nothing to jump from, he's already dead, he's only capable of one good punch at most..."

"You think? All right... Let's wait and see!"

I didn't have time to answer, Sergey ended the call.

The fight continued. The slow one was getting worse, but he still had strength, and he was dangerous. Time after time, he threw punches from as far away as he could, and they all landed. The big man swayed but held on, his back against the ropes.

"Grandstand play maybe?" came the message from Sergey as the final round began and it was obvious that the big man was barely on his feet, tempting the other to finish him off.

"Why? Stupid. He could run into a counter. He'll win anyway." I replied.

The fight ended, Sergey didn't write or call again. "Grandstand play..." was turning in my head. The expression puzzled and interested me. Without immediately finding out its meaning, I memorized it and filed it away in my mind. The pattern of the fight did not change – the technical boxer carefully carried the fight to victory without giving the big guy a chance.

For the next week I was plagued by gastritis. Every morning my stomach, which had calmed down overnight, made its presence known right after breakfast – it started to hurt. I would swallow a few pills, pour some anesthetic gel down my throat, and go to the bus stop. Half an hour of jolting along broken roads in a shared taxi and bus turned my stomach into a solid, aching wound. The minutes of the ride seemed like hours. Nausea would rise to my throat, and my stomach would feel like a heavy lump, impenetrable to food. I would turn pale, sweat, and saliva would fill my mouth. When I got there, I would get out of the shared taxi and walk down the path to the factory on shaky legs. A few times I threw up there. I realized the situation was much worse.

"Ulcer, definitely an ulcer," I thought the first time I threw up on the road. Both times I vomited so much that I broke out in sweat and tears. And then relief came. The pain was gone. For a few minutes afterward, I stood still for fear of upsetting my stomach. Then I walked slowly down the path. I knew from experience that the most important thing after vomiting is not to eat for as long as possible. I didn't eat. I lost a lot of weight, my stomach was gone. I became irritable and angry. When a person is in pain, he gets angry at everything around him. I was angry at myself, at my mother, at my father. At my stubbornness. I was angry at myself for leading such a lifestyle and putting my body in a miserable state. I was angry at my mother for acting like an idiot and rocking our decrepit family boat as hard as she could. I was angry at my father for being aloof, resentful, and doing nothing. I was angry at another relationship that didn't work out. Everything was bad. Everything but the business. It was going up fast, and that sharp contrast tore me in half.

Lilya called on Friday, November 4th.

"Hi, I'm here!" Her voice sounded into the phone.

"Hi, Lilya! Great! How long are you staying?" I answered with the rest of my emotions.

"Are you happy?" she said.

"Of course I am, Lilya!" I replied, but the sentence was pronounced with a hint of obligation.

"For all the holidays..." Lilya started, stopped, there was a rustle in the phone, a muffled displeased voice of her mother in the back of the room and a hasty, frightened answer of the girl. "Yes, mom, okay, I'll be quick... listen, I'll call you back later."

"Okay..." I barely managed to say it and heard tones.

In the evening I met Lilya in a cafe in the center. When I entered, Lilya was already sitting at a table with a friend. She looked striking, as always. Her black hair, as if dyed with tar, was slicked down, framing and shading her white face beautifully. Black mascara and deep red lips completed the firecracker picture. When she saw me, Lilya stood up and walked towards me. At that moment I suddenly realized that I saw her differently. Now it seemed to me that her face had too many flecks, her figure was far from ideal, her hands were ugly, her fingers were skinny, and the brightness of red nail polish irritated me with its vulgarity. Lilya smiled and I realized what had confused me about her teeth. She had a bridge in the upper right. It was misplaced and protruded slightly downward. Because of the dentist's mistake, when she smiled the artificial teeth were slightly exposed in front of the neighboring teeth and later hidden. I began to notice things I hadn't seen before. I wouldn't have, but the numbness of a brief crush had worn off irrevocably. What remained was the tugging feeling of duty and obligation, instilled from childhood, which weighed down and entangled my will.

"Hi," Lilya came closer, pulling me out of my introspection.

"Hi," I said automatically, putting my arm around her shoulder and walking towards the table.

"Aren't you going to kiss me!?" the girl was surprised.

"Oh yeah, sorry Lilya! I just got distracted for a moment," I kissed her cheek, said hi to the other girl, and sat down on a chair.

Lilya sat down thoughtfully across from me and looked at me for a few seconds with an attentive, studying gaze. I looked at her; Lilya looked striking, but I didn't care. I caught the first notes of indifference in my chest and I liked them.

"Will you have a drink?" Lilya said sympathetically.

"Yes, I'll have a drink!" I turned my head to look for a waiter. "I think I'll have some tea..."

"Tea!?" Lilya stared at me in surprise.

"Yes, tea," I nodded. "I don't feel like drinking alcohol."

I ordered a cake for tea. I shouldn't have. My stomach hurt immediately. I lit a cigarette and the pain eased a little.

"Where are we going today?" Lilya tossed back a lock of her hair with her practiced movement and looked at me, but immediately lowered her eyes to the ground.

"I don't know, anywhere," I shrugged.

"Maybe we'll go to the club?" she suggested.

"We could go to a club," I shrugged again, enduring the pain. "Do you want to dance?"

"I just want to chill out. I don't have time to go to clubs in Moscow – I have to work."

"A club then," I nodded.

Lilya gently asked me if I would mind if her friend came with us.

"I don't mind," I said, and a vague feeling of dissatisfaction came over me.

We walked around until we reached the club. There were two dozen people on the dance floor bouncing to the loud music. We went up to the second floor and sat at a table near the edge where we could see the dance floor below. My stomach kept hurting.

The waiter came over. The girls ordered champagne and dessert, I ordered tea and salad.

"Tea again!?" Lilya looked at me in surprise.

"My stomach hurts, I won't drink alcohol."

"Aha..." Lilya said indifferently and turned to the dance floor.

I lit a cigarette and listened to the sensations inside. My stomach throbbed and twitched. The waiter brought the order. The girls started with the champagne, I with the salad. Wrong again. I ate half the salad and nausea came to my throat, my stomach came to life and I felt a sense of blockage. I took small sips of tea. It didn't get better, but it didn't get worse either. I put my arm around Lilya's waist. She turned around, smiled and turned away again. Lilya's friend drank champagne in silence, occasionally exchanging short sentences with her. My mood was completely gone. My thoughts drifted away. I stroked Lilya's waist and tried to imagine our future together, the two of us in bed, her as my wife. Nothing came out, this girl was not in my future.

I felt more nauseous. My stomach ached unbearably. Sweat appeared on my face. I wanted to go home. I needed rest, treatment and diet. But I was in a nightclub, eating and smoking.

After a few glasses of champagne, the girls cheered up.

"How's your stomach?" Lilya asked, tossing back a strand of her hair.

"It's okay," I grumbled, smiling sourly. "More or less, it hurts a bit."

"Have some vodka!" Lilya smiled. "It'll cheer you up and your stomach will feel better..."

I didn't have time to answer, she turned away and continued to look down at the audience.

"Have some vodka! Have some vodka. Vodka..." repeated in my head. Anger began to boil in my soul, thoughts swirled in my head. "What a fool you are! She doesn't give a shit about you! All she cares about is having fun! To feel good and have fun! She doesn't give a shit about you and your stomach! She didn't say "have some vodka" because she cares about you and your health! She's worried about her fun! Have a drink, kill your pain and have fun with us! Spend the money! Spend it on fun! Spend more on me! Spend it on my friend too! You're the fool, you pay for everything! And in three days I'll leave, and you wait for me, I'll come back! And you will entertain me again, take me to cafes, clubs, spend on my fun! You're the fool!"

I pushed those thoughts away, but the facts kept scratching at my eyes, my mind, and my soul.

My stomach wouldn't let go. Time hardly moved. After the torment of the club and saying goodbye to Lilya, I flew home, stripped down to my underwear, locked myself in the bathroom and threw up.

Tomorrow at noon Lilya called again.

"My friend and I are sitting in a cafe, do you want to join us?"

"I don't know," I mumbled, feeling the remains of the urge to her. "I could, of course..."

"Stop!" My mind flashed immediately and I started to get angry with myself.

"Then come over, we'll wait for you here. We can go bowling later."

"The three of us?" I clarified, stalling for time, feeling a simple but important thought ripen in my head.

"No, why the three of us? My brother's coming over, so you can meet him. Let's go as four. And in the evening we'll go to a cafe, you and I."

The thought matured and the answer was born by itself: "Lilya, listen, I don't really feel well. You better go bowling and then we'll go for a walk in the evening, okay?"

"Yeah, all right," the girl grudgingly replied.

"Then I'll see you later, I'll call you at five, okay?" I continued nonchalantly.

"Yes, okay, see you later," Lilya said sharply and disconnected.

The thought lived in my head and didn't let me rest until the meeting. As soon as Lilya and I sat down in a cozy cafe, I asked: "So, how was bowling? Who won?"

"We thought about it and didn't go!" Lilya brushed it off. "We felt too idle."

"So the three of you just sat there for a while and went home?" I clarified.

"Why the three of us?" Lilya said, studying the menu.

"Well, your brother..."

"Oh, no! My brother called and said he couldn't, he had some things to do!" Lilya tossed the sentence without taking her eyes off the laminated book.

"I see," I nodded and stared at the menu, unpleasantly realizing the correctness of my thoughts.

The evening was tedious. I had to say something to Lilya, listen to her, and do it all without desire and attention. My interest in Lilya faded. There was only irritation and anger at myself for wasting time, energy and hopes. I decided to go for a walk with Lilya on the last day of her mini-vacation and that was the end of it.

"I'm sitting in a meeting at the hospital in the morning..." her voice brought me out of my thoughts, "we have a hallway with many rows of chairs. I'm in a white coat, like all the doctors, sitting somewhere in the middle. The head doctor is telling us something and we're all sitting there listening. I threw my hair back like this..." here Lilya repeated a movement I knew well, "and behind me sat this stupid girl who is always jealous of me. She's ugly herself and her hair is thin, not like mine..."

I looked at Lilya's hair. It was really beautiful – thick, strong, long.

"And this sheep, can you imagine, says, 'Liliya Mikhailovna, please don't wave your hair all over the audience, it's unhygienic!'" Lilya stared at me, expecting approval and support. "Can you believe how stupid she is!?" I turned around and said, "If you're jealous that I have such luxurious hair, then be jealous in silence!" This is the kind of idiot I have to work with! She sits there and tells me what to do! And by the way, I have an honors diploma and a post-graduate degree with distinction!"

"You have an honors diploma?" I said with a hint of surprise.

"Why, did you doubt it!?" Lilya glared at me aggressively. "I have an honors diploma, I was the best in the course and in the post-graduate school, I finished it externally!"

"Wow," I mumbled, annoyed by the empty self-glorification. "That's tough! You're good!"

"I know!" Lilya waved me off.

"Precious fool," I thought, and started looking at the girls at the other tables. And I liked what I thought. My upbringing had cracked again. Before, I never allowed myself to call girls names, even mentally. All sorts of emotions happened, but name-calling was not one of them. And I should have! It changes things. I immediately relaxed, felt light and stared at Lilya with indifference. She was telling me something. Still snobbish and arrogant. I barely made it through the next hour. When we left the cafe, we took a taxi to Lilya's house. At the gate of her house I gave her a quick peck on the cheek. She stood and looked at me with the fake look of a naive simpleton. For some reason, I reached out and pressed my lips to hers. They were soft, tasteless, and sticky with lipstick. After a few seconds I was disappointed – Lilya didn't know how to kiss at all. She moved her lips haphazardly around mine, not knowing where to put her tongue. I tactfully finished fumbling, mumbled something like "See you tomorrow, I'll call you when I wake up" and, holding back my running, walked briskly back to the taxi.

"Where to now?" said the taxi driver tiredly.

"Back to the center!" I almost shouted, as if revived.

Ten minutes later, I was almost running down the steps of the club.

"Hi, Rita!" I shouted to my ex-girlfriend, bubbling over with joy that was unclear even to me. Rita looked at me in surprise and said hello confusedly. I went to the small bar in the grotto and ordered a double "screwdriver". The adrenaline gave me a rush of emotions and a desire to drink. But after consuming three doubles in an hour, I became depressed and mopey. My mood was gone. I went outside, smoked, shivered, and looked around. The cold, piercing wind was chasing the last dry leaves and rare groups of people along the asphalt of the avenue. It was half past midnight. November is the most dreary month of the year. It was as if life had frozen and didn't know what to do next. Neither did I. I stood, swaying with alcohol, staring across the street.

"What am I doing here? Why do I keep coming to this club? How much longer will I come here?"

Such questions made my chest tighten. The meaninglessness of my own life suddenly became so clear that it was hard to breathe. As if to escape the thought, I became angry with myself and ran across the street. As I crossed the roadway, I stopped in the middle of the sidewalk and froze in a kind of stupor.

"Hi!" came a sudden voice from my left. I flinched and turned around. She was walking in front of me, the same blonde I'd seen twice before at the club. She smiled at me and walked briskly past me. She was with a friend. She was holding her hand and pulling her along. They were both laughing. The blonde was dressed the same as before, but she was wearing a gray coat with the top open.

"Oh, hi..." I mumbled, immediately feeling a strong rush of life.

"Come to 'Clear Skies'!" The girl turned and called, walking away quickly. A gust of wind from behind ruffled her hair. The girl flicked it away with her hand, but the wind wouldn't give up. The blonde girl shouted: "Come! I'll come..."

I tensed but didn't catch all the words. Her friend pulled the blonde's arm sharply and she laughed. Resonant and beautiful, revealing the flawless whiteness of perfect teeth. Her friend pulled her again, and the blonde turned to face her, her words drowned in the headwind.

"When?" I wanted to shout, but it was barely a whisper. I looked around, but no one was there. When I came to my senses, I found myself looking in the direction of the blonde and reaching for her. I looked at the club and immediately back at the blonde – the street was empty. The girl flew by like a ghost and disappeared into the night.

"When!? When to come!? Tonight!? Tomorrow!? When!?"

Obedying the impulse, I ran back across the street and found myself back at the bar.

"Another double!" I rubbed my palms together vigorously, shaking off the November chill.

I waited for the blonde until closing time. She didn't show up. Two hours flew by and the waiting made me feel alive. My stomach couldn't take the fourth double and it hurt. Cigarettes didn't help. I left the club and walked to the hotel.

"She didn't come. When will she come? Tomorrow? Sunday. Yes, that's right, she must have meant tomorrow! I've got to come over! She's so beautiful! What an extraordinary girl!"

The next day I met Lilya after lunch in a quiet street in the center. Her brother and her friends soon gathered at the entertainment center, the same one where Sergey and I played billiards. Lilya said we could join them. I agreed.

"You'll meet my brother too..." she added.

We slowed down, turned into the park, chose a free bench and sat down.

"I have a present for you," Lilya said suddenly, flashing her eyes and smiling.

I was surprised. Lilya opened her handbag, took out a men's perfume of a well-known company and gave it to me. With words of gratitude I accepted the gift and kissed Lilya on the cheek.

We were sitting in the park, surrounded by trees that had long since turned yellow and were half naked. The day was calm, sunny and warm. Soon the sun disappeared behind creeping clouds, and it grew cool. The drizzle dragged the sparse leaves across the concrete slabs of the park.

"How are your parents?" I forced myself to say. "How's mom? How's dad?"

I'd never met Lilya's father, but somehow I imagined him as an intellectual, Anton Pavlovich Chekhov-style. And next to him an angry broad with the voice of a watchdog. She barks, and Lilya's dad fixes his glasses on the bridge of his nose with a trembling finger and bleats, "I love my wife very much!"

"Oh! Mom has problems with these tenants!" Lilya suddenly burst into flames.

It turned out that Lilya's family owned another house nearby. And they rented it to three students. And they were having a weekend party with girls and, as usual, they fought and broke the furniture. It was the police who stopped them.

"Imbeciles!" Lilya almost shouted in anger, her face contorting.

"Well, yes, not the sharpest..."

"They're imbeciles, you know! Just imbeciles!" She waved her hand in front of my nose like a saber. I was silent. Lilya boiled up and started talking about something else. I supported the topic, but the image of Lilya's face, distorted with hatred, froze in front of my eyes.

We arrived at the entertainment center at five o'clock. There was a group of six people waiting for us. Lilya introduced me to her brother, his wife and the others. We sat down at a table.

"Would you like some vodka?" said Lilya's brother, a bespectacled brunette with a schlubby appearance.

"No thanks," I refused, "I'll just have tea, that's all.

"Well, tea it is..." he hummed and put the bottle down.

"Why won't you drink!?" Lilya stared at me sternly.

"Lilya, you know why," I answered as quietly as possible, almost in her ear.

"Aha..." she said, raised an unhappy eyebrow and commanded: "I want some champagne. Pour it for me!"

I poured. After emptying the glass, Lilya became cheerful, a blush ran down her face. The initial awkwardness of acquaintance passed, the group began to discuss common topics. Everyone chattered. Lilya, who was sipping her second glass of champagne, was having fun and sometimes threw vague glances at me. I smiled back, but in my heart I was bored. We played a few games of pool with Lilya. Clumsily holding the cue, she missed and was a bit promiscuous.

"What do you do for a living?" Lilya's brother asked as soon as we were back at the table.

I answered all the questions one by one – I have my own small business; I live with my parents; I don't have a car and I'm thinking about buying my own apartment. The schlubby one left me alone, and the crowd started chattering again, all returning to their previous topics.

"Pour me another one," Lilya commanded.

I did.

"Are you going to buy an apartment?" Lilya clarified.

"I'm thinking about it. I've got a decent amount of money, I don't need it for work, so I thought maybe I'd buy an apartment," I shrugged. The first time such a thought crossed my

mind was about a month ago. Before that, I was waiting for my father to start some kind of business. He had all the prerequisites: six hundred in a bank account, his own "GAZelle", almost free storage space at the factory. Take it and work. My father was inactive. It was surprising. I understood that money lying idle in the bank is bad, inflation eats it up.

"Buy one in Moscow!" Lilya was enthusiastic about the idea.

"No, Lilya! I don't even have enough money for a one-bedroom apartment in Moscow!" I grinned.

"Well, not in Moscow itself, you can buy it in the suburbs! The prices there are the same as here!"

"Come on! What would he do in Moscow? He can live here! Buy an apartment here and live, right?" Lilya's brother rebuked her unceremoniously and stared at me with a dull look.

I nodded and ducked into my cup of tea. Lilya threw her hair back nervously and took a big sip from her glass, smearing more lipstick on the rim.

After half an hour, the conversation at the table became sluggish. I remained silent, drank tea and was happy to have a lull in my stomach. Lilya, drunk and with a flushed face, actively intervened in one of the dialogues. She began to argue and prove her point in a peremptory manner. I listened. Lilya's brother joined the argument, and later the whole table. The group came to life. Self-confident Lilya was talking nonsense, if not stupidity. And I couldn't stand it anymore.

"Lilya, you are wrong here..." I said carefully. "Your brother says the right thing..."

"And you shut up! I know what to say and what not to say! Got it!?" She glared at me angrily and waved me off.

I was stunned and speechless. The others continued to argue. There was no doubt about it – I had been rudely and unceremoniously shut up! Immediately, my inner block activated – I swallowed the rudeness. If it had been said by a guy, I would have reacted. But a girl... I couldn't say the same to her. "Fucking manners!" A lump of anger rushed through me and my body instantly filled with rage. I looked at Lilya. She was in the middle of an argument – gesticulating, talking a lot and completely ignoring me. A nullity. I looked at Lilya again and immediately looked away, startled out of my thoughts – I wanted to punch her in the face, hard enough to knock out her remaining teeth. "Scum!" I boiled. With an unbelievable effort I controlled my anger and decided to talk to Lilya alone afterwards. I spent the rest of the evening sullenly sitting, and then I helped Lilya put on her coat in the checkroom and said:

"Lilya, let's walk for a while. And when we get tired of walking, we'll take a taxi."

"Okay," she said, pointing to the sofa next to her. "Give me my bag!"

Holding back a new burst of anger, I obeyed the order. Outside, the pleasantly cool air blew over my face, bringing me back to my senses a little. I was fine. The anger remained, but I controlled it. We walked in silence for about five minutes.

"Lilya, listen..." I started. "I didn't really understand what you said to me..."

"What didn't you understand!?" she parried aggressively.

"Do you realize that you humiliated me in front of everyone by telling me to shut up..."

"What did you expect!?" Lilya said indisputably. "I have a lot of friends, I'm often in groups, we communicate, I express my opinion, and if you don't like something, you have to get used to it... I'm a beautiful girl, that's the only way to treat me!"

I grinned, Lilya had presented me with a non-existent choice. Everything inside me was churning with the urge to punch that fool in the face! "It's not okay to hit and insult girls!" the barrier signaled in my head and I controlled my anger again.

"So that's it, huh?" I asked calmly, looking at Lilya. And at the same moment I realized one simple thing – Lilya was drunk, alcohol had exposed her essence. What was hidden behind the sign of intellectuality in her sober state, now came to the surface. A simple, bold hussy walked next to me.

"Yes, that's it!"

"Well..." I grinned and made a decision. "I see..."

We walked a few more blocks, I took a cab and drove Lilya home. I kissed her cheek, mumbled, "I'll call you tomorrow morning," and got back in the car.

"Where to now?" the taxi driver looked at me.

"Downtown, to 'Clear Skies'."

I stayed at the club until closing. The blonde didn't show up. I got drunk. I got home and I was on the toilet and I was puking inside out. I pulled the lever, the water rumbled, I saw out of the corner of my eye two drops of blood, and they were flushed.

Monday, November 7, as agreed with Sergey, was a day off. I woke up around noon. My stomach hurt a little and I felt wrecked. I managed to eat some breakfast and crawled back into bed. I picked up a book, started reading, and realized that I hadn't read for a long time and had missed out on a good read. I gave up on Lilya and decided not to call her again. No explanations or clarifications. I didn't need it.

Around two o'clock in the afternoon my phone rang and on the screen was "Lilya".

"Yes, hello," I said into the phone.

"Why didn't you call me?" she shouted almost rudely.

I shrugged, paused and mumbled: "I don't want to..."

"Hm!" she sounded surprised. "Well, as you wish!"

There was an immediate ringing in my ear – Lilya had hung up.

"Go fuck yourself," I thought. I was sure that Lilya would show up. "She'll call me again," I realized, thought of the blonde and continued reading.

CHAPTER 29

Her name was Natasha. I got the name from the pimply Polinka. I didn't feel well, but my feet carried me to the club. I spent the whole next week there, starting on Tuesday. Natasha never showed up. By Friday I was getting nervous, realizing that she would probably show up over the weekend. I drank a lot that night. On Saturday the same thing happened – she didn't show up and I got drunk again. The next morning a terrible depression hit me. I was at a dead end trying to figure out what was happening to me. I felt like I was in a cage of life whose walls were slowly closing in on me. In the evening I escaped from my depressing thoughts to "Clear Skies". I drank there and didn't wait for the blonde anymore. The last double, my ninth double, was unnecessary. I'd crossed the line, and by 3 a.m. I was completely drunk. Almost hanging on the bar, I mumbled something to the bartender, but I could feel my lips not obeying and the words not coming together. I was ashamed. I mean, everybody here knew me. Yes, I'd had a drink, but I'd always left on my own two feet. Now I was drunk. I could barely walk, swaying from side to side, only the narrow walls of the bar kept me from falling. Trying to keep my balance, I made my way to the exit. But when I reached the guard's chair by the checkroom, I collapsed on it. The music faded, the customers reached the checkroom for their outerwear and began to crowd and shout nearby. I continued to sit. Surprisingly, my brain was clear – I understood everything, heard and saw everything, but I felt like a rag. Gradually the visitors dispersed. I didn't want to go home. No one was waiting for me there. No one was waiting for me anywhere. Desperation rose in my throat,

my chest tightened. I looked up and was stunned, wishing I could fall right into the ground. Natasha stood in front of me. She was smiling, her eyes were shining. She was talking to someone behind me. I looked over there. One of the guards. He was ogling the blonde with the greasy eyes. She was glowing.

"Hi," she smiled at me and continued with the guard. "Is Polinka here?"

"Yes, she's still here, you can go to her," he said, and Natasha went deep into the building.

The desperation inside me exploded, choking me even more. I sighed heavily a few times, trying to get my breathing back to normal. It didn't help. The pressure inside me got worse and I started to choke. A wild wave of self-pity came over me, and tears welled up in my eyes. I breathed harder, fighting to hold them back. The tears froze. Afraid of letting a single one fall to the ground, I didn't blink. Not wanting anyone to see my tears, I bowed my head, as if I were totally wrecked. I was unbearably miserable. No one wanted me. Even that idiot Lilya didn't need me. I was sitting all alone, drunk and miserable. Natasha's image was in front of my face. She was smiling. The girl was perfect. She was so close in the vision and completely out of reach. A second wave of despair and self-pity washed over me. I breathed heavily again. Tears streamed from my eyes and I discreetly wiped them away.

"You'll never get a girl like that!" I heard my inner voice clearly. And as if condemned to be alone forever, I got up and walked away unnoticed.

I didn't call the picker-upper I knew, I didn't go to the hotel, but took a shortcut past the movie theater and deliberately walked through the deserted night park. The tears came again and I cried bitterly. I soon felt better. I walked on and, half sober, caught a random car and came home. My parents were asleep. I stripped down to my underwear and froze in front of the hall mirror. An unpleasant-looking guy was staring at me from there. Not badly built, but already showing signs of deterioration. The body looked flabby. The stomach was hanging in folds, the face was puffy and wrinkled, and the skin was an unhealthy color. The eyes were hopeless and sad, with the look of a hunted beast that could see no way out, resigned to its fate. I stared into my eyes and breathed heavily. My heart pounded, the alcohol pumping into my temples. I focused on the eyes, trying to see the irises and dive in. I saw the fire of life in them. It was barely smoldering, but it was alive. My stomach twitched in a sudden spasm and the quiet ache was replaced by a sharp pain. I clenched my abdominal muscles, but the pain grew. I pressed my fingers into my solar plexus, a familiar spot, like a button to shut off the pain. My fingers pressed into the spasming esophagus. I pressed harder – the pain intensified sharply. Angry at myself, I gritted my teeth and pressed again, my stomach ripping from the inside out. Hating myself, I slammed my fist into my solar plexus. My stomach twitched. "Suffer," I mentally condemned myself and struck the same spot with sadistic pleasure. Pain shot back. I gritted my teeth and punched harder. My stomach started to twitch. Another punch! More! More! My stomach jerked in random spasms as if I was being cut from the inside out. Nausea came to my throat. I went into the bathroom, knelt down and threw up in the toilet. I breathed a sigh of relief. A second spasm jerked my stomach from below, and a new fountain hit the toilet through my mouth and nose. Another spasm, the result was the same but a little weaker. My arms and legs immediately weakened, sweat trickled down my forehead and back. A pause and three more spasms. The stomach was almost empty. Another pause. I spit. Wiped away the tears. My stomach twitched one last time and went quiet. I spit again, wiped my mouth with toilet paper. My body wouldn't obey. I saw a few drops of blood in the toilet. Indifferently, I turned away and pulled the lever. Barely raising my hand to grab the doorknob, I struggled to my feet and staggered out into the hallway. In the mirror I saw the same haggard-looking guy again. When I looked at my reflection, I realized that I didn't want to live. Apathy and indifference pervaded me. The pain in my stomach had been with me for so long that it felt like I'd been born with it. "You're

shit," it went through my head again. It was clear to me that I had reached the point of no return. One more step and I would go to the bottom of life. Immediately a wild fear came over me and an icy shiver ran down my spine. A weak little man was hysterical in my chest – he wanted to live and was panting as if he was already in a tight coffin and life was about to throw earth on him. First he was hysterical, then he boiled over with anger and decided to fight. "That's it, enough of that, fight!" I mentally told my reflection. There was no pain. My stomach froze, as if it had shut down. I was almost sober. I felt a slight chill, dizziness, and weakness shaking my body. Staggering, I turned off the light, got into bed, tucked my legs in and curled up in a cocoon, shutting myself off from the outside world and falling into oblivion. The cocoon began to warm me from within. I fell into a dream in which I saw myself healthy, slim, with a guileless smile and long forgotten what pain was – I looked at the world around me and felt as if I was floating above it.

I tried to get out of bed in the morning, but I couldn't. My body was exhausted from the night and my stomach hurt. I reached under the bed, fumbled for a bottle of mineral water, and took a few sips. The water flowed into my stomach, cutting it and making the pain worse. I closed my eyes again and lay there for half an hour. Then I pulled myself together, got up and staggered to the bathroom.

"What happened?" my mother asked worriedly when she met me in the hallway.

"My stomach..." I said quietly.

"Again!?" she shrieked in frustration.

I said nothing, looked at my mother, and went into the bathroom.

"You eat garbage all the time, that's why it hurts all the time!" my mother said in my back. "That one was suffering with his stomach, and now you too! God, I'm so sick of it all!"

I closed the door behind me and got in the shower. My stomach was convulsing, my temples were throbbing. I was so weak I could barely run a washcloth over my body.

"Does it hurt?" my mother asked sympathetically when I was barely out of the bathroom. "Uh-huh," I nodded and went to bed. I had a sharp pain when I walked, and when I lay down, my stomach twitched with a dull ache. My father appeared in the doorway of the room.

"Stomach?" He said laconically and sternly. "Does it hurt?"

"Of course it's his stomach!" My mother splashed her hands. "He eats whatever food! I told him that a long time ago! I'm sick of it! He won't listen! There you go! He had it coming! Got an ulcer!"

I had no strength to object. My father came closer, assessed my condition and said:

"You need to be treated..."

"Yes, I do," I nodded, wiping the sweat from my brow and closing my eyes.

"All right, I'll get the medicine, I'll bring everything," my father said and hurried away.

"Maybe I should make you some porridge," my mother said quietly.

"Yes, Mom... please..." I said with an effort.

"Oh, son, son!" my mother sighed and went into the kitchen.

I ate a bowl of porridge with difficulty. My mother brought it to my bed. My stomach hurt at first, but after the first few spoonfuls it eased. When I finished the porridge, I leaned back on the pillow without strength.

My mother left the room. I spent the next half hour fighting heartburn, hearing my parents arguing and whispering in the kitchen through my slumber. Time slowed. It was as if the wheel of life in which I was spinning suddenly jammed and I was thrown against its walls at full speed. Going to work was out of the question.

"Okay, Roman!" Sergey replied cheerfully as soon as I called him and told him everything. "All right, take your time, get well! We will fight here with Verok for three of us, don't worry!"

The days went by monotonously. My mother fussed over me like a hen. She came out of anabiosis and started feeding me diet food. My stomach hurt less in the morning. But at night the pain would get worse and keep me awake. As I endured it, I was angry with myself. Every night I hated myself for all the past, my weaknesses, and the degradation that had begun. The weakness made me most angry. I imagined it as something viscous, like drench. And I floundered in it, not wanting to waste my strength on overcoming life's difficulties. "A wuss, a wimp, a jerk, a shit," I mentally called myself in every possible way, just to get me to fight my own spinelessness. My gut demanded action. I screwed myself up and fanned the fire of life in me. My mother fed me every hour, and my father went to the store at her request to get the necessary products. By the third day I had an appetite, but I was still weak and very thin, dizzy all the time. Severe pains would start at midnight and keep me in agonizing tension until three or four o'clock in the morning. It was like this every day. Painkillers and medications did not help. I drank them by the spoonful, but at night the effect was like nothing. My parents fell asleep in their rooms, the house fell silent, and I curled up under the covers, clutching my stomach with my fingers, and endured. At first there was pain, then colic and cramps. Time passed slowly, moving forward with the meager drops of a metronome – drip-drop... In the morning the pain would be gone and I would fall asleep, exhausted.

"You need a checkup," my father said with a serious look.

"Why?" I said. "I already know that I have an ulcer. The doctor won't tell me anything new. I just need to eat well, that's all..."

"Then eat well!" My father got angry. "You know what to do and you don't do it!"

I said nothing, and my father left the room.

On Friday, I went to the clinic with my mother. It was the first time I had been outside in a week. My stomach hurt and reacted to every movement of my body. I felt a little dizzy. My mother held me under my arm. The receptionist at the clinic said that the gastroscopy should be done on an empty stomach and in the morning. I made an appointment for the next day and we waddled home. The rest of the day I suffered as usual, at night it got worse, until five in the morning I lay twisted and exhausted and fell asleep.

"That's it, you can get up now," the doctor said phlegmatically as the black hose left my throat and I gasped greedily. The doctor sat down at his desk and started to write.

"How am I doing?" I asked, putting on my shoes and wiping my mouth.

"Not well... You have a surgical case. Ulcer."

"I know I have the ulcer... Is there no way without surgery?"

The doctor continued to write, and when he finished, he looked at me.

"You have an ulcer at the entrance to the duodenum. It's in a very bad place. It's inflamed and blocking the passage. So food can't get further down your esophagus."

"What if we operate, will it go away? What are the odds?"

"The odds are fifty-fifty," the doctor said. "You'll either forget about your stomach problems once and for all, or you'll be eating liquid food through a tube for the rest of your life!"

I pictured myself and my mother feeding me prepared food, and I shuddered.

"Doctor, just tell me... man to man," I said, looking him in the eye. "Do I need this surgery? Or will it go away if I eat normally?"

The doctor finished writing, got up from the table, sighed, and twirled a pen between his fingers.

"Go home, you don't need this surgery... Diet, regimen, and don't be nervous... Ulcers are also caused by nerves!" He handed me the report. "Be well!"

My spirits immediately lifted, as if a man sentenced to be shot had his execution stayed. When I waddled home, I ate my porridge and went to bed. The day passed tolerably well. In anticipation of an exacerbation, I had taken medication earlier in the day, but that night it did not help at all.

I started to feel the pain at ten o'clock. I was lying on my side as usual with my legs up and my fingers in my solar plexus. My cramped stomach hurt half as much in this position. My nerves, strained by the constant pain, had heightened my sensitivity to the extreme. The pain increased and by midnight it was unbearable. My stomach felt like it was on fire from the inside and twitched with cramps. The spasms reverberated through my nerves, causing my legs to twitch involuntarily. The apartment was dark and silent, my parents were already asleep. The metronome of time began to slow down – drip-drop... drip-drop... The seconds seemed to fall on the ulcer itself, and each time it flared with pain. My brain flickered with thoughts. For the countless times I started to get angry with myself and thought that my current state was a just punishment for my lifestyle. I didn't spare myself physically and I didn't want to spare myself morally. I didn't make excuses. I looked the situation squarely in the face and nipped self-pity in the bud. I passed a sentence on myself – "guilty" – and I was determined to carry it out. "No medication, I'll just lie there and take it," I decided, gritting my teeth.

"Basically, your life is shit..." I said to myself, "you're twenty-eight years old, no wife, no kids, no apartment, no car, no normal relationship with your parents, no health, no..."

I slipped into oblivion from time to time. The pain had driven my brain and nerves into a frenzy. One, two, three o'clock in the morning, I lay in the dark, resigned to any further course of my life. Everything became insignificant and indifferent. The realization of my own worthlessness suddenly became so oppressive and heavy that I cried. Quietly, trying not to let anyone hear my sobs. The tears flowed onto the pillow. But it didn't get better. The pain wouldn't go away. It burned me from the inside out, melting my whole body through the fiery nerves. The pain reached its peak and...

I blacked out.

It was as if my consciousness had returned to zero. Images flashed through my brain from nowhere to nowhere. They came and went. And I saw myself in them. The images seemed familiar, as if I'd seen them before. But I hadn't been in them yet...

I came to my senses.

The pain was gone and my body relaxed. I stretched my legs and straightened up completely. My stomach didn't react. "The ulcer has closed," I realized, instantly grasping the significance of what had happened. Someone's invisible hand had cut away the past and placed a blank book of the future in my mind.

I closed my eyes and fell into a sound sleep for the first time in days.

The pain stopped, my appetite returned, and I recovered quickly. But when I looked in the mirror on Sunday, I was horrified to see a skinny body that had lost about eight kilograms during the week.

On Monday, Vera called me and asked how I was doing. I told her everything was fine – I was recovering and would be back to work soon.

"Well, I see," Vera said. "Get well and come back as soon as you can..."

"Hi, Romych!" came the cheerful voice of my partner on the phone. "How are you?"

"Hi, Seryoga!" I rejoiced and broke into a smile. "I'm fine! I'm on the mend, next week I'll be back in the saddle! What's up, how are you there?"

"It's all right!" Sergey said reassuringly. "Get well, don't worry! Vera and I will do everything here together!"

"Listen, did you send an order for perfume to Moscow?" I asked, not noticing how the brain switched from rest mode to work mode.

"No, I didn't!"

"Are there any leftover goods in the warehouse?"

"Well..." Sergey sniffed into the phone. "There is a little bit, but marketable items have been sold long ago... Why are you worried!? You go to work and we'll make an order together!"

"I thought, if we already need the goods, why wait? What if you don't have it for a week? You better order it, get it, and sell it! Otherwise someone else will bring it instead of us..."

"Romych, no one will bring it! Everyone only gets it from us!"

"Well, that's true..." I agreed.

"So don't worry!" Sergey continued energetically. "Get cured! Get well! When you come to work, we'll make an order with you right away. Besides, why should I do it alone if we work together? Two heads are better than one!"

"Okay, Seryoga, you got it!" I smiled and my brain went back to rest.

"Here we go!" my partner cackled into the phone. "All right, feel better!"

"Thanks, Seryoga, bye, see you!"

By Tuesday night I was feeling even better. I was surprised to find that I hadn't smoked in over a week and had no cravings at all. I decided, "I'm going to quit smoking. To hell with it... I don't want to."

The second week I ate, read and slept. All kinds of thoughts came into my head. And more and more of them were new, incomprehensible thoughts that had suddenly taken on a new life.

On Wednesday I took my first walk. I dressed carefully, as if I were a seriously wounded man on the mend, and went outside. The fresh air smelled pleasantly cool in my face. It wasn't snowing yet, but nature was living up to its last snowless days. I pulled on my hat, turned up the collar of my coat, and followed my nose. Although I was tired almost immediately and breathing heavily, I felt at ease. The walk brought me back to life. I just walked and thought.

When I was near the mall, I went inside. There were people scurrying back and forth, creating an atmosphere of joyful bustle. I needed those emotions. I plunged into it and felt comfortable. On the third floor there was a bookstore. My feet carried me to it. I went inside. The books, their smell, the silence. I looked through the titles, not knowing exactly what I wanted. I searched by instinct. I found it. I picked up the book, opened it. "Hmm, in verse..." I scanned a few lines. It was easy and interesting to read. I bought the book. I immediately felt joy. I realized that I had bought exactly what I wanted! Smiling at my purchase, I walked out of the store and went home, knowing that the most important thing of the day was done. And already at home, back in bed, I opened the book and started reading:

1. Midway upon the journey of our life ¹⁻¹

I found myself within a forest dark,
For the straight-forward pathway had been lost.

The phone I had bought to communicate with Lilya was starting to burn my hands. I couldn't bear to even look at it, so I bought a new one on one of my walks – a nice black one that fit comfortably in the palm of my hand. I threw the old one to the farthest corner of the table and continued reading.

"Look who is here!" Vera smiled as she walked into the office on Monday, November 28th and saw me sitting in my usual chair behind the desk. "Hi! Are you well?"

"Yes!" I smiled back and held out my palm for a ritual greeting, Vera immediately clapped her palm on it. "I'm fine! Hi, Seryoga!"

My partner, who came in next, frowned dramatically, shook his head when he saw our ritual, and extended his hand to me. I shook it.

"Have you recovered?" He left the fake serious tone in his voice.

"As good as new!" I waved my hands.

"Rested too, eh?" said Vera. "Or have you been lying at home all these days?"

"At first I have..." I shrugged and suddenly remembered. "I quit smoking, you know!"

"Wow, really!!!???" Sergey stared at me, sat down in the chair by the door, crossed his arms over his chest and tilted his head to the side in surprise.

"Wow! Congratulations!" said Vera.

"I haven't smoked in two weeks!" I nodded.

"And no cravings?" Vera clarified.

"Nope!" I shook my head. "Well... sometimes I have thoughts, but I chase them away immediately..."

"I gave up right away, too!" Sergey chimed in. "Like you, I decided to quit and I did. And guess what," Sergey raised his index finger, "I was the only one in our whole company to quit!"

"Yeah, everyone around me smokes too. I'm really sick of these cigarettes..."

"Tyn-dyn!" I shoved my hand into my jeans pocket and pulled out the new cell phone, poking at the buttons to see the message.

"Did you buy a phone?" Sergey reacted.

"Yes, during my time off!" I nodded and added that I liked the phones of that brand.

"Yes, this company has handy phones!" Sergey nodded, reached into the pouch on his belt, pulled out his own, and tugged nervously at his foot. "Verok has a good phone, though I bought it a long time ago, but this..."

Sergey jammed his fingers on the buttons of his phone, frowned and said:

"The menu is stupid, I get confused all the time, and it takes a while to find the settings... It's a clumsy phone, I should have bought the more expensive one... how much is yours?"

"Seven thousand six hundred," I said. "There were better and more expensive ones, but I didn't spend much, why? A phone up to ten thousand is basically fine! All the necessary functions are there. And if you buy a more expensive one, it's a stupid overpayment and just showing off!"

"Yes, an uncomfortable phone..." Sergey sighed, fiddled with the buttons and put the phone back in his bag. "I'll have to buy another one..."

"Why!?" Vera stopped typing on the keyboard and stared at her husband.

"Vera, because!!!" Sergey barked. "You're not the one suffering from it! It's crooked, what can I do? What, do I have to walk around with it all my life?!"

"Oh man!" she waved and went back to her monitor. "Do whatever you want!"

"That's what I'm doing!" Sergey folded his arms across his chest and breathed loudly, his nostrils flared in indignation.

His wife tapped nervously on the keyboard. There was a tense pause.

"Vera, you haven't ordered the perfume yet, have you?" I said.

"No, Roma, we haven't," she said discreetly, not taking her eyes off the monitor.

"Seryoga, can we order now?" I looked at my partner.

"Yes, let's do it!" he cheered, splashing his hands.

"Vera, print us the rest of the perfume, will you?" I said.

"Just a moment, Roma," Vera almost took control of herself, the printer came to life, whistled and ejected a sheet.

"That's it!?" I was surprised and stared at it. "Oh, we have almost nothing!"

"It's been two weeks already..." Vera interjected quietly.

"Seryoga, sit here and draw the order!" I stood up and freed a chair at the table. "You know more about it, and then we'll sort it out together..."

For the next half hour we prepared the order.

"Well, look again with your own eyes!" Sergey held out a written sheet of paper.

"It looks okay..." I said. "How much is the money here, let's do the math."

"Three hundred and twenty thousand!" After seeing the result, Sergey looked at me in surprise.

"Not bad," I nodded, impressed.

"So we're going to order it, right?" Sergey was more surprised and looked at me confused.

"Well, yes, why?" I was surprised again.

"I mean, isn't it too much?" Sergey said doubtfully.

"Too much? Why? We counted, calculated and we need so much..."

"Maybe we should order less? It's a lot of money," Sergey took the order sheet in his hands and it shook in them like in the wind.

"What difference does it make how much it is?" I didn't understand the meaning of my partner's words. "We need the goods, there is a demand, we have calculated and placed an order. We didn't order what we didn't need, did we?"

"Well..." Sergey said and began to nervously crumple his lower lip with his fingers.

"Well what!?" I got a little worked up, feeling like a fly stuck in the dialog, receiving vague answers to each of my clear sentences. "If we need the goods, we should order them in the quantity they are sold in! Which part of it don't you understand!?"

Sergey continued to crumple his lip, squeezing it sideways with the fingers of one hand. This caused the lip to bulge up in the middle and then fall down between his fingers.

"Why should we order less!? We'll bring in the goods, distribute them to the depots, and that's it, an empty warehouse again! We need at least a week's supply! So we'll order for two weeks. We have a two-week grace period. We'll have the money from the first week by the end of the second week..."

Sergey's lip, a fat caterpillar wriggling between his fingers, curled up and froze.

"Fuck, Seryoga, what are you doing with your lips!!?" I crinkled involuntarily.

He awoke from his reverie, embarrassed, and pulled his hand away. Sergey's lips pouted and hung resentfully on his face.

"Well, yes..." he said.

"That's why I think we should order as much as we need!" I finished.

"Yes, Roman!" Sergey exhaled, relieved and a little offended. "Good! So let's order... Vera, here, send the order please..."

He handed the sheet to his wife, and it shook in his hand again. Vera took the sheet and began to work. Sergey turned the pen in his hands thoughtfully, took the cap off and put it on. He sniffed his nose. The room was silent for a few minutes.

"So you think we'll have enough money and be able to pay for this order, if anything?" Sergey looked at me.

"What is there to think about!?" I was surprised again. "It's simple arithmetic! We know the speed of sales, ordered the goods for exactly two weeks, it will be sold in that time!"

"And if it doesn't, I mean, what if it sells for three days for example!?" Sergey began to torment me with his doubts. Overcoming the stickiness of his indecision, I began to get angry again.

"Then three days it is! What difference does it make, for fuck's sake!?" I said sharply.

"Well, I wouldn't say thaaat..." Sergey said, as if he had found a support for the mud of his doubts. "We have to give the money, and the goods have not been sold yet!"

"We have money! We earn it! We'll give it back from our earnings, what's the big deal!?"

"So you think we have enough money now?" Sergey began to chew his lip again.

"I don't think, I knooow!" I leaned forward, not holding back my raised voice.

"Aha... you know..." Sergey nodded. "But how do you know!?"

"Seryoga!" I stared at my partner, looking at him like an idiot, completely confused by either the acting or the seriousness of the sentences he was saying. "I check the reports! Vera prints us reports every month... Are you aware of that!?"

"Well," he said.

"Well, that's what you say. You do look at them, don't you?" I glared at Sergey.

"Well," he said again, as if he was moving forward in the conversation by groping.

"Well, I do..."

"Then why are you asking if we have money for this purchase or not!? That says it all! You must know the financial situation of your company!"

Sergey looked at me thoughtfully and silently for a few seconds, then perked up and just said, "Well, I see..." and exhaled loudly.

There was a knock at the door – Alexey Semyonovich had arrived with the goods. His appearance saved our dialog with Sergey from an unpleasant end. The hustle and bustle of receiving the goods brought the time for lunch closer. Sergey and I went to the village to get something to eat. The lunch was simple – sausage sandwiches and tea. After he had eaten his share and was already sipping tea with a bite of sugar, Sergey said:

"Roman, how much money did you pay for the cafe on your birthday?"

"Five thousand, I think!" I replied, digging into my memory. "Why?"

"It's my birthday soon..." Sergey took a bite of sugar and sipped his tea.

"Wow! I didn't know, when?" I replied, sipping at my tea as well.

"The first of December..." Sergey took another sip.

"And how old will you be?" I asked.

"Thirty-three. The age of Christ," Sergey chewed sugar and slurped his tea.

"Oh! Yes! A beautiful age..." I gnawed at my lump of sugar.

"I'm having a party on Saturday..." Sergey said, naming a cafe. "Do you know it?"

"No... But yes! I know it! It's in the center, near the stadium..."

"Aha, yes, there. I booked a big separate table for six o'clock at night... have you been there?"

"No, I haven't... who else will be there?"

"You, my brother Romka..." Sergey leaned back in his chair, sighed and began to curl his fingers. "Vera, Melyokha and Dashka, Fedot and his wife, and Vitya Butenko and his wife."

"Well, I know your Romka and Melyokha, so I'll have someone to talk to," I said.

"That's right," Sergey nodded, "you'll get to know the others too, they're old friends of mine. Fedot has his own dairy factory. Imagine, he was in prison for five years, got out and bought the factory outright!"

"Wow!" I grinned, raising my eyebrows. "That's a good way to make money!"

"Aha!" Sergey cackled. "And Vitya deals in Chinese cars and sells them in our town. I don't know who buys them. The cars all fall apart, break down, they're so lousy..."

"Actually, he's doing the right thing!" I thought. "In the beginning, my father and I took on everything, as long as the goods were given... Yes, it's shit, but you can make some money! I think your Vitya does the same."

"Well, actually, yes!" Sergey nodded, chewing the corners of his lips.

"Besides, Chinese cars are shit now, but in five years they will learn to assemble them, the quality will grow, and Vitya will have his own company, all set up, selling Chinese cars! And business will boom!"

Sergey was silent, listening, looking at me intently.

"It was the same with the Koreans. The first cars were awful, but now people are eagerly buying them! And before, remember, they used to say – phew, Korean, it's a piece of shit!"

"Yeah," Sergey muttered.

I stopped talking. Sergey stared at me intently for a few seconds, then jerked his knee, looked down at his hands, twisted the pen restlessly, and sighed heavily.

CHAPTER 30

On the last day of fall, there was a knock on the office door at noon.

"Yes!!!" the three of us shouted and laughed in unison. Vera and I were sitting at our desks. Sergey was stretched out in the chair by the door, his left hand behind his head and his fingers in his opposite ear.

My father came in.

Our relaxation disappeared. Sergey immediately pulled himself together, sat up straight and stared at the floor. Vera became neutral and serious. I became a little nervous.

"Hi there, young people!" My father said deliberately cheerful, closing the door, leaving his hand on the doorknob and looking around at everyone.

"Hello," Sergey mumbled without raising his eyes and started to scratch his ankle.

"Hello," Vera said quietly, staring even harder at the monitor.

"Hello," I said and sighed, my heart beating faster.

"Ahem, I thought I'd come visit you," my father began, interrupting the pause after the greetings that none of the three of us wanted to break. Sergey fidgeted in his chair, distracted by some small matter. Vera glanced at my father, smiled politely, and stared back at the monitor.

"That's good," I nodded, realizing that I was the only one who had to communicate with him.

My father smiled awkwardly, put his hands in his jacket pockets, shrugged, looked around the room for our eyes, and then looked at mine.

"How are you here?" His smile was friendly, but it came out strained.

Suddenly, a feeling of gloating stirred in my chest. I tried to hold it back, but to my horror I realized that I was losing. The feeling grew rapidly. The only thing I wanted was for my father to leave as soon as possible and get rid of this nasty feeling inside me.

"Fine," I nodded. "Working..."

"Working, hehe..." my father shifted from one foot to the other. "That's good..."

He looked at the ceiling and the walls, glanced furtively at Sergey. He remained nervously silent, half turning over the papers on the cabinet shelf.

"It's nice here..." my father said to me, smiling awkwardly again. "It's cozy."

"Yeah, not bad..." I nodded, embarrassed by the degree to which my father was ignored by others, a related string played and I supported the dialog. "Why are you here all of a sudden?"

My father immediately came to life. His eyes were shining, he was moving, still standing in the corner by the entrance, smiling: "I just thought I'd stop by! I just thought I'd stop by and see how the young people were doing."

"Everything's fine, we're working..." I said, realizing the reason for the heaviness in my chest – my father looked pathetic. On the outside, he looked ordinary – black boots, jeans, leather jacket, gray shirt underneath, winter fur hat. What gave my father away were his eyes. They were begging! And for that I felt ashamed, my ears flaring up and starting to burn hot. I didn't want Sergey and Vera to see my father like that. I wished he would leave sooner and not disgrace himself.

"Well, I'm glad you're doing fine!" My father exhaled, coughing and scratching the back of his head in obvious embarrassment. My gloating grew. I began to get angry with myself, realizing how easily the not-so-good in me could be revived. My anger spilled over to my father. I mentally chased him away. I chased my father away because he had made the decision to leave on his own. I chased him away because I didn't want to gloat. I chased him away because my father looked pathetic. I chased him away because I didn't want other people to see my father as ridiculous and embarrassing. Because I loved my father.

"So what's going on at home, how's mom?" I said, avoiding a direct look.

"How? Heh!" my father started to turn the doorknob. "Don't you know yourself?"

"Well, yes..." I said, looking at Sergey. "We'll be here until five today, right?"

"Yes!" he exhaled with relief, clearly grasping the question that had brought him out of his defiant coldness towards my father. "Somewhere like that! We'll leave at five or so."

"Oh, I see, well, in that case, I'll be going home," my father said, smiling and looking at me. "I thought you might be off early today so we could go home together!"

"No, Dad, I'll finish later today, so I'll see you at home," I nodded.

"All right! Have a good day," my father said, turning to the door, stomping on the spot, pushing the knob and opening the door a little. "Take care!"

"Thank you! Take care!" Vera replied immediately.

"Goodbye," Sergey mumbled.

"Yes, Dad, bye," I nodded, catching my father's confused look. "See you tonight."

My father turned, hunched over as if guilty, as if his shoulders were pressed to the floor, and walked out into the hallway. I coughed to break the lump in my chest.

"Seryoga!" I began on the first of December, barely entering the office and extending my hand. "Well, congratulations on your birthday! I wish you health, happiness in your family and more money!"

"Thank you, Romych!" he shook my hand.

"And so that you have more money, I'll give you... money!" I said after a theatrical pause, which pleased Sergey so much that he cackled and fidgeted in his chair.

After saying hello to Vera, I plopped down in the chair by the door and reached into my jacket pocket.

"Vera, write off our three thousand bonus, please!" I said and handed the money to Sergey.

"Thank you, Romych!" he repeated, pulling his half of the "common fund" out of his "suitcase" – a thick bundle of money tied up with a rubber band.

"Roma, how should I write it off, from each of you three thousand or from one person?" Vera clarified. Sergey froze and looked at me questioningly.

"From each of us, so that we have an equal amount in the common fund!"

Sergey counted out three thousand from his share of the money, added it to the money I had given him, put it in a separate pocket of his briefcase, and said:

"I need a purse, Verok, because it's so uncomfortable to rummage through these pockets..."

Vera looked at Sergey and smiled slightly. He leaned back in his chair, crossed his arms over his chest, jerked his left leg and, chewing his lip a few times, stared at Vera.

"Got it?" Sergey said.

"Got it!" She replied, without taking her eyes from the monitor and tapping on the keyboard.

"Oh, right! I have a surprise for you too!" Sergey suddenly turned to me, reached into his briefcase again and pulled out two cigars. "Do you want one? Help yourself!"

I hesitated. Quit smoking and tease myself with a cigar again? But it's hard to refuse a man what he does for you. My tactfulness prevailed and I agreed:

"Well... okay. I can have one. I hope it doesn't make me want to smoke again..."

"Come on, Romych!" Sergey exclaimed. "These are cigars! We won't even inhale them!"

"Well, let's go into the hallway, otherwise Vera will breathe smoke again!" I said, getting up from the chair.

We lit our cigars. I gently inhaled the smoke. The same sour taste enveloped my palate. Sergey, with a look of bliss on his face, blew the smoke upward.

"I love cigars!" He said, pacing the cramped hallway.

I nodded and listened to my body. Everything inside me clenched and rumbled all over my body, all my organs and especially my lungs in search of nicotine. I realized that agreeing to Sergey's proposal wasn't the best idea.

"So, how is it?" he blew another puff of smoke upward.

"Not bad," I nodded, trying to take as few puffs as possible.

On Saturday evening I went to the cafe at Sergey's invitation. It was semi-basement, two floors down. The upper floor consisted of two niches – rooms with banquet tables for twenty people. Sergey rented one of the niches. After greeting the guests, I wished him happy birthday again. Sergey, like a hospitable host, made a fuss, smiled, cracked jokes and was very eloquent. Roma – Sergey's brother, Vera, Melyokha and Fedot with their wives – sat down on both sides of the table, leaving only two chairs empty at the far end. At the head of the table, as was customary, sat the birthday boy.

"Vitya Butenko and his wife will be here soon!" Sergey shouted over the music coming from the dance floor below, nodding to the empty seats at the table.

The evening was quite ordinary. Everyone joked, laughed, and drank vodka. I also had a few shots and listened to my stomach. It was shrinking, but it was holding up. I skipped the rest of the toasts and drank juice. I sat at the far end of the table, next to the empty chairs. My neighbor was Roma. It was the first time I saw him. He was a modest guy with glasses with strong diopters. He sat almost invisible, drinking with everyone, quietly contributing to the table conversation, but his remarks were lost in the general noise. We began to communicate involuntarily, and the conversation quickly turned to literature, movies, and art. Here Roma came to life and showed a knowledge that clearly went beyond the school level. We didn't realize how we were getting deeper into the dialogue, leaving the drunken shouts of the celebration in the background. I secretly compared the brothers. Sergey was the master of the evening – joking, laughing, eating and drinking to his heart's content. He looked like a firecracker and behaved with a touch of his own importance, evident in his movements and words. Roma was considered more profound and thoughtful. Nature had given him a more modest appearance. Roma, like a plant that had grown under less light and moisture, was a

puny and unassuming, slightly stooped fellow. I liked Roma at once, and found that my father's opinion of him was correct. The other guests seemed typical. I didn't even remember Fedot's appearance. I was bored almost immediately. I began to see something heavy in such feasts, empty and meaningless, stealing the time of human life. My boredom was broken by a new guest. He came to the table an hour late, dressed in a perfectly fitting light gray suit and with his wife under his arm. Vitya's posture spoke of a "respectable man" coming in. A brunet of medium height with a glossy, overweight face. His gaze radiated importance, staidness and significance. Vitya looked lazily around the table and, haughtily and snobbishly, dropped a word of greeting to everyone. Sergey, seeing the guest, got excited – hurriedly approached him, held out his hand, waited for a handshake, and happily returned to his seat. The latecomers took their seats. The feast went on – Melyokha told some stories, Sergey, laughing out loud, supported him.

"Vitya, take and eat all you want! Pour the vodka, the vodka is good, I ordered the best vodka here!" Sergey shouted to the other side of the table.

Vitya poured a shot and stood up. Sergey jumped up next, and the others rose as well. Vitya made a formal toast. Sergey broke off in gratitude and began to tell something from the past, which he said had brought him and Vitya so close. The word "friendship" and its synonyms flashed endlessly in his speech. Somehow I felt sorry for Sergey. Vitya's attitude to the party was written on his face, he sat with a haughty look and was bored. Sergey entertained Vitya from a distance. After an hour, Vitya made a phone call, got up and left the party, excusing himself for urgent business. I even thought the call was fake. The guests continued to drink vodka, I switched to tea. Then there was dancing. Everyone went downstairs and began to shake their drunken bodies. Sergey was dancing across from me, lazily and languidly moving to the rhythm of the music. He smiled, looked around and twitched his flared nostrils as if he was inhaling the smell of success that only he knew.

At about ten in the evening, the four of us – myself, Sergey, his brother and Melyokha – went outside to get some air, as they say. The snow was lying thickly everywhere, the frost of ten degrees below zero was pleasantly invigorating. After a stuffy cellar, the winter air was intoxicating.

Sergey and I went out with our overcoats on, the other two without. Romka, shivering in his sweater, lit a cigarette. Melyokha looked at me dazedly and returned to the cafe, shivering with cold. Fedot came out to replace him, also in a sweater. Here I could see him more closely – a short-cropped guy in his early thirties, about my height. I could feel muscle tone and strength in his movements.

We were standing against the wall of the building, with our backs to it and facing the sidewalk, separated from the roadway by a row of poplar trees. That's what saved us. A black "tenth" with tinted windows, having found a gap in the row of trees, flew at high speed from the road onto the sidewalk and stood like a stump at our feet. I looked down – the heels of my shoes were resting against the wall of the building, and there were two centimeters from the toes of my shoes to the left front wheel of the car.

"Fucking hell! What does he think he's doing!?" I swore, anxious to see the driver.

"Hey!" Sergey expressed his displeasure, throwing the hood of his parka off his head.

"What a faggot, for fuck's sake!?" his brother shouted, shivering from the frost.

"Hell of a cocky driver..." said Fedot, raising his eyebrows in bewilderment.

The driver's door was ajar. From inside came the sounds of dance music and puffs of cigarette smoke.

"Hey, how do you think you're driving!?" Sergey said, grabbing the top corner of the door and pulling it open. The door was held open from the inside. In the next very long minute, the driver came out and, swaying and breathing noisily, stood at full height in front of

Sergey. Immediately I felt the need to punch him in the face. I restrained myself, realizing that I would spoil the whole evening.

"One hundred and ninety centimeters," I estimated, still clenching my fists.

"Why are you driving like that, eh, buddy!?" Sergey said.

"Who drives like that, eh!!!? Who drives like that!!!?" squealed his brother Roma.

The other passenger door opened and a gangly, wiry guy got out.

There were two girls in the backseat. They were leaning forward. They started screaming drunken obscenities at us. I looked at the driver and suddenly realized that he was drunk as a skunk! The driver was hovering over Sergey with a shock of black hair, unable to see him, swaying and struggling to maintain an upright position.

"Why are you driving like that, I ask you!" Sergey repeated, grabbing the driver's half unbuttoned jacket from underneath.

"Get ready for a fight, Roma," I decided, watching the other out of the corner of my eye.

"You're a little cocky, I can tell!" Sergey's brother shouted, standing between me and Fedot, his head barely reaching our shoulders, and probably feeling confident because of it.

"Don't heat it up," I muttered to him. Meanwhile, Sergey wrapped the big driver's jacket around his fists, and he felt it and clung lazily to Sergey's jacket himself.

"What's up, buddy?! What do you want, huh!?" Sergey pushed the big guy. He didn't fall down and pulled Sergey with him. And they walked awkwardly to the trunk of the car.

"He is a former boxer... almost sober. One good punch to the jaw and that's it..." I thought, sensing the situation and freezing in anticipation. "He's going to hit him."

"Aaah!!!" The broads jumped out of the car and ran to the corner of the building, screaming with all their might. "Murder!!! Aaah!!! Help!!! Police!!! Aaah!!!"

I flinched. A woman's scream cut through my brain almost to the point of physical pain.

"Fucking broads..." Sergey's brother said quietly, looking at me and laughing nervously. "We should beat the shit out of them..."

"Why beat them?" I was surprised. "They're broads. A couple of half-drunk hussies..."

The gangly one moved leisurely toward the clashing couple.

"No, don't interfere!" I shouted at him, and the gangly guy froze in indecision. It was then that I realized there would be no fight. If there was, it would just be the usual hustle that happens a million times when both people in conflict want to stop. The gangly one looked at me and walked back to the clashing couple, going around the car on the far side. I stepped in on the near side and pushed him away from them.

"Stay out of it! They'll sort it out themselves! Nothing will happen there, they'll just stand there for a while and go away," I said to the gangly guy. "Let's get away from them. Just stand here, stay out of it..."

He finally realized we were outnumbered and backed off. The broads became quiet. Now they just watched and whimpered occasionally. Sergey, who was holding the big guy, jerked him back and forth. The big guy tried to do the same, but because of his intoxication he just swayed and moored.

"Do you understand what you're being told!?" one of Sergey's rare phrases reached me.

The big guy jerked, swayed, and drifted toward the road. Sergey was dragged behind him. Soon they were both stomping in the middle of the road. Sergey kicked the big guy again, and he fell on his back, dragging Sergey with him. Both of them ended up on the slippery snowy asphalt. One of them moored on the ground, the other one on top of him. Sergey tried to get up, but he couldn't because he was held by the collar of his jacket. I lost interest in the action and began to freeze.

"Fuck, give him a good fucking slap in the face and that's it!" Roma said belligerently. Barely restraining myself from sassing him, I said:

"I see you're a fighter! Will you give him a good fucking slap!? You're one and a half meters tall and weigh sixty kilos, he'll crush you without even noticing!"

Sergey's brother immediately shut up. I realized that the reason for his belligerence was simple – alcohol and a feeling of numerical majority. "That's how it always is, a whiffet like that will incite a fight and then run away," I thought irritably.

"Well, I'm going inside, it's cold," Fedot said and left.

Meanwhile, Sergey lifted the big guy up, and the two of them, clinging to each other again, slowly began to move onto the sidewalk. Ten meters up the street, a five-step porch protruded from the building. The couple moved toward it. Sergey walked with his back to the porch, the sobered up big guy pushed him with his size. Sergey tripped with his heel on a step, stumbled with his other foot and fell on his back. The big guy fell on him.

"Fuck! My leg! Bitch!" Sergey yelled, struggling to throw the man off him. Waving his arms and cursing, he finally got out from under the big guy, tried to get up, but couldn't. The big guy was lying there, holding Sergey's neck chain with his hand.

"Let's go take them apart," I said to the gangly one, heading for the porch. Sergey was leaning over the big guy, almost standing, sniffing heavily and pulling the chain to himself. He started to unlock the big guy's fingers one by one, and that's how he got free.

Alright, guys, let's wrap this up! I said as I walked closer. "Let's go, Seryoga. We'll freeze if we stay here. No sense in lounging around. You might catch a cold..."

Still swearing and sniffing, Sergey went to the cafe. His brother and I followed.

"What happened there, Seryozha?" Vera came up to us immediately.

"Never mind! Some asshole has completely lost his mind! He drove his car onto the sidewalk and almost crushed us all!" Sergey replied emotionally.

I went to the table and looked around – the cafe was still partying, the music was playing loud. Our party was winding down. Everyone had scattered. Romka appeared at the table.

"Want some vodka?" he said, and after receiving a negative answer, he poured himself a shot glass, drank it, looked around, stuffed a sausage sandwich into his mouth, and sat down in his seat.

Sergey came to the table and drank vodka, too. He was unharmed – no torn clothes, no abrasions, no damaged fists. Only his massive chain was twisted backwards around his neck, and the icon hung down behind his back. Sergey adjusted the chain and sat down in the chair. The evening was drawing to a close. In half an hour the crowd dispersed and I found myself alone on the avenue. I looked around and... went in a familiar direction.

"Ramsees!!!!" Vovka shouted into the phone. "Ramsees!!! For fuck's sake, are you asleep or what?!"

Of course I was asleep. Sunday morning, eleven o'clock.

"Vova, why are you yelling again?" I grumbled sleepily. "Were you born in a field?"

"Ramses, I'm sorry!" Vovka grunted with laughter. "I missed you! It's been a long time!"

"You have Lera to relieve your boredom," I grumbled, grinning.

Vovka invited me to another threesome and I agreed.

At six in the evening we met in front of the movie theater. A beautiful soft snow was falling. There were surprisingly many people on the avenue and the New Year's Eve mood was already in the air. We joined the stream of strollers and walked down the street.

"So what's up with you?" Lera said. "How is your Lilya?"

"Well..." I brushed it off. "I don't know! I kicked her the fuck out, that Lilya!"

"Fuck, Ramses, I like you – a tough guy!" Vovka shook his head.

"But what happened?" Lera persisted.

I told them.

"Somehow I think she's going to show up again," Lera said.

"You're not the only one who thinks so!" I grinned.

We entered a cafe. We chose a table with cozy chairs and started to order. As soon as I chose a fruit tea and a cake, I saw the surprise on Lera's face.

"I'm in the mood for something sweet!" I explained. "Maybe because I quit smoking..."

"You quit smoking!?" she was even more surprised.

"Well done!" Vovka said when he heard the news and shook my hand.

"It's so unexpected..." Lera said thoughtfully.

"I should stop drinking too," I added.

"What's wrong with you? You're not sick by any chance?" she laughed.

"I'm thinking about going back to the gym!" I said the last thing, which raised Lera's eyebrows to the limit. "I just need to get my stomach in shape first..."

The waiter brought the order – tea and a cake for everyone.

"What's wrong with your stomach?" Lera got serious.

"It was just an ulcer, I almost fucking died!" I brushed it off. "What's going on with you?"

"Lera is working with me at 'Pelican' now! I got her a job in the accounting department, she's sitting there counting money!" said Vovka, shoving a cake into his mouth with a teaspoon, chewing, looking at Lera and adding, "So that's it? You've seen your Roman!? Happy now!?"

She turned red.

"I'm fed up, Ramses, you know! Where's Romka? Why don't we see him? Why don't you call him? Go call him!" Vovka stared at me with an expression of puppy joy, turned to Lera with the same expression, "Happy? You see him now!"

"I am," she blushed and swept her eyes around.

"Come on, Vova..." I stood up for the girl. "The girl just missed me, happens to the best of us. I'm also glad to see you both... Hey, how's 'Pelican', what's new?"

"What's new?" Vovka waved, shoving a large piece of cake into his mouth and sipping tea from his cup. "Daddy's up to something. He takes the money out, then brings it back."

After about an hour in the cafe, we went back outside to a pleasant, almost imperceptible light frost, windless silence, and snow falling in large, sleepy flakes.

The snowfall intensified during the night, and by morning the city was almost knee-deep in snow.

I was the first to arrive at work on Monday and even managed to drink half a cup of tea before Sergey and Vera arrived. Sergey was limping. He looked at me with a swollen face, shoved his briefcase into the cupboard, said hello sluggishly and froze in the middle of the room, stepping on his sore foot and writhing.

"What, a battle wound?" I smiled.

"Fucking hell! It's been hurting for two days!" Sergey said grudgingly, grimaced, reached for his briefcase again, shrieked, and put the briefcase on the table.

"Seryozha!?" Vera looked at her husband judiciously.

"I know, Vera, I know! Yes, I said it, it happens! My leg, do you know how much it hurts?" he angrily defended himself, waited for his wife to look away, started digging in his briefcase, took out a purse the color of coffee and cream, and began to shift bills in it.

"Wow! What a cool purse! Let me see it!" I exclaimed, pulling my hand toward the wallet like a child seeing a new toy.

Sergey held it out to me with joy on his face.

"Do you like it?" he said.

"Uh-huh!" I turned the leather-scented wallet in my hands, gliding my fingers over the soft, velvety surface, enjoying the tactile sensations.

"My beloved wife gave it to me!" Sergey said, standing patiently, clearly enjoying my genuine admiration. The wallet reeked of importance and authority. Even empty, it looked full, and its owner was certainly a wealthy man.

"Here!" I handed the wallet back and looked at Vera. "It's a great gift! I should buy a wallet for myself, too, because I carry money in my pockets like a slumdog! How much does it cost?"

"Three thousand," she said.

"Cool!" I took one last look at the wallet before Sergey, taking his time and taking obvious pleasure in prolonging the moment, tucked the gift into his briefcase.

"Yeah, cool, and the birthday party cost me money! You spent a nickel on yours this summer, didn't you? Mine cost me a tenner..." sighing, he said, took a step back, hissed, wrinkled his nose, took a step back and groaned.

"The leg?" I sympathized. "Did you hurt it when you fell on the ground?"

"On the ground? No!" Sergey said nervously. "When we fell on the stairs! That asshole put all his weight on me, and my leg got squeezed between him and the rib of the step! It hurt so fucking bad! I tried to throw him off, but he held on to the chain while I got free..."

Sergey took some papers out of his briefcase, threw them on the table, wrinkled his nose again, hissed softly and rubbed his right hand.

"He's covered in wounds," Vera smiled, glancing at her husband in between.

"Vera!" he glared at his wife, indignant. "You should have seen him! He's so big, about as big as Romka! You fight with such a man, and then you tell me! All my hands are damaged!"

"Why should I?" Vera smiled. "It's you boys, always at odds over something..."

"Come on, damaged!" I brushed it off. "You just pushed each other a little!"

"What do you mean, pushed a little???" Sergey stared at me with a look on his face as if he'd heard an unbelievable lie. "I kicked the fucking shit out of him there and almost tore my hands off!"

He froze in front of the table, standing as if in righteous anger. I froze for another reason, wondering if I was imagining embellishments of past events.

"Seryoga..." I said calmly, "Where did you kick the shit out of him? I was standing ten meters away from you all the time. Me, Romka, Melyokha and Fedot. And that second dude from the car..."

"Fuck, am I lying to you now!? Is that it!?" He spread his hands.

"Seryoga, I don't know, I'm just telling you what happened," I shrugged, smiled and looked at Vera. "I stood there sober and saw you holding each other's lapels for half an hour. That's it."

"What do you think you're saying!?" Sergey angrily slammed the briefcase and shoved it into the cupboard. "What, I don't remember what I did, do I!? You were standing somewhere and I was fighting this bull..."

"Fighting???" My eyebrows went up in surprise. "He was drunk as a skunk! He could barely stand up and moo. Who was there to fight? If you'd hit him once in the face, he'd be down. You didn't fight at all! You came back to the cafe, you had no bruises, no abrasions, your clothes weren't torn, your hands were fine..."

"Your hands are all intact, look!" I looked at Sergey's hands. "No marks on your face either. Where did you fight? He didn't hit you once, he just held on to you."

"Roman!" Sergey stared at me in indignation. "I hit him four times on the road. What do you think, he fell of his own accord!?"

"Of course he did!" I chuckled. "I saw it! He slipped and fell and pulled you down with him! I'm telling you, he was drunk! I wondered how he could even stand on his feet!"

Sergey looked at me displeased for a few seconds.

"Well, I don't know then..." He waved his hands, turned around, limped toward the chair by the door, and plopped down in it, making a resentful face.

There was a knock at the door.

"Yes!" I barked, still smiling.

Senya's head peeked into the room and looked at us through his glasses.

"Hello," he said ingratiatingly.

"Senya, come in!" Sergey said sharply. "Why are you letting the cold into the room!?"

"Oh, pardon me!" He jerked, stepped into the room and carefully closed the door.

"Hi, Senya," I said, seeing how nervous Sergey's tone made him. "What do you want?"

The warehouse was covered with snow and we needed shovels to clear it.

"Senya, go!" Sergey said when the storekeeper had finished. "We'll buy shovels."

He looked at me questioningly. I said that the matter would be settled, and the storekeeper left.

"Well, Seryoga?" I exhaled. "Let's go and buy shovels..."

"Where are we going to buy them?" He waved his hands irritably.

"Here in the village, near the market, there is a store called 'Household Goods'," I said. "Let's go!"

I put on my jacket and hat, walked out of the office, kicked open the front door of the building, and ducked under a heating pipe to find myself on the street. I walked around the car, turned around and stood at the passenger door. Sergey waddled mournfully after me. He grunted, climbed into the driver's seat with difficulty, and started the engine. I got in beside him.

"Roman! If you don't know something, don't talk about it!" Sergey said as soon as we left the factory.

"What don't I know!?" I was surprised.

"I mean about the fight at my birthday party..."

"What did I say wrong? That there was no fight? There was no fight..."

"Damn, I don't know how to talk to you!" Sergey waved his hand and became silent.

"Why talk to me when I saw everything with my own eyes!?" I said.

"Well, that's exactly what I mean..." Sergey exhaled heavily.

We drove to the household store in silence. We talked a little while we bought shovels, put them in the back of the car and drove back.

"Nice fucking shovels!" I said. "Now Senya and Kholod will show their class! Senya is still okay – strong, but Kholod will probably work for five minutes and die there, in front of the fucking warehouse!"

We both laughed, which defused the situation. We passed the church.

"Roman, what is your father, Anatoly Vasilievich, doing now?" Sergey said.

"Well..." I shrugged and dug into my memory. "Fuck knows! Nothing in particular, like... I guess he does a little trucking sometimes... and that's about it. Why?"

"No, no reason! I just don't hear from him, you don't say anything. Well, do you communicate with him at all?" Sergey continued.

"Nah," I grimaced. "We communicate, but not much. We had a fight when he left us, so our relationship has been strained ever since. Well, we communicate, of course! But just in a casual way, not quite formal, but without much warmth..."

"Did Anatoly Vasilievich really do that – didn't want to work with us and left?" Sergey gave me a quick look and started chewing his lip.

"Well, yes! What else?" I didn't understand the question and shrugged. "I was surprised myself! He must have had a glitch... I didn't really understand why."

"Yes, strange behavior. Your father has puzzled us," Sergey chuckled.

"You don't say, it was fucking baffling!" I nodded, thought about it and turned away to the window.

"I even thought at first that you and your father did it on purpose!" Sergey said, cackling again.

"What do you mean, on purpose???" I looked at him, confused.

"Well... you and Anatoly Vasilievich, like, deliberately quarreled, invented this scolding, so that Anatoly Vasilievich could leave the company! Got it?" Sergey looked at me, and his eyes immediately darted around.

I began to think about what he had said, but it was no good. It seemed absurd.

"Why???" I said and stared at Sergey.

"Well, I don't know why, maybe so that Anatoly Vasilievich could take care of some other business and you, for example, could stay with us, that you could be here to take care of this company... what do I know? I'm just saying it as an option!"

"Aah!" I realized and laughed. "No fucking way, Seryoga, this is bullshit! No, that never happened! He really freaked out then! I was just as fucking surprised as you were!"

"So Anatoly Vasilievich doesn't do anything now, he sits at home?"

"Well, for now, yes," I nodded.

"It's just that Anatoly Vasilievich is very active. I remember when you first came to us, he was very businesslike, he gave the impression of a competent man..." Sergey said, wanting to continue, to add something, but stopped talking.

"Well... What can I say... it's just the way it is!" I summarized, and we drove to the office.

The next day I told Vera about this conversation. Sergey left on business at noon, and we were alone in the office. Vera was typing obsessively on the computer.

"Listen, what are you typing endlessly all week?" I wondered.

"Oh, Roma!" Vera sighed. "I'm doing our studies, term projects..."

It turned out that Sergey and Vera were part-time students at a branch of some economic institute in Moscow. There were a lot of them. The time of the session was approaching, and Vera was preparing term papers for her husband and herself in several subjects. They had studied for three years, but they needed six.

"Well, there's not much left..." I laughed. "Start and finish, eh, Vera?"

"Exactly!" She smiled and put the printed sheets into a folder.

"Whose term paper is this? Seryoga's?" I said.

"Yes," Vera exhaled doomedly. "Now I have to start my own..."

"Whose idea was it to go to school?" I squinted one eye, either out of idle curiosity or not knowing why.

"Mine. I told Seryozha that I wanted to get a higher education and would go to a correspondence school. And he said that either we study together or no one, so we went together."

"You did well in school, didn't you? An 'A'?"

"I got an 'A' in both high school and college!"

"And how did Seryoga study?" I smiled. "A flunker and a fool, I guess!"

"No," Vera smiled with a smile that speaks better than any facts. "Not like that, of course... well, so-so..."

"Well, I see!" I nodded and stood up, walking over to the cupboard. "Do you want some tea?"

"Yes, let's have some!" Vera leaned back in her chair, happy to have a chance to rest.

"Well, that's it!" I said when we each had a cup of tea in our hands and sat down in the opposite chair. "Seryoga said yesterday, 'I thought that you and Anatoly Vasilievich had invented this quarrel on purpose, so that Anatoly Vasilievich could leave the company and go into business for himself!'"

Vera stopped typing and turned her attentive gaze to me.

"Imagine that! It's as if my father and I came up with this to confuse Seryoga..."

"That doesn't make any sense," Vera said in surprise.

"Yeah, that's obviously nonsense! Seryoga surprised me with that statement yesterday! I said to him, 'Seryoga, why the hell do I have to put on a show?' He also said that he was impressed by Anatoly Vasilievich... That he was a serious, reasonable man, very businesslike, and all that..."

"Well, yes, I remember that!" Vera nodded and took a modest sip from her cup. "When you started taking the goods to 'Sasha', you were driving a red passenger car, I think..."

"Yeah, we had a red 'second' model back then," I nodded and took a sip.

"Yeah, I don't know much about it! Seryozha and I, I remember thinking..." Vera paused and wrinkled her nose, as if uncomfortable with her memories, "Anatoly Vasilievich is such a respectable man, so businesslike, thorough... and Roma next to him – some chump! Running around..."

It hit me! I froze, forgetting my tea and the sugar melting in my mouth. This revelation, the significance of which I intuitively understood at once, I had yet to comprehend and draw a conclusion from.

"Yeah," I grinned wryly. "Did I really give you that impression?"

"Well, yes!" Vera added in a simple way, not realizing the importance of what she had said. "We looked at you that way then, we didn't take you seriously at all..."

The dialog continued, changing topics, but I remained in the fog of my thoughts for the rest of the workday. And even on the bus home I thought about that one sentence. When I got home, I went through the whole dialog and the phrase again and again. I wanted to get to the source of it, tried to understand why I made such an impression, tried to see myself from the outside at that moment – the answer was not found. "Roma – some champ, Roma – some champ, Roma..." went around in my head in the silence of the night until I fell asleep.

CHAPTER 31

Talking to Sergey about my father only added to my guilt. Since my father had been laid off from the company, he had been doing some odd jobs. I remembered my father's and my business work – supplying detergents and other special agents for food production – and went to see my father. He was having dinner.

"Dad, why don't you get on that enterprise chemistry thing?" I began, sitting down next to him.

"Maybe I will..." my father replied, looking at me carefully and continuing to chew a piece of meat angrily. "What do you care?"

"I don't care," I shrugged. "I just remembered that we wanted to do it with you, but we didn't... I understand that it's a specific product, and to tell the truth, I don't really believe in it myself that anything will come of it, but as an option?"

"As an option, maybe," my father nodded with a chew.

"If you want to do it, you've got all the requirements!" I rejoiced and ranted. "The goods, I'm sure, will be given with a good delay. There is a warehouse. You can always unload and store as much as you need for free. You don't have to buy, just work for orders. Make a commercial offer and drive around companies with it... I can make a price and all the necessary paperwork... will you do it?"

"I will!" my father said sharply. "I said I would. Get the price ready."

I nodded, stood up and left the kitchen.

"Vera, let's print something!" I said as soon as I arrived at the office in the morning.

Sergey and Vera stared at me with interest.

"Seryoga, let me sit here!" I added impatiently. "I have to count something! Come on, come on, get up!"

Surprised and intrigued, he sighed, got up reluctantly and lazily from the table, and with the words "Oh, Roman!" went to the chair by the door.

I sat down at the table and told Vera and Sergey about yesterday's conversation with my father.

"Well, if he wants to do it, let him do it, why not!" Vera shrugged. "Come on, say what you want to print, we'll do it now..."

"Do you think something will come out of this?" Sergey grimaced and folded his arms over his chest.

"Seryoga, I don't know! Maybe yes, maybe no. I don't have much hope, but why should my father hang around? Let him try... Maybe he'll earn something..."

"I don't mind, no! Don't get me wrong..." Sergey said, waving his hand warningly. "Let him do it if he wants to... But how will he work, on his own?"

"I think we should let him work with us. We'll give him the goods at a minimal markup, and the rest of what he earns is his..." I suggested.

"Oh, well..." Sergey yawned and finished lazily, "I don't mind... let him work..."

By the end of the day, everything was ready – the commercial offer, the price list, and the contract with the manufacturer. Vera completed her part of the work quickly. I solved all the questions about the terms of delivery. Sergey sat idly by the door, looking at us with a bored look and occasionally picking his nose.

Vera clicked the mouse, and the printer produced a stack of paper, which I immediately began stamping. When I finished, I looked at my partner and said:

"Seryoga, sit back down! I need the general director's signature!"

Satisfied with what he had heard, he returned to the table with considerable dignity. He took the papers in his hands, thumbed through them, and said with a faint sarcasm in his voice and look:

"We sell so many things! Now we're going to sell this, too, aren't we, Roman?"

Sergey turned his face in my direction, and there was a slight sneer at the end of the sentence. And I felt that what he was saying was not only about the product, but also about me and my father. It was as if Sergey was making it clear that he thought this was a fool's errand.

"Yes, Seryoga!" I parried the mockery with a grin. "We'll make money on everything!"

"Sign here?" my partner poked at the top sheet.

"Yes, the commercial offer, there are fifteen sheets!" I nodded.

Sergey leaned his head on his right shoulder and took his time signing each sheet.

"Anatoly Vasilievich decided to do something stupid," he murmured with a smile.

"It wasn't his decision, I suggested it," I said, catching the joy in Sergey's words that stung me unpleasantly. "We've been talking to this manufacturer for a long time, but we haven't started work. It's unlikely that anything significant will come out of it, but maybe my father will earn something."

"Oh, Roman..." Sergey shook his head, put the last signature, raked the sheets together and pushed them haughtily away from him to the edge of the table. "Here... that's it... I signed it..."

"Okay, that's done, great!" I took the stack. "I'll give it to my father at home, let him study it..."

Sergey put his clasped hands on the back of his head, leaned back in his chair, turned slightly toward the window, looked out, and let out a soft yawn.

"What's with the perfume?" I started the next day, Friday, December 9, with a question as soon as I got to the office. "Did you call the shipping company?"

Sergey sat with his elbows on the table and his fingers on his forehead. When he heard the question, he slowly raised his head, looked at me and extended his hand:

"Hi, Romych..."

"Hi, Seryoga!" I shook his hand and plopped down in the chair by the door. "Where's Vera?"

"She'll be here soon," he said tiredly and leaned back in his chair.

"You're a little sluggish!" I blurted out.

"I have a headache," Sergey mumbled weakly, putting his hands on the back of his head.

A woman's footsteps were heard in the hallway and Vera entered the office.

"Have some Citramonum," I suggested, "it always helps me."

Sergey gave me a pained look, put his hands tighter around his head and shook it.

"Let's go to the drugstore!" I added. "Otherwise it'll be sore all day!"

I didn't have to convince him. I took the waybill from the first trip, gave it to the storekeeper, and caught up with Sergey on the street, walking sluggishly towards the "Mazda".

We passed the intersection and what had been in my subconscious came out.

"You know, I was talking to Vera the other day..." I said. "Well, we were talking about the moment when my father left us. And Vera said that, you know, when my father and I came to you in 'Sasha', when you saw us for the first time, you thought that he, well, my father, is an impressive, thorough, reasonable man, I mean, well, that he is in charge, 'and Roma is some chump', running around, fussing, a chump in general... Can you imagine? Vera just stunned me with those words! I was even a little bit shocked. I thought about what people think about me, how you, Roma, look like from the outside! I was even embarrassed... Shit, Seryoga, do I really look like that? Do I look like a chump? Hmm, that's amazing."

As we bounced along the snowy road in the "Mazda", my words went unanswered. The car climbed onto the asphalt and drove more smoothly.

"Vera just talks too much," Sergey grumbled petulantly.

We arrived at the pharmacy in silence. Sergey took a pill there and we drove back.

"Guess what, Romych, my headache is gone!" he said when we got back to the office.

"I told you so," I nodded, "I wouldn't advise anything bad."

The perfume shipment arrived at the very end of the workday. The sun had just set, and the remnants of the day were quickly fading into night.

"Let's go help unload!" I said, getting up from the chair and pulling on a jacket.

"There's a lot of goods, five pallets... It will take the two of them two hours to unload it."

Sergey got up silently and left the office after me.

We were done in an hour. I jumped off the truck. It was dark all around. Only one lantern was shining over our warehouse. The snow that had started to fall just before we unloaded was now coming down in big flakes, as if it wanted to defeat the light of the lone lantern.

"We did a good job of filling the warehouse, didn't we, Seryoga?" I said, entering the warehouse.

"Yeah, not bad," he replied, sniffing his nose in satisfaction. "I didn't expect everything to go so smoothly with us..."

"It will be totally packed by summer!" I said, feeling the fire of activity in my chest. The shark inside me rumbled, feeling not a drop of blood, but thin streams of it. I felt we were moving fast in the right direction. And while other companies were slow to react to market changes, as if half asleep, we were grabbing all the fat pieces in a row and greedily gobbling them up, whetting our appetites.

"I hope to God you're right!" Sergey sighed and waved his hand. "Do I mind?"

I gave all the paperwork on the cleaning products for the companies to my father. Without enthusiasm in his voice, he promised to look into it. I understood my father, it didn't look profitable. But I didn't want him to stagnate. I tried to shake him up, to cheer him up. Even in this way.

My life changed. Smoking cessation and skepticism of alcohol turned on a source of energy within me. The cells of my body began to rapidly fill with this energy of health. I began to feel the taste of food and see life more vividly. The negative and depressed state disappeared and I began to smile more often. When I felt the taste of life, I realized that I would never give it up again.

"Are you drawing term papers again?" I said, watching Vera's fingers tapping tirelessly on the keyboard. Monday, December 12, 2005. The time had passed three o'clock and it was rapidly getting dark outside the window. Sergey was gone.

"Not again, Roma... still," Vera smiled and continued.

She typed non-stop as if this work was the meaning of her life. A straight-A student. Vera was clearly affected by the syndrome of the same name. "Good wife, lucky Seryoga," I thought without a shadow of envy, realizing it only as a fact.

The next moment, Vera suddenly clasped her hands to her chest and sobbed. She wasn't crying softly, she was sobbing. She sobbed uncontrollably, the way you sob when you burst into tears and can't hold it in.

"I can't take it anymoore!!!" she wailed. Tears rolled down Vera's distorted face, interspersed with deep, uncontrollable sobs and convulsions.

I was petrified, mouth open, frozen in my chair, staring at the scene in utter confusion, not knowing what to do or say, or even if I should.

"Roooma, I can't take it anymoore!!!" Vera wailed, her whole body shaking.

The hysteria lasted less than a minute and ended just as suddenly. Exhausted, Vera fell silent. She immediately cleaned herself up and wiped the tears from her face. A few minutes later, the same Vera was sitting in front of me – concentrated, calm, polite, industrious. Her fingers fluttered over the keyboard with the same diligence.

"Vera, well, it happens..." I forced myself to say.

After five minutes of awkward silence, our conversation resumed as if nothing had happened. But my mind kept returning to what had happened. Soon Sergey arrived, all three of us plunged into work, and the incident was left behind. But in the following days I

returned to it, went over it in my mind again and again, trying and failing to understand. The episode seemed to fall out of the whole puzzle, and it was weird. I had known Vera and Sergey for six months, and I couldn't get enough of the joy of their mutual understanding. During that time they had never spoken an unkind word to each other, let alone quarreled. Some small things, which can be more in married couples, yes, they happened. But the hysteria... Why all of a sudden!? How!? What's the reason? I kept running this fragment around in my head and couldn't put it anywhere. It was clearly not part of the picture I knew. Exhausted from trying to solve the problem, I left the case and almost forgot about it.

Either Vovka called me or I called him, but in the middle of the week we met in the evening at "Clear Skies" – me and Vovka and Lera. There were few visitors and music played softly in the background.

"Have you seen Ritka?" Vovka said as soon as he sat down at the table.

"I have," I nodded, sitting with my back to the bar. "I already said hello to her..."

"Said hello!? Hee-hee-hee!" Vovka grinned snidely and began to study the menu. "So, for fuck's sake! What is there to eat in this shithole?"

"Shithole..." Lera grinned.

"Here we go, Lera!" I nodded and stared at Vovka with a playfully stern look. "Six months ago he was hanging around here so much that you couldn't get him out! And when he stopped coming here, it's a shithole now! Oh, Vova!"

"Don't Vova me!" He squirmed on the sofa with his ass. "Well, I just said that, just like that... It's a good place, of course... something to remember... hee-hee-hee! There, Ritka is here!"

"Who's Ritka?" Lera craned her neck and looked behind me.

"Roman's love!" Vovka blurted out.

"Wait, he was with Lilya, wasn't he?" Lera was surprised.

"That was later, but first he was with Ritka," Vovka explained.

"Aha..." Lera said and laughed. "I can't keep up with you!"

"Yes, Ramses is like that! He changes girls like socks!" laughed Vovka.

"Don't listen to him!" I said to Lera and got up from the table. "I'll be right here."

"All righty!" Vovka continued to sneer, giggling at my back.

I walked over to the counter. A moment later, Rita was there, too.

"Hi, Romochka!" she said, beaming.

"Hi, Rita!" I nodded and leaned against the counter. "How are you? Not many people?"

"I'm fine," Rita came closer. "No, not many. There was a lot on the weekend. How are you?"

"I'm doing well. I quit smoking. I'm thinking about going back to the gym, getting in shape," I smiled, noticing that Rita was looking at me the same way she had before. The coldness, the arrogance, the haughtiness – all gone. Rita's feminine vibes fluttered back in my direction by the thousands, surrounding me, enveloping me, trying to enchant me anew.

"Oh, really?" she said. "You'll be handsome, girls will stare at you!"

I grinned. I liked Rita. I loved her way of talking – a cocktail of irony, warmth, tenderness, sarcasm, and kindness. For a moment, it was like I was back in our relationship. But that time was over.

"I'm tired," Rita said, resting her head on my elbow and closing her eyes.

I was confused for a second, but I didn't feel my heart beat any faster. Rita opened her eyes and looked into mine. She sighed and, as if she understood, picked up the tray.

"Oh, right, just a minute!" She suddenly perked up and went into the back room; when she returned, she pushed something dark into my hands. "A present for your birthday... Many happy returns. I forgot to congratulate you back then, sorry..."

A black wallet of cheap leather. I turned it in my hands, opened it, closed it. You could buy such a thing at any stall for three hundred rubles.

"Thank you, Rita! It's unexpected and pleasant!" I lied and smiled. There was a pause. The very uncomfortable one, when there's nothing more to say and you have to end the conversation somehow.

"Okay, I better go," Rita touched my hand with the palm of her hand. "I have to work."

"Okay, see you later..." I said and walked back to the table.

Soon we were leaving the club. As we walked, I nodded to Rita, who nodded back and continued to stare. I couldn't bear her gaze, so I looked away – our time was gone.

Back home, I wondered what to do with the gift. I twirled the wallet in my hands and didn't know what to do. I didn't want to use it for its intended purpose. I wanted to throw it in the trash, but I couldn't. I opened the desk drawer and threw the wallet in.

A few days later, on a Saturday, I went back to the club.

"Romka! Hiya!" someone shouted, looming over me with a curly, shaggy head and a strong smell of alcohol. I raised my head.

"Oh, Sanyok, hi!" I held out my hand to the gangly fellow as soon as I recognized him.

"How are you? How's business?" He smiled and tried to focus his drunken gaze.

"Everything's fine, Sanya. Working hard," I said, automatically pulling away from the acquaintance who was breathing in my face. "How are you?"

"Innka and I are going out again!" Sashka said, shaking his curls and breaking into a drunken smile.

"Wow! Well, congratulations! Inna is a good girl!" I put together a neutral sentence, thinking it was wise not to get caught in Inna's tightly woven web of love.

"Yeah, she's all right!" Sashka nodded and widened his smile, which looked either cunning and fake or stupid and artless.

"All right, Sanya, I'll go..." I said.

"You're leaving already? So early!?"

"I'm getting old, Sanya, I'm getting old..." I hummed, "I've already left 'big-time sport'."

"Aha... well, okay, Romka, it was good to see you!" he patted me on the shoulder.

"You too, Sanya," I nodded and went to the exit.

"Strange character. I don't think he's a fool, but he's not serious, or maybe he's stupid, I don't know... One thing is clear – he drinks, he has a weakness for alcohol, which can ruin him if he doesn't get smart," I thought about the guy who was a combination of incongruous things.

And already on the street, walking leisurely through the winter city, I realized what was wrong with that gangly Sashka – he had no inner core. The guy had the makings of a good man, but the lack of an inner core turned him into a spineless rag doll.

"Roman, let's give ourselves a bonus, shall we?" Sergey said suddenly, sitting by the door in his usual pose, legs crossed, ankle on knee, kicking his foot and chewing his lower lip. "To celebrate the upcoming holidays..."

"All right," I shrugged and looked at Vera, who was drinking cold tea without sugar. It was almost always like this: someone poured tea into three cups at once, Sergey and I drank it

at once, and Vera forgot hers while she was working. In the end, she always drank her tea cold.

"How much should we take?" Sergey jerked his foot faster.

"I don't know..." I crossed my arms on my chest and leaned back in the chair. "I don't care..."

"Well... let's write off five thousand each?"

"Let's."

"Vera, write it off!" Sergey ordered cheerfully and took a bundle of money out of his briefcase – his half of the "common fund". "From me and from Romka, a bonus of five thousand each!"

Vera took a notebook from the table, rustled the pages, and made a note.

"Well, we'll give some to Verok, won't we?" Sergey said, glaring at me and looking at his wife, who was frozen over her notebook. "She does all the paperwork after all..."

"Yes, of course we will!" I agreed without hesitation.

"How much will it be?" Sergey smiled as he continued to look at his wife. "Right, Verok!? You deserve a bonus, don't you?"

"Well, as the junior and the only office worker, I think three thousand will be just right!" I said, looking at my partner's wife. "Vera, is three thousand okay?"

"Yes, Roma, it's okay," she nodded. "Should I write it off from you or from Seryozha or what?"

"You can write it off from either of us, I don't know..." Sergey said and looked at me.

"Vera, well, let's split it in half, so that everyone's common fund remains equal!" I said and added, "Seryoga, take three of yours for Vera and I'll bring you one and a half on Monday..."

My partner's fingers clumsily grasped the bundle and, shaking, began to count – slowly, awkwardly, confusingly. Vera and I watched in silence. Suddenly his fingers froze, Sergey raised his head and said: "How much should I take?"

"Eight," I replied. "Five and three."

"Oh yeah, right!" Sergey nodded, and his fingers fidgeted with the bills again.

Vera began absent-mindedly going through the papers on the table. I leaned back in my chair and turned around, keeping my eyes on my partner's trembling fingers.

"There, that's it, eight!" he said, shoving the bundle into his briefcase and taking out the new wallet, carefully placing the counted sum into it and returning the wallet to the briefcase.

"All right, done," Sergey exhaled, straightened up in his chair, and ran the back of his hand over his forehead as if wiping away sweat.

On Saturday, December 24th, I woke up late. Outside the window, snow was falling from impenetrable clouds. I didn't want to get out of the warm blanket, so I stayed half asleep. At some point I thought of Lilya – the holidays were approaching and she had to come from Moscow to visit her parents. And at the same time I felt that Lilya would call me. I looked at the phone next to me and... it rang!

"Hello."

"Hello," a deliberately soft voice said into the phone. "It's me, Lilya..."

"Ah, Lilya, it's you!?" I put surprise into my intonation. "Hi..."

"I arrived this morning... Maybe... I'll see you tonight...?" she said.

"See me? Yeah, sure... let's meet!"

I approached the movie theater at five to six and noticed Lilya first.

"Hi!" I said with a smile.

"Hi," she replied quietly, fluttering her eyelashes a few times and looking down. Her favorite trick. Lilya was wearing a white fur coat and a white beret. For some reason I immediately realized that the coat was new and that it might be Lilya's first outing in it. The beret didn't match the coat and spoiled the whole picture. It was like wearing leather pants and galoshes, combining things only on the basis of color. I felt an acidic amusement brewing inside me. Lilya looked at me innocently and lowered her eyes again. Her whole posture spoke of humbleness and humility.

"Actress," I thought, feeling the excitement of the game flare up inside me.

"Did you arrive today?" I blurted out mechanically, not even trying to please her with the question.

"Yes, today, this morning on the train," Lilya replied, holding her white purse in front of her with both hands, the way children hold their school bags.

"Ah-ha... I see," I said and turned my head.

Lilya waited, but I didn't continue.

"Where shall we go?" she asked.

"I don't know," I shrugged indifferently. "Let's take a walk, then we'll decide..."

"Okay, let's go," Lilya agreed meekly.

We walked slowly down the avenue. Lilya's hand gently took my elbow and I grinned. After half an hour of walking we turned into a cafe. And there our conversation flowed just as sluggishly. I didn't bother to say anything, Lilya drank coffee and was too delicate. I listened to her with my ears half-closed, forgetting almost everything she said.

"Did I tell you that I want to buy a car?" Lilya said.

"No, you didn't," I shrugged. "Maybe you did, but I don't remember..."

"After the New Year there will be good discounts in the showrooms, I'll buy it then, probably..."

"Well, good for you, what can I say..." I chattered with a spoon in a cup of tea and looked there too, just not to meet Lilya's eyes. "And what kind of car would you like to buy?"

"I don't know, I haven't decided yet. Some kind of small woman's car, I don't know much about it... Anyway, something small!"

I looked at Lilya, who was staring at me, and smiled languidly.

"As soon as I buy it, I promise I'll take you for a ride!" Lilya smiled dazzlingly, and I unintentionally looked at the artificial teeth again. Not so long ago, everything I had seen as something magical, whole and bright, disintegrated into heterogeneous elements, each of which looked ordinary and cheap. A kind of post-love effect.

"It's a deal," I smirked.

The evening ended as boringly as it had begun – I took Lilya home in a taxi without kissing her or arranging another meeting, said goodbye to her and returned to the taxi.

I was sure that Lilya would call soon, because someone had to sponsor her holidays. The call came at noon the next day. I refused to meet and lied about not feeling well. I liked the game, so I bet on another call.

On Monday, December 26, our company worked. Despite the holiday rush, there were orders and we worked until Wednesday. And Thursday was the beginning of the holiday period until January 9th.

Lilya called me on the 27th and suggested that we celebrate New Year's Eve together. I agreed, and Lilya turned on the old trick: she offered to go to a fancy club with her and her girlfriend or to go to a cafe with Lilya's brother and his wife. My choice.

"But I don't really want to celebrate with my brother," Lilya led me to the first option. "His wife will be there and we don't get along with her. And I don't really like that cafe..."

Should I take the two girls to an expensive place and lighten my pocket, or should I go to a cheap cafe and share the financial burden with Lilya's brother?

"Lilya, it's the opposite for me – I would go to a cafe, but I don't want to go to a club, sorry. Listen, if you don't want to go to the cafe, go to the club alone with your friend, and we'll meet after, we'll go for a walk, drink coffee, as usual!" I parried, knowing that Lilya didn't need "as usual" – to play a girl in love for a cup of coffee, not much of a profit.

"Well, yeah, we'll probably do that..." Lilya said thoughtfully after a pause.

We exchanged a few more general sentences and that was it.

On the 28th my parents had a big fight. My father was provoked by my mother, and since she had a reason for her anger, she cursed at him for an hour. My father reacted slowly at first, and then he began to shout. The apartment shook with the noise. My head too. I was ready to go anywhere.

"Hey," Lilya showed up. "I talked to my brother yesterday after our talk. He said he would invite us to a cafe. You said we could go to a cafe, shall we go?"

Lilya kept hogging the blanket. Not having a better option, she forced me to sponsor at least one evening in a cafe. I didn't care about the money. I was willing to spend it to keep the game going. My yes would be seen by Lilya as another victory. I was ready to give up a pawn for the sake of winning the game I was leading with my weaknesses.

"Cafe? Yes, Lilya, we can go to a cafe. I'm in! Let's go!" I reacted.

She got excited and cheerful. We agreed to meet at the cafe the next evening, we said goodbye and I left the hell of my home for "Clear Skies".

The next evening I arrived at the cafe. Five people – me, Lilya, her brother and his wife, and Lilya's girlfriend, whom she had brought along after all – sat down at a table, and then the banality began that was already making me sick. The repast. I was beginning to see something subtly stupid about such boozing. The inner changes that had taken place were becoming more and more insistent. I began to notice and see things I had not noticed before.

I looked around the cafe. I could see faces without any intellectual burden flashing before my eyes. Lilya's brother started pouring vodka as soon as he sat down. I refused and ordered a glass of whiskey and coke, which I sipped for a long time, giving the others a chance to drink the bottle of vodka. Drunk, everyone started dancing. Lilya had fun, laughed excessively and clapped her hands. She couldn't dance. I remembered that Lilya had told me that she'd taken dancing lessons. Lilya's poor sense of rhythm made her movements stiff and angular. Time dragged on. I repeated my order. Inside I was anywhere but in that cafe. This kind of fun seemed like a waste of time to me. Lilya's brother was heavily intoxicated, and he was talking nonsense mixed with a lot of profanity. "I have to stop swearing," I realized and felt a pang of shame. I drank the second glass. Lilya was having fun and continued to pretend to be something important. The surrounding circus made me sick. The waiter brought the bill and Lilya's brother and I paid equally. Eventually the crowd began to disperse. I went to the nearest taxi, negotiated a price with the driver, and opened the back door. Lilya got in first, and I got in next. There was a tense estrangement between us. The silence in the car only intensified it. Neither of us tried to pretend to be in a relationship. It wasn't there in the first place. Lilya no longer fit into the innocent sheep's clothing, and I began to see things clearly.

"Why don't you say something?" she said with a grumble in her voice.

"What should I say?" I replied without turning my head and looking out of the window.

"Well, say something!" Lilya got angry.

"I have nothing to say. What's the point?" I shrugged and looked at Lilya. She sat back in the corner of her seat and glared at me.

"What do you mean, what's the point? I don't get it!"

"It's simple, Lilya!" I exhaled, realizing that no one was going to make my choice and decision for me. "We don't really have a relationship. I don't see the point in clarifying something that isn't there. We don't see each other much. You come, we hang out, you go, that's it! There's no perspective and no point, to be honest..."

"Oh, that's how it is! Then why did you suffer all night, poor thing, if there's no point!?! Maybe we shouldn't have seen each other tonight in the first place!?"

"Maybe we shouldn't have..." I stared blankly out of the window, no longer willing to accept negativity and get nervous for a non-existent reason. We were approaching downtown.

Lilya was silent and I was overcome by indifference.

"There's no point..." I said aloud, more to myself.

"Maybe there's also no point in you driving me home!" Lilya said aggressively. "You sit here next to me and torture yourself!"

"Maybe there's no point in me driving you home..." I repeated apathetically.

"Then don't suffer, maybe you'd better get off right here! What's the point of waiting?!"

"Yes!" I came to life at last, having made a painful decision and for the first time overcoming the softness of my character toward women that had always caused me so much trouble. "You're right! I'd better get out!" I added to the driver, "Stop here! At the hotel!"

The car obediently pulled up to the curb. Silently, without turning around, I got out and walked forward to the traffic light. The taxi overtook me. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the puzzled and haughty look on Lilya's face. There was anger in her icy eyes. I smiled, lifted my head and looked up at the sky – the big snowflakes were falling slowly and thickly over my head, materializing out of the blackness of the sky, falling through the yellow rays of the street lamps. As soon as the first snowflake touched my face, it was as if an unnecessary burden fell from me and an unbearable joy erupted in my soul. I crossed the street, jumping childishly, restrained myself, and walked in the opposite direction to the bus stop. But I had an unbearable desire to run. The stop was about fifty meters away. And then a yellow "GAZelle" bus overtook me from behind. "Mine!" I realized when I saw the number, and... I ran! On the run I suddenly felt unbearably funny, I imagined that Lilya was running after me and wanted to catch me! And my salvation is only in this midnight "GAZelle"! I ran as fast as I could without any embarrassment! The few passers-by just saw me as a guy trying to catch a bus! But I was not running after the "GAZelle", I was running away from the barrier inside me. The barrier had cracked that evening, and it was only a matter of time before it was finally broken and left in the past. I was running from the past to the future!

CHAPTER 32

Throughout the holidays, I kept thinking about the money my father and I had in his bank account. Time passed, but there was no use for it. My hope that my father, having left Sergey and me, would invent some kind of business, take this money and start earning, was not justified. For six months he didn't even try to start anything. And when my father came to the office, I realized that he was knocking about, not knowing what to do. His agreement to take over the detergent business made me happy – indirectly, but my father was close to me again. I ignored Sergey's sarcasm. Yes, the direction was not easy and I shouldn't expect quick results. But I believed in my father. "If he takes it on, the result will come," I decided and calmed down. And I had to do something about the money.

"Dad, listen," I started, sitting down on the sofa in my father's room. "I was thinking, why should our money be in the bank, maybe we should buy an apartment with it, huh?"

My father looked at me blankly, rubbed his face with his hands, coughed and asked:

"Apartment?"

"Yes, apartment! Money is lying around anyway, and apartments are getting more expensive all the time! This way we invest in real estate, save money from inflation, and earn something!"

"Ahem..." My father put his hand under his chin and stared at the wall in front of him.

"Why don't you say something?" I said after a pause.

"I'm thinking!" my father said and stood up. "I have to think!"

"Then let's go into the kitchen and have some tea!" I suggested. "We'll think about it at the same time."

"That's not a bad idea..." my father said in the kitchen. "We just have to figure out if we have enough money and for what kind of apartment..."

"We don't have enough for a finished apartment!" I said at once. "I've already counted! Only enough for a co-funded construction, and that's for a one-bedroom apartment!"

"You mean we invest the money and the apartment is still under construction?"

"Yes, shared construction! The prices are lower than for ready-made housing, and there is no other way!"

"Wait, don't rabbit on!" my father put me in my place. "Let me think!"

"Think," I muttered. "Who's stopping you?"

My father poured coffee for himself and I poured tea.

"So!" My father crossed his legs and began to wiggle them gently, juggling the slipper on his toes. "So you're offering to buy an apartment... I see... that's an interesting idea!"

He stirred the sugar in the cup with a spoon, brought the spoon to his lips, blew on it, licked it, and carefully, measuring the parallelism of the table line, placed it next to the cup.

"But have you found out the prices yet? You have to find that out first! Find out which contractor, where and what they build, if they are reliable! It's not as easy as you think!"

"Dad, you talk to me like I'm an idiot!" I stared at my father. "Of course we have to find out! I'm not suggesting that we take the money to the first mickey mouse company we see! We'll find out everything, we'll figure it out, and we'll choose! I don't see any problem with that!"

"You don't see a problem anywhere!" My father stared at me with an attentive and displeased look and chuckled. "You're too nimble, I see!"

"Why too nimble?" I was indignant. "The money is just sitting there in the bank! Inflation is eating it up! In two years it'll be nothing! Is that what we earned it for!?"

I was mentally exhausted, silent. I was also physically tired.

"All right, all right, take it easy. I hear you. It's just that this is a big step and we need to think it over. And we will do it without your 'hustle and bustle' crap."

"Dad, let's do whatever it takes, as long as it works," I muttered.

"Well, then it's decided, we'll do it," my father summarized. "We need to pick a time and go check out the construction offices."

On January 5, I packed a bag and went to the school gym, which I had abandoned years ago and traded it for cigarettes, alcohol, and clubs. The amount I paid for the month was equal to what I'd downed in one night at a club. "How cheap it is to stay healthy and how expensive it is to ruin it," I thought to myself in the locker room.

I barely lasted an hour. The barbell, even with a small weight, was incredibly heavy. When I did the bench press, I immediately started breathing heavily, sweating, my heart pounding, and my joints aching. I could only do three pull-ups, sadly remembering the times in the army when I could easily do fifteen reps without any special training. Panting, I climbed onto the bench for the press; with difficulty and noisy breathing, I bent my body ten

times and my abs cramped. My own weakness made me angry at myself, and I was determined to look out for myself.

"Fuck, my whole body is fucking sore!" I groaned on Monday, January 9, as soon as I arrived at work and sat down in my chair. "So much for going to the gym, Roma!"

"Have you been working out or what!?" Sergey tore himself away from his papers and stared at me in confusion.

"Yeah, I decided to become an athlete!" I chuckled. "I quit drinking and smoking after all!"

"I don't even recognize you!" smiled Vera.

Without taking his eyes off me, Sergey put the papers aside, sat up straight in his chair, shook his head in agreement, and exhaled:

"Right, Roman, by summer he'll get buff! He'll be unrecognizable!"

"Oh, come on!" I waved him off. "If I just fix myself up, that would be good!"

"I think Senya and Kholodov are drunk!" said Vera, squinting at the office door.

Thursday, January 12 – the first working week of the new year was coming to an end. Sergey was drinking tea by the door, I was at the table. Vera said what I had suspected for several days.

"Of course they're drunk!" Sergey said, putting the cup back on the shelf. "It's the third day they've been like this. They must be freshening the nip after the holidays. Senya walks around with glassy eyes and shaking hands. And Kholodov can't say a word, swaying, holding on to the walls!"

I leaned back in my chair and thought.

"Fuck! This sucks!" I said after a few seconds. "We have to do something, Seryoga!"

"Yeah..." he mumbled, sitting relaxed in his chair.

Soon we called them both into the office and began the "interrogation". After a few moments of sluggish bickering, they confessed and began loudly promising it wouldn't happen again.

I said that the first time would be a warning, and if it happened again, a fine of a thousand rubles. Senya was indignant, splashing his hands and rocking on his feet beside Kholodov. He just mumbled something, kept his mouth shut and held on to the wall.

"That's it, it's a deal!" I summarized. "From now on, you will come to work sober."

Senya was about to object, but changed his mind and turned to leave. Kholodov began to stomp on the spot, turning around aimlessly and groping for the door handle. Senya found it first, turned it, opened the door, and pushed the drunken loader out into the hall. For another half hour, their room was abuzz with conversation. Then Senya's head poked through the office door and said guiltily: "Well, we're done, goodbye..."

"Goodbye, Senya!" Sergey shouted, just wagging an eyebrow in his direction.

"Aha..." The storekeeper was completely confused and disappeared through the door.

I glanced at my partner, who was sitting there, frowning, arms crossed over his chest, staring sternly out the window. Vera was typing, occasionally casting furtive glances from the monitor, then at me, then at her husband. Suddenly, the images of Senya and Kholodov – goofy forty-year-old fools – came to mind. A merry laugh escaped my lips.

"There's nothing funny about it, really!" Sergey frowned even more, flaring his nostrils significantly, giving his gaze even more severity. "Such things cannot be forgiven!"

"And who forgives?" I was surprised.

"Well, you spoke of some warnings..." Sergey jerked his knee. "I would have demanded the money right away, that's all!"

"Seryoga, you can't do that – right away! You should first announce the punishment and then administer it. A person should know in advance, not after the fact. Otherwise, instead of taking one thousand, you might take five at once! So as not to be petty... No, you can't do that, people might leave."

My partner was silent for a while, chewing his lip, jerking his knee, looking at me confusedly, and finally said: "Well, I don't know! I would have fined them immediately!"

The following Monday, the storekeeper and the loader were tipsy again. As a result, Petya left with the goods in the back, loaded any old how.

"Roma!" he shouted as soon as he started unloading at the customer's. "What should I do? It's all fucked up! It's not what's on the waybill, and some of the boxes aren't even here!"

"Petya, unload it as it is, tell them we'll deliver the missing tomorrow. Take the excess back to the warehouse, don't unload it, got it?" After gathering my thoughts, I decided.

"Got it, Roma! All right, bye!" he disconnected.

I put the phone on the table and looked at Sergey and Vera.

"We need to go to the warehouse," I said after a pause, rising from my chair.

"They seem to be drinking somewhere in the warehouse," Vera said.

"Yes, where else would they be drinking? Not here... under our very noses!" Sergey said.

"Let's go! Let's raid the warehouse! We have to find a stash!" I said, putting on my jacket.

Sergey got up next, put on his parka, and we went outside.

"Jerks!" Sergey said, pulling the hood over his head.

Our visit caused a commotion. Senya fidgeted and ran around the corners of the warehouse, eyes clouded. Kholodov, swaying, began to pretend to be busy.

"Senya, tell me, did you drink today or not?" I said as soon as I entered the warehouse. He stammered on the spot, sniffed his nose and wiped it with his sleeve.

"Senya, why are you silent?" Sergey added.

"Seryozha, well... what can I say..." the storekeeper mumbled, hanging his head.

"Where did you drink, Senya? There, in your quarters, or here in the warehouse?" I continued.

"There, in the room! We had some... but it won't happen again, Roma!"

"Of course it won't!" Sergey said, standing in the middle of the warehouse with an annoyed look on his face.

"Seryozha, seriously..." Senya bowed his head guiltily. "This is the last time..."

I looked at Kholodov. I had a strong feeling that he was the one who had started the boozing. Senya had already proven himself to be a disciplined, intelligent and diligent worker. Kholodov, on the other hand, had a demoralizing effect on him.

"Senya, you can drink, we'll just charge you a grand each and that's it!" I said ruthlessly.

"Roma, I mean, maybe you shouldn't, eh?" the storekeeper replied in a hushed voice.

"We should, Senya, we should!" Sergey said, walking up and down the aisles. "Where do you keep the vodka?"

"Seryozha, there is no vodka!" Senya perked up. "We've already... I mean... drunk it all..."

Sergey continued to walk around the warehouse, peering into various corners and sniffing. Kholodov stood still. Senya shifted his feet nervously. Sergey returned to the warehouse gate and walked to the left along the first row of pallets. He reached the end of the aisle, looked into the gap between the wall and the pillar of boxes, stuck his hand in and pulled out a half-full bottle of vodka.

"Senya, it's a fine!" I said angrily, seething inside at the deception. "Let's go, Seryoga!"

We poured the vodka into the snow and went to the office.

"Vera, write it down – to take a thousand from each of these..." I said, taking off my jacket.

"What, they were drinking after all, weren't they?" she said, pulling the notebook from the table and making a note.

"We found vodka in the warehouse! They stashed the bottle on the wall behind the pallet!" Sergey said, shivering, and sat down in the chair by the door, crossing his arms over his chest and sniffing his nose. "Jerks!"

For the rest of the month, both workers were defiantly sober.

"They're going to get off the wagon eventually anyway," I said a week later.

"You think?" Vera looked at me.

"What is there to think about, Vera? The holidays are coming up, February 23rd, March 8th, they'll be drunk, and then they'll cool coppers here. I think it's Kholodov. He's a fucking influence on Senya. I think we should fire him."

"Well, we fire Kholodov and Senya will work alone, is that it?" Sergey looked at me with a kind of frightened confusion.

"Why alone?" I was surprised. "We'll advertise, find a replacement."

"We have to find a replacement first, and then kick him out," Sergey said.

"Why? Why leave this Kholod? So that he and Senya can get drunk again?"

"Then we must find a replacement quickly, so that Senya doesn't have to carry the goods alone for long."

"Seryoga, if there's trouble, we'll go and help Senya, what's the big deal?"

He hesitated and said through his thoughts: "Well... I'd hate to... after all, we're paying him for his work, but it turns out that we're doing it for him!"

"Seryoga!" I looked at my partner reproachfully. "We won't break down! If necessary, we'll help!"

"Roman just wants to work!" Sergey snorted unhappily, looked at no one, rested his elbows on the armrests of his chair, locked his fingers and stared at the floor.

"Hello!!" I shouted through the closed window of the "Mazda", nodding vigorously, catching the moment when the bespectacled janitor standing at the gatehouse looked into the car. She was smoking with her head uncovered, wrapped in a quilted jacket and holding a cigarette pretentiously with two fingers in her hand. Without answering the greeting, the janitor looked away.

Sergey and I left the factory.

"Fuck!" I swore, not wanting to hold back. "Why the fuck doesn't she say hello!!! I almost broke my neck yelling hello!!! What the fuck does she need!!!!? Should I jump out of the car and dance for her and bow!!!!?"

"Roman!" Sergey laughed quietly, but clearly amused. "You got all worked up over a stupid woman! Come on! Do you need it?"

"Damn it, Seryoga!!! What the fuck, I ask you!!?" I just kept bubbling up inside. "I want to go out and punch her in the fucking face and say, "Why the fuck are you turning up your nose at me, bitch!!!!?"

Seryoga grinned and shook his head, laughing.

"Romych, what do you want from her? Look at her – she's forty years old, no husband, no kids, sits in that stinking booth all day, and you want her to greet you? You're

thirty years old, you have your own company and your whole life ahead of you! And all she's got is this booth..."

"I'm twenty-eight!" I said cheerfully, realizing that Sergey's words were true and cooling down.

"Well, all the more so," my partner smiled and looked at me, catching the change of heart.

I was silent for a few seconds, but finally I couldn't help myself and screamed one last time:

"Fucking cunt!"

Sergey burst out laughing, stopped, looked at me, looked back at the road and said:

"They all are, Romych..."

The car climbed out of the snow onto the asphalt and accelerated.

Vovka was completely drowned in his courtship of Lera, and I even stopped calling him to drag him to the club, which I only went to on Saturdays and sometimes Fridays. My routine was different. Work during the day, gym in the evening every other day. On the last Saturday in January, I was lazily hanging out between the bar and the dance floor with a glass of whiskey and coke, when suddenly the blonde girl stood next to me. It was like an electric shock, I froze and watched her out of the corner of my eye. She was having a lively conversation with the pimply Polinka.

"Hi!" I approached both of them. "Hi, Polina!"

"Hiii!" The blonde broke into a smile, flashed at me, and lightly touched my elbow with her hand. "You're here too?"

"Yeah, I thought I'd stop by," I nodded, "It's boring at home, but it's more fun here. Did you just get here?"

"Yeah, I'm here to see Polinka! I left my key at her place, can you believe it?" said the blonde without coquetry and affectation, which made me like her immediately.

"What do you mean, what key?" I said, looking at Polinka.

"We live together," she explained. "We rent an apartment, and Natashka left her key at my place!"

"Aha! I see!" I said. "So, you are Natasha? Nice to meet you! I'm Roma!"

The girl smiled again and held out her hand. I shook it gently, feeling the relaxing softness of her fingers and the warmth of her palm.

"Now we get to know each other better!" Natasha burst out with feminine interest.

"Did you know that Ritka doesn't work here anymore?" Polinka's voice came from the left.

"No, I didn't," I shrugged. "Why? Did she quit?"

"I thought you knew!" Polinka stressed the "you" part.

"Why should I know!?" I hastily interrupted her.

"Yes, she quit! She went to the guy she was having an affair with when you were dating her," Polinka smiled pretentiously, revealing her nicotine-stained teeth.

"I wasn't with her then, Polina!" I retorted, angry at the inappropriateness of what she had said. "Rita and I had a fight just before she left."

"Oh man, never mind!" she splashed her hands. "Anyway, she went to see her fiancé..."

"Well..." I smiled and looked at Natasha, "Let's wish Rita happiness and love!" Polinka became apathetic.

"How long are you staying here tonight?" I turned to Natasha.

"I don't know!" she said with a smile. "An hour, I think. Now that I'm here!"

Natasha waved her hands and smacked her thighs merrily.

"Then I'll come over a little later, okay?"

"Of course!" Natasha replied, and with a flick of her hand she whipped up a mop of hair on her head. "I'll be bored here without you! So come over!"

I stepped aside.

"I'll be bored here without you," I repeated in my head.

I waited until Polinka was busy with her work, and then I approached Natasha again.

So we started to see each other.

The "Epiphany frosts" were not cold at all, the temperature in the last decade of January dropped to eighteen degrees below zero and then returned to the usual ten degrees. February began. In the middle of the month we brought a large load of toilet water to the warehouse for the holidays. After unloading it, Kholodov was fired.

On the morning of February 22, I called Sergey and told him that I was going to be late and would come to work after stopping at a place on a personal matter. He replied immediately, saying that I could take my time, he and Vera would take care of things, and then added that I might not go to work at all because it was a day before the holiday, so it was a short day.

"Petya has only one run. We'll load him up and go home early! What's the point of driving an hour here when the workday is about to end?" he added.

I agreed and congratulated Sergey on the upcoming holiday.

"Thank you, Romych," he replied cheerfully. "Happy holiday to you too! I wasn't in the service, aha.... But you're a real soldier... Vera here also congratulates you! She wishes you... aha."

We said goodbye and I started to pull on my jeans.

"Aren't you going to work?" my father appeared in the doorway of the room.

"No, Dad, I'm not... I'm going – I'm going to the construction company, about the apartment..."

"Well, all right, yes... Then you'll come back and tell me what's what... ahem..."

Half an hour later, I was standing in the middle of the construction company's office, looking around.

"Hello, are you here to see me?" A petite woman with high stiletto heels walked briskly past me, entered the office behind a glass partition, and slid into an armchair.

"I guess..." I shrugged and followed her into the office. "It's about the apartment."

"That's right!" She said, introducing herself as the business manager.

The construction company was relatively new on the market and therefore offered favorable conditions to buyers: an initial deposit of thirty percent, fixing the price per square meter until the first price increase and its subsequent increase by only two percent per month, regardless of the size of the price increase. In fact, the price of a square meter of housing increased regularly, and the clause in the contract regarding the fixed indexation of the price increase was a kind of protection against price increases. The buyer was free to pay the remaining amount under the contract in any installments until the end of the construction of the house.

Of the two houses under construction, one by the market and one by the forest, I was interested in the one by the forest. It was to be completed by the end of the seventh year. The smallest one-room apartment of 44 square meters cost 616 thousand, a "two-room" of 61 meters 854 thousand. "The money is just enough for a one-room apartment, I can buy it, and then I'll pay off my father," thoughts began to run feverishly in my head, "will I really have my own apartment? So unusual and... and most importantly, it's real! Here it is, just hold out your hand! Unusual."

My heart was pounding and I couldn't organize my thoughts.

"Well, what have you decided? Which one did you choose? One-room, two-room?" the woman's voice brought me back to reality. I said that the terms of the contract were clear, but I needed time to think.

"Yes, of course! Think! Discuss!" she agreed. "And come! But don't delay, or we don't know when the price of apartments will go up again!"

When I got home, I told my father everything.

"Well, ahem..." he said, made himself some coffee, stirred the sugar with a spoon, took it out, licked it, and carefully placed it on the table. This action showed all the quintessence of my father's pedantry. I smiled; such thoroughness seemed excessive and therefore irritating. My father placed the cup on the table in the same measured manner, sat back in his chair, crossed his legs, tsked, and finally continued:

"Yes, their conditions are clear. But we need to visit or call a few more organizations, better visit, and then see from whom it is more profitable to buy an apartment..."

"Dad, of course!" I said, pacing the kitchen excitedly. "I think we should go to one or two of the biggest companies. See if they have deferments. The others, I have already checked, the conditions are worse – full payment in advance or half now and the rest later and without fixing the price! Then it's only enough for one room!"

"Well, let's buy you a one-room apartment. Fix it up, move in and live."

"With conditions like those in this office, we could sign a contract for two rooms!" I parried. "I would pay for a two-room apartment with everything we have, and gradually bring the rest from the company's earnings... the price is fixed! It's very convenient and favorable!"

"Now! Take it easy!" my father urged me. "I see you're ready to take the money! It's not a little money! We've been earning it for six years! Not for you to just blow it all in one day!"

"Dad, what do you mean, blow it?" I was surprised. "I'm not going to take it and sneak it away from you somewhere, am I? You and I are sitting here discussing this!"

"Discuss then!" My father shook his foot in his slipper. "And don't be in a hurry... Or we'll take the money without thinking, and the house won't be built, and then we'll end up looking at the bricks! There are a lot of them now! They start to build and then abandon it, and then people are left without a home..."

"Dad, I understand!" I seethed inside, overcoming my father's barriers of caution and doubt. "We'll look at everything, think it over, and make a decision together!"

"That's what we'll do!" my father nodded. "And don't make a fuss..."

"Okay, Dad, okay..." I nodded in relief, exhausted from the bickering.

"Did you do all your business there?" Sergey asked suddenly, taking his eyes off the sheet with the rest of the goods in "Fort". The calendar read Friday, February 24th.

"Yes, everything is fine!" I nodded and crossed my legs like my partner usually did.

"Vera, why one sheet!?" Sergey said confusedly, twirling the sheet in his hands and staring unhappily at his wife. "Where is the second one? Didn't you print it!?"

"Seryozha," Vera looked at her husband calmly, moved forward and reached for the pile of papers under his elbows. "There were two, open your eyes..."

She deftly pulled the missing sheet out of the others with her fingers and handed it to Sergey.

"Oh, yes! Thank you, Verok!" He said fidgeting and staring at the sheet he had received, and after a few seconds he said to me, "So, where did you go?"

"It's about an apartment..." I said.

"What apartment???" Sergey frowned playfully and looked at me intently.

"I just had an idea – to buy an apartment... My father and I have some money left over, well, from the time when we worked together... so I thought, why let it lie idle, we'd better buy an apartment! We don't need it here and my father doesn't need it. And apartments are getting more and more expensive..."

Sergey froze, looked at me thoughtfully for a few seconds, then came to life, perked up as if he'd shaken off his stupor, turned his head toward his wife and said emotionally:

"Verok, Roman is going to buy an apartment!"

"Well, he's doing the right thing," she shrugged. "Why should money just sit around in a bank somewhere? They are in a bank, aren't they?"

Vera looked at me with that last sentence, and I nodded.

"There you go! And since that's the case, I think Romka is doing the right thing..." said Vera.

"Well, in the bank you can get interest, after all – something will accumulate..." Sergey parried, obviously interested in the topic.

"Seryoga, that's a ridiculous interest!" I snorted. "How much is it... fifteen?"

"Less!" Vera waved away.

"All the more!" I shifted my gaze from her to Sergey and spread my hands. "No point!"

"Well, and Anatoly Vasilievich..." he began a new thought. "Why doesn't he want to take this money and go into business?"

"I don't know..." I shrugged. "I haven't really talked to him about it. He makes some money driving... And I think he's going to make some money with cleaning products for companies..."

"With these?" Sergey cackled.

"Well, yes, with them..." I smiled, feeling a pang of discomfort at my partner's words. He looked at me for a moment, wanting to say something, but the phone rang.

"Yes, I'm listening!" Vera replied, picking up the phone from the fax machine.

Senya from "Mercury" called. After a short conversation with him, Vera pressed the button and the fax machine printed the sheets with the next order.

"Vera, can you do it yourself or do I have to dictate it to you?" Sergey said irritably and reluctantly when the fax transmission was over.

"I'll manage..." Vera said and held out her hand.

Sergey carelessly threw the sheets on her desk, leaned back in his chair, crossed his arms over his chest, turned to me and said:

"So, Romych, what kind of apartment do you want – a two-room or a one-room?"

"Seryoga, I don't know yet..." I shrugged.

"How much money do you have? You could even buy a three-room apartment, I don't know!"

"It's not much money, six hundred thousand... Just enough for a one-room, they cost about that much in co-funded construction..."

"Have you decided to join the co-funded construction!?" my partner frowned.

"I don't have enough to buy even a one-room apartment, Seryoga!" I waved my hands. "The finished apartments cost seven hundred or eight hundred thousand... So it's either this or nothing!"

"Aren't you afraid?"

"Seryoga, it's not a matter of 'afraid' or 'not afraid', I just need to choose the right construction company. A lot of people build apartments like this and it's okay... Yes, it happens, construction stops and people lose money, but it's usually some crooks or small companies who build one house any old how. I'm still thinking! But I like this option because there is a chance to buy an apartment! When else will I get that kind of money? If the money

is in circulation, it will not be withdrawn immediately, it will take a year to collect it... Besides, apartment prices are going up! How much did you get yours for? How much was a meter?"

"I don't remember, it was... what year, Verok, two thousand and what?" Sergey looked at his wife. She answered immediately: "Two thousand, Seryozha! We moved in in October!"

Vera looked at me, smiled at the memory, and added:

"Imagine, we moved into the bare walls! There was nothing at all! We slept on a mattress on the floor, not even dishes! The first day we woke up, I ran to the neighbors to get a pot to at least boil some eggs! We had nothing of our own!"

Vera's eyes flashed with a memory. She brightened with a smile and looked at her husband.

"Yes, Verok went to ask for a pot!" he nodded. "We slept on the floor for the first year, didn't we, Verok? Then we bought our own furniture, made repairs... I remember they brought us a kitchen... We ordered a good, expensive one, forty thousand back then, can you believe it?"

"Wow!" I was surprised. "So expensive!"

"Yees, I made a good repair!" my partner exclaimed contentedly, leaning back more and stretching out in his chair, staring faintly at a vague point.

"Our eyes used to sparkle," Vera said, looking at her husband, leaning back in her chair, crossing her arms like Sergey and smiling. "And now they don't..."

"Vera, how long can they sparkle?" He fidgeted, sighed tiredly and looked at me. "Romych, you should visit us sometime..."

"Yes, by the way, come and visit us," Vera supported. "You haven't been to our house yet, so come! You'll see how we live! You'll see our nestlings! Lilka is already big, and Lyonka is also growing up..."

"That's great! You already have two! How old are they?" I said and felt a pang of envy. Envy of such a wonderful quiet family life that Sergey and Vera had. They lived, having already found their sheltered, cozy cove. I was still wandering on the waves of relationships on my own ship, rushing from one extreme to the other.

"Lilka is four, she'll be five this summer in August!" said Vera. "And Lyonka is only one year old, well, one and a half already, he just started walking, he'll be two in June..."

"When did he start walking?" I was curious.

"Just recently, I don't know..." Vera said, hesitating and starting to curl her fingers. "In the fall... Now he is one year and eight... That is, a year and three – a year and four."

"It's a little late..." I said, digging into my meager knowledge of children. "Kids usually start walking around nine months, I think..."

"No, Verok!" Sergey objected immediately. "Lyonka started walking earlier! He walked in the summer, remember?"

"When, Seryozha!?" she was genuinely surprised. "Lyonka didn't walk in the summer..."

"He did!" Sergey waved his hand, a gesture that doesn't tolerate objections.

"Remember, I took him by the hands at the dacha!?"

"Seryozha, that doesn't count!" Vera continued. "You just took him by the hands, and he just dangled with his legs a few meters in the air, touching the ground... and that's it... He couldn't walk. He could barely walk across the couch in the summer, remember?"

"Vera, don't say if you don't remember!" Sergey retorted. "That's it!"

Vera froze in a daze. There was a pause. The office phone rang.

The conversation, which had drifted away from the discussion about the purchase of an apartment to the children, was interrupted after the phone call, and we switched to work.

"If I were you, I'd rather sign up for a two-room!" Sergey said an hour later.

"You think?" I said, mentally leaning towards that option for a long time.

"Really, Romych!" Sergey got up from the table, put the kettle on, and it made a lazy noise. "See for yourself..." Sergey took a ruler from the table and began to juggle with it. "... You take your six hundred thousand, sign for a two-room apartment and have it built! When is the completion date?"

"End of 2007," I said.

"Another year and a half..." Sergey waved his ruler.

"It's not even that long!" Vera interjected. "A year and a half will fly by before you know it!"

"Yes, right..." Sergey said. "A two-room apartment is worth about nine hundred thousand there, right?"

"Eight hundred and fifty," I nodded.

"Even better!" Sergey started to turn the ruler in his hands. "You'll only have to pay two hundred and fifty thousand for the apartment in two years, and that's it... We'll work, you'll take money from the company and bring it to the apartment..."

The kettle bubbled, strained, and turned off. I poured the boiling water into three cups.

"Actually, you're right..." I said. "I thought so from the beginning, I just need to consult with my father... half of his money is there, you know..."

"Come on!" Sergey hummed, threw the ruler back on the table and sat down in a chair with a cup of tea. "What kind of father doesn't give his son money for an apartment? You build it, then give it to him, and that's it! If he demands..."

"Come on!?" Vera stared at her husband in surprise. "Why should Anatoly Vasilievich demand the money back? He won't! Everyone around builds apartments for their children themselves, or helps them if they earn good money! I don't remember anyone lending money to their children! I'm sorry, this is nonsense..."

"Verok, you're right," Sergey sipped from his cup. "People are just different! We don't know what kind of relationship Romka has with his father! Anatoly Vasilievich is a complicated man... It's not easy to get along with him..."

"Yes, that's also true..." Vera froze, thought for a second, looked at me and waved her hand. "Oh! They'll figure it out themselves! Why are we interfering, right, Roma?"

"We will, Vera, we will..." I nodded and grinned.

The next day, my father and I went to the office of one of the biggest construction companies in town. But after getting stuck in a terrible traffic jam for a couple of hours, we turned around and went back. The conditions for buying apartments with this company were the worst – full payment in advance and a higher price per square meter. I found that out on the phone.

"Listen, Dad..." I said as soon as we got home. "I don't see the point of going to other construction companies... All the big ones charge high prices. It makes sense to buy only from a company that is well established, but not big enough to dictate prices. Such a company deliberately keeps its prices lower than those of its competitors, otherwise it will not develop. And if it does develop, it will be the same... But as long as their conditions are good. I'm talking about the one I went to... And the house is brick... I think we should go to them..."

We were sitting in the kitchen drinking tea. My father was silent.

"What do you think, Dad?"

My father tore his absent gaze from one point, looked at me and said:

"Yes, let's go! There's really nowhere else to go, and we have to buy an apartment. You're not going to live with us all your life. It's time for you to separate... Yes! Let's go, let's go! When do you want to go there? How much money do you need for a down payment?"

"Thirty percent is enough... Should we buy a two-room or a one-room?" Remembering the unresolved moment, I added, "I think we should sign up for a two-room! Take six hundred thousand, and I'll pay the rest myself from my earnings!"

"You're so fast! Take six hundred thousand! It won't take long!" My father looked at me unhappily. "We'll take as much as we need for the first payment! The rest later..."

"Why keep it?" I said, but immediately realizing that I was getting back into the maze of empty verbal bickering, I hastily agreed. "Fine, let's do it your way!"

"That's more like it!" My father was pleased. "You're always ready to take it away! I see there are many of you, takers! You and your mother! You just want to take things out of the house! You'll learn to carry things into the house before you take them out! Smart asses..."

My mother immediately flew into the kitchen. It was as if she had been standing around the corner, waiting for a sentence or a word or half a word to argue with. She started screaming all at once, like she'd gone crazy:

"What – mother!!!! What have I taken out? I've done nothing but work all my life!!!! What haven't I earned!!!!? Half of this place was bought with my money!!!! The refrigerator was bought with my money!!! I bought the closet!!! I also gave you money for the washing machine!!!! You never would have bought it! You stinking miser! All your life you've been counting every kopeck! You never gave me anything! If I hadn't given you the money for the washing machine, I would have done the washing with my hands. My hands hurt at night from doing laundry. Washing your stinking underwear and socks at night!!! You ungrateful bastard!!!!"

My mother was standing in the middle of the kitchen, screaming. Lately I've only seen her like this. My mother would explode at every opportunity and scream uncontrollably at my father and me for a few minutes. After venting her anger and hatred, she would go to her room and after a while, the same day or the next day, it would happen again. And again. I understood that my mother had a critical condition where she could not control her emotions. The other thing that bothered me was that this condition had been going on for several years and was only getting worse.

My mother was never gentle. She could always insult me, call me rude names. Since I was a child, from the moment I started to remember myself, I had heard all sorts of things in my address. Sheep, idiot, bastard – these were the most common names my mother used to call me. And my father, too. He gave up trying to moderate my mother's rudeness and got used to it. I couldn't get used to it. Every time some insult went unanswered and spoiled my mood for a long time. And the most unpleasant thing was that every time my mother scolded me, my negative feelings towards her grew like a snowball. I knew that the moment was near when I would begin to hate my mother.

"And you're growing up to be the same kind of bastard!!!!" My mother gave me an angry look. "Daddy's little boy!!! Running after your daddy!!! Licking his ass!!! Fucking monkey boy!!! You're both assholes! You're not men, you're just... wusses!!! That's it, I rest my case!!!!"

My mother began to calm down, tired, exhausted.

"That's it! I'm not going to work for you anymore!!! Do you like living like this? Go ahead! Do your own laundry! Cook your own food! That's enough! I've cooked enough, I've done enough laundry! So much that my hands hurt! I've washed with my hands in cold water all my life! I washed so hard that they hurt at night from the cold water, and they still do! And you..."

My mother's face trembled. The features broke and lost their shape in an instant. I knew what would happen next. I had seen it many times before. My mother wept and, unable to hold back the tears, sobbed uncontrollably.

"You!!!" she shouted. "You especially!!!" my mother jabbed her finger in my father's direction and immediately moved it to me. "You too!!! Both of you!!! Ahhh! You ungrateful bastards, that's what you are! Ahhh! Ah-hhh..."

"Mom, come on!" I could barely say, pinned to the chair by her words.

My mother wailed, waved us off, and ran out of the kitchen. The door to her room slammed loudly. There was a heavy silence in the apartment.

"Oh dear..." I said, looking at my father. He shook his head, got up, grabbed his cigarettes and lighter, threw on his jacket in the hallway, and went out on the balcony to smoke.

CHAPTER 33

At the very end of February, I signed a contract to participate in the construction of a two-room apartment of 60 square meters. I went with my father to formalize the deal. We were met by the same woman – the business manager. She opened the brochure of the building on the table in front of us, and I chose an apartment on the third floor.

"For whom do we make the contract?" the woman said, choosing between us with her eyes.

"For whom?" I looked at my father, confused.

"Do it in your name," my father said, tweaking the corner of his mouth and turning away.

"For me," I said.

After signing, we went to the bank, withdrew the advance payment – three hundred and eight thousand rubles – and brought it to the construction company's cash desk. It was only after I left the office and went to the "GAZelle" that I realized that something important was happening in my life – the dream of my own place, which seemed impossible two years ago, was coming true! At the realization of this fact, I was shaken with excitement and euphoria. "My own apartment! A miracle! But how? How did we get this far?" I still did not believe in what was happening, mentally looked back – me and my father in an empty wholesale vegetable depot, my father gives two thousand rubles for the rent of the warehouse in advance for one month, we are left without money and start a risky beer business. Brrr! I shuddered at the memory. Would I do it again? I'm not sure! How much faith or excitement or even sheer stupidity did it take to pull this off? I realized that my father and I had performed a small miracle. Well done! I was not ashamed, mentally repeating to myself, "Well done!" and looked at my father. He was driving the car home with a poker face.

"Dad, this is great, right? Check it out! We bought an apartment!" I exclaimed. "Cool, huh?!"

"Well, let's just say we haven't bought it yet..." he met my euphoria with coldness.

I faltered. My emotions, as if I had stumbled over a rock and spread out, subsided.

"Dad, where do I put the contract?" I said at home, holding the folder with the documents in my hands.

"Put it anywhere. These are your documents! You decide where to put them."

I turned the folder in my hands, put it in my desk drawer, and walked out the door.

"Have you done all your things?" Sergey said as soon as I entered the office.

"Yes! Everything is fine!" I nodded and fell shivering into the chair by the door.

"Well!" Sergey jerked his knee. "Tell me! You bought an apartment?"

I nodded vigorously and, unable to contain myself, broke into a smile.

"The one with two rooms?" Sergey clarified, smiling back at me.

I continued nodding with the look and state of a happy idiot.

"Roman rocks!" Sergey said, looking at his wife. "He bought an apartment!"

"So what?" said Vera. "You bought yours a long time ago! Romka bought one too!"

Vera looked at me warmly and said:

"Congratulations, Roma! Now you can get married with a clear conscience..."

"No, now he might as well not get married!" Sergey cackled, got up from the table, walked over to me and held out his hand. "Well done, Romych, congratulations!"

"Thank you, Seryoga," I shook his hand, and all three of us plunged into our work.

It was almost noon, and Sergey and I went to the village to get something to eat.

"How many meters did you buy?" Sergey asked as soon as we left the factory. "How much did you pay?"

I told him everything as it was.

"Why didn't you take all the money at once?" my partner was surprised.

"I don't know, I offered my father to take it all at once, he didn't want to..." I shrugged and became indignant. "I don't understand, why keep it in the bank, dead weight! But basically, it is not very important now, even if there will be some price increase on meters, the rest of the apartment will only increase in price by two percent..."

"Well, two percent..." Sergey began to chew his lip, calculating in his head. "You took three hundred, and you had three hundred left, and two percent of three hundred is six thousand!"

"Well, yeah," I nodded. "It's not that much money after all..."

"What are you saying? It's still money! Six thousand here, six thousand there – you can waste a lot of money that way! Little by little, a little becomes a lot, you know!"

"Seryoga," I sighed, as if mentally squeezed between two walls – my father with his caution and my partner with his frugality, "I understand everything, but why are you teaching me? If it had been up to me, I would have taken the whole sum at once! I'll ask my father at the end of the month to bring the rest of the money to the apartment..."

We passed the intersection in silence. The fat old woman, with a down scarf wrapped around her head, fur coat and felt boots, holding a yellow flag in her hand, looked at our car and walked dejectedly to the duty house.

"You bought a nice apartment..." my partner said as soon as the "Mazda" left the dirt road and hit the pavement. "My parents have a four-room apartment like this..."

"Wow! You have a four-room apartment!" I was surprised.

"Yes, when my father got it while he was still in the army, two families lived there – ours and another one," Sergey nodded. "But when Romka was born, the apartment was left to us."

"Cool," I nodded.

"As for mine... I can't remember exactly, but it's even bigger than yours... sixty-eight or seventy-one... Seventy-one, I think!"

"A big one!" I nodded again.

"Yes!" Sergey smiled contentedly. "I have a whole penthouse there! The top floor! The view of the reservoir is amazing! And I have a big attic on top! I could even make some rooms there if I wanted to! I keep things there! Come visit me sometime, Romych, take a look!"

"Damn, Seryoga, you did well, you managed to buy an apartment at those ridiculous prices!" I said respectfully. "I remember, my friend just bought an apartment in the year ninety-nine or two thousand, so one meter then cost something like four and a half thousand, you know! He paid half of it off and the price jumped to nine grand. Can you believe that? That's twice as much! He also bought a two-room apartment, but it was a panel house..."

"I've got the same one, paneled too!" Sergey said, parking the car at the market in the center of the village. "Only I had the whole sum..."

"Wow! You had the whole sum at once! Cool! I thought you also participated in the shared construction..." I said, getting out of the car and stretching.

The weather was beautiful – clear, just below zero. The bright sun was already warming.

"No, I had some money, but not enough for a two-room apartment!" Sergey explained, stepping out from his side of the car. "I only had enough for a one-room..."

The "Mazda" honked its alarm, we crossed the street to a fast-food kiosk.

"Davidych gave me money..." Sergey continued.

"What do you want?" I glanced at him, looking over the kiosk window.

We ordered food for us and Vera.

"Let's have some coffee here too! The weather is great!" I suggested taking a table outside. "We'll still have time to get to the office... Petya won't be back for an hour anyway."

"And two coffees with cream!" Sergey called through the kiosk window and came over to me. "And Davidych helped me then – he lent me money, and I bought a two-room apartment..."

Squinting contentedly at the brightness of the sun, I looked at Sergey.

"Otherwise I could only buy a one-room apartment! Got it?" he added.

"Got it, got it!" I replied, copying the intonation, looking up and noticing that the sky had already become spring – an invisible transition had been made, winter was over. It ended so pleasantly for me – with the purchase of an apartment. Spring was coming. "Every day will get warmer, and then it will be summer!" I thought, feeling within myself the awakening of a new life.

"Listen, Davidych is a nice guy!" I thought. "You're lucky to have him! So the owner gave the employee half of the money for the apartment so easily..."

"Well, not half, but less!" Sergey interrupted. "And not gave, but lent..."

"Well, I understand that he lent it to you, that's good!"

"Not really!" Sergey snapped rudely, his features hardening slightly. "I paid this debt to Davidych from my salary for a whole year..."

My partner's features softened, and he added, almost conspiratorially, lowering his voice: "It's true, though, that he raised my salary from fifteen to forty thousand so that I could pay him for the apartment. He increased my percentage of sales. But he did it quietly, the others didn't know. I went to Davidych separately for bonuses."

Sergey moved his hands under the table and counted invisible bills.

"Wow, it's like he gave you this money as a gift! Awesome, first he lent you the money, and then he raised your salary! I wish someone would lend me money like that!" I hummed.

"Your order!" a woman shouted from the kiosk window, holding out a package of food.

We started drinking coffee. After we finished our drinks, we ducked into the "Mazda", still talking about the same subject. The sun was warming up the cabin and I didn't want to get out. Until summer for sure.

"Why did you take the paneled one?" I blurted out as soon as we turned around.

"What's the difference?" Sergey said, putting on his sunglasses.

"The panel houses have a flaw – they have a lifespan of forty years according to the standards! Come to think of it! And brick and monolithic brick – from one hundred to three hundred," I said.

"That's a lot of nonsense!" Sergey muttered. "All houses are the same, there's no difference!"

We went to the office.

"I'm telling you! I just found out! The panels last forty years and then the house is declared dangerous! Look at the panel buildings in my neighborhood, the ones that are twenty-five years old, they're fucked up. In fifteen years, they'll be dead for sure! And most of all, I don't understand how the price of a paneled apartment is the same or higher than the price of companies that build in brick or monolithic brick!"

I told Sergey everything I'd learned about prices in the city before I bought the apartment.

"Well, maybe now!" He replied after a moment's thought. "When I bought, the prices were okay! And what kind of building did you buy an apartment in, a brick one?"

"Yes, a brick one!" I nodded. "I was specifically looking for one like that..."

We passed the church in silence and drove down.

"The only thing that matters is that the house is built..." Sergey said. "Have you even seen the house?"

He looked at me through his glasses, which were as colorful as an insect's eyes, cackled, satisfied with what he had said, and added, "Have they even started building it?"

"They have, yes, I've seen it," I muttered, "they've already built four floors..."

"And how many floors is the house?"

"Ten..."

"Hello there!" My father walked into the office holding a folder on the last day of winter.

The atmosphere in the room immediately became tense. I could almost physically feel how Sergey and Vera had controlled their actions and emotions. Since the day my father had returned to our business and taken over the products for the companies, our relations with him had improved a little. But with Sergey, he continued to communicate sparingly and received the same in return. My father was like a fifth wheel in the cart – it is a pity to throw it away, and why it is needed – it is not clear. My father rarely visited us, five times in the winter. I understood very well that Sergey tolerated these visits only because of me. When my father came, he stamped his feet at the door. I felt sorry for him, so I got up.

"Dad, sit down, would you like some tea?" I said.

My father was pleased and sat down in the chair by the door. I put the kettle on and leaned my back against the wall on the other side of the door – the only place I could stand without disturbing anyone.

My father began to talk at length about how he had gone to various companies with a business proposal and whom he had talked to. To be honest, everyone listened to him half-heartedly. Sergey, occasionally glancing at my father, picked at the papers on the table, nervously chewed his lip, wrinkled his nose. Vera, with her usual composure, leaned back in her chair, crossed her arms on her chest, and listened with obvious interest. I, who knew her well enough, understood that such behavior only meant innate tact.

And then I suddenly noticed a peculiarity of my father's character – he could not communicate with people. I used to think the opposite. But now I realized what this inability was – my father didn't talk, he broadcast! He wasn't interested in the reaction of the listener. The person could get bored, lose interest in the subject, get tired of listening – anything! The problem was that my father didn't notice. He didn't think about the listener. My father could go on for hours about anything. The only decent way to interrupt my father's endless monologue was to say there was something urgent going on and to run away under that pretext. But if the "running away" was not fast enough, my father could follow and continue droning on. Did he become tedious as he got older, or was he always like that? I don't know.

I was tired of standing. My father took a few sips and held the cup of tea in his hands as if to warm them. I realized that the tea was probably almost cold and would never be finished.

"Dad!" I interrupted my father. "When did you say they were going to make an order?"

My father stopped and clapped his eyes.

"Well, when we invoice them, so they will pay!" he said in surprise.

"Listen, then let them give us their details, we'll make a contract, invoice them, they'll pay, and we'll ship them the goods, okay?" I continued calmly leading the conversation to its conclusion.

My father was taken aback. He blinked in confusion, took a sip from his cup, thought for a few seconds, and then said: "Well, yes... what else could it be?"

"That's it! It's a deal!" I perked up and walked to the middle of the room, signaling the end of the conversation. "Then bring their details and we'll make it quick! Right, Seryoga!?"

I looked at my partner. Having understood everything, he sighed gratefully, stopped fiddling with the papers and said: "Yes, we'll do everything, of course! Anatoly Vasilievich will bring the details, Verok will print the contract, the invoice, and we'll send these... what's-their-name..."

My father looked between Sergey and me in confusion.

"That's it, Dad, then it's settled!" I waved my hands and stood still.

"Yes, it's settled!" my father perked up, began to turn his head, wondering where to put the cup in his hands, put it on the nearest shelf, coughed, slapped his palms on the armrests of the chair and added, "Well, shall I go?"

As if conspiring, all three of us said at the same time: "Yes, all right, Dad! Goodbye! We have to work too, see you at home! Yes, we have to do the invoices! Goodbye, Anatoly Vasilievich! Goodbye! Bye, uh-huh!"

My father stood up, stomped awkwardly again, and held out his hand to Sergey. He sighed and shook it. I shook it next. My father coughed, put on his fur cap and walked out the door in an old man's manner. Immediately, the tension in the office disappeared, and all three of us cheered up.

Perfume sales for the holidays were excellent. Sergey, who drove his "Mazda" to customers, would bring bundles of cash to the office. At the sight of so much money, his eyes burned feverishly and his hands shook as he counted it. Making money from a jump in prices was a success. And by mid-March, the insecticide season was already upon us.

My personal life continued in a measured way. I saw Natasha two or three times a week – at the movies, in cafes, even a few times at "Clear Skies". In my relationship with her, there was not the same vagueness and turmoil as in my previous ones. It suited me. My thoughts became so calm and I tried them calmly on Natasha. I imagined our life, when we would start living together, how long we would live like this, and when we would get married. Thoughts floated in my head, I caught them and pedantically organized them in my brain.

The beginning of spring was foggy and slushy. The sky was thick with low clouds. Moisture hung in the air, making it warm but damp. The snow had turned to mush. It squelched underfoot and my boots kept getting soaked. The first sunny day came closer to the middle of March. Sergey and I drove from the city through the village to the factory. The sun shone so softly through the glass that our communication flowed lazily and complacently. We talked about current affairs, politics, women. The usual locker room talk.

"So, Romych!?" Sergey shouted suddenly. "Shall we shove dichlorvos to your Ilyukha!?"

"Why mine?" I parried.

"Well, you're palsy-walsy with him after all!" my partner cackled.

"There's no palsy-walsy, Seryoga!" I muttered, staring lazily at the landscape outside the window. The sun was mercilessly drowning the snow, and the wheels of the cars were helping – beating the melted mush into a muddy mess and driving out muddy streams of moisture. Water flowed from the broken asphalt down to the roadside and under the snowdrifts that lay in the shade of the trees. Spring exposed all the garbage under the snow. Wrappers, bottles, tin cans, bags – they all came out from under the snow. Nature was returning to civilization what people had generously thrown out of their car windows all winter.

"Ilyukha is a scumbag! You won't get anywhere with him! He won't take the dichlorvos, we'll have to get past him somehow," I added. "And we should stop by 'Homeland'! Offer them some dichlorvos! "They won't take 'Luxchem,' but they'll barter dichlorvos for sure!"

I looked at Sergey. He was driving with his glasses on, and without turning his head, after thinking for a while, he mumbled: "Yeah, of course... But we shouldn't leave the money there, we should take the goods immediately, because their director is a shady guy..."

"We'll do it like this, we'll collect something and immediately sell it to Senya at 'Mercury' or 'Peresvet' and let them sell it. We will need more barter goods in the summer."

"Yes, who would have thought that 'Homeland' would become so popular!" Sergey said. "I remember their director came to us and offered us pads. And at that time nobody knew what pads were, they had just appeared on the market. He ran to all the companies and offered them for sale. Nobody wanted to buy them for money! And they were sold badly. He kept running around, everyone kicked him. And now they're in every hole and they're selling well!"

"Well, what did you expect? The man ran, broke through the market, now he's getting high!" I said.

"Yeah, I know..." Sergey muttered.

We drove to the factory, ducked into the gate of the gatehouse and drove to the office building, near which we could see a dried-up thaw. Sergey drove the "Mazda" to it.

"Seryozha!! Roma!!" I heard over the roar of the engine and the rattle of the wheels.

I turned my head – no one.

"Seryozha!! Roma!!" came a woman's voice again.

"She's running," my partner said, looking in the rear-view mirror, and turned off the car. I got out of the "Mazda" – the bespectacled janitor was trudging through the snow from the gatehouse to us in galoshes.

"Roma, Seryozha, hello!" she said, out of breath, panting.

"Hello!" I said, and Sergey reluctantly repeated after me, getting out of the "Mazda".

"Roma, Seryozha!" The woman turned her head, not knowing whom to address.

"Senya told me the other day that you were looking for a loader in the warehouse, right? Your loader quit, didn't he?"

"Well, he didn't quit, we fired him!" Sergey said, puffed up with pride.

"Good, but do you need a loader?" Still gulping air, she looked at me.

"We do!" I said. "Do you know anyone who is looking for such a job?"

"Roma, I have a nephew..." the woman breathed, fixing her glasses and wrapping herself more tightly in her down jacket. "He's looking for a job right now and would go to work for you if you'd take him!"

"How old is he?" I asked.

"Eighteen..."

"Well, is he all right?" Sergey blurted out. "Isn't he drinking at least?"

"No, Seryozha, not at all!" the woman waved her hands. "He doesn't even smoke!"

"Oh, well, then let him come!" I nodded.

"Let him come! We'll talk!" Sergey said impatiently, half-turning.

"Aha, good!" the woman bleated respectfully. "I'll tell him, he'll come tomorrow!"

"All right, let him come," I nodded and followed my partner into the office.

"Okay, thank you!" the janitor said to Sergey's back, nodding, almost bowing, holding her glasses with her hands. "Thank you, Seryozha!"

The display of subservience made me cringe. At first, I took the janitor's arrogant attitude as a challenge and an ability to maintain a high standard even in such a shabby place. The woman was always reading in her room in the factory gatehouse. I even noticed the cover of the book once – Fyodor Dostoevsky's "Poor Folk". In my mind I formed a picture of a certain intellectual woman, brought to a miserable place by the will of fate, forced to jostle among the hard workers. The talk about her nephew led me to other thoughts, but I, who from the beginning was inclined to see only the best in every person, interpreted the change in her behavior as the woman's decision to establish friendly relations with us. I was all for it.

"Wow! She said hello!" I said, catching up with Sergey. "It's a miracle!"

"She has to get her nephew a job, so she said hello!" he hummed.

"Hmm, it's possible!" I nodded, impressed by the simplicity of the conclusion.

"It's not possible, it's a fact," Sergey added, as if he had encountered such a quality in people a million times. Moreover, it was the only one he had come across. There was a hint of disappointment in his voice.

"Oh, come on!" I waved and slipped into the building after my partner. "It doesn't matter, as long as she brings us a loader, because Senya's already fucking shocked in the warehouse! Like a biorobot!"

Our simultaneous laughter echoed through the empty floors of the building.

The janitor's nephew showed up the next day. Gangly, as tall as me, skinny like all young men, the nephew turned out to be a pleasant brunette with an intelligent face and a challenging look. The youthful exuberance in his eyes said that the nephew was here temporarily, and as soon as he got a chance, he would go and conquer the heights of life. I didn't mind, and the boy started work on Monday.

On Wednesday my father came to the office and brought the first order of detergents. It was small, only eight thousand rubles. We didn't know what to do with it. The problem was to deliver the goods to our town, which was a thousand kilometers away. To reduce the cost of delivery, it was necessary to bring more goods. The surplus would have to be stored, and in two weeks we would have to pay for the goods. The amount was considerable – about thirty thousand. Even if we sold the ordered part and made a profit of about eight thousand, there would still be twenty thousand in the warehouse, almost dead weight.

"When are we going to sell it?" Sergey looked at me, standing against the wall by the door. My partner sat at the table, my father in the chair by the door, Vera in her seat.

"No idea, Seryoga!" I shrugged, not feeling the need to make something up. "Maybe this company will pick up another batch later, or maybe we'll find another buyer. We will offer it to anyone. I think we can put a small batch in the warehouse so that the goods are always at hand. The amount is bearable, twenty won't bother us at all..."

I looked at my partner's sour, doubting face and realized that what we were doing had little promise. I didn't believe in it myself. The only reason I wanted to bring this stuff in was for my father. He had spent the winter doing odd jobs, and I could see the confusion and depression in his eyes. The rock of contradiction didn't dissolve as quickly as I would have

liked, so our relationship remained cool. I saw my father's arrival at the office as a step toward reconciliation, and I tried to help him in any way I could.

"Yes, I know, we'll bring it and put it in the warehouse..." Sergey sighed, trying not to look at my father. "Those canisters will just sit there gathering dust..."

"Seryozha!" My father said in that tense tone I knew so well, the way he always kept his growing resentment in check. I could physically feel the mutual dislike between my father and Sergey. Both of them seemed to walk along an invisible line in their communication, like the boundaries of their respective territories, signaling their determination not to give up their positions. At the same time, they tactfully didn't cross the line and communicated diplomatically. I looked at my father; he clenched his jaw and his gaze was fixed angrily on Sergey's face. The office fell silent.

"Seryozha," my father continued, "when we agreed that I would take care of this case, we decided that the first batch would have to be taken to the warehouse with a reserve and part of it left there! Now we're ordering this batch and you're trying to renegotiate! Why!?"

Sergey twitched slightly, a jab of precisely chosen words hitting the target. I looked at my partner with interest. Something inside me moved gloatingly. I was surprised. Perhaps for the first time, I realized that Sergey was antagonizing my father. Yes, I was angry with my father, but first, it was my father; second, it was our family business. Sergey's opposition felt implicit, like something unpleasant. My thoughts swirled vaguely in my head. But I could not understand them. I realized one thing for sure: there was an immediate dislike between my father and Sergey, and their friction was not just commercial. My father's departure raised new questions. I saw my father's straightforwardness. Straightforwardness of action and judgment is our family trait. My father, like a knight with an open visor, charged at the enemy. Sergey dodged a frontal fight and said without looking up from the table: "Anatoly Vasilievich, I don't deny it! We may have agreed on something, I don't remember..."

"How can you not remember!???" My father flared up, leaning forward in his chair.

"Anatoly Vasilievich, don't interrupt me, let me finish..." Sergey said tensely, but without raising his tone.

"We agreed, Seryozha, didn't we!?!? That if there is a small first order, it's okay – we'll bring more with the stock in the warehouse, right!?!?" my father pinned Sergey to the wall of facts with his "spear".

"Maybe we agreed, I don't remember very well, but if you say so, I know you're an honest man, then that's what happened..." Sergey said, as if his words flowed around my father's outburst.

"Seryozha!!" my father almost choked and turned red.

"Anatoly Vasilievich, we'll bring these detergents as you want, I don't mind! But I'm not the only one who makes decisions here! If Romka agrees, there's no problem! We make decisions together," Sergey finally escaped my father's attack, giving his face and posture the features of humility and undeservedly offended virtue.

I had no desire to escalate or inflame the argument. My father might say or do something harsh again. Then my efforts to bring him back to us would have been in vain. And the situation was stupid and not in my father's favor – it turned out that he was aggressive, and Sergey was just defending himself.

"Dad, keep your shirt on," I said soothingly. "That's what we'll do, we'll bring the goods in reserve. It's just that Seryoga doesn't remember this conversation in detail. Right, that's what we agreed..."

My father shifted to me with difficulty, the blood gone from his face.

"Give me your order, where is it?" I kept lowering the tension, not letting my father get a word in edgewise. "Here is the order. We'll do everything..."

I took the papers that Vera, who had been silent during the whole conversation, had handed me.

"How long did you say it would take for us to deliver the order?" I looked at my father, who had almost completely calmed down and pulled himself together.

"We'll bring it to them after payment, I said!" he said confusedly, running his eyes and trying to look anywhere but at Sergey.

"Good," I nodded, "we invoice them, they pay, we immediately order the goods, receive them and ship their order..."

My father coughed and started to leave, rubbing his fur cap in his hand.

"Okay, Dad?" I finished the situation quickly. "Are you going home now?"

"Yes, home, where else!?" My father exhaled loudly, putting his irritation to rest, and stood up.

"Well, let's go, I'll walk you to the car," I pressed the door handle and pulled it open.

"Goodbye, everyone," my father said, tilting his head and putting on his cap so he wouldn't meet Vera's or Sergey's eyes.

"Goodbye," Vera said politely and neutrally.

"Goodbye," Sergey muttered.

I let my father go and followed him out of the office.

"Your Seryozha, the sharpest tool in the shed!" my father said as soon as we were outside, following the path along the wall to the gatehouse. My father immediately lit a cigarette, he was nervous.

"Come on, Dad..." I gave a friendly chuckle. "Why? Well, he forgot what we agreed on, so what? We reminded him. No big deal..."

"He remembers everything perfectly well!" my father said, blowing out a puff of smoke.

We walked around the corner of the building, through the factory gate to the "GAZelle" standing on the side of the road. The snow squelched underfoot like a muddy, sandy, watery mess.

"Even if he remembers, so what?" I shrugged. "Maybe he just doesn't want to bring the stuff in and mess with it. I understand him, actually. The goods are not the most popular, quite specific... It doesn't matter, Dad! We'll bring it in, sell it, put the rest in the warehouse and sell it too, don't worry!"

We stopped. My father was finishing his cigarette, his face etched with suspicion and anger. He squinted toward the gatehouse, as if waiting for Sergey to appear.

"So how's mom?" I changed the subject.

"What about her!?" My father took a greedy drag all the way to the filter, so that the cigarette sizzled and smoldered, and threw the butt into the snow. "As if you don't know! Lying in her room, locked up..."

"I see..." I nodded and turned toward the gatehouse.

"All right!" my father exhaled.

"Yeah, see you, Dad!" I nodded.

My father held out his hand and I held out mine. My father shook mine too hard, even for him, as if he was taking out his anger on it. I went to the office. The "GAZelle" started up behind me and drove away.

Sergey didn't resist the order any longer; the goods arrived a week later.

Petya took five canisters to the buyer. And two dozen were left to gather dust in the warehouse.

On the morning of Friday, March 24, I could hear the stomping of feet in the hallway outside the office door. I was sitting at my desk going through some papers. The handle came down, the door opened, and two children entered the room and froze. Vera squeezed in next.

"Vera, come in, would you?" said Sergey irritably from behind the door. "How am I supposed to enter!?! You're standing right in the doorway!"

The kids stared at me. I smiled. The older girl, dressed in a pink jacket and a red knit cap, immediately started twirling and acting. "About three or four years old," I decided offhand. The baby, dressed in a gray-green jacket and a cap of the similar color, wobbled unsteadily on his feet and stared at me with the full width of his light blue eyes. "One and a half," I determined.

"Well, say hello to Mister!" Vera said and gave the children a motherly nudge from behind to clear the doorway. "Lilya, walk forward a little."

The girl ignored her mother's words, stomped her feet as if dancing, and walked over to the table. Her brother kept staring at me without moving and finally blinked.

"Hello!" the girl said, letting me out of the focus of her attention and shifting it to the items on the table, grabbing a pen.

"Hello!" I chuckled, "Whose are you, guys?"

Holding his briefcase in one hand and adjusting his hood with the other, Sergey squeezed into the office.

"Damn it!" he cackled as he met my gaze and shoved his wife with his stomach.

"Ours, say we are ours," Vera replied, moving her son a step forward.

"Hi, Romych!" Sergey held out his hand to me, cackled again, and pushed his way to the cupboard. "That's how it is today, yes! The whole family came to work, you see."

"I see!" I nodded, keeping my eyes on the baby.

He stirred, looked to the side and began to look around.

"Say hello to Mr. Roma," Vera said.

The baby looked at me, moved his lips silently and looked at the cupboard.

"What's your name, huh? What? Tell Mister!" Vera continued, skillfully taking off her outer clothes.

"Hello, Mister Roma!" the girl said, looking under the table and adding, "I'm Lilya..."

"Lyonya, Lyonya, hey Lyonya!" Vera called, catching the smallest one by the hood with her hand. "Lilya said hello! She told Mister her name! What's your name? Tell him!"

Dragged by his mother's hand, the baby turned toward me, looked at me nonchalantly, stuck out his lower lip, wiggled it a bit, and turned away.

"His name is Lyonya! Leonid!" Sergey said, taking off his jacket and sniffing his nose. "Romych, we had no one to leave the kids at home with today, you know! Let them stay here for a few hours. Verok will do her things quickly and we'll let her and the kids go, okay?"

"Seryoga, let them stay, does it look like I mind?" I nodded and continued to study the children. Lilya was a copy of Vera. Lyonya – unclear, something average from the looks of both parents.

"Well, I'm just asking!" Sergey waved his hands. "Just in case..."

"Seryoga, they're already here, aren't they?" I hummed, "And they're not bothering us, right, Lyonya?"

I smiled at the little boy. He turned slowly when he heard his name, caught my eye and, losing interest, turned away almost immediately.

Vera started fussing – turned on the computer, took off the children's outer clothes, sat Lilya down at the table, gave her a pen and a piece of paper, took Lyonya on her lap and started her work, which she finished in an hour.

"Well, Romych?" my partner looked at me tiredly, the children had behaved noisily the whole time and had exhausted even me. "Let Vera go?"

"Seryoga, of course!" I nodded immediately. "Let her go home, we'll do everything here ourselves!"

Vera quickly dressed the children and walked out the door with them. As soon as the office was quiet, Sergey plopped down in his wife's chair, ran his hand over his forehead, and exhaled noisily. I smiled.

"Oh my, Roman, it's like this every day!" he nodded. "Already in the morning I feel like a squeezed lemon..."

"Let's have some tea, eh, lemon?" I chuckled almost silently.

Sergey nodded.

On March 27, I bought another part of my future apartment. My father was stubborn at first and suggested that I bring the money later. When I asked him why I should wait, he couldn't answer, so he waved his hand and said: "All right, do it!"

"Just take it for ten meters, one hundred and forty thousand and that's enough! You'll take the rest in April," my father specified, adding, noticing my confusion, "that's the way to do it! You'll bring it later."

"Well, all right," I shrugged and went to the construction company's office.

"They say the prices will double this summer," the manager said as soon as I put the money in the company's cash register and returned to her office.

I was taken aback.

"So... if you have money, you can cover more meters," she added.

Digesting what I had heard, I walked out, got on a bus and went to the office.

"So did you take more money for the apartment?" Sergey said, looking at my face.

"Yes, I did..." I nodded, still in a slight prostration.

"How much?"

I said the amount and sat down in the chair by the door. The sun shone brightly through the dusty window panes. Vera was in her seat, Senya and the new loader were in the warehouse, and Petya was out delivering.

"How much more do you have to pay?" Vera asked.

"Half... a little less..." I calculated in my head.

"You'll manage!" Sergey waved. "We make money after all!"

"No, I'm not worried, I'm thinking about something else," I said thoughtfully, recounting everything I'd heard from the construction company manager.

"But that's nonsense!" Sergey waved off again. "There will be no such jump in prices! Why should there be? There will be some increase, as usual, and that's all..."

His words didn't convince me, but my worries were gone – any price increase would only affect me by a known percentage. In the evening I told my father the news and added:

"Dad, look, I think we should take all the money and cover the meters to the max!"

My father's cheekbones moved under his skin as he sat with his legs crossed in the kitchen.

"Can't you bring it later!?" my father gave me a barbed look.

"What's the point?" I was surprised. "We're going to lose two percent! How much do you have left in your bank account, one hundred and fifty?"

"One hundred and fifty," my father nodded, looking at me coldly, as if he'd found something bad in me and that finding had planted suspicion in his soul. "The point is, I may need the money."

"Well..." I was confused, thinking, my eyebrows knitted. "What do you need the money for?"

"Do you think you're the only one who needs money!?" my father said harshly.

"No, Dad, I don't..." I was even more confused because my father was escalating the dialog for no apparent reason. "I'm just asking... I didn't mean to..."

"I will make an insulated body for the 'GAZelle'! To transport fruits and vegetables..."

"Oh!" I realized. "That's a good idea! So you're going to work with fruit!"

"What do you want me to do? Spend the rest of my life running errands for you and offering these detergents!?" my father took another swing at me.

"Dad..." I was confused again. "I'm not suggesting that you run errands for us, we discussed this together! You agreed. We both realized that it would not be of much use... But... if you'd said no, we would have dropped the subject right away. I just don't understand you..."

"What don't you understand!?" My father didn't change his tone. "You make money and I'm the one left behind! I have no income, in case you don't know! Just my pension and what I earn as a driver! That's just enough to eat! I have to take care of myself somehow!"

"Dad!" I was completely confused as I realized that my father's words were all about me – everything that happened to him was my fault. "But I don't mind you making money! I offered it to you back in the fall – our warehouse is free, take the money and bring in any goods you want!"

My father remained silent.

"You didn't put it in circulation! And then we decided to invest in an apartment. If you need a body for fruit, go ahead. You just didn't tell me about it before."

"I'm telling you now!" My father waved his hand and turned the kettle on the stove nervously.

"Dad, I know what you're saying! But you make it sound like an ultimatum... You could have said it before... Just make me aware..."

"I couldn't say it before," my father said, as if to justify himself. "I decided... recently!"

"Well... okay," I shrugged. "You recently decided... how much do you need for that, anyway?"

"Well..." my father turned off the kettle, made himself some coffee, and went through the familiar ritual of stirring the sugar with a spoon, blowing on it, licking it, and setting the spoon on the table, measuring a perpendicular line along its edge. "About fifty thousand or so. That's how I calculated it..."

"Fifty thousand more, fifty thousand less, it doesn't matter, we still have to pay!"

"I think so too!" My father nodded and, satisfied with what he had heard, took a sip of coffee, his foot moving in time with his head again.

"So you're going to do this with Vasily, aren't you?"

"With Vasily, yes," my father nodded, and his face grew rigid again, as if I had intruded on some part of his living space. "Why!?"

"No, no reason... Just asking..." I shook my head and headed for my room.

I continued to see Natasha. Our relationship was so smooth that one would think we had been married for a long time. On weekdays I would meet her at the closing of the mobile phone outlet, and on weekends we would walk around the center and warm ourselves in cafes. On one of these walks we had a conversation about past relationships.

"We didn't see each other for long," Natasha said. "It was complicated..."

I described to Natasha the moment I first saw her and the tall blond man.

"Yes, that's him," she nodded and added bitterly, "It didn't work out."

Natasha hesitated and slowed down. Obviously she really liked the guy. I felt a pang of jealousy. We walked to the crosswalk, waited silently for the green light, and crossed silently to the other side. The pause dragged on.

"So how long ago were you in a normal relationship, you know, one that lasted more or less?" I gathered my courage and continued to dig into Natasha's past.

"I had a relationship... ended last summer... two years of dating..." she said, letting go of my hand and pulling up the collar of her coat. I slipped my hands into the pockets of my jeans and we pulled away from each other, walking in parallel.

"Oh! All right... Two years..." I said, hesitating, and added, "Why did you break up?"

"We dated for a year first, and then I met another... guy... a man... and that guy, my boyfriend... was only a year older than me, and this one was older..." Natasha said randomly, picking up words as she went.

"How much older?"

"A grown man, he was in his forties..." Natasha said.

"Wow!" I blurted out. "That means you dated two men at the same time!?"

"Yes, I happened to like both of them..." Natasha continued calmly. "Of course I didn't tell my boyfriend that I was seeing someone else..."

"Well, of course!" I nodded, continuing to play the simpleton, feeling uncomfortable with the details. "Why should he know, I don't think he'd be happy about it!"

"Right, we broke up with him because of that..." Natasha said tiredly.

"Oh, so he found out about the... other one!?" I shuddered.

"Yes, he did... Well, I guess I kind of got confused," Natasha waved her hand sadly and fixed her hair. "I decided that I didn't need any of this... And I broke up with both of them and realized that I'd better not do it again!"

"Well..." I sighed and smiled. "Good conclusion..."

"It's just that he wasn't a bad boy, but he didn't have anything... I mean, he was so young, really... Twenty-three years old when I met him. And this one... we were just friends at first... sitting in his car, talking... He helped me out a couple of times..."

"Hey, Natasha, it's all water under the bridge! No need to remember all that now, right?" I said, realizing that I didn't want to listen any more. There was no telling what else I might hear.

We went to the theater and in ten minutes we were watching a movie.

At the beginning of April, I paid the last ninety-eight thousand for the apartment under construction from my and my father's stock. He had a little over fifty thousand left in his account. The tension between us grew, and I could feel the reluctance with which my father took the money out of his savings book and gave it to me. His face froze like a stone in the bank teller's window. My father didn't even touch the money, he just nodded at me and said, "Take it". I scooped it out of the drawer and put it in my pockets.

"Thanks, Dad," I mumbled, feeling as if I had taken my father's money by force. His eyes, full of reproach and hardness, made it clear that I was doing something risky and unnecessary, and that he disapproved of my move and would only agree to it under my pressure. I realized that my father was treating the situation as if I had embarked on another venture, and that if anything went wrong, it would be my fault alone. And I accepted that.

"Are we going together or what?" I asked as soon as we left the bank.

"You go," my father said, reaching for his cigarettes. "I have nothing to do there..."

I nodded and walked right to the bus stop, my father turned and walked left – home.

"Did you take the money for the apartment again?" Sergey said as soon as I arrived at the office.

Vera sat at her desk. Sergey, interrupting his reading of the newspaper, put it aside.

"Yes, I did," I nodded and plopped down in the chair by the door. "So, how is it going?"

"Those two are in the warehouse! Petya's gone!" Sergey said cheerfully, stretching and yawning like a hippo, leaning back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest, sniffing his nose. "We have to place an order for 'Aerosib', Romych, remember?"

"Course I do!" I nodded, feeling a rush of cheer after the oppressive morning with my father.

"Course I do..." Sergey mimicked me, leaned forward, put his elbows on the table, pulled a sheet of paper from the pile of others and handed it to me. "Here! Look with your own eyes! I've drafted an order, but we decide everything together, so you better take a look, in case I missed something..."

I scanned the paper. The order was competently written.

"It's all right, Seryoga!" I nodded and handed the sheet back. "And how much does it weigh?"

"About five tons!" said Vera.

"Why so little???" Surprised, I looked from her to my partner. "Seryoga????"

"How much do you want to order!?" He got a little excited and spread his hands.

"Ten tons... will be just right, I think..." I shrugged.

"Roman, there is no such container for ten tons!" Sergey explained irritably.

"So what, they have delivery by truck! They'll bring ten tons for sure!" I said, not taking my eyes off my partner's indignant face.

"How do you know they will!? Maybe they won't!?" he tried to argue.

"Call them..." I said calmly, nodding at the phone. "Just call and find out."

Sergey was confused, silent, and said, still angry:

"Vera! What's their phone number?"

She quickly shoved her hands into the desk, took out a notebook, opened it with a measured movement almost on the right side, made a mistake on two pages, turned them over and said the number. Sergey, pressing the fax buttons hard and irritated, dialed the number. After five minutes on the phone, my words were confirmed.

"See?" I waved my hands as Sergey finished and calmed his irritation.

"Yes, they have truck delivery!" Sergey looked at me. "Make it ten then!?"

I blinked. Sergey sighed, corrected the order and handed the sheet back to me.

"Yup, that's fine," I nodded. "We'll distribute half of it at once, and half of it will stay in the warehouse as a reserve... As soon as half of the stock is gone from the warehouse, we'll make the next order. What do you think, Seryoga, how long will it take to sell it?"

"Ten tons?" He looked at me skeptically. "A thousand boxes of dichlorvos and four hundred of the rest? Well... I think that's enough for the whole season and even the winter!"

"Oh, come on! We would have sold a thousand last summer if we hadn't just run out."

"What, come on!?" Sergey sputtered in irritation again. "Do you know how much dichlorvos we sold in 'Sasha' in one season at most? And we sold it well there!"

"I have no idea, Seryoga!" I shrugged.

"Two and a half thousand boxes!" He raised a finger for the weight of his words. "And that's a lot! Only 'Arbalest', with its own dichlorvos, sold more!"

"Well, 'Arbalest' for sure!" I nodded respectfully.

We both fell silent for a moment.

"I think we'll sell them quickly, and sometime in late June we'll order more," I said firmly, feeling the intuition and looking into my partner's eyes. "You'll see, Seryoga!"

He didn't answer, and our conversation was interrupted again. To fill the awkward pause, I pressed the button on the kettle, and the kettle rumbled as I fiddled with my cup. I

made myself a cup of tea, took the first sip with sugar, and broke the long silence in the office:

"Why are you reading newspapers all of a sudden, Seryoga?"

"I've always read them!" he objected, a little tense and even offended. "It's just that I never took them to work, I read them at home! But I like reading newspapers, there's a lot of analysis and some interesting articles..."

"I just saw it for the first time, so I was surprised..." I shrugged.

"Roman, it doesn't mean that I don't read anything if you don't see it!" Sergey parried with a challenge, sticking out his lips resentfully.

"That makes sense!" I nodded, clearing the air of irritation.

"You read some divine books, and so do I! I read newspapers, I watch all kinds of programs on TV about business, about markets, about stocks... So don't think I don't do some self-education too!"

"Seryoga, I don't think anything, I just asked about the paper!" I said conciliatorily.

"And I don't read divine books, it's just the title. Interesting book. Read it if you want..."

"So what is this book about?" Sergey said as if reluctantly.

I told him.

"I'll have to read it sometime," Sergey muttered relaxed, realizing that there was no catch. "What did you say it was called?"

I said. Sergey said the title almost silently, just with his lips, and nodded.

That was the end of our morning socializing, and the office went about its business.

At noon, Sergey and I habitually went to the village to get something to eat. We passed the gatehouse, and as soon as we were near the janitor in glasses smoking at the entrance, she nodded and said hello. I said hello in return, Sergey shouted "Hello!" through the glass, smiled and said:

"She says hello now."

"Indeed..." I muttered disappointedly.

"So you don't watch TV at home?" Sergey set the topic of the dialog.

"I don't have it!" I blurted out and looked at my partner.

"What do you mean, you don't have it?" He was genuinely surprised and turned his head between me and the road.

"Well, my parents have a TV in each of their rooms, but I don't."

"What do you mean? Don't Anatoly Vasilievich and your mother live together?"

"No, they don't... they have their problems... Didn't I tell you?"

"I don't remember, maybe you did, I don't remember..."

"They live in separate rooms, and I'm in mine, and I don't have a TV, and I don't watch it. What's there to watch, Seryoga!? It's all shit! Fights, murders, endless talk shows, who fucked who and where! It's fucking retarded shit! If I need information, I can always find it on the Internet, it's easier for me!"

"Well, you see, you have the Internet at home, I don't... so I have to read newspapers or watch TV. I only watch one business channel and that's it! Have you ever watched that channel?!"

"Yes, I have!" I nodded. "Always some stock market reports like bulletins from the fronts... this one went down, that one went up... ten minutes later my head starts to swell, I want to buy or sell something urgently!"

Sergey laughed out loud.

"What's the matter, I'm wrong!?" I smiled.

"No, you're right, Romych, you're right!" Sergey nodded, chuckling and wiping the corners of his eyes with his fingers. "You just tell everything so emotionally! It's so funny..."

"Here we go... funny..." I couldn't resist and giggled.

"I just check the stock prices there from time to time..." Sergey added.

"Why would you do that?" I was surprised.

"Well, I have stocks..." my partner said a little carelessly.

"Oh, right... I forgot!" I nodded, feeling the irritation rising inside me and involuntarily responding with sarcasm, "Those are the ones that were first 'three hundred' and then 'five hundred' a month later?"

Sergey fell silent. I immediately regretted my foolish ability to be sarcastic and added conciliatingly: "Listen, Seryoga, but is there any sense in these stocks? Do they really grow there?"

"Yes, they do," my partner sighed.

"Have you had them long?" I continued, pulling the conversation out of the pit of sarcasm.

"I bought them when I worked at 'Sasha!'" Sergey was full of importance again. "I put them in the bank for management, let them grow..."

"And how long will they grow? When will you sell them? They can't grow forever!" I said.

"Why should I sell them? Let it grow! Romych, that's why I'm looking at all these security analyses! You're the one surfing the Internet, picking up chicks or whatever, I don't know what you're doing there, downloading movies... and I'm looking at stock prices, at their volatility..."

"Their what???" I stared at my partner. "Vola..."

"Volatility!" he said contentedly.

"What the fuck is that, Seryoga!???" I smiled. "It's the first time I've heard such a word!"

"Well, it has to do with stocks, how they change, go up or down," my partner explained nonchalantly with a wave of his hand.

"Uh-huh... I see..." I nodded, for some reason not taking this whole stock thing seriously. The belief in freebies, so persistent in most people, could not develop in me, left me long ago to go in search of other fools. All these stock indexes are invented for speculation. They have nothing to do with the real business.

"So I made a reserve for my kids, the shares are for them, let them grow up. When they come of age, they'll get some help from me," Sergey said.

"Oh, well... right!" I nodded, instantly feeling respect for my partner again. "Good idea, Seryoga! The main thing is to make sure that everything goes smoothly with the stock market."

"Romych, our economy is booming now, there won't be such a default as in ninety-eight, even if growth slows down somewhere, it's still a good investment – put your money in stocks and let it grow there! That's why I regularly watch the business channel and monitor the quotations..."

The market. The "Mazda" was parked at the curb. After ordering at a fast-food kiosk, we stepped aside. The sun was pleasantly warm. With each passing day, spring was coming closer and closer. I squeezed my eyes shut, and rainbow circles immediately ran under my closed eyelids.

"So, did you take all the money for the apartment?" sounded next to me. "Or not yet?"

"All of it," I said and opened my eyes. Sergey was standing opposite me, grinning and studying me.

"From now on I will take it from the company!" I grinned. "We'll have to be patient, Seryoga!"

"You're welcome to take it!" He splashed his hands. "Romych, we already talked about this! I understand, you need it. The apartment is a good thing! When will it be ready? In two years, just imagine, at thirty you'll have your own place! That's really cool!"

"Your order is ready!" came a woman's voice from the kiosk window.

We took the bags of food and went back to the office. We had lunch.

"Okay, guys, the reports are ready," Vera said, placing two stacks of sheets with tables and figures on the table. I took one and immediately started flipping through it, running my eyes over the columns of numbers. Sergey rolled up on the chair from the door, took the other one and started to leaf through it, too.

"Let's do the math!" I said excitedly, taking out a calculator and starting to strike a balance. I wrote the calculations on the first sheet of paper, crossed them out, and then wrote the total amount.

"One million, Seryoga!" I shouted, slapping my hand on the report. "Congratulations, colleague!"

I held out my hand to my partner, who shook it in confusion, smiled, and began to stare eagerly at the figures I had drawn up.

"Imagine, Seryoga, we made a million net in the first year... in less than a year! Without investing a single ruble of our own!" I raised my index finger. "Pretty cool, huh?"

"And how much did you make in one month?" Vera joined in the excitement, tapping the keys.

"One hundred and twelve thousand," I looked up at her.

"I see one hundred and twenty-five here!" Vera looked at the monitor in surprise, looked at me, and explained. "I ran the internal report, you know!"

"You didn't print it out, did you?" I started digging through the reports. "No!"

"I'll print it out!" Vera nodded, and the printer squeaked and produced a sheet.

I pulled the sheet over to me, and after checking the reports – manual and electronic – I found the difference in the "Other Expenses" line, and the balance matched.

"Shall I print this report for you, Seryozha?" Vera looked at her husband.

"No, Vera, no need!" He waved her off, at the same time diligently transcribing my calculations onto his copy of the report. "We can always look at it on the computer, can't we?"

"Yes, anytime," Vera said. "Choose a month and a year and start the report."

"Aha, okay," Sergey nodded and plunged into writing.

I smiled – his hand, clutching the pen awkwardly with chubby fingers, was shaking, causing the numbers to come out jerky and jagged. When he finished, Sergey leaned back in his chair, looked at the record, curled his lips down impressively and said:

"Right, Romych, one million fifty six in... nine months... not bad!"

"Not bad, you say, that's great!" I nodded. "We should make more this year!"

"God willing, Romych!" Sergey exhaled somehow pitifully with a touch of sadness and put his report in his briefcase. "I'm all for it!"

In mid-April, everything finally melted and dried up. The sun was getting warmer. Sales of dichlorvos increased every day. We distributed the winter leftovers to our customers and waited for a big arrival of "Aerosib" any day. Sales of perfumes and bath salts, on the other hand, were falling. We went from one product to another as if on an amusement ride.

On the morning of Monday, April 17, I entered the office without the annoying winter clothes – in jeans and a sweatshirt – and sat down in an empty chair by the door.

Sergey looked at me intently and said: "Are you still... training?"

"Yes!" I nodded, then reflexively contracted my body muscles to check their tone. "I am! Four months already. At least I started to feel like a different man! I've become so

decrepit, Seryoga! I had some muscles, but when I went to the gym – all rickets! Now I'm better, I'm stronger... I'll be back in shape in a year. These fucking parties won't do any good! I quit in time! I was smart enough to quit smoking, it's so poisonous! Fucking yuck!"

"Well, I can see it in you... You've gotten stronger, your shoulders hit the eye," my partner murmured, looking at his wife. "Roman's doing well, huh? He's taken up sports. In the summer he'll be jacked-up, he'll go to the beach, take his clothes off, show off for the girls..."

"What do girls have to do with it, Seryoga!?" I snorted. "I'm working out for myself!"

"Come on – for yourself!" He waved me off. "Who's kidding who... What's the point of working out for yourself?"

"Seryoga, for fuck's sake!" I stared at him. "You keep surprising me! Health is the main point! What girls? Ha! Go on with you!"

Sergey's cell phone rang. He took it out of the case on his belt and pressed the button. It kept ringing. Sergey pressed the button again with his finger. It kept ringing.

"Fuck, what kind of phone is this!?" Sergey shouted angrily, pressing the button several times, finally stopping the ringing and putting the phone to his ear. After a few minutes of talking, Sergey looked at me and said:

"We need to go to the warehouse, tell Senya to prepare the intercity order..."

"Let's go then!" I stood up abruptly, excited at the opportunity to leave the gloom of the office and be in the fresh air and bright sunshine. The desire was so great that I immediately left the office, pushed open the door of the building, and, caught in the warm rays of the sun, squeezed my eyes shut.

"Enjoying?" I heard a voice behind me.

"Yeah! Cool! It's warm! Finally..." I opened my eyes and went after Sergey.

He took out his cell phone and started pressing buttons.

"Stupid phone!" Sergey said. "I should have bought the black one!"

"Well, if you had bought the black one, you would have paid more money. They're the same," I brushed it off.

"No, that one was better! You have a good phone! It takes good pictures and videos, but this... I'll have to buy another one!"

"If you want it, buy it," I said, and we walked around the corner to the warehouse.

Senya leaned his naked torso against the heated wall of the warehouse, half lying on a crate. A newspaper cap shielded his head from the sun. Only the absence of the splashing sea at his feet disturbed the almost resort idyll that opened up before us.

"Senya, are you sunbathing?" I said cheerfully, which set the storekeeper in motion. He woke up, jumped up, and quickly pulled his T-shirt over his body. His cap fell down and Senya became entangled in the sleeves of his shirt. I laughed.

"Senya, come on, relax," Sergey said, holding back a laugh.

The janitor's nephew emerged from the depths of the warehouse. He gave us an indifferent look and stopped at the gate. After giving instructions for the work, we went back.

"So how do you work out? Properly!? You bench press the barbell, you lift it!?" Sergey said as soon as we turned the corner.

"Well," I was surprised, "yes. How else? Are there other ways to work out!?"

"Well, could be anything!" Sergey shrugged his shoulders. "What do I know? Maybe you're doing it somehow else! You're forward-minded... maybe you've invented something! Some extraordinary exercises!"

"Seryoga, what are you talking about!?" I hummed, "Just pull the weights until you turn blue, that's the whole science! Lie down under the bar and press!"

"How much do you bench press?"

"Oh! Not much! When I came in this winter, I could barely do 80! Can you believe it? Now I'm doing ninety-ninety-five, and hopefully by summer I'll be doing a hundred!"

"Well... that's pretty good. What are you wearing? Flip-flops or sneakers?"

"Flip-flops... why?" I shrugged, again surprised by the question.

"It's just that I have a friend who also works out... And he said that only fools train in flip-flops, all normal people train in sneakers," Sergey said, cackling quietly, obviously enjoying his words.

"Why fools?" I said, feeling that the phrase hurt me unpleasantly and caused irritation and anger, but I continued with apparent calmness: "If you are a weakling, you will still press the sixty-kilogram barbell...no matter what you wear – sneakers or flip-flops..."

I brushed it off irritably, fell silent, my mood was spoiled, and there was a feeling that the sentence was meant for me and had been said for a reason.

"No, I didn't mean it like that!" Sergey simply shifted the blame for his words to someone else. "That's what he said, not me... Train in whatever you want..."

The conversation was interrupted. This feeling accompanied me all the way to the office, where Sergey was the first to enter, opened the door wide and said to his wife from the threshold:

"I need to buy a barbell, too, Verok!"

The couple's eyes met.

"What? Romka is working out... I'll buy a barbell, take it to the dacha and work out there all summer!" Sergey added, responding to his wife's silent surprise, plumped down in the armchair by the door, crossed his legs as usual, and began to chew his lip. "We're going to live at the dacha for six months in a week! That's what I'm going to do! The air, nature and sports! All together!"

Vera said nothing, obviously holding her objections, smiled and lowered her eyes to the table, busy with some paper. Sergey turned his eyes to me, as if looking for support.

"Well, that's a good idea! You have the mass! You'll lose fat, get fit and look good!" I said warmly.

"The girls at the beach will be happy!" Vera sneered without lifting her eyes.

"Come on, Verok, don't talk nonsense," Sergey muttered irritably.

There was a pause.

"I'll sign up for some hand-to-hand combat later, you'll see!" I blurted out.

"What do you need hand-to-hand combat for?" Sergey snorted in surprise. "Go to boxing!"

"No, boxing is not my thing! I tried it once when I was a kid, I practiced for two months, had two sparring sessions, one of them I knocked out, the other one broke my nose, and I left!"

I laughed, remembering this incident from my childhood. Sergey cackled too.

"And it's not because I got punched in the nose! I just don't like boxing, because only hands can fight, they stand opposite each other and hammer on the head all the time... you can become a fool that way! I still need my head, I use it to think sometimes!"

I laughed again. Sergey leaned back in his chair in a similar mood.

"You like boxing!" I said. "That's why you practiced, and you were good at it..."

"Yeah, I've even been in competitions! I won some tournaments!"

"See? If you like what you do, you always get results! That's the law of life! I didn't like boxing! I'm not going to fucking torture myself! It's just not my thing! So I quit! I like martial arts where you can swing your legs and push and grab! I have such a figure, I'm tall, my legs are long, swinging is the best for me! You, on the other hand, are stocky, like Tyson, so a sport without legs is just right for you!"

"By the way, everyone compared me to Tyson! The trainer said that our builds are similar, I am good at diving in from underneath!" Sergey perked up, pressed his hands to his chin and shook his shoulders to the sides, then put his hands around the back of his head and threw his head back under the influence of memories and added, "Yeah! Five years of boxing, imagine that!"

The truck from Novosibirsk arrived on Friday, April 21.

"So, Roma, how much is there?" Senya asked as soon as the truck stopped at the warehouse.

"Ten, Senya!" Sergey said contentedly and walked along the side of the truck.

"Fuck..." the storekeeper choked, smiled, scratched his chin, and added, "Up the wazoo."

"Yeah, Senya, that's a lot," I laughed and nodded. "Two or three hours, with breaks..."

"I understand, hehehe..." Senya glanced over his glasses at me with his sly look, glanced back at the loader standing nearby, and returned his gaze to me. "The two of us?"

"Yes, Senya, the two of you!" Sergey came up and cut off the sentiment.

"Oh, fuck..." Senya shook his head.

"Go ahead, Senya, start unloading!" Sergey shouted.

Senya jumped into the warehouse on stiff legs.

"If you need us, we'll be in the office," Sergey said over his shoulder and walked away.

We left.

In the evening, when I was already at home, Vovka called me and screamed into the phone as usual:

"Ramses!!! What are you doing tonight!? Let's go to this shitty place, huh?!?"

I didn't need to be begged, at nine o'clock I was shaking Vovka's clinging hand in the center of the city.

"So what's up, bigwigs!?! Getting rich!?!? Hee-hee-hee!" he growled.

"Absolutely, no choice!" I smiled, glad as hell to see my friend. "How are you doing? Lovey dovey!?"

"Lera is pregnant!" Vovka blurted out.

"Wow!!! That's news!!! Cool, Vovan! Congratulations! How long has it been?"

"Over two months!" He was beaming with joy.

An hour later, as darkness fell, we went down to the small bar of the club.

"Let's booze it up, Vovan!" I said, feeling the return of my former desires and moods.

"That's the spirit!" He turned to the bar and yelled over the music, "Bartender, for fuck's sake!! Bartender!! Pour me and Roman a whiskey and coke!!"

We were left in the grotto with a glass of black liquid in our hands, sitting by a small shelf. The tobacco smoke, the loud music, the flickering lights on the dance floor, the hum of voices – I was so unaccustomed to it all that I soon felt tired. What had once energized me was now draining me. I realized that it was about an inner change – I was becoming different. There were changes happening within me that I felt but only vaguely understood. But I liked them. I wanted them. The shell I had been in all this time was wearing away. I looked at the visitors of "Clear Skies" and half of them I didn't recognize anymore. New faces, the wave of change had already washed out the old. My turn was coming. Such thoughts made me sad. I took a big sip. The feeling that I was no longer comfortable here grew. I looked around, trying to catch the old excitement, but there was none.

"Why don't we take a walk and then go home?" I suggested.

"Alrighty!" Vovka nodded, caught my mood with a glance, turned the glass over into his mouth and patted me on the shoulder. "Let's go, Ramses! I'm so happy to see you!"

We walked outside. It was quiet after the rumble of the club.
"So you're getting married soon, aren't you?" I said with a grin.
"Yes, we're doing it this summer," Vovka replied.
"Awesome! Let's get you married!" I hummed. "You'll be a father soon."
"First me and then you, eh, Ramses?" Vovka grinned and rubbed his hands together.
"At least I will have a party at your wedding, because nobody I know is getting married; they have all been married and divorced a hundred times! You're the only one left, you old prick!"
"I'm not old and I'm not a prick!" I laughed.
"You've got this, what's her name, Natasha? You're dating, she's a good chick – take her and marry her, that's all!" Vovka said.
"Vova, I don't mind," I shook my head. "How much longer can I knock around alone, I like her, if everything will be okay, then why not? I'm all for it..."
We walked leisurely along the beaten path to the hotel, reached it, passed a number of cars with taxi drivers standing in a bunch and looking at us eagerly, left them behind and walked on.

CHAPTER 35

"That's it, the train began to roll!" I said on Wednesday, April 26, as soon as I entered the office.

Sergey took his eyes off the newspaper, Vera off the monitor. They both stared at me questioningly. I sat down in the chair by the door and explained:

"Yesterday I took the money for the apartment, that's it! The price went up! Ten percent at once!"

"How are you going to pay now?" Vera was puzzled.

"He only has two percent!" Sergey reminded her, sighed and rolled up the newspaper.

"Oh, right!" Vera waved her hand and smiled. "I forgot!"

Sergey looked at me with a slightly confused look, blinking and thinking about something.

"I thought you brought the last of the money last time... didn't you?" he said.

"Yes, I'm out of savings! That's it! That's what I saved from my salary!" I confessed.

"And how much did you take?" my partner sniffed.

"Nah!" I brushed it off. "Just chicken feed! I only bought two meters, twenty-eight thousand five hundred!"

Sergey looked at me thoughtfully for a second, turned his head sharply toward his wife, and said: "Come to think of it, Verok! Roman goes out, hangs around in various clubs, meets some chicks, and manages to save money for an apartment from his salary! And we barely have enough to feed our family for a month!"

"Seryozha, what did you expect?" she said. "He's alone, he has expenses only for himself, and you have two children! If you were alone, you would have enough money for yourself! You would save it too, and you..."

"Yes, I understand!" Sergey nodded and chewed his bottom lip, looking at me. "How long did it take you to save this money?"

"How long..." I spread my hands. "As soon as I signed the contract in February, I started saving... March – April, well, and there was some money left over from February..."

Sergey paused again, as if checking something in his head.

"You saved money on two meters in two months!? We get paid seventeen and you save fourteen!?" He made a surprised face.

"Well, not in two months... three... I didn't really count it, Seryoga. I had money, so I took it! I hardly spend anything on myself now! We don't hang out with Vovka, we go out with Natasha, and even then I don't spend much... Not like with Lilya! Thirty grand a month – phew!! And gone!"

"Some Natasha..." Vera rolled her eyes up and smiled. "We don't have time to keep track of your friends, Roma! It's Lilya, then Natasha..."

"It's over with Lilya! The past!" I smiled. "Now Natasha!"

"Why did you and Vovka stop hanging out!?" Sergey said. "Did you have a fight?"

"No, we didn't have a fight! That's it! He's settled down! Lera's pregnant, they're getting married this summer!"

Sergey wanted to say something, but then there was a knock at the door. Petya came in and filled everyone's brains with a stream of questions – What have we got today? Where am I going? And those are in the warehouse, right?

Sergey irritably shoved the waybills to him and said: "All right, Petya, go," and began to bend down to pick at his sandal, as if the driver were not there. He staggered to the door, looked at me and Vera, and said confusedly, "Ah, okay, I'm off then," and left.

The whole month of April was a blast. Every day we kept our customers stocked up on dichlorvos. We understood a simple rule – the more dichlorvos they ordered from us, the less they would buy from our competitors. By the end of the month, we had distributed half of the ten tons.

"Not bad, eh, Romych?" Sergey said in surprise, looking around the warehouse on April 28th.

"Just right, Seryoga!" I nodded. "In May they'll have eaten the first half, in late May or early June we'll distribute the rest, and in mid-June we can order again..."

"You think?" He looked at me carefully.

"You'll see!" I said, not realizing the source of my confidence.

Sergey was silent, and soon we left the warehouse and walked back to the office.

"What are you doing for the holidays?" my partner squinted against the sun.

"I don't know... Rest... Go out with Natasha, maybe see Vovka... And you?"

"I'll go to the dacha!" Sergey exhaled almost sadly. "I'll take the kids there for all the holidays, I'll take the barbell... By the way, I bought a barbell!"

"Really???" I was surprised. "I thought you were kidding!"

"No, I have to work out! I have completely given up on sports, at least you cheered me up! Nobody around me does sports, all my friends are like Melyokha – they just want to get drunk and dance in some pub! In such an environment it's hard to think about sports. Now I'm going to start training. I should also buy a punching bag, hang it in the dacha, to remember my youth, to train a punch..."

"What does this have to do with the environment?" I was surprised. "If you want to train, go ahead and do it!"

"I wouldn't say that, Roman... The environment has an effect!" Sergey parried.

"Well, it does, but not to that extent. No one is forcing you to drink with them! It's your personal decision! There, Senya – he decided not to drink anymore, and he doesn't..."

"That's because we kicked Kholodov out! And Senya, he's keeping his place..."

"I don't think Senya stopped drinking just because he was afraid," I said, wanting to see the storekeeper's decision as motivated not just by fear, but by something more conscious – an inner choice. "But because he chose to. The environment doesn't influence a person's choice that much, if he really chose something..."

"Roman, you don't have such an environment!" Sergey began to get annoyed.

I didn't want to aggravate and argue, the weather was too nice for that. So I just went back to the beginning of the conversation and said: "A punch bag is a good thing! We have one hanging in our gym and sometimes I hit it to warm up before training."

We walked lazily to the office, all our thoughts already on the holidays. There were four days off, four more after that, and then the hot summer. My feeling of closeness to the first really good earnings intensified. Driven by the excitement of money and the growing volume of the company, Sergey and I quickly moved into the tantalizing unknown.

Vovka called again in the morning, screaming in my ear:

"Ramses, we have a walk with Lera in the fucking center! Lera wants to see you! She fucking pissed me off this morning! She's been whining for two hours. Where's Roma? Where's Roma? Come on, let's go for a walk together!"

Vovka was like a brick – square, clinging to everyone with the corners of his behavior and jokes, completely unaware of it and absolutely happy.

"I'll be there, give me some time to eat and I'll be there!" I replied with a smile.

"Hurry fucking up, eat faster! We're waiting for you! Yeah, yeah... Lera says hello! Yeah! She tries to grab the phone! Yeah... Here... Kiss Roma... Yeah... Right on the gums and through the phone!" There was more squirming, giggling and sniffing of Vovka. "So, Ramses, you know what I mean – she's kissing you through the phone! Uh-huh... You wish! So come on, come quickly..."

Half an hour later I saw the pregnant Lera. She was immediately embarrassed and blushed.

"That's more like it! Well done!" I said. "See? You can do it if you want to!"

"We can, but what about you? It's time for both of us to become fathers, how long can we go to these pissing pubs!?" Vovka almost shouted, pointing happily at Lera's belly. "This is the fucking meaning of life!"

"Do you know who's coming?" I looked at Lera.

"A boy, I think," she said.

"Yeah! They said it would be a guy!" Vovka shouted.

"Have you chosen a name?" I looked at them both.

"No, we haven't thought about it yet..." Lera looked at me guiltily. "Maybe... Andrey..."

"Andrey, well... it's okay..." Vovka mumbled. "Andrey Vladimirovich..."

"Or Sasha...?" Lera looked at me questioningly for some reason.

"Aleksandr Vladimirovich... well, it's not bad either..." Vovka said.

"Or Roma?" Lera kept looking at me.

"Roma... Roma... why not!?" Vovka perked up. "Ramses, eh!? We'll name our son Romka!"

"Don't look at me!" I was surprised, embarrassed, felt cornered.

"Fuck, that's it, Ramses!! We'll name our son after you! He'll be Romka! What do you think, Lera?"

"I like it..." she said, shrugging her shoulders and looking at me.

"Don't look at me!" I chuckled. "I'm pleased, of course! It's so unexpected..."

We walked through the center of the city. The avenue was crowded, car traffic was blocked, people were walking along the road in both directions. There was a festive mood in the sunny warmth of the air. We walked the whole avenue and half of it back, sat in a street cafe, walked back out onto the avenue, and then my cell phone rang. The number was not in my contact list, but I recognized it.

"Hi, Roma, it's Lilya!" came a silky voice in my ear.

"Hi Lilya, how are you?" I said calmly, but my heart started racing, pumping my blood with adrenaline for a split second. I intuitively realized that the moment of finality of the story with Lilya had arrived. I had to solve it like a problem. Once and for all.

"Recognize me? Nice..." Lilya purred.

"Yes, I recognize you... Are you here in town?"

"Yes, I came for the holidays to my parents, I took some time off from the hospital,"

Lilya sang.

"I see, good for you," I nodded, feeling my inner tremors subside. Anger and cynicism joined the calm. And then my arms and legs suddenly swelled with fatigue, weakness and emptiness growing in my body, as if someone invisible had taken my strength in the seconds of communication. I wanted to stop the conversation. I looked at Vovka. He was grinning and making faces and gestures. Lera smiled and listened to the conversation.

"Remember I promised to take you for a ride in the car when I bought it?" Lilya said.

"Oh yes, I remember... Did you buy a car?"

"Yes, I did. I came from Moscow in it..." Lilya said and fell silent.

"Ah... well, good for you, congratulations! Having a car is good!"

"Thanks..." Lilya made a second attempt to throw the thread of conversation to me.

I didn't say anything.

"If you want, we can meet downtown at three, I'll give you a ride..."

"Yes, let's meet downtown at three, suits me."

"Okay, then I'll meet you at..." Lilya named a place. "I'll be in a gray 'Matiz'."

We said goodbye, I put my phone in my pocket and looked at Vovka, who was grinning.

"What's up with your Lilya?" he said. "She bought a car, wants to take you for a ride!?"

"She has to find a fool to pay for her partying, that's why she called me!"

"Come on, maybe she just wants to see you, she missed you," Lera interjected.

"She missed me, you say... she missed the free fun!" I nodded.

"Ramses is a tough nut to crack! He's not so easy to get! Got it, Lera?"

"I got it, yes... poor girl..." she answered Vovka ironically.

"Yes, very poor!" I nodded. "A few months with her and you're poor!"

Vovka laughed chokingly.

"Okay, I'm going... on a date with Lilya!" I said goodbye to the couple.

In anticipation of the finale of a long, cheap flirtation, degenerated from an unwritten novel called "The girl Lilya, who could have been the mother of my children, but turned out to be an ordinary bitch", I went to the meeting place.

I saw her across the street. The "Matiz" was at the curb, and Lilya was standing on the grass next to it. She was wearing a loose blue dress with a belt below her knees. Lilya noticed me, waved and smiled. I crossed the street and we greeted each other. The adrenaline started to flow again, because I did not want to give away the excitement, so I tried not to look at Lilya. I reacted painfully, like a patient who had been dissected earlier without anesthesia, who still survived and who started to panic when he met the doctor for no clear reason. And the urge to smash the doctor's head in was just too strong.

"Nice car!" I said, sitting down in the car after Lilya and stubbornly pretending to look at the interior. "Cozy... so small..."

The car was crap. Cheap plastic, minimal parts, bad soundproofing.

"Buckle up," Lilya commanded and put on her seat belt.

I buckled up, the "Matiz" started and we drove off. The suspension was stiff, and through the rattling of the wheels I felt every bump in the asphalt with my ass. And that sound of the engine, not like in big cars, but sharp, like a motorcycle... We began to slowly

exchange vague general phrases in the style of "how are you and how are you?", until Lilya took the bull by the horns again and asked bluntly: "Where are we going?"

"I don't know," I shrugged, although I wanted to say "I don't care," and added, "As long as we don't go around the center, it's too noisy here..."

"We can go out of town, to the park..." said Lilya, driving the car unsteadily.

"Yeah, it's cool there..." I remembered the day I sacrificed my T-shirt to make a torch in that park and added, "Let's go... Take a walk there."

"I need to buy cigarettes, I'm out..." Lilya said, looked for a shop, stopped, took fifty rubles out of her purse and handed them to me. "Could you go?"

"Yes, of course," I said, knowing very well what her "Could you go?" meant.

Women like Lilya don't go for cigarettes themselves, they send others. And they have a choice – to go for cigarettes or to refuse. If you go, you will go for cigarettes for these "Lilyas" all your life. If you refuse – separation is inevitable. It frightens those who are on the hook of love. I wasn't on the hook anymore. I had another reason to go.

Soon I came back with a pack of cigarettes. As expected, Lilya was pleased. For her, I was the same Roma who had been "going for cigarettes" since our first meeting and who continued to do so.

Twenty minutes later, we were there. In the evening the park was almost deserted.

"Now that I have this car, I'm thinking about other things," Lilya said, annoyed. "Before, I would have bought boots for ten thousand, but I had to buy summer tires."

I understood her. In addition to the necessary, in her opinion, status purchase, there was also the hassle.

"But now guys want to meet me while stuck in traffic, can you believe it?" Lilya looked at me, stepping carefully on the sand with her heels, trying not to get it in her shoes.

"I can imagine," I nodded, grinning.

"They even try to get acquainted at gas stations!" she added.

"Why are you so stupid?" I thought.

Walking next to Lilya, I realized that I was being controlled by an inner player. And it was driven by the question – by which methods would Lilya turn me into an obedient idiot again during her next fun? We left the asphalt road and walked along it into the forest. We immediately smelled the coolness of the forest. Lilya shivered and wrapped her arms around herself. I took off my jacket and threw it over her shoulders. Lilya gave me an appreciative look and a strained smile. Appreciative exactly, not grateful. Gratitude is for equals, appreciation is for servants. I grinned. As we walked deeper into the forest, we talked about all sorts of things, but I was waiting for the main thing.

"You know, I've been thinking about our relationship..." Lilya started. "We had a little fight the last time... I think relationships can be all kinds of things, and you and I have our rough patches... But I like that we get through them and appreciate our relationship."

Lilya fed me bullshit, head down, walking measuredly, watching her steps, occasionally flicking back her long, thick black hair with her hand.

"Well, yeah..." I muttered.

"And today, lo and behold, we met and we're really socializing... I even missed our meetings..." Lilya flipped a strand away again and gave me an analyzing look.

I walked, looking at my feet like she did, and shoved my hands into my jeans pockets.

"We always have such a good time together..." Lilya said, coming closer and taking me under her arm, pressing her breasts lightly against me and looking up into my eyes.

"Had," I mentally clarified.

"We could find a quiet cafe tonight and spend some time together..."

"Yeah," I murmured.

Lilya let go of my arm, came back to the same distance and wrapped up the jacket.

"It's just that sometimes you're a little unyielding... You're rude to me sometimes... It makes things difficult between us. I don't think you should act like that... Be more gentle and you'll see that our relationship will be better. I don't understand the rudeness, the outbursts... I'm hurt and offended by them... I don't want to hear such things in the future..." Lilya continued to work on my consciousness.

"As soon as I relax with you, I'll end up down on my uppers," I thought, smiling and looking at the girl. She also looked at me during the monologue, studying me like a doctor – would the patient accept or reject the therapy? I didn't show any signs of rejection and continued to walk around like a docile vegetable. I was bored, so I added fuel to the fire.

"What do you mean, rude?" I looked at Lilya in surprise. "I'm just reacting to your rudeness... You've been rude and boorish to me, and I'm acting the same way..."

She grinned, the sentence hitting its target.

"Now wiggle out," I mentally encouraged Lilya.

"You're a guy, I'm a girl. I have my emotions after all. You have to realize that and take it gently, it's wrong to be intransigent... We can have a great relationship if we don't pick on little things like that..."

"As great as your browbeaten jerk of a dad and termagant of a mom," I thought, grinned, and said: "Well... I guess..."

After passing the far point of the big circle, we started to walk back. Lilya kept spinning a list of what I should do. The list sounded vague. I, as a man, had to do everything. She, on the other hand, as a woman, just had to be. And that was my male happiness. I, a fool, could not comprehend her words and taste the juicy, poisonous fruit of my relationship with Lilya. When she tried to convince me, she sometimes lost her patience. Then a copy of her mumsie burst out of Lilya, which she effortlessly hid behind a forced smile. She treated me with a hatchet, tried to buckle me, to break me. Lilya saw me as a stubborn, untrained stallion who would kick and then get under the saddle.

"What are we going to do tonight?" she said as we walked to the car.

"I don't know. We could go to a cafe and drink coffee," I shrugged, and once we were in the "Matiz" I added, "I bought an apartment, by the way!"

"You bought an apartment!?" It was as if something important had switched on inside Lilya, her eyes lit up and she looked at me differently. I could literally feel my stock price skyrocketing.

"Yeap. The house will be ready in a year and a half," I said, deliberately not looking at Lilya.

We drove back to the city.

"You bought a one-room apartment?" Lilya asked the obvious question.

"No..." I said as casually as possible, "Two..."

"Two!?" Lilya looked at me, stopped talking, thought about it, and after a minute added, "And why didn't you want to buy one near Moscow?"

"There's no point in me buying it there now... Maybe I will, later."

We drove almost to the place where we met. Lilya repeated the question about this evening.

"Listen, Lilya, I'm hungry! Let's stop here, eat, drink coffee!" I pointed to a two-story cafe building, and the "Matiz" immediately parked in front of it.

We went upstairs. The second floor was cozy, the interior in the style of a village hut.

"Fried eggs, please, tea and... what would you like?" I looked at Lilya.

"Green tea... no sugar!" she perked up and fixed her hair.

I got really hungry out there, and when the order came, I devoured the fried eggs. Lilya took a cup of tea with a confused smile on her face and took a sip. I looked at the girl with a deliberately withdrawn gaze, as if I was seeing her for the first time. Sitting across

from me was meekness itself. Who would have thought that she was a calculating, cold schemer? Lilya's eyes betrayed her.

"What are we going to do tonight?" Lilya insisted, still as meek as before.

"I don't know, I haven't even thought about it yet," I mumbled with a half-full mouth. "I should at least go home first, get changed..."

"I park my car there, on my brother's parking lot in your neighborhood!" said Lilya. "I can give you a ride! I'll park the car while you change, and we'll go somewhere together!"

"Well, okay..." I mumbled and finished my tea.

We left the cafe, got into the car and drove to my neighborhood. Because of her inexperience, Lilya drove the "Matiz" tense and silent. I didn't bother her with conversation either.

"Where should I stop?" said Lilya.

"There ... right at the bus stop," I pointed with my hand.

Lilya turned on her turn signal, slowed down and stopped where I told her to.

"Thanks, Lilya!" I said without looking at the girl, got out of the car, slammed the door and walked home without looking back.

Behind me, "Matiz" shrieked, the engine started nervously, revved up and drove off. I grinned and felt my spirits rise. I was in the mood to have a good time.

After dinner at home, I went to the club. After an hour there and two glasses of whiskey and coke to add to my euphoria, I went outside. I had a lot of thoughts in my head, I wanted to put them in order, to come to my senses. I crossed the street to the movie theater and walked through the park.

I thought about Lilya, about how being with her had changed me. I felt that I had become different. There had been an important systemic shift in my understanding of myself – the foundations of my personality had shifted to the right places, where they should have been originally. I vaguely realized that my upbringing had put them in the wrong places to begin with, and I finally found a way out of this impasse of attitudes instilled by my parents. I realized that smoking was over for me. Thoughts of giving up alcohol also loomed. Another beacon was sports. My consciousness fixed these beacons in my mind and decided to go for it. The old way of life was still clinging to me with its hooks – old habits. Each of these hooks was like a heavy block of concrete. But consciously and methodically, pushing myself, I removed the hooks one by one, and the next steps were easier. I realized that there were many more hooks, and only when I was free of all of them would I be able to go easily wherever I wanted and feel the fullness of life. Shivering, I zipped up my jacket and walked a lot more before my legs got tired and I took a cab.

On the morning of the third of May, I entered the office to find Sergey sitting at his desk with a newspaper.

"Wow, you're here already!?" I was surprised, knowing that it was ten to nine.

"I came quickly!" Sergey shook my hand. "I came from the dacha, I thought there would be a lot of cars, but the road was completely empty! I got here in fifteen minutes!"

"Is Vera not here?" I looked at the computer, which wasn't turned on.

"No, she won't be!" Sergey sniffed his nose, looked at me, turned the page of the newspaper. "Lyonka has a fever, I left Vera with him!"

"Well..." I took a chair by the door. "We can do the waybills ourselves..."

"That's what I thought!" Sergey waved his hands and leaned on his elbows over the newspaper.

"We'll have to call the customers and prepare the goods for the whole day," I said.

"Well..." Sergey looked at the phone screen. "We'll start calling after nine. We could also check the mail, 'Fort' always sends the leftovers before nine."

He said it without taking his eyes off the newspaper. I didn't move either, I said in a joking tone: "Well, since Vera isn't here... Then you are for her today! Crawl over to her place and I'll take yours..."

Sergey looked at me, sighed, smiled slightly, rolled up the newspaper and went to Vera's empty chair. I moved to his seat.

"Shall I turn on the computer now, or can we wait?" He said with an irony I could easily detect.

"As you wish, we'll start working when you turn it on," I shrugged.

"Where is this button?" Sergey groaned heavily, bent over his stomach and reached under the table with his hand. There was a click and the computer came to life.

"How do you turn on the Internet here?" Sergey said, looking at the monitor with a puzzled expression. His hand barely touched the mouse, covering it from above, his fingers shaking. It had been almost a year of working together, but Sergey hadn't made any progress in his computer skills. He didn't really care. After all, there was Vera, his active wife, who would do anything at the first command.

I answered Sergey, showing him.

"Uh-huh, got it... uh-huh, okay, got it..." he said and clicked twice. It didn't work the first time. He clicked again. It worked. The modem rattled, the Internet was connected.

"Where's the mail?" Sergey asked the next question.

I was patient – I replied, I showed him.

"How do you print it?" A few minutes later another question came.

I told him.

The printer whistled and rolled out six sheets instead of three.

"Wow! Why!?" Sergey stared at the sheets in his hands.

"Fields should be put out..." I said, exhaled, suppressed the nervousness that had arisen, got up from the chair and did it myself. Sergey followed my actions with puzzled eyes, and in the end just said: "Aha, I see..."

He didn't understand anything.

The trade program went faster. My partner sniffed, thought hard, and poked at the keyboard with shaky fingers, but he got the job done and the waybill was created.

"Roman, here!" Sergey handed me the remains of our goods in "Fort", which I had just received by e-mail. "Dictate and I'll put the goods through!"

For the next half hour we did everything – we made waybills for three wholesale depots.

"Petya has arrived," Sergey said, looking out of the window, signing and stamping the waybills.

"Seryozha, so, how is it going?" the driver shouted, falling into the office and spinning his eyes.

"Well, first of all, hello, Petya..." Sergey said moralizingly, holding out his hand.

"Oh, right! Hi, Seryozha!" He jerked and shook my partner's hand and mine. "Hi, Roma! I've completely lost my mind with this road, traffic jams everywhere!"

"And second, here are the waybills for both runs..." Sergey handed the papers to the driver.

"Aha!" Petya grabbed the papers and stared again. "Is Senka here?"

"I don't know, Petya, look for yourself!" Sergey replied with slight irritation.

"Seryozha, are the waybills ready!?" Senya's head popped through the door.

"Ah, here's Senka!" rejoiced Petya. "We were looking for you!"

"Why!?" The storekeeper opened the door. "I'm right here!"

"Senya, Petya!?" Sergey shouted, restoring silence, and after a pause added, "Go to the warehouse! Load the goods! There you can discuss who's where!"

Petya made a fuss, hurried to the exit, and began to push the storekeeper out the door with his belly.

"Okay, okay, we're off, Seryozha!" Senya jumped into the aisle, stopped, turned, and said to me over the threshold, "Roma, your father is there!"

"There? Where, Senya?" I was surprised. "There, at the warehouse! On his 'GAZelle'!" shouted Senya from behind the door, not seeing me through the door and not daring to enter the room again. "Only he's without the cover!"

"What do you mean – without the cover!?" I said, looking at Sergey in surprise. He put his hands on his head and rested his elbows on the table, showing his helplessness and fatigue.

"Okay, we're off!" came from the hallway, and the workers left.

The office became quiet.

"Let's have some tea, Romych, I haven't eaten anything this morning!" Sergey came to life.

"Why didn't you eat?" I was surprised and pressed the kettle button.

"The kids were sleeping with Vera, I didn't want to wake them!" Sergey said, leaning back in his chair. "And Vanyok came, there's not much room..."

"Who is Vanyok?" I asked in surprise.

"Verka's brother!" My partner rubbed his palm from top to bottom of his face, as if to wipe away sleep or tiredness or all of the above.

"Oh, right! Vera has a brother!" I remembered. "And what does he do now?"

"Nothing... drinking..."

"How long will he drink?" I asked rhetorically. "What about work?"

"Well... he works sometimes, then he gets kicked out... then he doesn't work for a while, my mother-in-law feeds him and gives him moonshine. Then he works again. Anyway, this Vanyok is useless, to hell with him!" Sergey waved, got up and went to the kettle. "Shall I pour it for you?"

"Yes, sure," I nodded. "And where does he live? Separate or with your mother-in-law?"

"Separate?" Sergey was indignant. "He lives with her, with Verka's mother..."

"Hey, where's his... her father?" I waved my hands, confused by this story about Vera's family tangle and the relationships within it.

"They got divorced a long time ago, Verka's father... too..." Sergey stuck his index finger under his jaw and handed me a cup of tea.

"Aah! Well, that explains why Vanyok is like that," I nodded.

I reached for the sugar and scooped up four lumps. Sergey took one.

"Does your mother-in-law buy moonshine for him?" I was confused by a sentence I didn't immediately understand.

"No, she makes moonshine herself!"

"For Vanyok?"

"Well... for Vanyok, for herself... I can have a shot after work..."

"Why, does she drink too?!" I stared.

"Well, yes... sometimes she can have a drink with Vanyok, for the sake of it..."

"Fucking hell!" I continued to stare, forgetting about the tea, but after a moment I remembered, dipped a piece of sugar into the tea and immediately bit into it, taking a sip.

"That's just my mother-in-law's way – so Vanyok doesn't go out all day..." Sergey took a bite of sugar at the very corner and also sipped from his cup, "She pours him a glass in the morning... Vanyok drinks and falls asleep! And she calmly goes about her business."

"Damn..." I froze with my mouth open and sugar melting in it. "Complete fuck-up! I can't understand it! Her son is a drunk and she doesn't treat him, she gives him a drink! Fucking hell! So much for a mother!"

"Romych, this is how people live!" Sergey sighed heavily. "You see, you don't understand, I don't understand... But this is how people live... Now you understand what it's like for me. It's a good thing I managed to get Verok out of there, otherwise she would have..."

Sergey waved a lump of sugar, chewed off the crumbs again, and took a sip of tea.

"Yeah..." I drew a dark picture in my head of Vera's mother – a half-alcoholic living with her alcoholic son and pouring moonshine into his glass in the morning. "Ugh!"

I shuddered, shivered. Sergey cackled, bit and sniffed a sugar cube, sipped loudly from his cup and said: "Let's go to the warehouse and see what's what!"

We left the office and were barely on the road leading down to the warehouse when we saw my father's "GAZelle". The car was parked at the corner of the warehouse and there was no cover over the body. Sergey and I were talking about something, but as if on cue, we stopped talking. My father and I still had a strained relationship. My father blamed me for his leaving the company. I thought he'd screwed things up himself. It was at this point of silent recrimination that he and I were stuck.

"Why did Anatoly Vasilievich take off the cover?" Sergey muttered.

"I don't know," I said quietly, watching my father gather tools in the cabin. "He told me he was going to make a box on the 'GAZelle' instead of a cover..."

"Is he going to drive some kind of goods?" Sergey said, lowering his head and pretending to look under his feet while watching my father from under the brows.

"I think he said he wanted to do tomatoes, well, vegetables, fruits..." I also looked down at my feet, we were already ten meters away from the "GAZelle".

My father noticed us. He looked at us carefully, took the cigarette out of his mouth, blew out the smoke, put it back in, and went about his business.

The distance closed. Five meters. I glanced furtively at my father. He was fumbling under the steering wheel in the cabin. The tension grew. Three meters. The same. I could almost physically feel the tension turn to confrontation. My father deliberately did not make eye contact. One meter. "Is he going to say hello or not, is he going to look or not?" I thought, still sneaking glances at my father. He continued his preoccupation. "One meter. Well?" echoed feverishly in my head, and I glanced at my father, hoping he would see it. My father didn't raise his head. Sergey and I passed the "GAZelle" and turned the corner. My soul immediately pinched, squeezed and twisted. "Somehow it's all wrong, it shouldn't be like this, it's not good, he's my father... why doesn't he look at me? Am I his enemy or something? It's high time he realized that no one is to blame for this conflict but himself! He slammed the door and left! Nobody kicked him out. And nobody could, we had an agreement. Even if he and Sergey don't like each other, no one would throw my father out! He shit all over himself! He just got in the car, said I won't work with you and bailed. Why would he do that? Why!?" My mind was racing. I was trying to understand how this ridiculous thing could have happened, how my father could take odd jobs, consider me almost an enemy, and not even say hello. I was immediately ashamed of my thoughts. I suddenly realized that I was justifying myself. I immediately contradicted myself that no, I was not justifying myself, I was judging the situation impartially. But the guilt remained and grew. And my father's defiant ignoring of me made me feel even worse. I felt like a traitor. "Terrific! Here we go!" I was confused, bewildered, stuck in my thoughts. I exhaled heavily. I gathered my strength and came back to reality. Sergey and I were already in the warehouse. All three workers were carrying boxes to the back of the truck.

"Finished?" Sergey said, looking into the body under the cover.

"Yes, Seryozha, almost done!" shouted Petya, carrying the box and breathing heavily. Without waiting for an answer, Sergey went deep into the warehouse. I went back outside.

"So, shall we go to the office?" Sergey came out of the warehouse a few minutes later.

"Let's go," I nodded sluggishly, pulling myself together – we had to walk past my father again.

A few steps of oppressive silence and my father was behind me again.

"So, Anatoly Vasilievich decided to take up tomatoes?" Sergey said as soon as we were far enough away from the "GAZelle".

"Well, yes, the season seems to be starting now, so he has to earn money, too. We work, and he just hangs around on his own..."

"Why is Anatoly Vasilievich alone?" Sergey looked at me puzzled. "He seems to be with us again. I thought we had decided that he would take over this chemistry... I don't mind, neither do you... If Anatoly Vasilievich thinks I'm secretly against it, then tell him that I'm all for it! Let him develop the direction! If he doesn't like the percentage, we can increase it! In fact, we can keep the minimum to pay off the warehouse, and he can take the rest!"

"I'm for it too, Seryoga," I waved my hands, clearly realizing that there was no use for my father in this business, and he was doing the right thing, because even the highest interest on unsold goods is not enough, life needs real money. "But you see yourself, these canisters are hardly ever sold. One order and that's it. And the rest of them sit in the warehouse."

"How are we supposed to deal with them now that Anatoly Vasilievich has decided not to deal with them anymore?" Sergey's tone hardened. "Are we going to sell them ourselves?"

"No, my father said he would try to sell what's in the warehouse... Although, we have to admit that this thing is a dead end... I think we should sell the rest and not do it anymore..."

As we passed the transformer box, we saw the janitor with glasses in the gatehouse. She was smoking. When she saw us, she came out of her melancholy, nodded vigorously and called out:

"Roma, Seryozha, good afternoon!"

"Anatoly Vasilievich poked us with a pin nicely," said Sergey, waving his hand and poking the air with his forefinger like a nail.

"No, Seryoga, what pin!?" I shook my head. "It was a dead deal from the beginning, I suggested it to my father... I just wanted him to do something..."

I dismissed it as an idle topic. We were already in the front yard.

"And if we don't sell these canisters, what will we do?" Sergey slowed down and looked at me demandingly.

"We won't do anything, we'll just use them to wash the dishes!" I said indifferently. "Ten cans each, we won't have to go to the store for detergent for a few years."

"So we threw away ten grand each for nothing, huh?"

"Well, first of all, we haven't wasted any money, the goods are in the warehouse, we just have to sell them. Second, even if we don't sell it, we can use it at home, we're still spending money on it. And third, if you are so sure that we 'threw away ten grand', I can give you my tenner from the profit and the matter is closed!" I finished a little irritated, tired of Sergey's whining. Instead of thinking about how to solve the situation, he was intensely picking at a failed trading operation, looking for someone to blame.

I finished the sentence just before the door of the building. Sergey opened it and went in. I followed him. I didn't hear an answer to my conclusions.

My father spent the first half of May rebuilding the "GAZelle". Already on Friday at noon he arrived at our warehouse with the metal frame of the future box welded in the back. None of us said hello. What an idiotic situation!

"I've always supported you! Always! Because I was brought up to believe that you have to protect your family, always be on their side! You can do whatever you want to strangers, but you can't betray your family!" my father burst out on Saturday, May 6, telling me everything he thought about me and this case; my father ran around the kitchen pouring a stream of accumulated resentment on me. "And you, on the contrary! You ran after your Seryonya like a whiffet! You didn't support your own father!"

"First of all, I didn't run after Seryonya like a whiffet," I said calmly, which took a lot of effort, my father's words stinging like a blade. "And second, I didn't betray you. Do you think I betrayed you?"

"Yes, I think so! You rushed to that Seryozha Lobov, who is a shrewd and cunning crook! Seryozha can get up anyone's ass without soap! And you don't see it! He did it on purpose so that I'd fly off the handle and leave! He didn't want me to deliver your goods for fifteen thousand and then hire Petya for the same money!"

"Dad, I'm not defending Sergey..."

"Yes, you are! You defend him all the time! And all he does is shit all over the place! Your Seryozha is a sly dog!"

"Well, he's not mine... And I didn't betray you..."

"Why didn't you stand up for your father when Seryozha was scrimping?! Why didn't you raise your voice!? Huh!? That's just it! You chickened out! Tucked your tail!"

My father was exhausted, took a breath and added disappointedly:

"Keep kissing your Seryozha's ass! He'll do the same to you! You'll see!"

"Dad, I don't kiss anyone's ass, and don't use words like that, okay!?" I tried not to get angry, but it didn't work. My father said nasty things to me. It was unpleasant, but I didn't want to make excuses. Guilty people make excuses. I didn't feel like one. My father made it seem so grotesque. Was that how he saw it? I gathered my courage and tried again to tell my father how I saw the situation:

"Dad, even if I wanted to take your side in this dispute, I couldn't. We had an agreement – no relatives of the four of us would interfere in a dispute between us. Sergey, when I asked Vera about her salary, didn't get involved. He said – I'm an interested party, you decide for yourself! Was there such a thing? There was. And I stayed out of it when you started arguing about your salary. Yes, Seryoga clearly underestimated it. Ten thousand is not enough. No one would work for that, and you wouldn't either. And I wouldn't. Well, then you have to defend your position! Make some arguments! You should have said to him, 'Seryozha, look for a driver with his own car for ten thousand a month, and if you can't find one, I'll drive the goods for fifteen, or as much as you can find!' Well, you could have said that! You could have! And he wouldn't have had a choice! He'd have hesitated for a while and sat on his ass. He would have agreed to pay you fifteen. And you'd be driving our goods right now. But you said you didn't want to work with us, that we'd find a driver wherever we wanted, and you slammed the door and left. Didn't you? You did!"

My father stood in the middle of the kitchen, listening silently.

"We stood there with our mouths open! I remember that Vera looked at me and said, 'Why did Anatoly Vasilievich leave, what happened to him?' And I shrugged my shoulders and said, 'I don't know, I'm stunned myself!' And Seryoga stood there and didn't understand either..."

"Your Seryoga for sure!" My father waved me off. "He's a hell of a player! He'll make any face he wants!"

"What's Seryoga and his face got to do with it!?" I got angry again. "You left yourself! It wasn't Seryoga who threw you out, and it wasn't me or Vera! If you hadn't left, no one could have kicked you out! We had an agreement – we work as four! And we would have found a place for you, if not in the 'GAZelle', then certainly in the office!"

My father didn't answer; he was standing in the middle of the kitchen, eyes blinking, staring at me.

"Here's the thing!" I paused so that my father could understand the meaning of my words. "It's not that someone betrayed you. You're looking for someone to blame. You're the one who screwed up.

My father was silent, blinking, opening and closing his mouth like a fish on land.

"And then you're driving around, doing odd jobs... so I thought maybe I could get you a job somehow... with all this chemistry... I thought it would do some good... I thought you said yes... and then you said no, but okay... I don't mind... Seryozha started charging me for these canisters – what did we buy them for!? Okay, it's pocket change, we'll sell them ourselves! That's not what I mean! I'm saying that it's nobody's fault but yours that you left... It was your decision... Yes, Seryoga, he was a miser. And I don't know why he made such a fuss about this five thousand, when we got Petya for fifteen! I don't understand it either!"

"He did it on purpose! What's not to understand!?" said my father.

"Maybe he did it on purpose, I'm not arguing, but I don't understand why he would do that! All right, maybe you had disagreements with him, and you didn't want to see each other... That's not the point! The point is that you're looking for someone to blame! And there is no one! It was your decision. And I tried to get you back, but you left again... So... What does that have to do with us... me... Sergey... Vera?"

"I don't want to work with you," my father said suddenly in a simple way, and all the steam of our dialogue, which had been under the pressure of mutual demands, evaporated in an instant.

"Well, you see..." I let out a sigh of relief and immediately felt empty and tired. I was so tired that I had a headache. I got up and walked out of the kitchen.

CHAPTER 36

My mood for most of the rest of the holiday was ruined. I was in a deep emotional hole and all alone. In the family, relationships had reached the stage of complete idiocy. Mother, father, and son lived together and barely spoke to each other. It was the weekend and I didn't know how to get out of this trap. My business partner? He has his own family, his own worries. Vovka? The same thing. He was going to make it official in a couple of months. Natasha? We were seeing each other. But it was weird. So calm and measured that I began to wonder if I was really interested in our relationship. It felt like a formality. I liked Natasha, but without admiration or inner fire. Our behavior was so similar that I began to suspect she had the same condition. Natasha's work schedule was also not conducive to our relationship. She worked all the holidays without rest in different locations, substituting for her colleagues. Our communication during these days was reduced to two fleeting meetings. Half an hour together after ten at night, and she would go home to sleep, only to be back at work at eight the next morning.

Finally, the working days began. The weather was warm and dry, and the dichlorvos were selling like hotcakes. I regularly studied the electronic report and noted with satisfaction the growth of the number in the "profit" column. Sergey quickly became addicted to this activity as well.

"What's the number?" He would ask me, nodding at the monitor.

I or Vera would press the buttons and the result would appear on the monitor. The "number" would grow for the whole current month, and then the peculiar game would start again. We had already gotten used to the fact that the monthly profit exceeded two hundred with a turnover of one million. Salaries and expenses – about eighty thousand. In total, we had a net profit of more than one hundred thousand.

I became addicted to reading newspapers. Sergey would bring a new one every week, and we would take turns reading it for a few days. Every day my father would literally cobble together a box for the "GAZelle" at the warehouse. Sergey and I would pass my father several times a day, and neither of us would say hello. My father would give me an icy, accusing look. I would look back at him with defiance, anger, pity, hatred, and even a little gloating. I felt pity – my father had literally been thrown overboard in a business we had worked hard to build together. Anger – for my father's innate stubbornness, which sometimes turned into obsession. Hatred – because my father caused trouble for everyone for no reason. Defiance was in response to my father's rebuke. I felt that my father cherished the thought of going back, of us asking him to come back because we were afraid to go on without him. Gloating because we went on without my father, business was booming, and my father was riveting plywood to the frame of the box.

"Roma!" my father said as Sergey and I passed the "GAZelle" again, coughing a few times, worried. "Could you come over, help me, hold it here?"

My father said it so humbly, and his look was so battered, that my pity grew stronger and drowned out all other feelings. I wanted to go to him and say, "Why are you suffering with this box? Why didn't you work with us? Now you're poking around in your dirty overalls and you don't even know why."

I climbed into the half-paneled box and forced myself to say:

"All right, what do I hold?"

"Press this sheet," my father said, rubbing his nose, another gesture of embarrassment.

I pressed a sheet of plywood against the metal frame of the box. My father took a rivet gun, tacked the sheet in several places, and said discreetly: "That's it, thank you..."

"You're welcome," I said dryly, jumping off the back of the truck, hiding behind it and beginning to catch up with Sergey at a slow pace. After he had passed behind the cabin of the "GAZelle", he stopped ten meters away and waited for me with a mischievous grin. When I noticed this look, I lowered my eyes, my chest tightened – my father and I had never looked at each other during our brief conversation.

"So... that's it? You helped?" Sergey said as soon as I got close to him.

"Yes, I did..." I nodded and kept walking, looking under my feet. I sighed, invisible hoops squeezing my chest, and exhaled. Sergey walked beside me and asked:

"So Anatoly Vasilievich would make a box and go for tomatoes or something?"

"Well, yeah, I think he said that..." I nodded.

"But how is he going to do that...? He's never been in the business before... Does he know where to get them... prices...? And where will he sell them? He's just gonna stand on the market and sell them or what!?"

"No, a ton and a half at the market is a week, or even two weeks. And the tomatoes will be dead in a week... He wants to sell them wholesale! He's going to sell them at the 'water market.'"

"Alone or what?" Sergey didn't let up.

"No..." the crooked image of our parking lot neighbor popped into my head. "There's this guy my father knows, Vasya. I think they're going to buy and sell together. Let him do it, no use sitting at home. At least he'll earn some money! A car makes at least a ten a week, one trip a week, that's forty thousand! Otherwise, he'd be working here for fifteen thousand. Yes,

he was right to leave. We'll be comfortable without him, he won't bore us with his tediousness, and he'll earn more without us! It's better for everyone!"

I shook off my heavy thoughts with a sigh of relief, feeling that I had found exactly the words I wanted to say to myself. My desire not to offend or hurt anyone in any situation was finally satisfied.

We passed the transformer box and approached the front yard before I snapped out of my thoughts and noticed that Sergey was also thoughtfully silent. It was as if he was trying to comprehend the new human construct changing around him.

I opened the creaking door of the building and ducked into the chill. Sergey followed.

"Wow!" I stared at the newspaper in amazement, unable to believe what I was reading.

It was a normal working day in the middle of May, and the three of us were sitting in the office.

"Hey, Seryoga!!" I tore myself away from the newspaper, looked at him, then at Vera, and read a fragment of the article. "According to analysts, in the summer of 2006 is expected to increase housing prices by fifty percent! And here's the graph... 2005 – 20%, 2006 – 50%, 2007 – 20%, 2008 – 20%... Go figure!!?"

I froze and looked at my partner, and he looked at me.

"That means apartments will double in price in three years! That's fucked up!" I said.

Sergey blinked a few times, exhaled, brushed it off, and, looking back at his papers, muttered: "There won't be anything like that. It'll be the usual, this... twenty percent, and that's it."

"I don't really care!" I waved away, too. "I managed to buy an apartment! But just think, what if it really happens? Prices will skyrocket, and you won't be able to buy those damn apartments! Mine is worth about nine hundred... and it's going to be one million eight hundred... Hell of a price!"

I looked from Sergey to Vera and back again.

"Nah!" Sergey brushed it off again. "Apartments will go up in price the usual way, and that's it..."

"Hmm, we'll see!" I scratched the back of my head. "I'm curious myself..."

"We should definitely stop by the 'Homeland' and nail that dichlorvos crook!" I said, sitting with Sergey in the Mazda. In the morning we left the office for "Fort". On the calendar it was May 22, Monday. We had stocked up on dichlorvos for our customers, and the sales weren't long in coming. The supplies of dichlorvos were rapidly dwindling, and by the end of June we would need another batch. Sergey and I were gripped by business fever – a clear sense that things were looking up and we had to keep up the pace.

"Yeah," Sergey said, "we should. Right, let's take the leftovers from 'Fort' and stop by on the way back!"

Having received four sheets of leftovers, we returned to the car and began to study them.

"Oh, fuck me!" I exclaimed, looking at the last sheet. "Amount due: 112580.80!"

I stared at Sergey. My partner's face became playfully serious, moved his eyebrows, then relaxed and smiled.

"Really!?" He reacted. "Come on, give it to me! Wow... One hundred and twelve thousand..."

"Seryoga, and it's only Monday! That's less than a week! Thursday is still three days away. At this rate, they'll sell another fifty for sure!" I ran my eyes over the columns of sales and residuals – two-thirds of the numbers were transferred to the "sold" column.

"Man... how well things have progressed," Sergey nodded, putting on his glasses and puckered his lips.

"We have to load Petya here today!" I got excited.

"Right, we can send him fully loaded..." Sergey said.

We passed the barrier and drove out of "Fort" and into "Homeland".

"Come to think of it!" I was excited. "This is the first time we'll get more than a hundred here! What was our maximum before? In February from the perfumery, how much did we get? Eighty!?"

"Then I got eighty-six thousand four hundred," Sergey said the exact number.

"Well, you see!" I rubbed my hands together. "And now we'll get about one hundred and fifty thousand! Great!"

"Right, our cash is really flowing..." Sergey said, maneuvering on the winding dirt road, raised his index finger, froze, reached for the phone in the niche by the gear knob, froze again. "Romych, remind me to call Tambov! Just this week a customer from there promised to pick up dichlorvos for the season... and he always takes a lot..."

We finally got onto a normal road and took the ring road.

"Listen, what do you think..." Sergey went on, "Maybe we could lower the price for Tambov, sell it like we did at 'Sasha', in seven or eight percent, and we'd be okay, huh?"

"Seryoga, what's the point?" I was surprised. "You said yourself, he takes once a year at the beginning of the season and that's all... he doesn't show up until the next season... So why should we break the prices?"

"Yeah, right... I'm just saying... it's just that we raised the prices so much!" Sergey grinned and shook his head. "I'm just not used to selling at such a markup..."

"Seryoga, people are just stupid! They could sell with a good markup, but they only make ten or twelve percent! And then they realize that they are really working for nothing! There is volume, but no profit. The warehouse eats up their five percent, two percent goes around, and what's left is five percent! Who the fuck needs a business like that!?"

We rolled down the ring road and I went into monologue mode. Sergey didn't interrupt, just bit his lips nervously. His eyes were hidden by the mirrors of his glasses, but his hands gripped the steering wheel tightly, betraying my partner's excitement.

"I've said it before, Seryoga, and I'll say it again... You and I have a unique situation. A rather large company closed down, and after it was left a good product... And we quickly realized that we should, well, sort of call ourselves the successors of 'Sasha'. Especially since you worked there, everyone fell for it... And nobody started to claim this product..."

I shut up and turned to the window, diving into myself, trying to see the future.

"But I think this is a temporary situation..." I continued. "I think in a year or two, when they realize it, they will start checking us for a markup. There will just be more competition! And yes! You're right – we could set a standard markup right now and work with it... But, Seryoga... we won't make shit. We're going to waste these two years, and then we're going to wish we'd priced it higher. So I suggest we do what we are doing now – not stick to some mythical standard markup! That way we won't make shit and, what's worse, we won't grow! If we run at the same speed as the bigger companies, we will only fall behind... It's simple math – a big company with big sales will earn more on the shaft, and a small company will earn less... We're a small company... and we have to work either faster or at a higher markup... That's the only way, Seryoga..."

The car turned right off the ring road onto the road to "Homeland".

"So, personally, I think we should be found guilty of excessive markups in two years and start whining... We can get out of this easily – we will reduce the markups to standard ones, and everyone will shut up and continue to take goods from us. Yes, maybe someone will fall off, but it won't matter... At standard markups, we don't give a fuck! But we will

make our money, you know? And we'll have our money right here." I pat myself on the pocket of my pants. "And fuck the rest of them! We're not a charitable organization, we're all here for one thing, to make money. So I suggest we earn the money we can earn... and we have that chance!"

Sergey was quiet. I finished, even exhausted, silent. We're almost there.

"And what makes you think that someone will snoop around our goods, calculating markups?" Sergey said confused after a long thought. "Why would they do that?"

We rolled into the yard of "Homeland", the picture was the same as before – two new red trucks stood in the corner of the yard, a truck was being unloaded in the warehouses, a five-ton truck was being loaded next to it, and two "GAZelles" were waiting for their turn. The increased activity in "Homeland" immediately caught my eye – in addition to the main part of the building, an unfinished part was functioning. Inside we could see stacks of goods. We drove up to the red trucks.

"Seryoga, they will, definitely, you'll see..." I said, examining the yard and noting all the visible changes. "Everyone is looking for new goods to develop. The big ones are unlikely to come, although, of course, not a fact! But the small ones, like you and me, someone will definitely come... calculate the markup, get fucked up, and want a fat piece of it. That's it."

We got out of the car. I stretched out, giving my spine a nice workout.

"Well, I don't think that's going to happen..." Sergey's lips curled unhappily, as if he was curling them from the unpleasant phrases that spoiled his good mood from the trip to "Fort". "No one at 'Sasha' did that..."

"That's right, Seryoga..." I nodded and walked towards the "Homeland" office. "We judge others by ourselves. I have always calculated the prices of competitors in search of a good product."

Sergey, walking at the same leisurely pace, was a few steps behind me, and so he kept walking, catching up with me only in the middle of the courtyard. He was silent, and our dialog broke off of its own accord.

We passed the director's car and ducked into the building. In the sales area, I immediately started scanning the merchandise. The prices were surprising. I started comparing them from memory with what other companies were offering and calculating the markup from "Homeland". I thought about it – nothing matched! I looked at Sergey – he was hanging around the hall, obviously bored, with his hands in his pockets, absent-mindedly looking at everything from the floor to the ceiling. I went back to the prices and checked my calculations; they were correct. But the result was strange – it seemed that the company was either operating at a small loss, or at zero, or at a paltry profit.

"Hm!" I paused in thought at another shelf.

"What's up?" Sergey came over and stood half sideways behind my right shoulder.

"Strange shit!" I shrugged. "I don't understand how he can trade at such prices! It's bullshit! He doesn't make any money... or I don't know anything about trading..."

Sergey was silent. He stood next to me, staring uninterestedly at the same place I was staring, and remained silent.

"All right, let's go see him!" I decided and turned around to go to the office.

We agreed surprisingly quickly. The decisive moment was our agreement to barter goods of "Homeland's" own production.

"Fuck, he's already in production... fast..." Sergey said thoughtfully as we got back into the "Mazda".

"Yeah, good for him, such a money grubber..." I hummed, remembering the director's appearance – short, bald, stooped, always with his head buried in his shoulders, with shifting eyes and inarticulate, quiet diction.

Sergey stared thoughtfully ahead without even trying to start the car.

"Who would have thought it, right, Roman...!?" he looked at me, slapping his palm hard on the gear knob. "Three years ago, I remember, he went to all the companies and offered these fucking pads... Everybody told him where to get off, and he was still begging... And they didn't fucking sell. No, they sold, but they didn't sell very fucking well. You know, like the stuff you used to bring me to sell... shit like that... No offense."

"Seryoga!" I grinned merrily. "None taken! I know myself that I brought you shit! Well, there was this situation – I traded what they gave me without money, and it's always shit!"

I spread my hands and made it clear that I understood everything then and have no complaints now.

"You pushed me that 'Stove Cleaner' too!" I suddenly remembered. "It's the same fucking shit! I had a fucking hard time with it! No fucking chance to sell it, I had to give it back to you!"

"Gah-gah-gah!" Sergey burst into a deliberately guttural laugh. "Yeah, I did!"

"I went to pick up the goods and saw 'Stove Cleaner', two boxes on the waybill. What 'Stove Cleaner', for fuck's sake??? I didn't order it! While I was thinking, the storekeeper had already put them in my hands."

"And you took it, didn't you? Gah-gah-gah!" Sergey threw his head back and laughed even more rudely, looking at me with the eyes of a crook who had managed to cheat a simpleton.

"Well, yes... I did!" I shrugged, feeling again the uncertainty I had felt when I had received the unwanted boxes, and that incident immediately came to mind, along with the unresolved question – why did he have to do that, to cheat in such a primitive way? "But I still don't understand, why did you do that in the first place?"

"We had a distribution agreement with the manufacturer at the time, and they were producing this new product. Well, we had to order, we took twenty boxes, and they didn't sell at all, you know!" Sergey clapped his hand on the steering wheel and began to stroke it. "And Davidych said, 'Go ahead, push this hanging stock somewhere...' so I pushed you two boxes, gah-gah-gah... I thought, if you notice them, we'll take them back, if not, you'll sell them, gah-gah-gah... Well, you didn't notice them. Yes, we pushed those two boxes to you... so funny!"

"No, I noticed it right away!" I objected. "What I didn't understand at the time was why the fuck you slipped it to me like that... on the sly... it turns out you just fucked me over."

"No, I mean, I didn't fuck you over!" Sergey objected, getting a little serious at once. "I just had to do something with this stuff..."

"Yes, you did fuck me over! You slipped them to me on the sly, and I don't know why. You could have just said to me, 'Roma, I've got some goods, they're not selling well, let me give you a few boxes, and you try to sell as much as you can, if you don't sell, I'll take it back...' Could you do that? And I would have helped you. It wasn't nice, you slipped it to me quietly, and I gave you the fucking 'Stove Cleaner' back anyway. I only sold, like, eight or something. I don't remember."

"See, you sold it!" Sergey seized on the sentence.

"I would have sold it anyway, if you'd asked me properly and not pushed it in secret!" I said with pressure, wanting to emphasize this phrase so that my partner would understand the difference, which was quite obvious to me.

"Well, I don't know..." he shrugged and put the key in the ignition. "Shall we go?"

"Yeah, let's go..." I nodded tiredly and turned to the window. A casual discussion about an episode from the past had stirred up the questions that had been slumbering in my

soul and had emerged in a new capacity, with new food for thought. It seemed to me that Sergey did not see anything shameful in what he had done then, although he found the subject of conversation uncomfortable and hastily ended it.

"Fuck..." Sergey muttered, poking at the keys of his phone and getting angry.

"What's the matter?" I said, walking next to him and following his clumsy fingers with my eyes.

"I want to see the time! I press buttons, but they don't work, or they work, but not right away... It's a shitty phone! I have to buy a new one!"

"Eleven thirty," I said, just looking at my watch. "Why don't you buy a watch? Although nowadays you can look at the time on your cell phone..."

We staggered into the warehouse. The summer heat had been brewing since mid-May. I changed from jeans to light pants and from long sleeves to tank tops. Sergey started coming to work in light cotton summer pants and shirts over them, unbuttoned almost to the navel. Our style of dressing was diametrically different: I wore figure-hugging clothes, which only emphasized my height and vigor, and Sergey wore everything loose and baggy, which hid the flaws of his figure and excess weight, but gave him solidity and importance.

"Romych, as soon as I started boxing, I stopped wearing watches..." Sergey said, tucking the phone into the pouch under his shirt. "I broke one watch in a fight and never bought it again. They don't stick to me. Besides, what if there was a fight?"

"Oh, come on!" I looked at him incredulously. "So what, you're going to live your whole life without a watch, waiting for some mythical fight? Even though you don't really need it now, you can just look at your cell phone and that's it..."

"You're so quiet, Roman!" Sergey, smelling disbelief, was indignant. "I fought a lot when I was young! Do you know what kind of character I had? I was in every fight, they barely had time to separate us! When I met Verok, I settled down... And then the children. Kids changed me a lot. I became a completely different person."

I admired my partner's words; the words "responsibility", "maturity", "thoroughness" passed through my mind. These changes seemed to me like in a movie with a quick montage – the young Sergey, fighting and reckless – holding the small newborn Lilka in his arms – and the current Sergey, a father of two children, building his own business and standing confidently on his feet. I liked the image he created.

"Well, yeah, I'm actually very calm..." I nodded. "You'd have to try very hard to get me to punch you in the face. But if you do, that's it – my bar falls... ha! I'm like my father in this respect... He puts up with it for a long time, and then suddenly he flies off the handle and that's it... fucked up."

We came to the open gate of the warehouse. Senya was slumped against the wall on a makeshift chair, bare-chested and wearing a turban made from a T-shirt. The loader was sitting on a box of goods in the shade of the warehouse.

"Howdy, slackers!" I said cheerfully and stepped into the coolness of the warehouse.

Senya, sensing my mood, did not jump up, but just fixed his turban and smiled.

"Senya, a customer from out of town is coming tomorrow!" Sergey said and went into the warehouse.

"Who on earth is that?" Senya was already standing behind me, turning his head in confusion and shifting his gaze between Sergey and me.

"Senya!" Sergey gave the storekeeper a dismissive and stern look. "Not who on earth, a customer! And you're lying here, spreading your frame and warming it in the sun!"

"And what shall we do, Seryozha? There are no arrivals yet, we don't need to collect waybills."

"I'll get you a waybill!" Sergey said and fell silent, the sound of the engine growing behind the warehouse wall. Everyone listened. The sound reached the corner and stopped.

"Who's that there?" Senya looked at me in confusion.

"Anatoly Vasilievich is here," I said, often calling my father that for others.

"Aha..." said the storekeeper.

"Senya, listen to me!" Sergey shouted angrily, throwing lightning bolts out of his eyes at the storekeeper, who instantly shrank back reflexively and began to tremble.

Sergey put his hands behind his back, clasped his fingers, and walked through the warehouse in a measured, important manner. Everything he did – the movement of his fingers, the turn of his head, the tilt of his chin – told everyone who the boss was. I noted with irony that Sergey often behaved that way in small things that I didn't pay much attention to. And to compete with the storekeeper in regalia – I considered such behavior pointless. I smiled. Senya trotted along, trying to keep up with Sergey. He stopped in the middle of the warehouse, with his feet wide apart.

"Look, Senya, we'll give you the waybills, you prepare the goods for tomorrow..." my partner said after a pause.

"But..." Senya hesitated, stepping from foot to foot, rubbing his stubbly chin in confusion. "Petya hasn't been loaded yet... the second run... As soon as we load him, I'll..."

"Yes, Senya, you understand everything correctly!" Sergey turned his square shoulders and walked with short legs towards the exit.

I left the warehouse first. The reason for the storekeeper's rebuke seemed far-fetched to me, and the scene itself unpleasant. Why? I don't understand. Senya was a decent enough guy. His original cunning has long since disappeared. "Still, the environment changes a person," I thought, noticing that Senya was changing, becoming more responsible and hardworking. He didn't need to be told twice, the warehouse was always in order, and every remark Senya corrected immediately, qualitatively and without slackening. And I felt that such "disciplinary" pressure on the storekeeper was unnecessary and even harmful. But I didn't point this out to my partner and started basking in the sun.

"Let's go, shall we?" His voice sounded behind me.

"Yeah, let's go," I nodded and we walked towards the office.

My father's "GAZelle" was indeed around the corner. With its new high box it looked almost like a real truck. My father was picking up tools in the cabin, saw us, said nothing, and continued working. My mood was immediately spoiled, I walked by silently. Sergey was silent, too. I turned around – the box was almost finished, only the doors were missing – they were in the back.

"So, Anatoly Vasilievich will get tomatoes?" Sergey said.

"I don't know..." I shrugged. "I guess so... we don't talk about it..."

"But... do you talk at home at all?"

"Yes, we do... only when we need to... about something we have to do."

"What about your mother? Still not working? She stays at home?"

"Yes, it's the same. It's even worse. It's fucked up. Nice fucking family, huh?"

"Well, Romych, what did you expect? It wasn't great for me at home either... We lived in two rooms at first..."

"What do you mean, two rooms?"

"They used to give four-room apartments for two military families. So we lived in ours with another family, us in two rooms and our neighbors in the other two. Then they moved out and we got the whole apartment for ourselves. Imagine: me, Romka – my brother, my mother, my father and my grandmother – my father's mother... and all five of us in two rooms!"

"Yeah, that's tough... two families in one apartment... ugh..." I shivered.

"Yeah, well... that's how we lived, but then we each got a room. At least I could bring a broad into my room... Verok and I lived there first..."

We reached the door of the administration building and went inside.

"Why did you ask for the time?" I remembered.

"Oh! Right!" Sergey perked up. "That's right, Romych! What time is it?"

"Twelve," I looked at the clock again and sat down in the chair at the table.

"I have to go to 'Fort' for payments!" Sergey said, taking his "suitcase" from the shelf. I didn't want to sit in the room on such a sunny spring day.

"We could go to 'Fort' together," I suggested.

"Romych, why do you have to go with me?" Sergey looked at me cautiously. "I'll be there and back in no time! You better supervise those guys to make sure everything is packed for tomorrow..."

"They won't pack anything until we send Petya on the second run," I said.

"Romych, I'll be quick! Rest here... with Vera. Talk about your broads while I'm gone..."

"We don't talk about my broads with Vera," I replied insulted.

"Gah-gah-gah! I was joking, Romych!" Sergey played it back, extremely pleased with the effect. "That's it, I'm off... I'll be back soon!"

My partner left the office, appeared in the window, went to the "Mazda", put his briefcase in the trunk and got behind the wheel. The car came to life, drove in a circle on the square, kicked up a cloud of dust, and drove off.

An hour later, the "Mazda" returned. Sergey got out, took his briefcase from the trunk, and walked back to the office with a satisfied look on his face. I looked at him. His eyes were hidden behind his glasses. But it was as if I could see them. I felt that Sergey could see me and Vera through the window, but he was looking at me. We looked into each other's eyes through his glasses, and I felt that Sergey was getting high from that moment on. His gait changed under the sensation. Sergey walked importantly, as if carried by a sense of his own significance. A little more measured step, a little more chest out, a little more assertive chin. All "a little more". And the briefcase in his hands bounced, as if it carried a pleasant weight.

"You brought it?" I smiled as Sergey opened the office door with a wide energetic movement and put his "suitcase" on the chair by the door. "How much!?"

"Vera, write it down!" Sergey said in a businesslike manner, pushed up his glasses, placed them cleverly on his forehead, put his hands at his sides and breathed like a locomotive, flaring his nostrils eagerly.

Vera reached into her desk, rustled, fumbled for a notebook, pulled it out onto the table, opened it.

"One hundred and forty-two thousand five hundred!" Sergey said and added to his wife, "Did you write it down?"

"Yes, Seryozha, I did..." she replied calmly, even nonchalantly.

"So how do we divide the common fund? Half as usual? Half for you and half for me?" Sergey looked at me and chewed his lower lip vigorously.

"Well, yes... as usual," I nodded.

"Vera, look how much we have in the common fund with Romka!?" Sergey said, elbowing both hands into his briefcase, pulling out bundles of money and freezing with them.

"On you – ten thousand five hundred, on Roma – exactly twelve," said Vera.

"Aha!" replied Sergey, throwing the bundles on the table and taking his wallet out of his briefcase. "How much did you say I had, Vera, ten thousand five hundred?"

"Yes, Seryozha, ten thousand five hundred..." she exhaled, already doing something in the computer, not taking her eyes off the screen and not stopping clicking the mouse.

"Aha! Okay..." Sergey opened his wallet, took out some bills and counted them. "I have nine and five hundred... Vera, don't you remember if I dipped into the common fund recently or not?"

"Seryozha, we stopped at the store on the way..." Vera began.

"Oh, right! Exactly!" Sergey interrupted her, raised the index finger of his left hand, continued to hold the open wallet with his right, kicked his feet. "We stopped at the store and bought berries and fruit for the kids..."

"We bought a lot of things there..." Vera added, looking at her husband and staring at the monitor again. "Food for the dacha... and vodka for you..."

"Okay, okay... Man! Lyonka's birthday is coming up!" He got excited.

"Oh! Cool!" I perked up too. "And how old will he be?"

"Two. Listen, Romych, let's do a bonus – let's each take a ten! I can't keep up with all these birthdays..."

"All right, Seryoga," I said, crossing my arms over my chest and shrugging my shoulders.

"Vera!" my partner said immediately, "write off a ten from me and from Romka..."

He deftly tossed me a bundle of hundreds, took one for himself, counted out ten banknotes, put them in the part of his wallet where his share of the "common fund" was missing, and said defiantly: "Here, Romych, see? I'm putting it into my common fund, I took from it, now I'm putting it back, so that you don't think anything..."

"I wouldn't think anything of it. Well, you took it, but you put it back. Vera keeps records anyway..."

"Yes, that's what I wanted to tell you, I can dip into the common fund sometimes, but then I still put it back from my own money... And you see, I even have the money in different compartments... the common fund in this one and my own in this one!"

Sergey began to eagerly show me the sections of his enormous wallet.

"Seryoga, you can keep them any way you want... As long as you have the amount written down in this notebook at the right moment, and that's it! And all these compartments are for your own convenience," I dismissed the explanations, seeing them as unnecessary formalities.

"But I'm showing you that everything runs smoothly here!" he was offended.

"I get it," I nodded.

"Vera, calculate how much of the rest I should give to Romka to make it equal?"

Sergey said, exhaling as if he had done a titanic work and there was no less to do, and stared at the bundles of money on the table.

Vera's fingers deftly tapped the buttons on the calculator, and she voiced the answer.

"Aha, I see! So this is for you and this is for me!" Sergey said, dividing the money, putting his part back into his briefcase and starting to put the bonus ten into his wallet. I watched the action – the bills went into the empty compartment and the wallet grew in size. It took on the finished look of a piece of paradise – swollen with money, weighty, its very appearance said more about its owner's status than anything else. Sergey closed the wallet with a pleasant effort, weighed it in his hand, and put it into his briefcase.

"That's a nice billfold you have!" I said, shaking my head.

"Indeed!" Sergey replied happily, adding a pinch of sadness to his joy at such a pleasant inconvenience, "I carry it everywhere!"

His partner finished fiddling, looked at the table and asked:

"Listen, how are you going to carry your own?"

He was right – I usually went to work empty-handed. I couldn't even get used to having a wallet – I carried money in the pocket of my jeans or jacket.

"Right, there's nowhere to put it, that's for sure..." I muttered, looking at the cramped pockets of my pants. "I'll just take a bag and put it in there... Vera, do you have a bag?"

"Let me have a look, Roma," she rummaged in her bag.

"If you want, we can put it on me, that's all!" Sergey suddenly suggested. "I have to hang around with this money anyway... By the way, maybe we could put the money in the bank tomorrow?"

Sergey froze and asked both of us with his eyes.

"Right, about that..." Vera said, looking at me. "We're going to put the money in the bank anyway, so why should we pass it around a hundred times? Let him have it."

"You want to put the money in the bank tomorrow morning?" I clarified, thinking it over.

"Well, why not," Sergey shrugged. "I'll go straight from the dacha to the bank tomorrow – I'll deposit the money, I'll stop by 'Peresvet' – I'll take the leftovers for Monday and I'll go to that, whatdoyoucallit, 'Sphere'!"

We kept cherishing our plans for "Sphere", a large wholesale company on the left bank of the city. The company dealt in building materials, but also sold household chemicals and had one of the best sales volumes in the area.

"That's it, then it's decided, you'll do the left bank tomorrow morning..." I agreed.

"And take the money, you'll put it in the bank tomorrow... Vera, put my part on Seryoga..."

The notebook opened again, Vera made another entry, the notebook closed.

Petya arrived and drove directly to the warehouse. Soon he was on his way with a full load.

"I think we can go home early today..." Sergey said either to me or to his wife, but the words were clearly meant for me. "There will be no more deliveries today, Petya has left, the goods for the intercity are being assembled in the warehouse... why sit here?"

"Sure, we can," I nodded.

"Seryozha, Vanya is also coming with us!" Vera reminded him, blushing.

"Oh, right! Vanyok is coming..." Sergey dropped his head on his chest, almost doomed.

"And where is he going? I mean... with you to the dacha?" I looked at both of them.

"Yes, Roma... We're going there anyway, and we'll pick him up, so he won't be alone in the city," Vera said in the tone of a caring older sister.

"Vera, call Vanyok, tell him to come here at five, and then we'll go!" Sergey said impatiently, sighed, unclasped his hands and pushed his briefcase to the bottom shelf of the cupboard.

At half past four there was a tentative knock at the door. Vera's brother entered. Their physical resemblance was obvious. About one hundred and eighty centimeters tall, a slender, slim, short-cropped blond with light blue eyes and a sly, shy look. Light pants, a white shirt with a thin dark stripe and sleeves rolled up to the elbows. Vanya looked neat, but his clothes were cheap, the kind you buy once and wear forever.

"Hello, Vanyok!" Sergey extended his hand carelessly and casually, not hiding the formality of the gesture, after which he lost all interest in the guest.

Vanya shook Sergey's hand a little fussily and shyly, greeted me and Vera with a nod, and remained shuffling from foot to foot in the corner near the entrance. His awkward stance was saved by a plastic bag that Vanya passed from hand to hand to make it look like he was busy with something. Within a few minutes I had formed an opinion – a future alcoholic or a big drinker. They all dress like that. Always in clean, ironed clothes in the morning. Almost always in pants and shirts, and they wear jackets for extra respectability. They come home late at night drunk and in wrinkled, dirty clothes. The next morning they are clean again, someone takes care of them in the morning, ironing them, dressing them in everything fresh

and sending them to the alcoholic front. On which many such ironed and combed fighters have fallen. If you do not know their nature, they make the most benign impression, especially on single women – quiet, do not interrupt, tactful and useless. And, as it turns out later, problematic. The women willingly pick them up and begin to take care of them like little children, washing, feeding and ironing them. The child humbly thanks for everything, puts on clean clothes and goes for a drink. Having been tortured enough with such a "suitcase without a handle," the woman leaves him or returns him to his mother, who really has no choice. Vanya lived with his mom and went to his mom's dacha. I looked into his almost transparent eyes and saw in them a cunning, shallow mind, laziness, shrewdness and lack of inner strength. The brother turned out to be the opposite of his sister – honest, intelligent, hard-working and responsible.

Soon we were driving out of the factory. Vanya sat in the back on the left, I on the right. The bespectacled janitor nodded first and said goodbye. She puffed on her cigarette as usual, holding it with two fingers and sticking her pinkie out pretentiously. All three of us nodded at her and left her in a cloud of dust. As we shook on the bumps, we sluggishly exchanged sentences about work. I glanced at Vanya a few times, but he was silent, smiling to himself. The "Mazda" climbed out of the gravel onto the asphalt and accelerated.

"Roman, what if they steal my briefcase with the money in it, what are we going to do?" Sergey said suddenly, looking at me through his glasses and the rear view mirror.

"Why 'we'?" I was surprised. "You have the money..."

"There is also your half of the common fund in it..." Sergey continued to look at me in the mirror.

"What's the difference? It's registered to you, you have the money, you're responsible for it..."

I fell silent, but the lenses of my partner's glasses continued to stare at me intently.

"...if they steal, you'll owe the company," I finished, shrugging my shoulders and continuing to wonder inwardly about the strangeness of the question, the answer to which seemed obvious to me.

"Hmmm..." Sergey said, and the cabin fell silent.

After a minute, the silence was broken by Vera, who began to discuss with her husband the food supply at the dacha. Sergey stopped on my street. I said goodbye to everyone and went home. Later that evening, Sergey called me – he offered to dispatch the morning customer together and take the money to the bank all at once. I agreed.

The "GAZelle" with Tambov license plates arrived early in the morning, and I was literally five minutes ahead of it. Sergey arrived at the same time. The client – a short, close-cropped man in a light-colored Hawaiian shirt – entered the office with a plastic bag and dumped a pile of money on the table. The room was immediately filled with joyful excitement. Sergey began stuffing the money into his briefcase, making it swell and look like his wallet.

An hour later we filled the "GAZelle" to the brim as well, the car sagged on the springs almost to the bump stops and rolled away, squeaking pitifully with everything it could.

"So, Romych, I'm off to the bank..." Sergey shook the heavy briefcase in his hand.

"Yeah, go ahead, Seryoga," I nodded and was left alone in the office.

Vera showed up an hour later, and Sergey came back at three, but with good news – "Sphere" had agreed to take dichlorvos from us and had placed the first order.

"Damn, Seryoga, that's fucking great!" I said when I heard the news. "On Monday we'll deliver it together with 'Peresvet', they're right next door, almost over the fence!"

CHAPTER 37

"Romych, are you going to take a break this year?" Sergey said on the last day of May. I tore myself away from the papers, looked at my partner and his wife, and thought for a moment.

"I don't know," I shrugged. "I haven't thought about it at all."

"I mean, Verok and I used to go to the sea every year back in 'Sasha'. We used to take the kids and go by car... But last year we couldn't go... 'Sasha' closed down, then we merged, started a business... Well, you know... And now everything seems to be going well – the warehouse is working, Petya is delivering..." Sergey continued.

"So, what do you suggest, should we go on vacation?" I said.

"Well, do you mind?" Sergey sniffed his nose and put his ankle on the other leg.

"No, it's a good idea!" I leaned back in my chair at the table and thought. "I'm just thinking... When do you want to take a vacation? You want to go to the sea?"

"Well, yes," Vera replied. "We'd load up the kids and go, wouldn't we, Seryozha?"

"Yeah, I'd get some rest!" He put his foot on the ground and exhaled as if relieved. "It's already the second year without a vacation, and we have to take the kids to the sea to warm them up... We can go from June 1st! What day of the week will it be?" Sergey said, putting his hand in his pocket for the phone. In the next ten minutes everything was decided – the first two weeks of June will be a holiday for Sergey and Vera, and the second for me.

"So, will you be okay here alone?" Sergey summarized. "Senya and Petya will load, so you don't have to carry anything, just collect orders and prepare waybills. We don't have to hurry with the non-cash payments, they can all wait two weeks, and when Vera comes back she'll pay everything that's due. You don't have to get cash either, let it sit there, why do you need it? No need to waste time with it..."

There was a knock at the door, and Petya came in, turning his eyes and breathing heavily, as if he were eavesdropping, and cried from the threshold: "Roma, Seryozha, I mean... what about us? Could we take a break this year, or what? Or are we like serfs... without rest?"

"Like serfs, Petya!" Sergey supported the joke.

"Hee hee hee hee!" The driver burst out laughing and covered his mouth.

"When do you want to go on vacation?" I clarified.

It turned out that Petya wouldn't mind going on vacation from the beginning of summer for the same two weeks.

"How can we let you go? Who will carry the goods?" Sergey said stubbornly. "No, we can't..."

Petya rolled his eyes in surprise and opened his mouth.

"No, Seryoga, we can't let Petya work without rest!" I intervened.

"How will we work then!?" he wondered.

"Well... We could ask Anatoly Vasilievich..." I suggested.

By the end of the day, everything was settled – Petya would go on vacation at the same time as Sergey and Vera, my father agreed to work on a delivery truck this time, and Senya refused to take a break.

"So you're going to the Black Sea by car next week?" I summarized.

"Yes, we are..." Sergey nodded.

"Then you owe me a sea souvenir," I smiled.

Since Monday, it was as if my father and I were back in the past – we started driving together again. I couldn't afford to let my father go on his own and just chill in the office. The growing sales of dichlorvos quickly fueled my excitement and I forgot about time and

conventions and worked hard every day. Two weeks flew by, and on Monday, June 19, Sergey and Vera came to work rested and tanned. Petya came too.

"So, Romych, how are things going?" my partner said cheerfully, as soon as he crossed the threshold of the office with a radiant face and a good mood.

"Fine, Seryoga!" I smiled and shook his soft, warm hand. "I made a load of dough in two weeks! Wanna know how much the office made?"

Sergey's mood became even more benign, his nostrils fluttered as if trying to catch a whiff of profit. Vera, sitting at her computer, clicked her mouse, smiled and said:

"Let's see what you've been up to while we've been away... Whoa!"

"How much is there, Verok?" Sergey leaned towards his wife.

"One hundred and eighty thousand, Seryozha..." she said.

"One hundred and eighty thousand!?" Sergey knitted his eyebrows, gave me his patented look, looked at the monitor. "Romych! Have you sold all the dichlorvos or what!?"

"Not all of it, but I load all the customers! Sales are good, so my father and I worked so hard that I was tired at the end..." I leaned back in my chair with the relief that comes to any man who has done his work honestly and to the limit. "So, Seryoga, the next two weeks are yours! Work just as hard and we'll make a lot of money for the month!"

"Romych, we'll do everything we can, when are you going on vacation, tomorrow?" he said.

"Yes, tomorrow," I nodded. "The first vacation in all this time, you know, Seryoga!"

"Yes, Romych!" Sergey put the briefcase on the table and put his hand inside. "As promised, we brought you a present! Here you go!"

A glass penis emerged from the briefcase and stared at me. I was stunned and stared at the gift. Vera blushed, smiled and looked down. After I got over my surprise, I realized that the gift was a bottle filled with brown liquid. The dick-like container ended with a neck and a cork. Sergey held the bottle by the neck and watched my reaction with a satisfied face.

"Seryoga!" I rolled my eyes. "What the fuck is this?! Damn!"

"It's a gift," he chuckled, shaking the cock bottle in the air. "Here! Take it!"

I took the gift in my hands and began to look at it.

"Is that cognac in there?" I guessed.

"Cognac," Sergey sniffed. "You wanted a present, so here's a present for you!"

"Aha..." I said, confused, feeling the mood souring and irritation growing. The way the gift was presented was mocking.

"Thanks, Seryoga," I joked, suppressing my negative vibes. "How am I supposed to carry it home? Just like that, in my hands? I'll scare the people on the bus!"

Satisfied with his prank, Sergey pushed the briefcase into the cupboard and sat down in the chair by the door. Vera, still smiling and blushing, took a bag and handed it to me: "Here, take it."

"Oh, thank you, Vera!" I said, slipping the gift in the bag and putting it on the shelf in the cupboard.

The rest of the day passed noisily and happily – Sergey and Vera shared their impressions of the holiday, and I was looking forward to the beginning of mine. In the end, Sergey drove me home and went to the dacha with his wife. I looked at the bag in my hand and felt another wave of irritation. I didn't know what to do with it, the package burned my hands. The gift felt more and more like a slap in the face. I came home, angrily shoved the package to the back of my desk, and tried to forget about it immediately.

"Seryoga, show me the figure!" I said impatiently, flying into the office on Monday morning, July 3rd, and barely having time to say hello to my partner and Vera.

"Just a minute, Roman, wait," he murmured, sitting down softly in a chair at the table, grabbing the waybills prepared for the day and shouting: "Se-enya-a!"

There was a murmur behind the wall, a hurried step in the corridor, and the storekeeper appeared in the room. Sergey handed him the papers and Senya went out. The office was quiet – Vera was clicking and jingling with accounting papers, Sergey was half lying in his chair with a colorless, blank look on his face.

"Seryoga!" I shouted impatiently, squirming in the chair by the door. "What's with the figure? Show me what you've earned while I've been resting! More than me and my father, I hope! Vera!?"

I looked at Sergey's wife.

"Vera, show him," he muttered, slightly irritated.

"Just a moment, Roma," she ran her fingers over the keyboard and froze. "Shall I print it out for you?"

"No, I'll just look at it!" I jumped up from my chair, walked over to the monitor and looked at it. "Well, what is it!? How much!? ... Oh... Sixty???"

I looked at Sergey stunned, he didn't move.

"Seryoga!??? Sixty!???" I said. "Seryoga, why so little!???"

Completely baffled by the figure, I returned to the chair and sat down.

"Roman, that's the way it is," Sergey waved his hands. "We sold as much as we could."

"Why so little!?" I stared at my partner in complete disbelief. "My father and I delivered so much, you sold nothing..."

"Roman, but how am I supposed to sell more if you loaded them all!?" Sergey became agitated. "Wherever I call, there are goods, nothing is needed yet!"

"It's still not enough..." I said, feeling a huge hole of frustration growing inside me. I remembered how my father and I worked selflessly for two weeks – every day I meticulously called customers, collected orders, then loaded the "GAZelle" to the brim and rolled with my father to the customers, where I bypassed all the offices, then unloaded boxes with my father in the warehouses and rolled back to the warehouse, wanting to have time for the second run. And so on for two weeks. We were exhausted, but the result was excellent. And my understanding of working with expectation extended to the next two weeks, which Sergey worked for two. Did he? I looked at the softened body in the chair, and resentment and universal injustice burned me from the inside. I realized that Sergey had not strained himself for two weeks and had spent them half-lying like that, realizing that the money for the month had already been earned. It was as if I had been robbed. I struggled with the lump in my chest for the rest of the day, but my mood was already ruined. In the evening, not knowing what to do with the accumulated anger, I grabbed the package with the cock bottle and threw it in the trash.

My father started with the tomatoes. I have to admit, he built a great box. It was roomy inside and I could stand almost to my full height. My father was always good with his hands – everything he made with them was well thought out, practical and sturdy.

One evening my father called me from some stanitsa in the Krasnodar region. He and his friend Vasya had gone there in their "GAZelles" to buy tomatoes, a thousand kilometers away. The conversation was short. My father said that they had a safe trip, they would go to bed right in the cabin of the car, in the morning they would start buying goods from the local population, and in the evening they would try to return. Even though our communication was dry, I was really worried about my father. I wanted him to succeed and I wanted my father to start making good money. Although his partner was a slippery guy, he was very smart in this business – he knew everything – where, when, how much and at what price to buy and sell. It

was easier to start with someone like that and avoid a lot of mistakes. But there was a "but": fruits and vegetables are perishable. Remembering the ordeal with the beer, I decided not to deal with perishable goods. I expressed my doubts to my father. And the fact that this business is difficult for him because of his age – after fifty, loading and unloading a ton and a half alone is not easy. I encouraged my father to find a business similar to ours, but my words went unheeded.

The next evening my father called me again and said he was on his way home. I wished him a good trip and worried about my father for twenty-four hours until he called again the next evening. I came home around 1:00 a.m. – my father was already asleep in his room. When I got up in the morning, he was gone. I called him – my father was busy trading at the wholesale market. In the evening at home we were able to communicate for the first time. I was curious about everything, so I asked my father a lot of questions.

We arrived, slept overnight, started buying in the morning, finished late, about ten in the evening, loaded two tons into the box, decided with Vasily to leave early in the morning, went to bed... When I woke up, Vasily was gone, he had left alone at night, I had to drive back alone on an unknown road, I got a little lost on the highway, I successfully bought tomatoes, sold half of them on the first day, the car was left at the market at the trading place.

My father was smoking on the balcony, and I stood next to him with my shoulder against the door and listened.

"Vasya is an asshole!" I said, remembering Vasya's wrinkled, mustachioed face, the swindler with the shifting, lying eyes, and instantly seething with anger; I wanted to punch Vasya in the face, but all I could say was, "Why did you have to mess with him, I don't get it!"

"Who else was I supposed to mess with!?" My father twitched and glared at me indignantly.

"No one!" I parried. "You should have worked yourself, that's all!"

"It's all very well to say that – you should have worked yourself! And what about driving alone on the highway? What if something happens on the road? A breakdown for example? Stop talking bullshit!"

"Well, the road, yeah..." I nodded. "I don't know, ride with someone else!"

"Who??" My father stared at me.

"I don't know, there must be someone else," I was confused. "Vasya rides alone after all."

"He's been doing it for years!" My father shook his hand with a cigarette in the air.

"Well... that's true," I shrugged. "Still, it's not okay... Vasya is a jerk! Leaving you alone at night like that... He left you there on purpose!"

"On purpose!" my father said, getting really angry. "So!? What can I do? That's the way he is! And so are you! You and Vasya would make good friends! With friends like that, you don't need enemies! You'll set your friend up if you get the chance!"

It hurt. My father threw mud at me again. All my efforts to repair the relationship were shattered by a verbal slap in the face. I didn't want to talk to him anymore.

"I see," I muttered, depressed. "Only assholes around you, and you're the only one wearing white..."

"What, you don't like the truth?" my father said, glaring at me angrily and nervously, greedily pulling out the rest of his cigarette. "You listen!"

"Okay..." I brushed him off. "Sell tomatoes... Have a good sale..."

"Don't worry, I will!"

I turned and walked away.

"Romych, why don't we spend some time outside tonight?" Sergey suggested in the middle of the week.

"What do you mean?" I didn't understand.

"Well, we do that sometimes with friends, we get together and just go to the countryside, we take some food – salads, meat... take some good wine or cognac... And we just drive out to the countryside in cars and sit for a couple or three hours, just relaxing... drinking, socializing... just relaxing!"

"Well..." I pictured it in my mind and thought about it.

"I've got a folding table and chairs with me, 'Hunter'... in the trunk... So we just need to stop by the store, get some food... and something to drink. I could use a few shots of cognac. I don't know what you drink in your clubs... gah-gah!" Sergey cackled. "Tequila or whiskey? I don't know what's in fashion now!"

"Seryoga, I haven't been going to clubs and drinking what's in fashion for a long time!" Feeling the sharpness of the words, I parried. "I drink what I like, not what's in fashion... I can drink beer too..."

"Well, my Romka likes beer too!" Sergey said.

"Why, will he come too?" I was surprised.

"We can take him with us! I'll call him, find out..." Sergey took his phone out of its case. "Yeah, hey, bro! We're going to hang out in the open with Romych after work, how about you?! Yeah – me, Romych, Verok and you if you want... Where? We haven't thought about it yet..."

Sergey looked at his wife, she said: "Maybe in the park near our house?"

"Oh yeah! Bro, Verok tells me that we can do it in the park! Yeah, aha! Yeah, let's do it, huh? I don't know yet... around seven o'clock I guess... aha... Yeah, call me around six and I'll tell you for sure! Uh-huh... yeah, okay, bye, bro!" Sergey put the phone back in its case and looked at me. "Romka's coming too! So, are you in?"

We went.

I told him where we could buy some excellent ready-to-eat food, and we stopped on the way to the store. Salads, roasts, a bottle of wine, several bottles of beer and a bottle of cognac – everything we bought was put in the trunk, and in forty minutes we were near Sergey's house. The park was within walking distance – a hundred meters along the asphalt road that led to the iron gates of the park. We drove up to them. There was a lock on the gate.

We went to the park through an open wicket, found a place under a spreading tree and carried the contents of the trunk there. Sergey's brother came over and started to help him unpack the camping chairs and table.

"Hey, you see what kind of set I got?" my partner said. "My bro gave it to me – 'Hunter'! It's an expensive set, worth eight grand, and I got it for free!"

Sergey shook the unpacked table in the air and began to assemble it. The set was the usual one – a table and four chairs with tarpaulin seats. But Sergey drove me crazy within a few hours, praising it, mentioning it ten times in conversation:

"I've been to the stores, I've checked the prices... blah, blah, blah... but 'Hunter' is better."

Or: "Romych, you can see for yourself – I have everything good, branded, I don't buy shit, we're sitting on my 'Hunter'..."

Or: "... well, what did you expect, it's 'Hunter'!"

The only thing I remember from the whole meeting was that and Sergey eating salad. Vera drank wine, Roma and I drank beer. Sergey, having made it clear that beer was not for him, theatrically enjoyed cognac.

I was bored during the gathering. I wanted to leave almost immediately. And I understood the reason for this reaction – there was too much of Sergey and Vera for me.

These faces at work, so let's have a rest with the same group? No, thank you. The concept that Sergey insistently imposed – business in a close circle of friends, holidays together – began to weigh on me. Besides, I was not interested in spending my free time that way. I agreed to the meeting because of my innate tactfulness and the very "not to offend anyone" thing. I sank into the soft "Hunter" chair next to the "Hunter" table, listened and watched Sergey practice his eloquence. The alcohol quickly awakened hunger, and everyone began to put food out of containers onto disposable plates.

Ready-to-eat food is a separate topic. It has long been a result of conflict in our family. My mother, who shut me and my father out, left the issue of food to us. My father and I ate mostly randomly and on the run. My stomach began to show signs of trouble again. One day, my father stumbled upon the prepared food section of a store on the street next to our house. The food in this section was excellent. My father and I began to buy it regularly, and our diet improved. And it was this section that I recommended to Sergey.

My partner got up from the table, took a forkful of salad from the container, and shoved it into his mouth, chewing. Threads of cabbage hung from his lips and chin.

"Yeah, that's a pretty good salad," he said, slurping a few times and tasting it. "Pretty tender...well soaked...will do!"

His "will do" stuck in my mind, along with his oily, fat, munching lips and the lazy, careless movements of his fork. The image of Sergey appeared to me from the other side.

Natasha and I agreed to meet on Saturday at eight o'clock. It was unbearable at home, so I left at five, came to the center and walked along the avenue. After walking all the way down, I turned around and walked back. In one of the summer cafes I noticed Inna. She waved friendly and I approached the table. Inna was with two friends. I sat down next to one of them, across from Inna and the third girl.

"Taking a walk?" Inna looked at me with her usual attentive squint.

"Yes, I went downtown to see who was here and what was going on," I nodded.

"Alone?" the girl probed me with her eyes.

"Well, yes... alone for now..." I leaned back in my chair, "... and then we'll see..."

"Not married yet?" Inna said.

"Not yet..." I said, feeling more and more like I was being interrogated. "I still have time..."

"Sure," Inna smirked. "Plenty of time!"

There was a flicker of disappointment in the girl's barely perceptible expression. Finally, Inna looked away and fixed her gaze on her hands, which were lying on the table, holding the phone.

"You'll never get married..." she waved her hand doomedly, looked at her friends, grinned, and added caustically for them: "He's a chosen one!"

I felt awkward. Inna looked at me and I looked at her. Inna's friends did not understand our dialogue, but we read between the lines. Sensing my indifference and calmness, Inna couldn't resist and slapped me in a feminine way.

"Do you even have a girlfriend?" she said with the same squint.

"I do," I replied calmly, smiling only at the corners of my eyes and mouth.

My phone, as if coming to my rescue, screamed "Hit me!" from my pants pocket and beat a drum. I pulled the phone down to the table and it went on:

Can you keep up
Baby boy, make me lose my breathe
Bring the noise, make me lose my breathe
Hit me hard, make me lose my (hah, hah)

"Yes, hello, hi!" I put the phone to my ear and stared at Inna, who was all ears. "Me? I'm here, in the center, in a cafe with some girls I know, met them by chance, chatting... No, just acquaintances... I was just passing by, they saw me, I saw them, they were sitting at a table, I came over and here I am, waiting for you..."

The first time I heard a hint of jealousy in Natasha's voice, I realized I'd gotten myself into a stupid situation – telling her where I really was and with whom – and so I took the initiative:

"Where are you now? Are you going to the center? Ah, well, let me walk towards you, I'll meet you at the hotel then? All right, I'm on my way... Okay, bye."

I said goodbye to Inna, came to the hotel in ten minutes, and saw her almost immediately. Natasha was on the crosswalk. She smiled at me and ran towards me.

"Hi!" we said almost simultaneously and kissed.

"So?" Natasha dramatically put her hands at her sides and clicked her heel. "Who are those girls you were sitting with in the cafe?"

It felt good. I suddenly felt needed, smiled and joked.

"You shouldn't sit there with any girls!" Natasha said sharply, crossing her arms over her chest, her face becoming serious.

A forbidding sentence. I tensed inwardly, preparing myself for a retort.

"Come on, Natasha, don't be silly!" I smiled. "We were just chatting..."

"Ah, just chatting!?" The girl became even more serious and took half a step away from me. "I call him and he chats with some ex-girlfriends!?"

I suddenly realized that Natasha was really stuck on what had happened. Reasonable jealousy, yes, it felt good. But Natasha flew past the point of measure in a flash, and there was panic in her eyes.

"Come on, Natasha..." I smiled again. "I was just talking to an acquaintance... I have friends, acquaintances... What, I can't talk to them?"

"You can't!" Natasha cut me off excitedly.

"So how am I supposed to live, you're the only girl I can talk to, right?"

"Yes!!! I'm the only one you can talk to!" Natasha screamed.

You can, you can't. I've heard that somewhere before. I was fed up with women's prohibitions.

"You know what!" I said softly, with pressure, suppressing a burst of anger with an effort. "I will talk to whoever I want, whenever I want! And if you can't understand that all my interactions with other girls are of a friendly nature, then that's your problem!"

Natasha was silent and looked at me fearfully. I softened and repeated again:

"I was just walking along the avenue, a girl I know was sitting in a cafe with her friends, she saw me... There was still time before our meeting, so I just chatted with them! That's it! There's nothing to talk about!"

Natasha stood tense as a cord.

"Oh, never mind! It's okay!" she said, cheered up, smiled, came closer to me, hugged me with a jerk and squeezed her arms tightly around my chest. "I won't give you to anyone!"

In my head I immediately experienced a whole bunch of feelings – I thought I had finally met the one who would say such important words. That all the previous failures in the relationship were worth this luck. And that I had never dreamed of such luck, although of course I had. My thoughts were all mixed up, I hugged Natasha and we walked slowly down the street, cooing softly.

"Roman, are you still seeing this, what's-her-name...?" Sergey said suddenly, switching from the usual office chatter to the personal.

"Natashka, you mean? Yes," I nodded.

"I just thought we could go out together. You could take your Natashka and we could go to a barbecue – me and Verok and you and your Natashka..."

"I don't know, I guess we could..." I shrugged and looked at Vera, who was minding her own business and listening to our conversation with half-closed ears.

"Your Natashka is beautiful, isn't she?" Sergey asked a strange question.

"Well..." I was stunned and smiled confused. "Well... she is... I mean... not bad!"

Vera looked at her husband with ironic surprise.

"Roma, tell him – all my girlfriends are beautiful!" she said.

"Seryoga!" I said immediately, breaking into a smile. "All my girlfriends are beautiful!"

"So take your beauty today after work and let's go for a barbecue!" Sergey leaned back in his chair. "I just feel like eating a normal shashlik! After all, we seem to be living in the dacha, and it's been a long time since we grilled shashlik, right, Verok?"

"Well, yeah..." Vera nodded, wrinkled her nose, and smiled. "I'd like to eat some shashlik!"

"There! All the more! Let's go, Romych!" Sergey insisted.

Not very eager, but I agreed.

We left work early and arrived at the park at seven o'clock. We drove down to the reservoir and sat down about twenty meters from the water. I got out of the car. The silence of nature immediately filled my ears. The wind lazily moved the greenery of trees, bushes and reeds. In my pocket my cell phone came to life.

"I'm at a barbecue, Vova!" I said, answering the call.

"Who is it? Vovan?" Sergey asked, looking at me through his glasses. "Tell him to come to us!"

"Ramses, fuck, sure thing!!!" Vovka yelled into the phone. "I'll be right there!!!"

In about forty minutes, he was walking awkwardly from the entrance of the park toward us. By that time we had already settled down – we had set up a table and chairs and built a fire. I didn't notice how Sergey's skullcap appeared on his head. He took it out of the trunk, put it on the back of his head and began to show all sorts of activity – laughing, joking, inquiring about the state of the fire and giving instructions to his wife. Vovka shouted, "What's up, Ramses?", clapped my hand with his palm, shook Sergey's hand with restraint, nodded to Vera and muttered something under his nose. Sergey's deft hands moved metal shots from the trunk of the "Mazda" to the table.

"I got it at 'Travels'," he explained. "I usually buy everything there. That axe there is from 'Travels', and the flashlight..."

Sergey bragged about an expensive tourist shop. I looked at Vovka, who was serious. I noticed that the relationship between Sergey and Vovka had never gone beyond the formal. There was a slight, neutral tension between them.

"No, I won't drink cognac!" said Vovka, seeing the bottle in Sergey's hand. "I'll take a beer!"

I opened a bottle of beer for myself and another for Vera. Sergey poured himself a shot.

"Seryozha!?" His wife looked at him seriously and with restraint.

"Come on, Verok, I've only got one shot, I'll eat meat soon, everything will be fine..." he waved away his wife's reproach. "Besides, we are close to the house, there are no cops here..."

Everyone clinked glasses, took a sip of beer, Sergey drank the cognac in one gulp and said:

"Well? It's time for shashlik?"

Vovka and I put the meat on skewers and put them over the coals. Natasha arrived. A jeans suit and cowboy boots, a crop top supported from the inside by her large breasts, pushed her jacket open, a snow-white, luxuriant head of hair – the girl looked graceful. For the first time I saw how Vera's composure betrayed her – she fixed her eyes on Natasha's breasts, and no matter how hard she tried to look away, it was all in vain – I noticed her gaze there again and again. And there was only one feeling in it: envy.

For the next hour Sergey acted as an entertainer. I cooed with Natasha and made shashlik with Vovka. Vera bounced around the table, keeping up the various topics of languid conversation. The conversation did not go well. Like pieces of different human clay, we didn't fit together even under the pressure of a shared pastime. Natasha stayed close to me and Vovka, while Vera and Sergey were the other part of the group.

The shashlik was eaten. Suddenly Sergey took a chair and went down to the water, found a free place in the tall coastal grass, sat down with his back to us and looked at the water. The group broke up completely. Vovka fretted with boredom, constantly scratching the back of his head. Vera, with the automatic movements of family life, cleared the table. Soon Sergey returned. In everyone's eyes was the desire to end the meeting. The rain helped – it began to drizzle. Everyone ran, threw the table and chairs into the trunk and rushed to the car to escape from large drops. It began to pour. As soon as we left the park, it was over. The group broke up. The rest of the evening was spent by the three of us – me, Vovka and Natasha – walking around, and towards nightfall we went to a club.

By mid-July, we had sold almost all of the dichlorvos. It was time to bring in the next batch, so Sergey placed an order.

"Seryoga, why are you ordering so little? The best sales are ahead of us! It's not enough! – I stared at my partner with a sheet of paper in my hand.

"Roman, we have all the customers loaded to the brim!" He relaxed and waved his hand. "It's already the end of July when everyone will be chewing up the leftovers! And we have three tons for early August!"

Sergey ran a pen under his throat.

"Fuck, that's not enough..." I was surprised. "I would have ordered more, ten tons, the same order as the first one, just for the second half of the summer..."

"Roman, for what?" Sergey grimaced. "This way the dichlorvos will stay for the winter for sure!"

"So what?" I retorted. "Let them stay! What's it to us? We're not paying for them! We'll write a letter explaining what's what, I think the factory will agree!"

"What if they tell us to buy them back?" Sergey grumbled.

"Well... if so – we'll buy them back!" I replied. "There will be three hundred boxes left... How much is that? One hundred and fifty thousand! Fuck! That's bullshit! We'll buy it back, hands down!"

I dismissed the possible difficulty, realizing its utter insignificance.

"But in the spring we'll earn an extra ten to fifteen percent on the reassessment... That's fucking great too!" I added, raising my eyebrows upward for convincing.

"No, let's order it this way! Why do we need to overstock? Then buy back unnecessary goods in winter and bury money in it until spring!?" Sergey was stubborn.

"Well, okay," I nodded. "But you'll see, we'll be left without goods in the middle of the season..."

We ordered three tons and started waiting for a container by the end of the month.

In the middle of July, on Friday the 14th, I turned twenty-nine. I told Sergey and Vera in the office at noon, adding that I was inviting them to a table at the entertainment complex

the following evening. They said the usual congratulations, shook hands, and Sergey gave me five thousand ruble bills from both of them.

I met Natasha first on Saturday. She looked as minimalist and stunning as ever, wearing flesh-colored breeches and a strappy tank top. For the second week in a row, the heat of the day had forced everyone to wear the bare minimum. Natasha stomped her stiletto sandals toward me, and we kissed and hugged. Soon Vovka appeared. He shook my hand until my shoulder ached, shouted many sincere, pleasant words into my face, and pressed rolled-up green banknotes into my palm.

"Here, Ramses!!! Congratulations, you bigwig! It's the birthday of such a man!!! How could I not come!!! Well... Where is your accomplice!!!?" Vovka turned his head. "Ah, he hasn't come yet!!!? Ah, fuck him... Anyway, develop your business with him, I wish that you, bigwig, buy up everything here in this fucking town!!! That you buy up this whole fucking town!!! Oh... one more thing..."

Vovka noticed that his escapade made Natasha laugh and was immediately embarrassed.

"... yeah... you know!!! Fuck, where was I!!!" Vovka scratched the back of his already disheveled head. "Anyway, Ramses, have everything and don't be accountable for it!!!"

I hugged my friend and thanked him. After watching them go up to the second floor of the building, I went back outside and stopped on the steps of the entrance. A few minutes later, Vera and Sergey emerged from the darkness of the park. Vera was dressed in the same colors as Natasha. Flesh-colored breeches down to the middle of her shins, light sabots on her feet, and a white fitted T-shirt. I didn't even get a glimpse of Sergey; Vera came up the steps, stood beside me, cupped my face in her hands and kissed me on the lips.

"Many happy returns!" she said quietly.

Sergey came up the stairs next, stretched out his hand in a haughty manner, shook mine subtly, and said with a half smile: "Congratulations..."

I escorted them upstairs as well. Our table was already generously filled with food and alcohol. The evening began and passed in a typical way – each guest congratulated me again, and after that the conversations began sluggishly. Communication hardly worked. Sergey and Vera sat on one side of me and Natasha, Vovka on the other. If Sergey had been an active leader during the meetings in the park, here he sat relaxed and silent, leaning back on the sofa and spreading his arms over the backrest. After half an hour, the alcohol eased the general tension. After another hour, the music started blaring and the dance floor was filled with customers. Natasha and I sat with our arms around each other, whispering and kissing all evening. Sergey smiled at us, shook his head and spread out even more on the sofa with a bored look on his face. Vera, on the other hand, seeing our tenderness with Natasha, felt like a woman, embraced her husband, pressed herself against him and tried to kiss Sergey on the lips several times. Each time he reluctantly pulled his face back and turned away. Vera smiled guiltily and pressed her lips to his indifferent cheek. An hour before midnight, Sergey began to yawn regularly. Everyone was tired. Even Vovka calmed down, sat silently on the sofa and watched the performance on the stage with glassy eyes. It was time to go. Half an hour before midnight the party ended, everyone was outside. Sergey and Vera said goodbye and left.

"So, shall we go for a walk?" I looked at Vovka and Natasha.

"Yes, let's go!" Vovka nodded.

We walked leisurely through the park to the movie theater. After two hours of club music, the silence of the park was a balm to my ears. Shortly after midnight we found ourselves at the hotel. Vovka left. Natasha and I walked a few more stops and took a taxi. Twenty minutes later we entered her apartment. That night I stayed at Natasha's place for the first time. Falling asleep, I thought about the fact that my life was coming out of the darkness

and into the light – my apartment was being built, my business was growing, and I was dating a beautiful and intelligent girl. What more does a young guy need on his birthday? The positive events in my life finally began to outweigh the negative ones – my difficult relationship with my father and my mother's crazy behavior. But I hoped things would get better in my family, too. I reflexively hugged Natasha's hot, sleepy body tighter, pulled her close to me, buried my face in her hair, relaxed my muscles, and immediately fell asleep in the middle of the humming, empty room on the only mattress on the floor.

CHAPTER 38

After my birthday I found a monetary gain in my pockets. On Tuesday, July 18, after work, the "Mazda" drove to Sergey's dacha and carried me in the back seat.

"Seryoga, stop in front of the construction company!" I said.

"What, you're taking the money for the apartment?" he looked at me in the mirror.

"Yes, I collected a little here..." I said. "You and Vovka gave me some money!"

"Did Vovan give you money too?" Sergey said.

"Yes, he gave me a nickel, just like you," I nodded.

"What did Natasha give you?" Vera added, turning slightly.

"Natasha?" I was surprised by the question and said without thinking: "She didn't give me anything! What does it matter? She'll give me something later! She's a girl – she came and that's enough!"

But the question puzzled, confused and stumped me. I was embarrassed, either for myself or for Natasha, and my ears were burning with heat, so I shut up.

"So, how much are you going to take to the apartment now?" Sergey saved me from the pause.

"Not much, fifteen thousand! I'm only buying one meter!" I said.

"You're going to take another nickel from your salary, aren't you?" Sergey guessed.

"Well, yes, obviously!" I spread my hands.

"Well! You never know!" Sergey smiled and chewed on his lip. "Maybe you have another business, maybe you earn money somewhere at night without me!"

"Naaah..." I smiled too. "Go on with you... Nothing like that... I only take what we earn with you..."

The car pulled up to the curb, and after saying goodbye until tomorrow, I got out.

As soon as I entered the manager's office, I heard the news – the prices had gone up.

"Twenty-one??? For one meter!???" I froze, took a step towards the chair and sat down.

"Yes! Don't you know that!?" The woman rustled the papers on the table, looking for the right one. "A week ago, prices jumped all over the country! You see, we signed the contract with you just in time! Otherwise you wouldn't have bought an apartment at those prices now!"

"Yeah..." I mumbled, still in a daze. "It's just that I read a forecast in the newspaper about such a price hike, and we argued with my partner about whether there would be such a hike or not..."

"Why were you arguing?" the manager asked in surprise. "Here it is! It's already happened!"

I shook my head in silence, stunned.

"And that's not the end of it!" the woman added.

"Are apartments going to go up in price even more?" I stared.

"Of course! It will definitely be thirty by the end of the year!" the woman said confidently. "At the end of the summer there will most likely be another price hike..."

"Okay, you're really freaking me out. I'd better go to accounting..." I said confusedly, stood up, grinned wryly, mumbled "goodbye" and walked thoughtfully down the corridor. Having received a check for 15120 rubles in the accounting department, I went out into the street and walked home just as thoughtfully. There was something to think about – luck or a miracle. I couldn't make up my mind. Luck, definitely. How come the idea of buying an apartment hit me? And not just hit me, but persistently pounded my brain from the inside until I fulfilled its requirements. What was it? Intuition? At the new prices, the apartment was worth one million three hundred thousand. Even with two percent, it didn't cost me more than nine hundred thousand. Four hundred out of nowhere! Almost fifty percent increase in price! Oh-ho-ho! It's a miracle! I managed to jump onto the rear platform of the last car of the departing train! If I had waited six months, the prospect of my own apartment would have been a long time away. I'm twenty-nine. The apartment will be completed when I am... Thirty! I suddenly remembered my thought and stopped, stunned. The thought that came to me a long time ago, but came so confidently that I believed in it – I will buy my own apartment when I am thirty! It gave me the chills! How did I know that back then!? How!??? It's an amazing coincidence... Coincidence??? Or is it intuition? Or a miracle? What was that!? Stunned by the puzzle that suddenly fell into place in my mind, I slowly walked forward. At home, I told my father the news and said, "Imagine, Dad, if we hadn't brought the money then, we wouldn't see the apartment now..."

My father smoked excitedly on the balcony, hesitated for a few seconds, and then said "yeah" meaningfully, adding a little later, "It turned out interesting".

And he showed no more emotions, but I was torn up inside by them. I couldn't contain my joy at being so incredibly lucky. All weekend long I was almost jumping for joy and reigniting the conversation with my dad about the timely purchase. He didn't even seem pleased. My father was lukewarm in his support, more out of tact than anything else. Or maybe he was just tired after another run and wanted to rest before the next one.

"Seryoga, fuck!!! I'm going to tell you something, you're going to be fucking shocked!" I burst into the office the next morning and sat down in the chair by the door. "Son of a bitch!"

"What happened there!???" He played along with me, a worried look on his face, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms over his chest.

"You won't believe it!" I continued to pique interest, shifting my gaze from Sergey to Vera. "Apartment prices have skyrocketed! Just like the forecast said it would jump, it did! Do you know how much one meter of my apartment costs!? You'll never guess!"

"So, how much?" Sergey muttered.

"Twenty-one thousand!!! Remember when you brought in the paper and there was this fucking chart that predicted that housing prices would go up fifty percent in 2006!???"

"Yeah," Sergey muttered again.

"Yeah, yeah, they did! You said at the time – no, twenty percent will be the usual growth and that's it! And I thought – fuck knows what it's going to be like!"

I jumped up and down in my chair and stopped talking for a second to catch my breath.

"Did your construction company tell you that?" Sergey knitted his brows and fidgeted restlessly in his chair.

"Yeah, the manager said that!" I nodded. "And she said that this is not all and that by the end of the year a meter will cost thirty for sure! Fucking thirty, Seryoga!"

"If my apartment cost eight hundred and fifty thousand in old money, then now," I looked at Vera, who ran her fingers lightning fast over the calculator and said:

"A million... well... about a million three hundred..."

"There you go! And at thirty percent," I looked at Sergey, "one million eight hundred! Twice as much!!!"

He chewed his bottom lip nervously and jerked his knee from behind the table.

"Yeah... That's tough," he said after a long pause, during which he looked at me with a detached, almost glassy stare.

"Oh dear," said Vera, bringing her husband out of his stupor. Sergey perked up, turned his head toward her, and still thoughtfully said:

"Didn't Vitya Butenko manage to buy two apartments there?"

"Well, yes, they said that they had signed a contract and, like Romka, they also brought money, paid, and I think they had paid everything or not yet, well, I don't remember!" Vera waved away the details that did not interest her, but that Sergey was meticulously absorbed in.

"I think he's paid for some of it," he said. "Or he's paid one and partially paid the other... I don't remember either! I'll have to ask Vitya!"

"Why, did he buy two apartments?" I wondered, looking between the tables.

"He bought the neighboring apartments on the top floor," Sergey said. "You know... there are three apartments on the floor, and he merged two of them... and now he has a penthouse under the roof..."

"Whoa! It's awesome! I like it!" I nodded. "I'd do it too, if I had the money! Nice! Two bathrooms, two toilets, two kitchens! He bought two two-room apartments?"

"No, I think there's one three-room and the other two-room... or two three-room."

"Holy shit, he's got himself a real penthouse!" I kept wondering.

"Yeah! I'm telling you! He's got it under control!" Sergey nodded. "He has his own car dealership..."

"Well, you see, people buy Chinese cars after all, since he can buy two apartments at once!"

"Yeah, they do. They're cheap..." Sergey muttered thoughtfully. "Why not, he has a jeep worth five hundred thousand! A nice one, I've seen it... I'd get one of those for myself!"

"So Vitya's doing fine! Nice job!" I said.

Sergey listened to the sentence with a sour face, sighed and, unclasping his hands, said:

"Yeah, Vitya's doing fine..."

In the middle of the week, Vovka called and asked if I could help him move – in the pre-wedding rush, he was leaving his rented apartment and moving his stuff to Lera's. There was a flicker of shyness in Vovka's voice and I realized that he was uncomfortable asking me for help.

"Ramses, I got a deal with some dudes at 'Pelican'! Three more will come up, maybe four! Anyway, there will be guys there, would you come and help if you can?"

"Vova, of course I will!" I said, realizing that my friend needed help.

The morning of the appointed day, I went to his house and there was a truck parked in the driveway with an elevator platform in the back. As I walked up the crooked stairs, I felt a little pang in my chest – it was a pity that Vovka's bachelor life was coming to an end, and with it our parties. "The wild times are over," I thought as I saw the apartment door open and immediately heard a familiar voice. Vovka paced up and down, cursing.

"Ramses, fuck, hello!" Vovka shook my hand in response to my greeting. "The guys will be here soon and we'll start carrying everything down to the fucking car! I'm moving out,

Ramses, I'll be damned, Lera will ring me in a week and that's it, you'll be the only one left here unmarried!"

I looked around the apartment, almost everything was already packed into bags and boxes. In half an hour, the two of us had the rest of the stuff packed – we could start moving.

"Where the fuck are they!?" Vovka shouted. "Maybe down there at the entrance!?"

"Yeah, maybe..." I shrugged and Vovka rushed out into the street, I followed him.

There was no one at the entrance.

"Well, Ramses, let's wait another ten minutes and start carrying them, and they'll help us when they come," Vovka said nervously, shifting his eyes and not looking into mine.

"Vova, no one will come..." I said the obvious. "We'll have to carry everything ourselves... So, why don't we get started? They will help if they come."

"Yeah, Ramses, fuck 'em all! Let's do it!" Vovka said, twirling the phone in his hand for several minutes, hesitating to call.

We started with the light stuff – bags. We moved things around pretty quickly, walking up and down, stretching. Towards the end, the heavy stuff remained – the refrigerator and the washing machine. Four floors down crooked stairs, it was cramped too. We rested a little on each floor. Hot, sweaty, but we made it. Everything was to be unloaded in the same apartment in the same building, only downtown and on the fifth floor. When I heard the news from Vovka, I groaned, but climbed into the cabin. Twenty minutes later, we were there.

"Lera's uncle and his son will help us!" Vovka said encouragingly.

He was still uncomfortable, I could understand that. It was a sizzler. The two of us started lifting things. The same kind of entrance, the same crooked steps and narrow passages. Soon two men came up, it became easier and things went faster. We were done in an hour. After saying goodbye to my friend, I staggered home, tired but in a great mood.

My relationship with Natasha has somehow revived and taken on a new quality. We started seeing each other and waking up together in her room more often. I was so used to the lack of home comforts that I didn't pay any attention to the emptiness of the rented apartment. I was drawn to the inward peace. It was absent in my family, and since my father was regularly on the run, the apartment became a physically dead place. My mother's face and body had faded from the long absence of daylight. She had become a decrepit old woman with a crazy, empty, watery stare and a hateful expression. She would occasionally come out of her room like a shadow, make her way to the refrigerator, fumble around in it, take something back to her room and eat it there. Whenever I saw my mother, I felt creepy and tried to stay out of her sight.

On the 26th, around 9 p.m., I was walking downtown with Natasha when my father called. The sun had almost set, and the evening was quiet and serene. In a tired voice, my father said that he had returned from another trip and would leave the "GAZelle" with the goods at the market overnight, and he would stay there and start selling in the morning. The image of Vasya sneaking out at night to leave my father in an unknown place immediately came to my mind. After this incident, I was more worried about my father than ever. I wanted to run straight through the streets of the city and down to the market. But I just mumbled to myself in embarrassment that I would go to the market later today. My father was glad. After a few hours of meandering through the streets down to the reservoir, I found myself at the "water market" at twenty to midnight. There was a tired silence on the territory of the market – a large asphalt area with a lot of warehouses, containers and cabins, filled with trucks of different tonnage along the perimeter. Even the local dogs didn't run or bark. It's been a long day for everyone. I walked along the rows of cars, looking for our "GAZelle". I found it

quickly. The car was parked in the shared lane. I approached. Looked inside. My father was asleep. He was lying half-sideways, his head on the driver's seat, his arms folded across his chest so as not to rest on the gear knob, and his legs bent, one knee resting on the dashboard and the other perpendicular to the back of the seat. "Why didn't he go home to sleep? It's so uncomfortable," I thought, looking into my father's face. He slept the deep sleep of an exhausted man, his face drawn, his muscles stiff in a tense, anxious state. I stepped away from the car and walked back. After midnight, the city had fallen into a nighttime silence. I walked half an hour up a long hill and out of the poorly lit streets of the private sector into the bright lights of the center. I didn't bother to hail a cab, too many thoughts were swirling around in my head. My legs settled into a comfortable rhythm and carried my reverie home, stopping only occasionally at the 24-hour fast-food stands for a glass of coffee.

The next day, after I had barely done the current things at work, I called my father. The cheerful and energetic voice on the phone said he had been selling since eight in the morning, but sales were so-so. I said I would come up in the evening at the close of sales, and I was at the market at seven o'clock. The trade was over, all the goods were already stowed away in cars and warehouses. People walked tiredly through the market or sat in the cafes at the entrance, having dinner. Near my father's "GAZelle" there was a faucet sticking out of the wall at waist height, from which a jet of water whizzed a few meters away, and several men were washing themselves. They took turns putting their waist-bare backs under the stream, grunting and groaning from the coolness of the water, rubbing themselves with their hands, snorting, and jumping away. Seeing me, my father stepped back from the water and smiled. I staggered toward him. Vasily appeared between us, five steps from my father. Wiping his torso with a towel and smiling relaxedly through his mustache, he sauntered toward me. I continued to walk toward my father, noticing out of the corner of my eye that Vasily's hand began to rise, reaching out to shake mine. He was close now. Without changing my direction, I walked around him and held out my hand to my father.

"Hi, Dad!" I said and felt a firm handshake.

My father did it with passion. A handshake was almost the only expression of emotion my father allowed himself. He is never lavish of it. Dry as a desert to the senses. That's how his mother raised him, having once said that children shouldn't feel how much their parents love them. I hardly did. Any accomplishments I made were accompanied only by a handshake. I do something well – a handshake or silent approval. Or simply no disapproval. Not even the words "well done" were uttered. And I grew up with that – no disapproval as approval. That's the ultimate fatherly affection. And so I immediately understood the message of that handshake – my father was thanking me for my support. And I was happy that our relationship had warmed up.

"So, Dad, how was the sale, did you sell a lot of tomatoes?" I said, deliberately standing with my back to Vasily, who, after a certain incident, ceased to exist for me as a person.

"Not really..." my father exhaled, wiping his face with a towel after washing. "Phew... sold the fourth part... sales are not very good..."

"It's okay, you'll sell the rest tomorrow," I said, and we went to the "GAZelle".

"I hope so... After noon, a truck arrived with tomatoes, but yesterday no one was here, I could sell for a good price... You never know..."

"And this one... Has your Vasya sold anything?" I asked, looking around.

"Yes, Vasya sold almost everything!" My father was excited. "He's been spinning like a top since this morning! While I was sorting it, setting up the scales, taking out the boxes, some buyers came up to him and bought half a ton at a time. And then at eleven o'clock someone bought another half-ton, and so on, he sold some more... Tomorrow, he said, he'd finish selling the rest and go for another batch."

"What about you?" I wondered.

"What about me?" My father waved his hand at the car, "I'm going to sell it! There's more than a ton here... and I have to sell it in two days or it will be spoiled by the heat..."

I stayed with my father for about an hour. We had a bottle of beer at a sidewalk cafe and my father stayed in the car again. I wished him good luck and walked back up the hill. Once again my mind was spinning with all kinds of things. Why did my father choose the most difficult and risky business option? You drive, roll for thousands of kilometers, you load and unload, you sleep in the car, the goods are perishable, the prices jump – all the risks and inconveniences. Why? It's easier to organize a business similar to the existing one, or something more reliable. No, he decided to break his back... with this asshole who left him alone right away... I didn't understand how my father could work with that asshole after that, I wouldn't have shaken his hand, which I didn't... Maybe he had no pride or dignity... After all we could sit down together, come up with some new business – and knock yourself out! "No... "He's carrying these tomatoes. I hope he's making good money with them... Otherwise, if the income is the usual, why make such a fuss? It's not worth it."

My father sold the rest in two days, slept at home on Saturday and left again on Sunday evening. Vasily came back on Sunday with a new batch. On Wednesday my father arrived with two tons of tomatoes. He sold them for a long time, like five days. And when he was done, he said he wasn't going anywhere anymore. My father was nervous, so I didn't bother him, but a few days later he told me everything. It turned out that he had called Vasya from the south to find out the price of tomatoes in our market. Vasya said that the price was high and that my father could buy it at the price the farmers were offering and bring it in. But Vasya was lying – my father had arrived, the price had been kept low for a few days. All because of two trucks – they brought in forty tons of tomatoes and drove the prices down. All those who brought smaller quantities of tomatoes, like my father, lost money. My father also sold the goods at a loss. He made good money only on the first batch, subsequent batches yielded smaller profits, and the last batch was a loss. My father was depressed, I sympathized with him, but in my heart I was glad it was over. I could see my father curled up in his sleep in the car. I did not wish him such a fate.

Vovka got married. The wedding took place on the last weekend of July. Vovka asked me to photograph the event, and I ran around with my camera all Saturday, capturing meaningful moments. Carrying the bride over the bridge is one of them. In our town center there is an old stone bridge, a short one, literally fifteen meters. And grooms carry brides over it in their arms. On either side of the bridge are lanterns, dressed waist-deep in a square brick "shirt". No sooner had I photographed Lera's transfer across the bridge than the newlyweds moved on to the next tradition. The wedding guests occupied the bridge. Lera took a bottle of champagne in her hand, Vovka put his hand over hers. I got ready. Both of them brought the bottle to the corner of the lantern "shirt" to perform the ritual of breaking a bottle of champagne for good luck. The people on the bridge froze. Lera swung languidly, obviously cautious, and slammed the bottle against the corner. It didn't break. Vovka snorted, supported by a few chuckles on the bridge.

"Let's do it again," Vovka ordered.

Lera slammed the bottle against the corner. Clink! The bottle bounced right back up. A dozen voices laughed on the bridge.

"Lera!" Vovka said nervously and laughed apologetically.

Clink! The stone corner parried a blow. The bride laughed, the bridge rumbled.

"Give me the fucking bottle!!!" shouted Vovka, flying off the handle, snatching the champagne out of his wife's hands and smashing the bottle against the corner. "Here you fucking go!!! That's how you do it!"

Lera looked at me and smiled. Bridge exhaled in relief and headed for the cars.

They rented a semi-basement cafe in the center for the wedding. The toastmaster started torturing the guests with stupid contests and other entertaining bullshit, and they responded by gorging themselves on food and vodka. After an hour, when the toastmaster was exhausted and the dancing began, I sneaked out and went home. I even managed to take a nap there and returned to the cafe four hours later at eight o'clock. The wedding had already descended into a drunken frenzy, and no one noticed my absence. It was over by ten. I said goodbye to the newlyweds, walked towards the club and called Natasha.

"01.08.06 90.720 6m² 48m²" – I wrote down in my day planner that evening and closed the book with satisfaction. The day before, Sergey and I took ninety thousand each as a bonus.

"Romych, shall we take some money from the common fund for ourselves?" Sergey said, taking two hundred thousand out of his briefcase and putting it on the table.

"I don't know," I thought, calculating our debts to suppliers.

"Vera, look, to whom and how much do we owe?" Sergey guessed my thoughts.

She went through her notes, saying numbers and deadlines.

"It's all right!" Sergey summarized. "There are no urgent payments, our warehouse is full..."

"Well..." I thought. "If that's the case, then... I guess we could!"

"Here we go!" Sergey smiled and started to divide the money into two parts. "Vera, write off one hundred and eighty from me, and a bonus for me and Romka... Or maybe we'll take a hundred each!?"

My partner froze with wads of cash in his hands.

"No, ninety is fine!" I said, mentally calculating the amount I needed.

"You'll probably take yours for the apartment, won't you?" Sergey looked at me carefully.

"What else, Seryoga?" I hummed, smiling. "Not for boozing..."

"How should I know!" he said complacently. "Maybe you and Vovan will rent a VIP bathhouse with a pool full of champagne and chicks with boobs like that!"

Without letting go of the money, Sergey drew two huge circles from his chest into the air, as far as his arms could reach, and laughed.

"No, Seryoga, what chicks?" I laughed, casting a cautious glance at Vera, who was squinting at her husband. "I have Natasha, Vovka got married..."

"Really!?!?" Sergey seethed with exaggerated interest. "Vovan got married!?"

"Yeah..." I nodded. "This weekend... Lera is already seven months pregnant..."

"Roman! Your friend is going to be a father soon, and when are you!?" Vera said.

"Vera, I'm not even married yet, let me get married first! Then we can talk about children," I smiled.

"Marry your Natasha!" said Vera. "She's a good girl!"

"Right," Sergey said, digging his hands almost elbow deep into his briefcase and sticking his nose in. "Natasha's a nice girl..."

He lifted his head above the "suitcase," looked at his wife, and said:

"Now, Verok, we have something to celebrate your and Lilka's birthday with!"

"Shit, Seryoga!" I snorted, "You have regular birthdays! You just had one recently..."

"Romka was the one who had it..." said Vera.

"Ah-ha..." I said.

"By the way, I gave him the book you told me about!" Sergey said, shaking his index finger in my direction. "This, whadayacalit...? This comedy...?"

And he fell silent, embarrassed.

"The Divine Comedy," I helped.

"Right, that's the one!" Sergey nodded. "Let him read it, my bro likes to read."

"Have you read it yourself? What do you think?" I was suddenly interested.

"Roman, when am I supposed to read it!?" Sergey exclaimed. "I have a family, two kids... I'm always exhausted..."

"Man, that's too bad!" I cooled down. "You should read it, it's awesome!"

"Well..." Sergey smiled and shook his head. "One day... maybe... I will."

I realized with disappointment that this would never happen.

"Seryoga, listen!" I picked up the topic of conversation, having found out that I was interested in a temporary lapse in my partner's biography, we were once again driving around the city in the "Mazda". "So you worked on the 'ZiL', ran over this fucking 'Zaporozhets'... You got kicked out... Where did you work then? What did you do?"

He looked at me, smiled at the mention of the accident, and took a deep breath:

"Romych, I've done all sorts of things! I went to Bulgaria to get goods, I sold cassettes, I even sold Pepsi-Cola... you know, in cans!"

"Oh, yeah..."

"We used to bring it in wholesale by the carload and sell it here, distribute it to the kiosks!"

"Oh! Wow!" I was surprised. "What, really by the carload!???"

"Yes!" my partner waved his hand confidently. "What did you think... I made a good deal back then!"

I was somewhat surprised by the new facts of Sergey's biography. My imagination vividly drew a picture from his words – carload deliveries, large volumes of sales... But somehow it didn't fit. I had an idea of the principles of trade, knew the people and the level of income in the "nineties". The Pepsi-Cola rail car and the image of Sergey, as I had seen him when I first met him and as I knew him now, appeared in my mind. One didn't fit the other. That was what puzzled me.

"You brought Pepsi here by the carload with someone else?" I clarified.

"Yes! I remember unloading the rail car at night! Those, you know, big packages... Pepsi, Seven Up, Mirinda... And then we'd take them to the kiosks and sell them."

"Fuck, Seryoga, with such volumes you must have made some fucking money!" I frowned in disbelief. "Even if you only sold one rail car, it was fucking great money! But where did you get the money to buy a rail car in the first place!?"

"Roman, you see! We should have made money, but we didn't. Yes, we made some money, but then we started buying fucking walkie-talkies to talk to each other so we wouldn't be discovered, some incomprehensible waste of money... here and there... and all that... never mind!" Sergey waved me away annoyed.

I was silent for a minute, processing a bunch of fragmentary information in my head, trying to glue something good out of it and build a coherent picture – it didn't work.

"How many of you were there?" I said.

"Three..." Sergey said annoyed. "We started doing some bullshit..."

"Seryoga, so you only supplied goods to kiosks and didn't work with wholesalers?" I tried to find out what volume of goods appeared in the story.

"We only got into these wholesalers at the very end! When we were already being overrun by other companies! I said at the beginning that we should take over the wholesalers, but my dumbasses were like 'No way! We have to lay low! Or they'll come after us!' So we ran around the kiosks until we broke up..."

"Why did you broke up? You could have started some other business...besides, you made money..."

"No, there were some suspicions, rattling..." Sergey grimaced and waved me away. "Roman, you can't trust people! They all betray you! I don't know about you, but everyone screwed me over..."

"I don't know," I shrugged. "My father and I haven't ditched anyone, and no one has ditched us..."

"Roman! That's just the way you are! And so am I! And people, they're just..." My partner spread his hands and brought them back, the left one on the steering wheel, the right one on the gear stick. "That's why you and I get along... Let's go buy some bananas!"

The car, without waiting for my answer, turned right and ducked into a parking lot in front of the fast-food kiosk in the center of the village where we regularly bought food.

"How did you end up in 'Sasha'?" I continued my questioning.

"You know, Davidych was one of the 'Arbalest' owners before..."

"Really??? Wow! I didn't know that!" I was surprised. "So that's it!"

"Yes. Davidych also took Vera with him. And when he left 'Arbalest', he took her and another girl with him... Verok, she proved herself in 'Arbalest' and Davidych took her... And he and the owner of 'Fluffy' started 'Sasha' together... They worked together before!"

"Whoa! I didn't know that..." I was silent, thinking about the new information, after a few seconds I continued. "So... Davidych took Vera from 'Arbalest', but how did you get to 'Sasha'?"

"Verok recommended me to him!"

"Ah, I see!" I nodded.

"Davidych was looking for a manager to take care of wholesale sales, and Vera put in a good word for me... And I started working at 'Sasha'..."

"What year was that?" I was puzzled, trying to piece together a timeline of events.

"I don't really remember... Maybe '95..."

"So Davidych and the owner of 'Fluffy' started together? Why did they split up? How long did they work together?"

"I came, and after two years they separated... And the year before that... Maybe we could take some food to the office too?" Sergey suggested and I nodded.

After picking up a bag of food, we continued on to the factory.

"Oh, the food has arrived!" Vera clapped her hands. "I'm so hungry, boys!"

"Here, eat something!" Sergey put the bag on the table in front of his wife.

"I was thinking..." I said, jabbing my finger at the kettle button. "We still need to find a canteen... We're eating fast food all the time, and that's not good..."

"Roman, where will you find a canteen around here?" Sergey stared at me.

"Seryoga, there are businesses everywhere, like the brick factory at the last bus stop. One stop from here... There must be a canteen there! We'll have to go and find out."

I was right, and the next day we had lunch in the factory canteen.

In the second half of August, at the end of the work week, I found myself at Sergey's house for the first time. As soon as the "Mazda" parked in front of his driveway, I got out and looked around – a paneled L-shaped house in pale blue paint stood between the park and the one-story houses of the private sector. Remembering that Sergey's apartment was on the top ninth floor, I looked up.

"We have windows on the other side," Vera said.

The three of us got into the elevator and went up. The bell rang. Roma opened the door.

"Hey, bro!" Sergey said, going in first.

"Daddy! Daddy's here! Mommy!" Lilka shouted, looking out the door of the apartment. Behind her back, little Lyonya was staring at me in his underwear.

The apartment turned out to be spacious: a square hall of about fifteen square meters; in its left wall, two doors – a bathroom and a toilet; to the right – a large living room; directly in the middle – the door to the nursery; diagonally to the left – the kitchen and behind it a cramped balcony of three square meters. I took off my shoes, stepped onto the tiled floor, and Sergey began a tour of his domain.

"Your kitchen is awesome!" I said sincerely, running my hand over the heavy countertop.

"Yes!" Sergey beamed with pride. "Forty thousand back then, imagine!"

"Wow!" I was amazed, as I had calculated that a normal set would have cost half as much.

"Well..." Sergey went on, turning the handle of the balcony door. "We have a balcony here!"

We went inside. Romka came in next, took out a cigarette, went to the window, lit it, and spat on the street.

"How cramped it is here," I said, looking around and turning carefully on the spot.

"I don't even understand why we need this balcony!" Sergey perked up. "It would be better to make the kitchen bigger! I can also spit out of the window!"

"Seryoga, Vera is actually drying the laundry here," I looked up at the clotheslines and smiled, realizing that my partner had a vague idea about household chores.

He changed his face when he realized he had made a mistake and looked at me in displeasure.

The next stop on the tour was the bathroom and toilet.

"Oh! What, you didn't do anything in here!?" I froze in surprise at the open bathroom door, opened the next door, and it was the same. Both rooms were as they had been bought – painted walls, whitewashed ceilings, and cheap plumbing. I looked at Sergey. He was embarrassed and started making excuses:

"Roman, you can't do everything at once! I have done the most important thing. You think it's easy to do everything? I had a hard time with the parquet in the hall, I had to lay it twice! Renovating an apartment is not that easy! When you get your apartment and start renovating, you'll see what I'm talking about. I'll do it! You and I each took ninety thousand, so I'll use it! You took yours for the apartment, but I'll have to spend it on the bathroom and toilet so that Lyonya and Lilya can poop comfortably! Good thing you're not a family man!"

The speech surprised me. It was as if Sergey had revealed something that had been sitting restlessly in his head.

"Seryoga, I'm just saying," I shrugged. "Well, you'll do this... You've already done almost everything but this... So why are you so worked up? It's your expenses in the apartment, you're not throwing money away, are you?"

There was a pause. We continued in awkward silence.

The nursery was modest, just the bare necessities – two cribs and a toy corner. As I left the room, I pulled on the door, but it banged against the jamb.

"Shit, Roman, it won't close!" Sergey swung the door back open and chuckled awkwardly. "I've had a lot of trouble with it, I'll have to call a repair specialist to fix it!"

Driven by my meticulousness, I went back into the room, let Sergey in, and tried to close the door again. The door frame was bent inward from the sides.

"Wow, why is it so bent, Seryoga!???" I wondered.

My partner waved his hands, burst out laughing, covered his face with his hands, uncovered it, and said:

"Damn, Roman, you have no idea how much trouble I had with this door! I installed it, everything was fine, I put the foam in, the foam dried up and I couldn't close the door! I put in too much foam and the frame swelled up! Got it? I started digging out the foam! It took

me half a day! There were pieces of foam all over the floor! I laughed, Vera laughed! I managed to close the door with pain and misery! But then it did not close again! I'll have to install it again! Got it?"

After telling the story in a joking manner, Sergey stared at me questioningly.

"I got it, but why were you foaming with the door open? It's clear that the frame will be torn apart, the door can't be closed afterwards... You should have closed it and then foamed it..."

"Shit, Roman! Looks like you know everything!" Sergey parried irritably, and his cheerfulness was washed away from his face, and he looked at me harshly and unhappily.

"It's not that, Seryoga..." I shrugged, feeling my partner's sting, and added conciliatorily, "Anyway, you'll do it... It's just a door... Let's go there."

I smiled and nodded in the direction of the living room. It was unusually long, with a large aquarium dividing it roughly into two halves. The closer part was occupied by a classic pair of a TV and a couch with a coffee table in front of it and an armchair on the side. The part behind the aquarium was occupied by a double bed. Behind it was a rectangular alcove, empty, as if it had no use and had been left as it was.

"Wow! Awesome!" came out of my mouth. "What a big aquarium!"

"Four hundred liters," said Sergey.

Behind his back, the children appeared silently, stood hesitantly by the couch and stared at me. Vera came in with plates of food and started to set the table.

"Was there a balcony here too?" I looked at the contours of the alcove and noticed that its shape was exactly the size of a balcony in typical panel houses.

"Yes, there was a balcony," Sergey put his hands at his sides and immediately began to wave them. "I smashed everything here... these partitions, cut them out with a perforator, and made some space."

"The room got bigger!" I nodded and walked over to the large window. "How many square meters did you say your apartment was? Sixty-eight or seventy-one?"

"No, not sixty-eight!" Sergey said. "I remember! Seventy-one!"

I easily understood the meaning of his haste – Sergey wanted to measure apartments with me. I smiled and turned back to the window, the view was beautiful – there were no high-rise buildings right up to the water, and the reservoir stretched out before my eyes. Only one-story houses spoiled it with their squalor. Suddenly the instigator in me came to life and I said:

"Seventy-one is it with or without balconies, Seryoga? Because the balcony area doesn't count as living space, and you've added a balcony here..."

"Roman, I don't remember!" He began to wriggle. "I'll have to look for documents."

When I guessed Sergey's reaction, I smiled and realized one of his peculiarities – to measure his achievements with others. At the same time, I remembered a conversation I had long ago about lifting weights. The conversation flashed in my memory and only confirmed the assumption – then I mentioned my maximum weight in the weightlifting press, Sergey followed with his – a little more. I found this observation interesting.

"It's just that if you count with balconies, it's less square meters without balconies..."

"No, no! It's without the balconies! Exactly without balconies!" Sergey added with the expected heat. I smiled inwardly, finding this behavior funny and even childish – like a boy in the sandbox proving that his soldiers are better.

"Boys, you can sit down to eat! Everything is ready!" Vera's voice sang from behind us.

I turned around – the table was completely full of plates. My eyes widened in amazement. It was as if the table had been covered with a magic tablecloth. Whoosh, and there it was – salads, jellied meat, smoked pelmeni, sweets for tea. There was a bottle of

vodka in the middle of the table. I suddenly realized that I was embarrassed by all this attention and pampering. When had a woman ever treated me like this? I couldn't remember.

Romka came into the living room, turned on the TV and sat down in the armchair.

"Roman, take a seat!" he said, blinking through his thick glasses.

I walked around the table, sat down on the couch, and noticed Lyonya under the table. His mouth was open and he was studying me with interest. I winked and waved my hand at the child. Lyonya retreated a little. Lilya, who was standing by the TV, shrieked and, like all children who want to attract attention, climbed under the table to her brother and immediately created a crowd there. Lyonya puffed, rattled, shrugged, and waved at his sister. Lilya, squealing and showing her big baby teeth, went her own way. Lyonya whimpered, gave his sister a weak kick, and backed away.

"Lilya!" Sergey shouted. "Why are you bothering Lyonya?"

"Dad, I'm not..." she calmed down frightened.

Lyonya looked at me again, studied me, crawled out from under the table, stood up and walked over to Sergey's brother, who was fiddling with the remote, changing the TV channels. He stopped. Rhythmic music came from the TV. Lyonya turned to the sound, came to the screen and, enchanted by the flickering images, twitched to the rhythm on his crooked baby legs. Lilya immediately forgot her fear, grinned happily, ran to her brother and began to jump squealing, trying to outdance him.

"Pumpkin-headed," I thought, feeling aversion to the girl. I could smell food coming from the kitchen. Vera walked back and forth, transforming the coffee table into a festive board. Sergey sat down on the couch, opened a bottle of vodka and raked three glasses from the table with his fingers.

"No, Seryoga, I won't!" I protested.

"Athlete!?" his brother said, fixing his glasses on the bridge of his nose with his finger.

"Yes, Roman is working out! Hee-hee!" Sergey cackled. "Bro, will you have one?"

"Sure, bro!" Romka waved decisively, and the vodka flowed into two glasses.

Lilya, after glancing at me a few times and seeing my lack of interest, stopped twitching and went into the kitchen. Lyonya danced and stared thoughtfully at the flickering clip on the screen. I looked at him. After turning around a few times, the boy noticed my interest, and as soon as the music ended, he was back under the table.

"Lyonya, why are you sitting there?" Sergey said. "Get out of there!"

"Come here... to us..." I waved to the child, patting the couch with my hand. He crawled and stood on the couch up to his full height. I took the child and sat him down between me and Sergey. Lyonya got an apple from his father and started chewing it. After half an hour the feast was over – Roma went to the balcony to smoke, and Sergey to the kitchen with his wife. I went to the window, opened it and looked out. The sun was already setting, the city was frozen in the evening heat. "A week or two and that's it, the evenings will get cooler," I thought and turned around. Lyonya was standing at my feet, looking at me with blue eyes. Silently I took him and lifted him up. There was no objection. Lyonya settled into my arms as if by habit.

"Look how beautiful it is, huh?" I told him, turning to look out the window.

The little boy was staring out the window with all his eyes, his cheeks and lips pouting. He was a carbon copy of his father. I started talking to him, telling him about the scenery. Lyonya took a deep breath and, keeping his eyes on the window, wrapped his arms around my neck. "Friends now," I realized.

The next minute my head was spinning with thoughts of family, children and Natasha. I was trying on the role of husband and father. "I think it's time. I'll be thirty soon... Everyone's already married... even Vovka, for the second time... I'm the only fool here. And

I've got a decent girl... and I want to hold such a little baby in my arms... my own." I sighed and put the child on the floor. He looked at me and we walked over to the table. I wanted to leave immediately, call Natasha and start building my own happiness, not wiping the corners of someone else's. I turned the image of Vera and Sergey's family and could not get rid of the thought that people could do it, that life could be like that – good children, a decent husband and wife – everything is fine! I felt wistful and tight in my chest. I tried my best to get rid of these thoughts, but to no avail. For the next half hour Vera, Sergey and Roma said something to me. I answered something with a strained smile. I had to leave, to be alone, to regain my composure.

I stayed for another hour or so, but the uneasiness didn't go away. Vera continued to fuss around the house, seeming to have time for everything and paying attention to everyone. Sergey and his brother had a few more drinks, ate and stared at the TV. Sergey asked me something. I answered sluggishly. The evening was not going well. I picked a moment, said goodbye and left. I walked a long way to the bridge. I thought about what was important. My intuition never failed me. I thought about the night I lay in bed with a worsening ulcer and passed out from stomach pains. That moment was significant. I knew it. I saw something important, but I only vaguely understood what it was. This knowledge slowly revealed itself to me like a riddle. The only thing I knew for sure, nine months after that night, was that I was not born to do what I was doing.

CHAPTER 39

By the end of the month, I had managed to raise some more money, and there was an entry in my notebook: "30.08.06 15.120 1m² 49m²"

We never received any dichlorvos in August. Their leftovers went to customers the first week, and for the next three weeks we sat without the main seasonal product at the peak of sales. I was nervous and angry, while Sergey was surprisingly complacent and didn't seem to care about the lost profits.

"Next year we'll be stocking up on dichlorvos!" I said at the end of the month. "So we have enough for the whole season and even the winter!"

"Gah-gah-gah!" Sergey laughed his intentionally rude laugh and threw his head up. "Roman's going hyphy!"

And this laughter started to get on my nerves.

On the first day of fall, the railroad crossing that led to our factory was closed for two weeks for repairs. We were expecting a car full of late dichlorvos any day now, so we were worried. But, as Petya said, there was another road, also dirt, that led from the factory in the opposite direction, to the other end of town. And on that road there was a bridge, a small one. "Very flimsy, and a truck can't go over it, a car can, but not a truck," Petya added, chewing seeds and spitting carelessly so that the husks didn't fly off at once, but stuck to his chin and fell off later. Sergey would leave the "Mazda" at the crossing for the time of repairs, and Petya would drive on the spare road. But what about the truck? I suggested that Sergey and I go and check the bridge. The bridge was indeed flimsy – it was shaking slightly under the weight of the loaded "GAZelle".

"Roman, what are we going to do with the truck?" said my partner, puzzled.

"Nothing, Seryoga!" I said and made a decision. "We will overload it here! It will reach the bridge, and here we'll reload the goods to Petya's 'GAZelle' and he'll take them to the warehouse. There is no other way!"

"But we have three tons in there!" Sergey looked at me helplessly.

"Then we'll make two trips or ask my father to help us!" I added, irritated not so much by the flimsiness of the bridge as by my partner's attitude.

The truck arrived on September 4th. We were lucky with the weather – the temperature was above twenty-five and there was no sign of rain. My father agreed to help us. Sergey and I drove the "Mazda" to meet the truck and bring it to the bridge. Both "GAZelles" came from the factory. We reloaded the goods in the middle of the street – a large private sector on the outskirts of the city. Sergey and I, dressed in T-shirts, shorts and flip-flops, handed over the goods from the back. Petya, Senya and the loader took boxes from outside. It took us about two hours. We were sweaty, tired, and covered in fine, disgusting dust.

"Fuck, uh..." Sergey said, slowly straightening up and climbing out of the truck onto the ground.

"What, your back?" I guessed.

"Yeah... Fucking hell!" He wrinkled his nose and wiped small beads of sweat from his face with the back of his hand. "I have a bad back... uh..."

"Mine hurts too, we worked hard today..." I said, catching my breath and feeling the T-shirt stick uncomfortably to my back.

When Sergey and I arrived at the warehouse in the "Mazda", Senya and the loader who had unloaded Petya had already half emptied my father's "GAZelle".

"Dad, come on, get out!" I said, and I climbed into the back of the "GAZelle" and started handing out boxes instead of my father. My father had already helped us, and I was embarrassed that he was carrying our goods as well.

It was almost six o'clock when Sergey and I went to the water faucet at the gatehouse. There, having stripped to the waist, we washed our faces, washed off the sweat and dirt, and went back. A hard, nervous Monday was coming to an end.

"Do you want a ride?" Sergey looked at me.

"Huh? No... I'll go with my father," I waved him away. "No need for you to circle around because of me..."

"Roman, but I don't mind!" Sergey waved his hands. "Why don't I drive you?"

"I'll go with my old man," I waved my hand again. "He's here, he's going home anyway..."

After drying off, Sergey and I put our T-shirts back on. There was a common tiredness in the air. Petya left. Senya closed the warehouse and went to his kennel, followed by the loader. Sergey got into the "Mazda" and drove to the office.

"Shall we go?" My father looked at me and finished his cigarette greedily.

"Yes, let's go," I nodded and got into the "GAZelle". I didn't think about anything. I wanted to get home and shower as soon as possible. So we drove off. We left the "Mazda" at the office, passed the gatehouse and made an unusual right turn – we took a detour over the flimsy bridge. The shower was postponed for at least an hour. The "Mazda" appeared in the mirror behind us and followed.

"So how are things with you and Sergey, is everything okay?" my father said.

"Yes, everything is fine," I nodded. "We worked well during the summer, the quantities are growing. Now we'll bring poison in the fall, salts in October... We'll have to bring in more of it... We'll probably bring in a truckload at a time... and then in December perfume will come... Actually, we're lucky to have a good selection of goods! Everything Seryoga gave us from 'Sasha' went into business and sold well! Sales are already under a million a month! Our 'Luxchem' doesn't even make half of that... about the same sales we had before. We had a hundred and fifty, a hundred and eighty a month at the most, and here it's a

little over two hundred. All in all, this merger can be considered a success... I'm not saying that, of course, but I'm kind of freaking out, Dad, to be honest..."

For some reason, I even lowered my voice to a half-whisper.

"To have such a product and join forces with us! Why? If I were Seryoga, I wouldn't have teamed up with anyone, I would have rented a warehouse and done the same thing myself and taken all the money for myself! Nonsense... I don't understand him... but it's good that he didn't..."

"Why are you surprised?" My father said grudgingly. "Seryoga couldn't do anything on his own in the first place, he never had that experience before!"

"So what!?" I was surprised. "What experience did you and I have when we started delivering beer? We had none! We just started doing it! And we had an even worse situation – we had no insight and understanding of what and how to do it... We just knew that we had to get the goods to the wholesalers and that's it... And he, I beg to differ, worked for several years as a manager in a wholesale depot, yes, a small one, but still... they had five stores of their own, or how many... six? Doesn't matter! He had time to practice on someone else's example. And then just rent a warehouse, renegotiate all the contracts for himself, for his own company, by the way! He already had a company! What's the problem? Transfer your suppliers to it, inform your customers that it is no longer 'Sasha', but another company, and go ahead!"

"You're a strange man," my father said with a grin.

"Why should I be strange?" I said. "It's as clear as day!"

"It's clear to YOU!" my father almost shouted, emphasizing the word "you". "You already have experience working independently! That's what counts! Not how big a company you work for! Do you understand? And he hadn't worked alone for a day. He sat behind Davidych's back in a warm office and just pretended to be important and pouted his lips!"

"Well... I don't know..." I shrugged, glancing in the mirror – the "Mazda" was swaying along the dirt road behind us. "He was in business before 'Sasha' too..."

"WHO!??? SERYOGA!???" My father stared at me, putting all his surprise and disdain into both words. "Oh, come on! Who told you that, he!?"

"Yeah... I was talking to him the other day, and he said he used to do all kinds of things... he used to sell 'Pepsi-Cola' with some friends... they used to bring a carload of it... I don't know, he said they used to get it by the carload...or was it just one car..."

"By the carload!???" my father continued with the same intonation. "Do you know how much a carload of this stuff costs? It's not even our shitty household chemicals! It's millions! Two, maybe three-I don't know! But it's a lot! Where did Seryoga, who just the other day was working as a driver on a construction site, get the money to bring a carload of 'Pepsi'? Think about it!"

"Well, he said they were unloading railroad cars... the goods were coming in..." I continued sluggishly, already sensing inconsistencies in the logic that I hadn't noticed before.

"Maybe he unloaded it! Like a loader!" said my father. "Maybe he and his friends unloaded SOMEONE'S carload of 'Pepsi,' and they weren't paid with money, but with these very cans of drink... and they got a few packages... and then they drove them to the kiosks and sold them to get their money... That's right! Where else would you put them? Drink them yourself?"

My father blew out his breath. I remained stunned and silent.

"That's all!" My father nailed me with iron logic.

My brain began to process his emotional monologue. We passed the bridge and entered a wide sandy area. The "Mazda" caught up with us, raced to the left and, accelerating, insulted, as if Sergey had heard the conversation and wanted to object, broke in front of us.

"Seryoga lies to you, and you let yourself be duped," my father added, slowing down a bit, lighting a cigarette, and rolling down his window all the way.

"What's the point of him lying?" I looked at my father, confused.

"I don't know..." he said and blew the smoke of the first puff out the window. "Ask him..."

The batch of dichlorvos arrived and almost all of it was sold to "Homeland" the next day – three hundred boxes. We partially sold the remaining fifty boxes by the end of the month.

"Roman, you registered the apartment for yourself, right?" Sergey asked suddenly as we drove the "Mazda" away from the stall – I'd bought a bunch of bananas and took a bite, peeling one.

"Uh-huh," I mumbled, mouth full.

"But there's Anatoly Vasilievich's money in there too, isn't there?" Sergey looked at me.

"Well, yes," I chewed.

"And how are you...? Will you give it to your father later?"

"Yeah," I shrugged. "What's the big deal? I'll make money and pay it back... In fact, we haven't even talked about it yet, we bought an apartment and that's it! Seryoga, I don't think he needs it, this apartment. So I think I'll keep it. I don't know about the money... But of course I'll give him his money. I'm not going to leave my father without money. Like, the son took money from his father, bought a house, and waved to him like, 'Thanks, Dad, for the apartment, and now you can be free!' Is that it? I'm not an asshole to do that to my own father! I think I'll just give him his money, that's all..."

"But your apartment there has gone up in price..." Sergey said. "How are you going to repay your debt? Just the amount you borrowed, or at the new price, the value of his share?"

I stopped chewing the banana and was puzzled. It's true! My father and I hadn't agreed on anything. We just bought the apartment and put it in my name. And it's gone up in price! What should we do now? What do I owe him? "If the amount of money I borrowed alone is three hundred thousand, and if I assume that my father didn't give me a loan and just invested his money in real estate, then it's..." I thought about it and counted the new amount of debt on my cell phone.

"What are you calculating? The new prices?" Sergey looked at me out of the corner of his eye.

"Yes... I did the math... fucking lot of money..." I said, staring at the screen of my cell phone. "Four hundred and fifty thousand it turns out... plus fifty percent Seryoga, can you believe that?"

I looked at my partner and started to eat the banana automatically.

"Gah-gah-gah!" Sergey threw his head back and laughed contentedly. "You borrowed money from your father! Now you'll need three years to pay it back!"

"So what!?" I objected, mentally searching for the positive side of the situation. "The apartment is still increasing in value! Well, I'll pay back more, I didn't borrow the whole amount, only a third... But the whole apartment is going up in price... No matter how you look at it, it's a win-win for everyone! Me and my dad... He will earn some money and I managed to buy the apartment, in fact, for pocket change... It turns out we were just helping each other out... If my father hadn't agreed to take the money for the apartment, what would we be doing? We'd be sitting there like idiots with the money... he'd have three hundred and I'd have three hundred... Fucking great! And what would we do with it? Yes, we could put it into business and make money, and then buy the same apartment, only not for nine hundred

thousand, but for... how much is it at today's prices? over one million two hundred! What's the point? You still have to earn the difference... And housing prices are still rising... By the end of the year, they promised thirty for a meter! At this rate, you'll never be able to keep up with these fucking prices, Seryoga! No... I'd rather do it this way! I'd rather give more to my father, but I'd have an apartment, than both of us being afraid of losing our dough, and neither of us getting a damn thing!"

"Actually, yes, you're right," Sergey said thoughtfully, and after a moment's reflection he suddenly said: "Give your father only what you have borrowed!"

"What do you mean?" I raised my eyebrows and took the second banana.

"Well, you did not agree on what terms he gives you the money! So just give him what you borrowed... Just say thank you and that's it."

My brain ran the proposal through the sieve of morality and issued a rejection.

"No, Seryoga, this is bullshit..." I muttered and ate the banana thoughtfully.

"Why bullshit!?" my partner flared up, even jumping up behind the wheel, splashing his free right hand, throwing it up from the gear knob.

"Seryoga, what the fuck would you call it!?" I was also indignant now. "Like, thank you, Dad, for helping me earn money with the apartment, you get your money back and goodbye!?"

"What do you mean, earn money with the apartment!?" Sergey threw an angry, argumentative look at me, not wanting to give in. "You're not going to sell it, are you!?"

"Well..." I thought about the new question. "No, I'm not. Not yet... no!"

"Yet or not yet! What you do with it is another matter!" Sergey didn't stop. "You didn't buy it to sell, did you!? You bought it for yourself!"

"Seryoga... damn it..." I agreed and disagreed with my partner. And all because the purchase of the apartment was not negotiated by me and my father. And now, after the price increase, I didn't know how to value the money we had spent. Like investments? Then, logically, I should at least give my father his share back at the current market value, i.e. buy it out. Like money borrowed from my father? I could do that. And this way is of course easier and more profitable for me. But first, and for the umpteenth time, we haven't discussed the status of my father's money. Secondly, profit is not a word that should appear between close relatives. Can you imagine me, a son, making money from my father? I didn't even understand the meaning of such a phrase. It didn't fit into my head at all. My sense of justice said only one thing: I should consider the best option for my father, which is to pay him the actual value. And if my father himself says, "Son, I don't need this profit, as a father I can't take more money than I gave you, I helped you as a father to his son," that's another thing! Then I could say to my father, "Thank you, you helped me a lot," and later thank him in a sonly way. But to look for an advantage... no... not my thing. So I said: "No, I can't do that!"

"Roman!" Sergey grimaced immediately. "You and Anatoly Vasilievich are so complicated! Both of you are fiddly! Like father, like son... so rectitudinous..."

"Damn it, Seryoga, you're interesting!" I got angry. "My father and I started and worked together, we made money, and then I, a handsome guy, made a fortune with his money, and I dump my dad, right!?"

"Roman, I'm not telling you to dump him!" Sergey was angry and gritted his teeth. "I'm saying don't give him more than you borrowed! Nobody knew that the prices would rise so much!"

"No, no one knew!" I parried and was silent, but immediately added, not wanting to put up with such a dishonest thought that only seemed decent. "But I didn't borrow from my father either! We took the money together, so we get the income together!"

"All right, suit yourself!" Sergey waved away irritably.

We arrived at "Fort". And just in time. Our conversation had gotten a little heated, and a break in communication came in handy. We entered the sales room. Sergey went to the cash desk, I ducked between the shelves of the display cases and started to study the goods. Sergey came back.

"Did you get it?" I muttered.

"Yes," he muttered, the remnants of irritation still running across my partner's face.

"How much?" I said dryly.

"Here, you want to see the leftovers?" Sergey pushed four sheets of paper into my hands.

"Total payable: 72600.00" I looked at the last sheet and said:

"Without dichlorvos, the payouts dropped immediately..."

"Yes, that's true," Sergey sighed and looked at me. "Let's go?"

"Yes, let's go," I nodded, uncomfortable with the tension that had arisen between us, and added frustratedly: "A whole month without dichlorvos, we would have sold for half a million... Fuck, we would have made a hundred!"

Sergey pushed open the front door, winced at the brightness of the sunlight, walked down the porch steps, and without turning around, said irritably: "Roman, what's the use of talking about it now? We didn't do a good job! Who knew they'd have such a pickle with the goods?"

"Seryoga, next year we'll have to order a lot of them all at once," I got angry inside. "Right before the season starts, so we don't have any of these screw-ups!"

"We will, Roman, we will!" my partner was also angry.

We got into the car like two electrified balls. The tension between us was palpable. I decided to defuse the situation and resumed the conversation about apartments:

"Seryoga, do you have an apartment in your name or in the name of you and Vera?"

The car started and drove to the exit of the depot.

"Vera and me," he said as soon as we left the area.

"Ah, well, that's good!" I nodded, "You were married before you bought the apartment, so everything is fair – jointly acquired property!"

"That fucking mother-in-law..." Sergey said in a fit of anger. "With you and Anatoly Vasilievich, you see, everything goes well – everything is based on trust... He trusts you, you trust him... That's why you're doing so well! But I'm in shit here and there. I have to fight all the time. Roman, you won't believe it!"

"Come on, who do you have to fight with?" I was really surprised.

"Roman, with my own mother-in-law!" Sergey blurted out. "When I bought the apartment, do you know what a fight she and I had? I bought the apartment, started to register it for myself, she said – no, register it for you and Vera! I told her, what's the difference? We are a family, Vera and I don't divide anything, we share everything! She said no, do it for two and that's it!"

"Wow, she really had a go at you!" I shook my head and hummed.

"Yes! It got to the point of a fight! She even started telling Verok to divorce me!"

"Are you serious?"

"Yes! What do you think?" Sergey looked at me with the look of a righteous man suffering from the injustice of others. "Her mother – she's one of those... vixens! Verok is nice! And this one..."

"Yes, Vera is very nice!" I nodded. "She has a golden character! That's interesting... Mother and daughter, but how different they are! So what, you made the apartment for two?"

"Yes, I had to do it that way! Not to get divorced! We already had Lilka... I couldn't leave the child without a father and ruin the family, could I?"

"Oh! No, of course not, Seryoga!" I eagerly supported him, found in my heart a sincere reaction to such a decent man's position, and at once hardened against his mother-in-law, enlisting her in the camp of Sergey's enemies, and thus in mine.

On Friday, September 8, it got much colder. On Thursday Sergey and I rode around town in shorts, but on Friday I had to put on pants. "This is the end of summer," I thought and felt sad again. Autumn, short daylight hours and winter were ahead. Already on Friday afternoon I had an unbearable wish that summer would start again, that fall and winter would fly by in a second and that life would continue from April. The next day would be a holiday – another City Day. Sergey, referring to this, offered to take five thousand from the "common fund" for the celebration. I agreed.

The crossing didn't work yet, the "Mazda" was parked near it on the side of the road. The three of us walked along the road to the car, got in and went home.

"Are you going to the dacha?" I asked, barely warming up in the back seat.

"Yes, Roma, we'll live there for a long time, until October for sure," Vera said, turning her head back to me. "If we're lucky with the weather, of course, and it doesn't rain..."

Overnight it got even colder, and on Saturday I had to put on a jacket. Vovka called me and screamed into the phone that he missed me and Lera missed me even more and that they were going for a walk in the center and that I should come to them as soon as possible. An hour later, at four, I was at the center. We met. Lera was shuffling from foot to foot like a goose, her bulging belly, eight months pregnant, no longer hidden by the folds of her clothes.

"Wow!" I blurted out and Lera immediately blushed. "Soon?"

"Yes!" Vovka nodded. "In a month we'll have a baby! Another Romka will be born!"

We walked around all evening, in a good mood, fooling around with Vovka for every reason and no reason at all. Natasha worked that day. And something was wrong with our relationship. I felt them freeze. Natasha's eyes were still smiling at me, as was her face, but there was a question in her look. It was as if Natasha was thinking about something. And it had to do with me.

I almost didn't spend any money over the weekend and took the five grand bonus along with the money I had previously saved to pay for the apartment and made a note: "11.09.06 15.680 1m² 50m²".

In the middle of the month, the janitor's nephew quit, and we were left without a loader. But not for long. That very evening, the cunning Senya snuck into the office and offered to hire his son as a loader.

"Senya, is he strong?" I asked.

"Strong...? Well... I mean..." He hesitated, looking at me and Sergey. "Not like you or Sergey, of course! You guys are tough! You probably work out."

"Roman does, yes!" Sergey said with a barely perceptible irony that I was beginning to catch after a year of working together. It was as if I had gotten used to my partner and began to distinguish many shades of his behavior and speech.

"Senya, can he lift a box of salt?" I smiled.

"He is!" Senya said embarrassed and blushed.

"Then bring him here, Senya!" Sergey summarized. "Let him come tomorrow..."

"Fuck!!!" I exploded, turning around in the "Mazda" and looking closely at the glasses-wearing janitor we had just passed as we left the factory grounds with Sergey. The broad was standing at the entrance gate, where she always was, smoking as usual.

"What a crooked cunt!!! She didn't even say hello, Seryoga!!! Can you believe it???"

"Gah-gah-gah!" He threw his head back.

"Come to think of it!!! I nodded at her and she was just like... Fucking old cunt!!!" I shook with hypocrisy. "She lifted her fucking mouth and didn't even look at us, Seryoga!!! She fucking pretended she didn't notice!! Why the fuck would she do that??"

"Gah-gah-gah, Roman, you're so naive!" Sergey laughed, watching and enjoying my rising emotions with obvious pleasure.

"Son of a bitch, Seryoga, what the fuck is this?! How can she do that!? She didn't say hello before, I thought, fuck it, maybe some people don't get along with others right away... But then she started to say hello and now what? She's turning up her fucking nose at us! How come???" I sat up straight as the car lurched down the dirt road to the newly renovated crossing. There was a storm of emotions so strong it gave me a headache.

"Roman, you keep asking yourself..." Sergey managed to say.

"Yes, Seryoga, I keep asking myself! How can I not? It's fucking cynicism!!! Fuck, I can't imagine how you can behave like this – to greet or not to greet a person just because it's profitable for you to do so or not to do so!!!? How can you do that? Okay, I can understand – she didn't say hello, and then she had to get her nephew settled, and she started saying hello to us! Okay, I can understand that. But how can she, literally the day after he quit, stop saying hello?!? How???"

I stopped talking to catch my breath. Sergey was silent, smiling, looking at me as if I were a comedian giving an amusing performance. Because of my restraint, I rarely showed strong emotions in front of him. And Sergey watched my hypostasis with pleasure and curiosity.

"Is it like she used us?! And now she doesn't fucking need us and she doesn't have to say hello and she just turns up her fucking nose again! Who the fuck does she think she is?! Some lonely old toad living in a fucking kennel! Working in the same stinking kennel in a run down factory with stinking bowls of dog food and she can't even be bothered to say hello to us!?? She's fucking crazy! Old cunt! Fuck her! Why are people so fucking shitty?! Is it so hard to be a normal person?!?"

"Roman, people are all like that... what did you expect?" Sergey said philosophically.

"I want people to be normal! If you say hello to them, you should hear hello back! Damn it, Seryoga, what did I do to her?!? Did I steal from her? Did I insult her? Humiliated her?"

"Roman, you see what her life is like and what your life is like. You are co-owner of a company, you have your own business, you bought an apartment, and she...?"

Sergey gave me a reassuring look, and it worked.

"I understand, Seryoga," I exhaled, as if trying to breathe out the residue in my chest that had formed after the janitor's behavior. "But that's no reason to act like that... You have to remain human in every situation..."

"Well, you get back at her somehow, that's all!" My partner smiled mischievously.

"Get back at her?" I was surprised.

"Yes. For example, she says something to you with that disgruntled mouth, and you tell her – and you smell like an old woman – and that's all..." Sergey said.

My partner's sentence startled me. As I thought about it, I fell silent. Slowly I began to understand – not the meaning of the phrase, but its subtle peculiarity. Sergey uttered a phrase that hit the broad at her weakest point. I replayed the situation in my head – a lonely forty-year-old unattractive woman, living in a slum, with no chance to meet a normal man, to somehow improve her life, realizing that her life as a woman is coming to an end... and it is coming to an end as ignominiously as in a garbage dump... and she hears this. I shuddered. Such a sentence would be a painful sting for her. Sergey suggested that a bad thing could be answered with a worse thing...

"Shit, Seryoga..." I turned to him. "Are you crazy? It's fucking awful to tell her that! Seryoga, you're such a... ha-ha! How the hell does your head work?! I can't believe it. To think of such a thing! It'll kill her right away!"

"Gah-gah-gah!" He threw his head back with glee. "So tell her that."

"Fuck, Seryoga, I understand what you're suggesting, but I can't say that!"

"I would!" My partner curled his lips in surprise.

"No, Seryoga, you can't say that. You must be a complete scumbag to say such a thing..."

The car rolled up to the crossing, and then the semaphore began to flash red, the bells began to ring, the barriers on both sides were lowered, and fences came out of the asphalt.

I was distracted by the innovations of the crossing, but as soon as the electric train rolled into town with its horns and whistles, the restless thoughts returned – everything boiled up inside again. The train crept to the right, the fences were lowered, the barrier was raised, and we were off.

"I still don't understand this kind of behavior..." I exhaled heavily. "Even if you just think about it, it's really stupid to act like this! I mean, we see her every day, what if she needs something else? What is she going to do? She can't come to us and ask us! No, maybe she can, but we won't be able to help her. What is she thinking, Seryoga? I mean, you have to think ahead somehow..."

"Roman, they're broads! They're all stupid!" he exclaimed. "They can't calculate a day ahead, and you want them to strategize!"

"Well, not all of them are stupid... Your Vera is not stupid... She's smart and thinks ahead..."

"Well, some of them can think a day ahead, I guess. But not two or three days ahead... She's an ordinary hen, what's there to love her for!?"

"Well, you're right..." I nodded. "There's nothing to love her for..."

The "Mazda" climbed from the dirt road onto the asphalt.

"I don't love broads at all," Sergey grinned and accelerated. "I don't love Verok either..."

I didn't say anything and Sergey sighed heavily.

"Listen, Romych, I need to consult with you..." he looked at me, met my questioning gaze, and continued. "Look... We've started to have extra money from the turnover, you know – the work is going on, we pay everything on time, but the earned money has nowhere to go, it just sits on the account and that's it..."

"I see your point, Seryoga!" I nodded. "Money lying idle is an unacceptable folly. Let's think about what to do with it! We could, for example, take a good distribution and increase sales..."

"No, Roman, I don't think we need more goods! What for?" Sergey looked at me uncomprehendingly and grimaced. "We already have a full warehouse!"

"Seryoga, it's full, so what?" I was surprised. "We can rent another one..."

"No, Roman, I don't think that's a good idea..." Sergey wrinkled his nose. "We could do something else. I don't know, like you and Anatoly Vasilievich – invest in real estate, for example. Or buy land..."

We drove to the crossroads near the church and turned right along the central street of the village. On the right, an unfinished building caught my attention – a building made of white silicate bricks in the shape of a press iron. It was adjacent to a four-story house and was frozen in its construction – only the foundation and walls of the first floor protruded from the ground. The building was overgrown with weeds.

"That's an interesting wreck, Seryoga!" I said, remembering a loophole in the law – if construction is underway on a plot of land, the owner of such construction has priority in

taking ownership of the plot. A lawyer told me this from his practice. "You throw two building blocks on the land," he said, "and then you register the land under the allegedly started construction as property." I told Sergey about this trick.

"Look, it's a good idea!" His eyes immediately lit up. "Let's try it! Let's start taking steps..."

"Aha, I like it too," I nodded. "We could get a decent piece of land, and the building itself, if completed in line with the house, will definitely be three stories... the area there is about sixty or seventy meters, so the total will be about two hundred. That's a big office! We'll have a shop on the first floor, managers on the second floor, and on the third floor we'll make an office for ourselves – we'll have our control headquarters there!"

"Shit, Roman!" Sergey almost shrieked, his eyes sparkling with childish joy. "I love these military words of yours! Headquarters!"

"Well, that's it!" I laughed. "If you like it, we'll build a headquarters!"

We spent the second half of September dealing with this unfinished building. We made inquiries about the site, ordered a geodetic survey of the area. Sergey even changed a little in appearance – the self-assurance in his walk and look increased, which disappeared as soon as we entered the building with the sign "Regional Technical Inventory". The mimicry of his behavior became amusing. Sergey was big and self-confident in unimportant and small situations, but he became modest in situations where he had to take active steps. The corridors of the institutions seemed to drain his strength. Sergey would wander confusedly through them, and when we were alone in front of the sacred door, he would knock shyly and timidly, asking, "May I?" So it was with the office, which we visited several times on the business of the unfinished building. Our inquiry was led by a quiet, intelligent woman of about forty. Soon important facts were revealed – the building under construction was de facto impossible to buy, the last owner of this building, a company, went bankrupt and closed down, the question of ownership was left in the air and could be solved only in very high offices. Sergey and I immediately became sad and said goodbye to the dream of our own "headquarters".

"Please, just don't forget to pay for the geodetic survey," the woman said politely, handing us an official document with a scheme of land measurements – the result of her work. Earlier, the woman had done us a favor – she had ordered the survey without any advance payment from our side, which was a violation. Now she was worried and said that she would get a reprimand if we didn't pay.

"How much is there to pay?" I clarified.

"A thousand rubles," said the woman.

"Oh, that's nothing!" I waved my hand and added reassuringly: "Don't worry, we'll pay it today or tomorrow. Thank you very much. It's a shame it turned out like this. We wasted your time, eh!"

"It's a shame indeed," the woman said sympathetically. "But you didn't know it would be like this. Come back to us, we'll find you another plot."

Sergey silently took the document and put it in his briefcase. We said goodbye and left.

"We'll have to remember to pay for the survey," I said as soon as we were both in the "Mazda".

"Fuck her!" Sergey blurted out, turning the key in the ignition irritably and jerking the gearshift nervously.

"Seryoga...???" I looked at my partner in surprise, numb for a few seconds. "What do you mean, fuck her? She did the work, we got the document, we have to pay for it!"

"What did she do? What good is this piece of paper? She said we can't buy these ruins! That means she didn't do anything!"

"Seryoga..." I sat there, stunned. "She doesn't deal with such things, she deals with measurements. She's done her job. We have to pay... Besides, she's done us a favor, this company only works on a prepayment basis."

"I still don't think we should pay her!" Sergey said sharply and put the car in reverse.

I fell silent in a daze. We drove off, merged into the general flow, and Sergey's attention was taken by the road. Something flashed in my brain, and I sat there for a few minutes, as if blinded, and came to my senses. I thought about what my partner had done. He had cynically, in his own words, "screwed up" a person. The deed did not fit in my head – the woman was willing to meet our needs and break the order, in fact, set herself up... and in return for her kindness got spit in the face.

I began to develop the thought. "She'll probably get a reprimand and a fine, and the thousand she didn't get from us will be deducted from her salary. What did she do to deserve that? Being nice?" Everything exploded inside me, I was on fire – I wanted to go to the office and make Sergey pay the thousand. I was sure that he would agree at once, and would only resent it for the hell of it. He would be sorry about the money, though. But I knew for sure that I could force him. "Yes, a conflict! So what? It's more important to be honest! It's important to save the company's face! How can he not understand that this is not the way to behave!? The most important thing in business is reputation! How many times my father and I, when we were still doing business together, moved only on it, getting the most favorable terms of cooperation. Reputation is one of the pillars of success in business! Why create a negative reputation with such actions? It will be worse for us! Stop!"

My thoughts froze... "For us?" The flash again. "Us! Both of us!" I grinned bitterly and turned to the window. Neatly done – one guy shit on the company, but the stain was on both of us. "And you can't prove to anyone that you had nothing to do with it. We work together! Like a team! Like two horses. One does something wrong and the burden falls on the other. What's the solution?" I was talking to myself, the inner dialogue completely absorbed me. "What should I do? Fix it, wipe the stain after him? And if it happens again, what? Wipe it off for the rest of my life? For what purpose? Am I his babysitter? Should I let him keep doing this?" Again my mind flashed back to the past. "Has Sergey ever done this before? Has he, or did I not notice?" Like a fisherman pulling a bottom out of the water, I pulled other similar episodes from the past for the episode that had happened. Previous facts, like hooks with a catch, began to float out of my memory into the bright light of realization. "There had been incidents! Small, insignificant, but there were! Why small? Or am I misjudging them? Because they're like drops – drip-drip-drip – eating away at everything. The company, the relationship." Similar episodes flashed through my mind, the ones I remembered. And, amazingly, they were all somehow unimportant. Like little sources of bad smell, when it smells unpleasant nearby, but not enough to get out of the place – a place of comfort and coziness. And the person wrinkles his nose, but tolerates it. And my partner's behavior in similar episodes was exactly like that – unpleasant and unacceptable, but so weak in effect that I always preferred to turn a blind eye. And as I realized at that moment, the decision to tolerate was made unconsciously, just to overcome a feeling of discomfort, nothing more. I sighed heavily, my thoughts began to lose the energy of emotional chaos, and as they cooled, they began to organize themselves. I realized that I had discovered a bad trait in Sergey's character.

And one more thing... remembering the previous similar cases, I realized that until today I had done exactly that to eliminate the negative consequences of my partner's behavior for our business. Sitting in the car and looking at Sergey's resentful, pouting, hypertrophied lips and haughty expression, I made an incredible effort to restrain myself and decided not to "clean up" after him anymore. "Let the mistakes and negativity accumulate," I decided, making my conscience about the piggishly unpaid thousand to shut up.

CHAPTER 40

"There's a letter for you at the gatehouse!" the bespectacled janitor shouted at my back as I entered the factory gates and passed the gatehouse.

"Thanks, okay, I'll pick it up," I turned and went into the office. "No hello, no goodbye!" I thought angrily. The broad was standing there, smoking a cigarette, her arms crossed, either on her already noticeable belly or on her big breasts lying on her belly. I wanted to push the cigarette into her mouth. It was just after nine, and I was the first to arrive. I put the kettle on in the office and went back to get the letter. I pushed open the door to the gatehouse. "Oh God, what a stink!" went through my head. In the far corner of the cramped hallway was a bucket and basin filled to the brim with a disgusting gray slurry of guard dog food. It was a mixture of mush and something else, and it smelled disgusting. My stomach twitched with the urge. I held my breath, pushed open the door to the room, ducked inside, and closed the door behind me, instinctively wanting to keep the horrible smell out. The broad was sitting at the table with an open book. Without turning to me, she closed the book and slid the envelope across the table to me.

"Aha, thanks!" I said, saw the title of the book – Crime and Punishment – and, holding my breath, jumped outside. The fresh air was like a narcotic, I sucked it in as deeply as I could and went to the office. In ten minutes everyone had arrived – Senya and his son had come, Petya's "GAZelle" had pulled up under the office window, followed by the "Mazda".

"Hi!" said Vera, the first to enter the office. "What's up, what's new?"

"Same old, same old. I picked up a letter at the gatehouse," I said, stretching out in the chair at the table, shaking Sergey's hand and saying to him: "She doesn't say hello, you know? What a bitch!"

"Who? That broad?" Sergey nodded toward the gatehouse. "Passionate about Dostoevsky?"

"Ha!!" I leaned back in my chair. "You've seen it too!?"

"Well, I went in there to see her once, and here we go... Dostoevsky!" Sergey spread his hands and added with a hint of contempt: "That's the kind of books our janitors read!"

"I just came in..." I began to answer the question in Vera's eyes, "to get a letter, and this – I hummed – 'Passionate about Dostoevsky', has 'Crime and Punishment' on her desk! Well, Seryoga, it turns out, has seen this book, too!"

"Aha..." Vera said. "Well... what can I say! We are no match for her!"

"The book is good," I smiled and added angrily, "but that broad is a fucking sheep!"

"Roman is still upset that some broad doesn't say hello to him!" Sergey explained to his wife, turned to me and said with pressure: "Roman! To hell with her! You shouldn't care about some idiot! She sits in her kennel with the dogs and will sit there until she is old! She's just frustrated with her life, so she's happy to stick a pin in you to make you twitch. Don't mind her!"

"It stinks so much in there!" I nodded. "How they sit there all day is beyond me..."

"Oh, right, it does smell awful in there..." said Vera, sitting down in the chair and starting the computer, instinctively putting her hand to her nose as if to cover herself.

"Have you read this book?" Sergey looked at me cheerfully, finished rummaging through his briefcase, put it on the cupboard shelf and sat down in the chair by the door.

"Of course I have!" I said. "It's a school program, Seryoga!"

"Aha..." my partner said grudgingly, and the smile faded from his face.

The office phone rang.

"Yes, hello," I answered.

"Hello, may I speak to Verochka?" a slightly lisping female voice said. This is what happens when your dentures don't fit properly. I immediately became serious and felt a wave of negativity come and go in the phone receiver. I realized who was calling.

"Here, it's for you!" I said coldly and handed the phone to Vera.

"Yes, hello, yes mom, hi..." she said into the phone.

I looked at Vera and thought, how could an ugly single mother give birth to a wonderful daughter and a worthless alcoholic son? My imagination, using Sergey's stories, immediately created an unflattering image in my head – a vicious old biddy, a shallow-minded loser who shits all over the place. I took Sergey's side unconditionally and did not want to communicate with this broad, not even on the phone. Vera gave me the phone back and I got rid of it by throwing it on the cradle.

The work fuss began – Senya came to the office, got the waybills for the first run, and Petya went to the loading. We were on the phone and on e-mail. Calls, correspondence – everything as usual. By noon, Vera had done the reports for September. The month was as good as August in terms of sales. The summer campaign was over and it was time to prepare for the winter campaign. After lunch we began to solve the problem of the first import of salt. Salt is a heavy and cumbersome commodity, it was cheap and transportation was expensive. It was expensive to order a little. It was dangerous to bring a lot of it, we could not sell all of it during the season and be left with expired goods for the next season. The short shelf life of salt, one year, ruined everything. But even last winter our sales approached the volume of a truck. I thought about it and suggested to Sergey that we bring in a full truckload of salt in October.

"Do you think we'll sell it?" He looked at me uncertainly.

"We have to do the math, Seryoga," I shrugged. "Figure out roughly, based on last year – how much the pharmacies take from us, the networks and other customers..."

The work was in full swing. Vera printed out the data, Sergey sat down to calculate. After a couple of hours of discussion and forecasting, we came to the conclusion that everything could work out.

"We just have to make it so..." I summarized. "We're going to load the truck completely with the cheapest salt, to reduce the transport load. And on top of that, we'll throw in a couple of tons of the expensive one. We'll use the cheap salt for the whole season. Until spring. And the expensive one until New Year's Eve. And we will deliver them as needed by the transport company according to the orders, so as not to keep too much in the warehouse. That's all.

Sergey listened, leaned over the sheet with the order calculation, chewed his lips, exhaled loudly and said: "All right, that's fine! Let's do it!"

In the second week of the month we had an unexpected visit from "Luxchem". There were three guests: the owners Aslanbek and Edik and the son of the former. We had not been warned about the visit, so we were surprised, and it happened that six people crowded together in our room and began to discuss business. Vera sat in her place, Sergey in a chair at the table. Out of respect and etiquette, I gave the only remaining chair by the door to Aslanbek, and his son stood against the wall next to his father. Edik and I leaned against the last available wall by the door.

In the first half of the negotiations, I was more of an observer. Aslanbek started the conversation with me out of habit. His eyes showed surprise and even confusion about my new business partner. Aslanbek was clearly getting the length of Sergey's foot. After a while he got used to it, added a few sentences to our dialog and took over the communication. I didn't mind – everything that was said, I had heard from these people more than once. After the incident with "Homeland", when "Luxchem" shipped the goods behind my father's and

my back, I had written off all agreements with Aslanbek and Edik. I realized that the price of their promises and assurances was penniless, and that from now on I should solve my current tasks without making any promises to these characters. Aslanbek began to probe Sergey and me about our moods and plans. He was surprised to learn that we had grown significantly as a company over the past year. Our position had become stronger, and it was immediately evident in our communications. I took a hard stance, remembering all the injustices these two had done to me and my father. The conversation was like a copy of the previous ones – the guests were saying the same thing: we need to increase sales, increase the number of customers, and so on. I had no desire to listen to such things. I was silent, leaving the yackety yak to Sergey. He liked it. Sergey literally blossomed and even grew physically – he straightened his already broad shoulders, leaned back in his chair, pursed his lips more than before, and turned into a monolith of self-importance and significance. Even the weather-beaten Aslanbek suddenly began a dialogue with him, with notes of ingratiation and pleading. His words made Sergey blossom. It was the first time I'd seen my partner like that – sitting like a rudiment of an official whose only sense of life was to alternate his vocabulary between permissions and refusals. "Yeah, it's not like talking to me or my father, guys," I grinned and continued to watch everyone. Edik was the same as I'd always known him – cunning, shady, unscrupulous. He always promised and said whatever was necessary to get what he wanted. I used to think that Aslanbek was his mirror image – a decent man who kept his word. I began to doubt it and thought that this couple was more likely playing the role of "good and bad cops". Appealing to one about the other's dishonesty was an empty endeavor that I had naively engaged in earlier years. Negativity began to build up within me. I knew I was getting all worked up, but I couldn't do anything about it – old hurts were coming up and demanding satisfaction.

"Come on, make suggestions!" Edik smiled mischievously. "Aslanbek and I are all for it! We are for increasing your profits! Please, order as many goods as you want! We will always support you! Offer solutions! When you have found a new customer, call us, let us know! And Aslanbek and I will know – that's it, Roma supplies goods to this customer, we don't interfere!"

"What do you mean, you don't interfere!?" I couldn't help it. "You got into 'Homeland'! I was working with my father at the time. We told you that we had to get there with your goods, and we would go to the director for appointments for a year, sitting there in the hallway... And when he gave his approval, you just dropped the goods directly. A whole truckload of it!"

Edik wouldn't be himself if he'd pulled in his horns – he smiled mischievously, looked me in the eye and said without hesitation: "Roma! You should have told us right away! You should have called us immediately if one of our agents shipped goods to your client! We would have solved everything right away!"

"Edik!!!" I almost shouted in his face, boiling over in a flash. "What agents!!? What the hell are you drivelling about?!? You were there in 'Homeland' yourself!! I saw you at the reception! You came to us in the morning and went there in the afternoon. Why are you lying???"

Edik was only slightly embarrassed, and only because his actions had become known, not because he had been accused of lying. Shame was unknown to him. I looked at Edik with a burning gaze, and he grinned and turned away. I immediately felt an emotional collapse, all my energy spent fighting the lie. And he just looked away. Talking to Edik about decency was like chopping water with an axe. I fell silent, the negotiations were over for me. No matter what anyone said next, I decided for myself – I'm not interested! "I'm going to do it my own way, just make money with their goods, while they deliver them for free... not develop anything on purpose, not look for customers for their goods... as it's sold, so it's

sold... let them shit themselves... I'm not going to bust my ass for these assholes anymore," I decided, and I felt better. After I calmed down, I stared apathetically out the window. There was silence in the room, which was overcome by the experienced Aslanbek. He dialogued with Sergey. Sergey continued to sit on the throne chair, feeling like a general director. My give and take with Edik had a certain effect on Sergey – he completely relaxed and slipped from the etiquette of business communication to the bully-style talk.

"Sergey, I think you and your partner Roman should be more active in promoting our goods in your region," Aslanbek babbled in a cliched text. "Here, pay attention, Eduard has already said that we are actively expanding our assortment, introducing novelties..."

"Nah, these shitty novelties don't do us any good at all!" Sergey leaned back in his chair and said the sentence with killing arrogance and contempt.

Everything inside me squeezed. "Shit, Seryoga! What are you doing!?" my brain screamed, but outwardly I just wrinkled my nose. My partner screwed up, he literally spat in the faces of the owners of the supplying company. I didn't give a shit about Edik's reaction – I didn't care about unscrupulous people myself. But Aslanbek... I looked at him. Aslanbek's face was flushed, but with a noticeable effort he held himself together and answered calmly:

"Sergey, I don't think you should say such a thing about products! It's people's work. Whether it's good or bad is up to the customer. We try to make competitive products..."

"Nah, what the hell!" Sergey interrupted him, turning around in his chair. "That's the way it is! We have some big distributions that we use! Your goods are not at the top of our list! Yes, we sell them for old times' sake. When we teamed up with Roma and Anatoly Vasilievich, we included your goods in the general price, but they don't do us any good, so..."

Sergey slapped our guests in a harsh and cynical manner. I stared at the floor, aware of the danger of his behavior. There could be consequences. "He won't suffer this humiliation. Aslanbek won't show it, but there will be an answer," I thought, glancing furtively at everyone, "something will happen..."

The conversation after Sergey's maneuver died down rather quickly. The guests said goodbye and left the office with unhappy faces. The three of us were left alone. I sat down in the chair by the door.

"Seryoga, you son of a bitch!" I burst out laughing, the stress had taken its toll. "Fuck, talking to Aslanbek like that! It's completely fucked up! Shitty novelties... Did you see his fucking face!?! He was fucking stunned! I thought his eyes would pop out and roll across the floor..."

"Gah-gah-gah!" He threw his head back, enjoying my emotional speech. "Why, Romych!?! Did I say something wrong? This "Luxchem" gives us less than a third of the profit, it hardly matters! The markup on everything is ordinary, we only mark up more than 40 percent on these... gah-gah-gah... shitty novelties...!"

"Here we go!" I laughed again. "Fuck, Seryoga, you just shit on them!"

"But why are they acting like we owe them something?" said Sergey, looking at me and barely holding back his laughter. "Now we put a pin in them, let them pull it out!"

We all laughed at once. A tragedy had turned into a comedy. Nothing could be changed. I felt that we wouldn't get away with such a maneuver. And I realized that Sergey had once again shit on our company and a lot of it. I did not want to clean it up after him, and I even forgave him, and all for one reason – Sergey's bully behavior avenged once and for all everything that my father and I had unjustly tolerated earlier. I satisfied my thirst for revenge.

By the end of the week we had some cash.

"Roman, what are we going to do with all this money?" Sergey looked at me, sitting at the table with an open briefcase and wads of cash in his hands. "We have no debts, no one to pay..."

"Seryoga, I don't know," I shrugged.

"So are we just going to put money on the account?" Sergey wrinkled his nose.

"What else can we do? We can put it on the account, we can keep it just like that... There are not many options..."

"Right! The amount is not that big. We have thirty thousand in the common fund, and I have another sixty... That's one hundred and twenty..."

Sergey looked at me expectantly, and I looked at him apathetically.

"I mean, why don't we just take it for ourselves? A summer bonus? You take it to the apartment and I'll start fixing the bathroom and the toilet..." Sergey said. "How much more do you have to pay?"

"Eleven meters, a little less..."

"You see, you need money too!" Sergey added, freezing his hands over the money on the table like a hawk over its prey.

I needed no convincing. I took my share, stuffed the money into my jacket pockets, and after the weekend, on Monday evening, October 16, an entry was added to the planner – "16.10.06 62.084 3.89m² 53.89m²". "Seven meters left," I froze over the diary, which marked the small and large steps toward gaining housing freedom.

"Roman, listen, we have a change of general director in December, right?" Sergey looked at me after lunch, when the three of us had just returned from the canteen in the car.

"Yeah, I don't remember exactly, but I think so..." I spread my hands, sitting in the chair by the door.

"Vera, when is the change of director?" Sergey perked up, raised himself on his elbows over the table and stared at his wife over the monitor.

"Seryozha, you can look in the founding documents, I don't remember," she said.

"In December, in December!" Sergey shook the forefinger of his right hand. "I remember, we founded the company in December 2003, just three years before the next change!"

Sergey leaned back in his chair, bit his lower lip, crossed his arms over his chest, turned the chair toward me, and stared at me.

"Why did you even mention it?" I asked.

"I just thought we'd have to deal with the paperwork, the re-registration, the bank..." He crinkled his eyes. "Maybe we shouldn't do that, eh, Romych? Let's leave it the way it is?"

I was silent, thinking about the subject.

"There's no difference... After all, we make decisions together... And who's the general and who's the deputy... it's just a formality. The bank still needs both signatures..."

Sergey waved his hands and pretended not to understand the meaning of the impending procedure of changing positions in the company. In fact, he was right – our castling didn't change anything. Any legally significant step required both founders, and one of us could not do anything. It was the same with the finances in the bank account – any transaction required the signatures of both of us. And from a human point of view Sergey was right – the forthcoming exchange of places did not solve anything, it just took time for bureaucratic fiddling. Yes, there was an agreement about compulsory castling every three years. But it could be neglected.

"All right. We don't have to change, Seryoga. I don't really care. I'm not vain," I chuckled, "I feel lukewarm about the sign 'General Director'! Keep your position..."

"Ah, well, then it's a deal!" Sergey perked up, leaned back in his chair with a happy smile, and added, "You're like a gray cardinal, Romych! You don't hold the principal position, but you have the last word in the company!"

Sergey cackled. I smirked at the compliment, realizing that my partner had flattered me on purpose. It was clumsy. What for? Not a single strand of my soul reacted to what he said – flattery didn't work on me, vanity was really alien to me. I was even surprised; Sergey seemed to have studied me enough not to waste his time with flattery. I smirked again and saw how his mood instantly lifted. And I realized that being the general director, even of a meager company, even on paper only, was important and meaningful to Sergey. I didn't mind.

My relationship with Natasha was getting more and more frustrating. Whenever our eyes met, she would hastily look away. Without asking, and not wanting to guess, I attributed this behavior to the autumn blues that had taken hold of me. I looked at the fading nature and listened to my inner state. It was as if something in me was fading as well, and I could barely feel the stirring of a new beginning. I tried to understand such a change, but I could not. Only at night, when I fell asleep, did the images that had flashed through my mind that night come back to me more and more often. They would disturb my equilibrium and drive me to action. What kind of action? I didn't know. Being in such a thoughtful state, I automatically agreed to Sergey's entreaties to go to the country park with his family on Saturday. I did not want to go, but I was in such a moping mood that I wanted to get rid of it at least for a while. Sergey picked me up in the "Mazda" at the agreed place. The whole family was in the car – Vera in the front, the two children in the back. I sat down with the children. Lyonya, dressed in a green jumpsuit, gawked at me silently. Lilka, having received an unexpected spectator, immediately began to wriggle and deliberately make a lot of noise.

"Lilya, sit down!" Sergey barked, looking at his daughter in the mirror. The girl blushed, calmed down, came to herself in a moment, giggled, looked at me furtively, saw my smile, giggled again and started to fuss all over again.

"Lilya!!" Vera said in a threatening tone.

We arrived. Lilya jumped out of the car herself, Vera took Lyonya out and put him on the ground. The boy stood motionless, staring blankly. Vera took out a bag of food and led Lyonya by the hand into the park. Lilya ran ahead, wiggling and dancing. Sergey, as the head of the family, followed solemnly a few steps behind. I lifted the collar of my denim jacket, adjusted my baseball cap, and followed with my hands in my jeans pockets. The moping didn't go away. The next two hours passed in thought. My thoughts floated around in a shapeless mass in my head, letting me back into reality, then pulling me back into myself. The kids were having fun – Lilka was running, squealing and jumping like a machine, and Lyonya in his jumpsuit couldn't keep up with her, stomping his feet awkwardly. Sergey, Vera and I talked about something. My sentences were automatic, I was lost in my thoughts.

"It's good that we can go out together like this, isn't it, Romych?" Sergey said. "When you and Natasha get married, you'll have your own rugrats, and our crowd will grow!"

"Riiight!" laughed Vera. "Then we'll have to take more than one bag of food with us!"

I nodded and smirked, burying my chin in the collar of my jacket and deeper into my thoughts. "When you and Natasha get married... maybe... maybe... everything is unclear with this Natasha. There is no love, the main thing, neither she has for me, nor I for her. It didn't happen... We just like each other and that's it... I have to be honest with myself. There's no love... Marry a pretty girl just for the hell of it? What's the point? We'll have kids and get divorced anyway. It's stupid. Okay, let's just leave things as they are. Our relationship is a bit of a mess. But that's okay. If we get along, we get along, and if we don't, we don't..."

"Mom, did you get the sausages!?" Lilka jumped up to the bench and stuck her nose in the bag.

"I did! Lilya, close the bag! Don't!" Vera said sternly.

The girl stepped back a few meters. Lyonya, hearing the word "sausages", perked up and scampered to the bench, raising his hand in the direction of the package on the way.

"Lyonya, what... do you want some?" Vera said.

"He's hungry, feed him," Sergey ordered.

Vera made a fuss – she took a plastic container out of the bag and opened it. Boiled sausages and black bread were inside. Lilka jumped up and reached for the food.

"Lilya, stop jumping! If you want to eat, sit down and eat properly!" Vera shouted at her daughter.

The girl jerked her hand away in confusion, looked around for support, met my gaze, smiled guiltily, looked down, put her hands behind her back, and froze in indecision. Lyonya came to the bench, picked up a sausage, and clumsily put it in his mouth.

"Vera, put him on the bench!" Sergey added.

She immediately obeyed the order and gave Lyonya a piece of bread. Standing on the other side of the container, Lilya used her fingers to peel the paint off the bench.

"Lilya, don't, you'll get your hands dirty!" Vera ordered. "Take a sausage and eat it!"

The girl happily grabbed the sausage, instantly cheered up, smiled at me, ran a few steps away and began to dance on the concrete tiles of the path.

Time passed slowly and I continued to flounder in a viscous swamp of thoughts. After demolishing the first one, Lyonya immediately started on the second one. Lilya kept jumping with a sausage in her hand. Puffing his cheeks and sniffing, Lyonya reached for the third. His sister had half eaten the first one. Ignoring the bread, Lyonya pulled the fourth out of the container. Lilya jumped up to the bench and grabbed a piece of bread from the container with her free hand. Lyonya ate the fifth. Lilya jumped, galloped – as much as she could, trying to impress the others and me. Lyonya took the sixth sausage. There was one left in the container. Lilka had almost finished the first one. Lyonya had just finished the sixth when she jumped up to the bench and grabbed the last one. Lyonya, shoving the rest into his mouth, hastily grabbed the last sausage from his side with his hand. Lilya was stunned, but immediately came to her senses and pulled the sausage harder. The age difference took its toll, Lyonya almost let go of his sausage, immediately became dejected and began to wail.

"Lilya!!!" Sergey barked.

The girl jerked her hand away, took a few steps back and looked at me questioningly. I watched the scene, still shivering from the cool autumn breeze. It began to darken, the gray clouds becoming the colors of twilight. Taking advantage of his sister's confusion, Lyonya grabbed the sausage and pulled it into his mouth.

"Lilya! Let Lyonya eat!" Vera shrieked in a falsetto.

The girl squirmed guiltily and fell silent, her eyes looking at me in incomprehension. I felt sorry for her. The beginnings of Lilya's character didn't bode well for her. Suddenly I felt a wild urge to leave. "What am I doing here?" I heard it clearly in my head. "Other people's children, other people's family, other people's joys. Why am I here? Participating in their lives? Why? Where is my life? Why am I not living my life? I'm standing here now and I don't want to be here... So why did I come? Is it embarrassing to say no? I'm so fucked up with this fucking trait! I'm acting like a weakling! Why is it so hard to say no? Just say no! I don't care what anybody thinks! I don't have to give in to other people's wishes!"

I woke up. I looked around. I was in a certain place at a certain time, and I didn't want to be there. I got scared. It was as if I had been forcibly thrust into someone else's life. And this force was done with my consent. I wasn't weak-willed, I knew that, but the damn politeness was killing my own life in the bud.

"This is not my life! I shouldn't be standing here! I'm living someone else's life, and I should be living my own. Sergey lives his own life and draws me into it. By agreeing, by accepting his invitations again and again, I am killing my life. Every moment of agreement is a denial of my own life. I am killing myself!" Fear struck again. I almost started to walk home.

"So it's time to go back?" Sergey looked at me as Lyonya finished eating. I nodded and breathed a sigh of relief, having made a firm decision never to be under anyone's thumb again. No one ever.

On the last day of October, Sergey and I were in the car again on a business matter.

"Roman, is Anatoly Vasilievich still working with tomatoes?" he said.

"No, Seryoga, what tomatoes? It's already November," I said.

"What do I know? What is he carrying now? He's carrying something, right?"

"No, he's not carrying anything now," I muttered, not wanting to discuss the subject.

"Then what is he doing?"

"Seryoga, I'm not really asking him," I exhaled, feeling my dissatisfaction with Sergey's insistence on questions. "He's doing something... It seems he's taken up transportation now, he's got some regular customers, he delivers goods to them..."

"From city to city?"

"No, here... in the region and in the city..."

"Why doesn't Anatoly Vasilievich start his own business?"

"Seryoga, I don't know, ask him!" I was a little irritated. "To start a business you need money! And we invested all the money in the apartment!"

"So Anatoly Vasilievich has no money at all?"

"Well, he has some... I have no idea... We haven't talked to him about it. If he wants to, he'll start a business, if he doesn't, he won't. I don't know what's in his head, Seryoga!" I said, annoyed at my father for making me endure uncomfortable questions, for making me bend over backwards to answer something.

"So I take it you don't know what he's doing!" Sergey slammed the palm of his hand on the steering wheel, as if summarizing the dialog and drawing a conclusion.

"Nope, I'm not interested at all..." I turned to the window.

"I see..." Sergey exhaled.

The mood suddenly turned ugly. In a few minutes of dialogue, I became nervous and was now silent in this state of mind. I tried to understand the reason for the irritation. Sergey's questions? Definitely annoying and very intrusive. And so annoying that at one point I felt like rudely cutting him off. Having found the obvious reason, I came across another, less obvious but more weighty one – my father's inaction. And I realized that it was the main one. That's why Sergey's questions felt annoying, because they hit the mark and made me justify my father's inaction and defend him in every possible way. It wasn't nice to realize the reality – my father didn't even want to do anything serious on his own. He followed the path of people who were not burdened with intelligence, like his friend Vasily, who was only capable of primitive "profiteering". I, however, feeling my father's intelligence and analytical mind, expected more from him. I expected my father to undertake a serious task. I've been waiting for this step since he left the company. I waited one month, two months... six months. I couldn't stand it, realized that nothing was going to happen and took all the money to the apartment. I didn't fail and almost doubled my father's and my savings. But still I kept waiting for something "special" from my father. I believed in his abilities, which my father often proclaimed and demonstrated to others. I believed, I waited... and nothing happened. Sergey asked questions as if he could smell how uncomfortable they were for me, and he poked more and more at that spot in my mind. I was defending my father's failure. This definition loomed in the back of my mind, but I pushed it away as soon as I turned to the window.

After a few minutes, Sergey started asking me questions about the apartment: how much was left to pay, when would it be ready, and what kind of repairs would I do – expensive or not so expensive? He, for example, did everything expensive, Sergey said, and

recommended that I not save money and do everything well. I nodded, supporting the dialog with one-word sentences. My mood only worsened, and I began to resent Sergey's impudence. It seemed he hadn't acted like this before. "Or had he? Maybe I just didn't notice? Or maybe the fall had that effect on me." My stomach hurt. Sergey turned on a broken record about the "penthouse" – what a good man he was to have bought an apartment on the top floor, what a magnificent view from there, and even the attic was his now, he hung a lock there and even dragged the old bathtub up there, let it be, it would come in handy. And it was all so clever that I couldn't resist telling the truth as it was, just to stop this stream of boasting.

"Seryoga, what is it with you and the penthouse!?" I turned sharply to my partner and stared angrily into his eyes. "Everyone knows that the outermost apartments are sold to all kinds of suckers! Ask any realtor, go to any agency, they will tell you the same thing – the first and second floor and the top two are the most lame! The builders sell them through agencies because these apartments are hard to sell! Nobody fucking wants them! All the best apartments are sold by the developers themselves, and all the shitty ones are given to realtors, and they sell them to those who have too little money! You said yourself that you bought the apartment because time was running out and you had a certain amount of money, right!?"

I pierced Sergey with an angry stare.

"Right..." he muttered.

"And your apartment was cheaper than the others in the building!?"

"Yes..." Sergey forced himself to say.

"That's it!" I spread my hands. "So much for the penthouse... It's just an apartment on the top floor of a building under the roof... I was offered the same thing! This woman immediately began to offer me an apartment on the ninth and tenth floors... I told her I don't want that! And she immediately offered me the third and fourth floor! That's the whole story..."

Sergey was silent.

I was emotionally drained, but I immediately felt better. I turned back to the window and began to stare nervously at the passing landscape. I knew I'd said something offensive and Sergey didn't like it. But I couldn't listen to the self-praising lies any longer, even my enormous patience had run out. I hit him with the truth and thought I had done the right thing.

A truckload of salt arrived from St. Petersburg at the beginning of November. Eight people unloaded the goods – four hired loaders, Senya and his son, me and Sergey. We carried the boxes on our hands, having previously laid out a solid field of pallets in the right part of the warehouse – we unloaded the truck on them. The loaders carried the goods, and Senya and his son stacked them. We started at ten o'clock, when the night chill was invigorating, making everyone shiver and chase away the remnants of sleep. The warehouse was comfortable – the heat of summer had not yet weathered out of the brick walls and boards. The warehouse gave off the remnants of it inside, and I didn't want to go outside at all. Sergey and I, dressed in work jackets, were standing near a pile of boxes, helping Senya to stack the goods, and we were in a joyful excitement, feeling that we were doing something significant.

Sometimes I would take a break from the hustle and bustle of work, look at our business from the outside, and realize that Sergey and I were doing something bold, something with passion and courage. Before my eyes were images of managers and other executives of other companies – they were not our equals. They went to work, fulfilled their duties, and only occasionally strayed from the beaten path, and then only by accident. These companies could be compared to medium or large armies with heavy wagons, which could only move and exist on well-trodden tracks, moving along them thoroughly, but slowly and sluggishly. Our company, on the other hand, was like a small squad that could only benefit by

cutting roads through untraveled areas, forests, and swamps, popping up unexpectedly here and there, and taking advantage of the dazed state of our competitors' superior forces to grab the loot. I liked our adventurism, it got the blood pumping and kept the adrenaline high. We were on a roll. I could feel that drop of blood. We were moving fast towards it, and the drop was growing in my eyes, looking like a heavy bag of money just a few swift raids away.

While the goods were being unloaded, the industrious Vera took inventory, calculated the selling prices, calculated the markup and profit, and called us at the warehouse.

"Seryoga, this is fucking crazy!" I reacted to the call in disbelief. "The average percentage is sixty-three! If others find out that we sell them goods with such a percentage, we will be beaten like Ostap and Kisa! The waybill is what, eight hundred, right?"

"Eight hundred and fifty," he said, listening to my emotions with burning eyes.

"Fuck, if we sell the whole bunch, we'll make half a million in salt alone!"

Sergey piled up the boxes and listened attentively.

"And the perfume will come in a month!" I added excitedly. "Cool!"

We worked until five in the evening. We were all tired. The peak of fatigue was at three o'clock in the afternoon and the last fifteen minutes of rest. After that, work resumed, and with it came a feeling of dullness – the movements became mechanical. The last box was placed on the outermost pile under the silent indifference of eight tired men. Just as silently, with only the occasional necessary phrase, all of us collected the garbage and put things in order. Sergey paid the loaders and they left. Tiredness finally pushed me into the car as soon as my back touched the seat in the "Mazda". I wanted to go home, get into a hot bath and lie motionless for an hour. So I did.

The next day I could hardly get out of bed – everything hurt. It was good to have a weekend ahead of me. After two days of rest, I came to work on Monday feeling refreshed. Sergey and Vera were already there. Vera was doing the mail and the bank. Sergey, crunching his scissors, was cutting pages out of his old black planner.

"What the hell are you doing that for?" I was surprised, put the kettle on, unzipped my jacket but didn't take it off, and plumped down in the chair by the door – the first November frosts had thrown cold air under my jacket, which I wanted to get rid of as soon as possible and get warm.

"Roman, why do I need them?" Sergey broke from his preoccupation and pointed to some of the already cut sheets. "These are my old notes from 'Sasha'. Do you need them?"

"No," I shrugged and watched with interest.

"I don't need them either!" Sergey said and started to "shear" a new bundle of sheets.

In a few minutes it was done – the planner, which had lost a third of its weight, was on the table.

"Here, you want to tear it?" Sergey smiled.

"All right!" I hummed and took the cut sheets from my partner's hands, rolled up in my chair to the trash can and began to tear the sheets and throw them into the trash.

"The hands are resting from this, aren't they?" Sergey's voice sounded behind me.

"Yes, interesting sensations..." I nodded. "The fingers are relaxing. Especially after these salt boxes, they don't even bend. My hands and elbows hurt!" I turned around. "Vera, did you do the waybills for the pharmacies?"

"Yes, I did on Friday!" said Vera. "There they are, Roma, on the fax!"

I finished with the sheets and rolled up to the table. Sergey took the waybills and leafed through them.

"Seryozha, sign them while you're at it!" Vera added, remembering.

My partner took the pen, leaned to the right, settled into the chair, placed his elbow on the table, tilted his head to the left, and began signing the waybills. The pen moved smoothly and expansively. The signature began with a long diagonal stroke from bottom to top, then

down again, up again, and from there down to the right with two semicircular monograms, which changed from the bottom to a horizontal oblong curl. And the signature ended with a similar diagonal stroke, shooting up from below in a sharp, wide, sweeping motion, leaving a pompous squiggle, as if a spring had popped out of the elastic mechanism of the signature. I found myself thinking that I was watching Sergey's calligraphy practice. There was no doubt about it – he was practicing, perfecting his signature. I looked at my partner's face – it was focused on the process and shining.

"That's it, Verok, I'm done!" Sergey said, throwing the pen carelessly aside, raking up the waybills, tapping their ends against the table, adjusting them, and with similar carelessness of his hands, returning them to the metal holder of the fax, leaning back in his chair, exhaling, and looking at me. "Two hundred and twenty thousand!"

"Nice..." I said, thinking about the prospects. "It's only the beginning of the season... Five months... There wouldn't be just one order a month, would there?"

"Well, they usually do an order once every three weeks!" Vera explained.

"That's three or four hundred a month," I looked at Sergey. "The whole car will be sold..."

"We have expensive salt for a month. We'll have to reorder a few times for sure..." Vera said, smiling conspiratorially and adding, "And the markup..."

"How much is there?" I smiled in anticipation.

Vera fiddled with her fingers on the keyboard and said, blushing:

"Well... on the cheap one – fifty-eight... And on the expensive one – one hundred and thirty-four..."

"Seryoga!" I looked at my partner, smiled, and shook my head. "I officially declare to you – we are crooks!" I couldn't help laughing and for some reason lowered my voice and continued: "Imagine, if you tell anyone that we make such percentages on salt, everyone will just go fucking nuts! All the others, like fools, use the goods by the standard twenty percent... Well, some not very popular can make thirty... That's it! But we have a good product and wild markups... Fuck, Seryoga! The main thing is that nobody finds out... at least for a couple of years... At least we'll have time to make big bucks..."

"Why do you think it's a couple of years?" Sergey was surprised and cautious.

Remembering the previous conversation on this topic, I just repeated my thoughts:

"This can't go on for long... This is not a normal state of the market, complete freebies, and we have to use it while we can... Fuck, a hundred percent markup! Think about it! What markup did you use on that salt at 'Sasha'?"

"Well..." Sergey paused, as if he didn't want to tell the truth, but he had to. "Thirty-five we had before the showcase and a discount on wholesale – that's fifteen percent..."

"Standard twenty percent!" I waved my hands. "Everybody sells like that... And they have even less on the marketable goods – ten to twelve percent. And everyone thinks we make a similar percentage. Herd thinking. It's good that we managed to set prices according to the market... and you were stubborn back then, now you see – it worked!"

"When was I ever stubborn?" Sergey was indignant.

"Well, I remember what you said when we were pricing dichlorvos and then salt. You were fussing over money, like, why such markups?"

"I wasn't fussing!" Sergey jerked immediately. "Just don't use those wordies of yours and Anatoly Vasilievich's! I know you..."

"Seryoga, all right – no fussing," I said conciliatingly. "What would you call it? I remember you were very hesitant, and I almost had to talk you into it."

"When have you ever talked me into anything!?" Sergey was indignant and stared at me angrily. "We sat down, calculated the prices, and I said right away – let's do it! And you don't have to make up that someone talked me into it!"

Suddenly I didn't feel like arguing. I remembered Sergey's insecure look and frightened voice very well. I was disgusted by all this contrived courage of my partner, who denied the moment of his own insecurity in the past. I replayed the episode in my mind. I smirked inwardly. And I realized that my father had the same trait. He and Sergey were similar in that – the unwillingness to admit their mistakes, insecurities, or weaknesses. Perhaps they both thought that admitting such a thing would make them weaker, less significant? Such foolishness. I smirked again and answered Sergey with a shrug of my shoulders: "Maybe so... No argument there..."

CHAPTER 41

In the middle of the week, a car arrived from another city, brought the goods, and was loaded with ours. The three of us were sitting in the office when there was a knock at the door around four o'clock in the evening.

"Yes!" Sergey shouted from behind the desk, and the door opened.

"Hello, I've loaded up, the guy in the warehouse said the documents were in the office!" A big man walked confidently into the room, bringing with him the smell of diesel and tobacco.

I sat by the door with my legs crossed like Sergey. He sat relaxed in the chair. The appearance of the driver didn't move any of us. Only Vera jumped up, grabbed the prepared waybills and began to look through them.

"Seryozha, you must stamp and sign!" she said, handing the documents to her husband. He reluctantly leaned forward, put his elbows on the table, took the stamp, sluggishly tapped it twice on the papers, and handed the documents to the driver.

"No signature," I mentally noted for some reason. "I wonder if he hasn't signed papers before. I think he has... Or not always...?"

"And put your signature on it," the driver said in an unquestioning tone.

"Well done, this driver," I remarked again, grinning to myself, and fixed my gaze on Sergey's face. It immediately changed to one of displeasure and... and something else, barely perceptible, intertwined with the displeasure in his features. Without changing my posture, I continued to watch the events unfold. Sergey returned the waybills with a nervous movement of his hand, signed them with an ostentatiously careless stroke, and irritably pushed the waybills across the table toward the driver.

"Now that's more like it!" the man said, looked at Sergey, said goodbye and left.

I replayed the scene in my mind. The doubts were almost completely gone – I gave 99.9% that the driver had the length of Sergey's foot. About what? What my brain had unconsciously suspected my partner of doing, and what I had just realized – Sergey didn't want to sign those waybills on purpose. Hmm? I wondered. Why? I realized that this barter transaction was bypassing the tax office – it turned out that my partner didn't want to expose himself with his signature. It looked unconvincing. "After all, the company won't get away with its tricks in a tax audit anyway. Strange." I thought and searched my memory for similar cases.

On November 9, Sergey returned to the office at two o'clock in the afternoon.

"Roman, have you already paid for the apartment or not?" he asked, catching his breath and finishing dictating to his wife the amounts he had received from a few wholesalers.

I said there were only seven meters left. Sergey offered to split the available cash and I agreed. We paid ourselves another "bonus" and left work at five o'clock. Half an hour later I was in the office of the construction company and paid the last amount for the apartment. The accountant issued the most important document – the deed of full payment for the apartment. I did not walk home, but floated. The feeling that some inexplicable miracle was still happening to me never left me. Like a blind kitten, relying only on my intuition and listening to it in every possible way, I took a risk – I put all my father's and my six years' earnings into the joint construction, and the risk turned out to be a huge success. I ran home and immediately told my father the news. He mumbled, "Well, good," and went out on the balcony to smoke. My mother, hearing the sounds of my appearance, slipped out of her room and appeared in the kitchen. I was sitting at the table eating dinner. It was shameful and frightening to look at my mother. Her appearance was very deteriorated, as if she had aged

ten years and looked sixty. Being in a constant state of aggression and depression was doing its job – my mother was fading by the minute. Her half-gray hair had grown below her shoulders and looked weird compared to her usual short haircut. Her skin had become flabby and pale from lack of sunlight. Deep lines had formed on her cheeks, accentuating the pasty laxity of her skin. My mother was dressed carelessly, letting herself go, as happens to people who have lost touch with the world around them. Her eyes told the same story, empty, lifeless, full of pain. They were getting glassier and dimmer every day. More and more often, I chased away the bad thoughts that entered my mind. "My mother won't last long," I thought, shuddering at the realization. And that's why I couldn't look into those eyes – I felt helpless. All my tentative attempts to contact my mother were met with a barrage of aggression and profanity. Every curse imaginable in the context of our family was heaped on my head – in my mother's eyes, I was my father's lackey, a daddy's boy who had joined a stronger parent for his own good, and a coward who had left my mother to die. My compassion for my mother and my desire to help her were swept away by her aggression, making room for counter-anger and hatred. It was an absolute dead end. After several attempts to get along with my mother and somehow bring her back to normal, I realized one thing: I should leave her alone and hope for the best. In the few hours I would spend at home, my father would also take the brunt of it. My mother would call him a bastard, a miser, an asshole, and a coward. My father would tolerate the attacks in silence, sometimes smiling back at her, which would drive my mother into a frenzy in no time. Sometimes my father could not stand it and would respond verbally, as if to add fuel to the fire of my mother's anger, which would immediately flare up and the verbal abuse would pour down on my father's head with even greater fury. Anyone in their right mind could see that my mother had mental problems.

"So that's it, huh? You paid for your apartment?" my mother said aggressively as she walked in.

"Yes, that's it, paid in full..." I said, waiting for the attacks to start.

"Now you're finally going to move into your apartment and live there," my mother said, pouring a spoonful of coffee into a cup that hadn't been washed in a few weeks and was therefore covered in sticky coffee stains.

"I'm going to live there," I said in a deliberately neutral tone, knowing from experience how sensitive my mother was to any other tone.

"Good for you, you don't want to be a burden on your parents! Move in, get married, just leave me alone!" she said with a familiar emotion that usually followed a breakdown into screaming and hysteria.

"I'm not really bothering you..." I said carefully.

"Of course not..." My mother poured boiling water into the cup and began to stir the drink with a spoon. "Neither you nor your father! It's a good thing you two are against mother, huh!?"

The hysterical tirade had begun. I prepared myself to endure it.

"No one is doing anything against you, Mom," I said, trying not to meet my mother's sizzling glare of anger.

"Of course you're not! You're just waiting... you and your favorite daddy for me to die! Take that!! You see that??" My mother flipped me the middle finger. "Like hell I'm dropping dead!! Got it, you!?"

I was silent. After standing like that for a few seconds, rocking from side to side, whether from tension or weakness, my mother turned and wandered into her room. My appetite was gone. I picked at my plate with my fork and thought that if there was a hell on earth, it was in our apartment. And somewhere in the distance, a year for me, flickered a little spark of light – my apartment. "Wait a year and that's it," I thought, "get the apartment, make repairs, move in and forget everything. And then, you'll see, everything will be better." And I

thought that my mother and father would no longer get along, that they should separate, all of us should separate, and then life itself would decide how the family would continue. As if to save my peace of mind, I drew a happy picture of the future in my head – me and Natasha, living happily in my apartment, and only good things ahead. I looked at my watch – it was time to meet her after work. I put on my jacket and left the house.

At half past nine I entered the pavilion. When Natasha saw me, she smiled at me, and I immediately felt that the problems in our relationship had returned to my soul.

"That's it, today I gave the last money for the apartment," I shared my joy.

"Really?? That's it?? Now the apartment is yours??" Natasha smiled her gorgeous smile enthusiastically and when I nodded affirmatively, she clapped her hands. "Yay!"

We hugged. I smiled, but an alarm went off inside me – I looked into Natasha's eyes and she kept hiding them from me. I sat down on a chair and was glad for the moment of respite – Natasha had to get ready for closing and she was back to work. I sank into my thoughts, occasionally exchanging short sentences with the girl.

"I think our relationship is a bit stagnant," Natasha said, standing next to me and resting her knee on a nearby chair. I snapped out of my reverie.

"You think so?" I looked at her and realized that I thought so, too.

"Yes, we've been seeing less of each other lately..." Natasha added in a calm tone and immediately got distracted by something at work. I was left alone on a chair in the corner of the pavilion. I had a lot to think about. Our relationship was indeed stuck at the point of indifference. I chased the most obvious thought away, but it kept sticking in my brain – we'd both grown cold to each other, never to be rekindled.

"You know, I was thinking..." I began, clinging to the relationship. "I know it's a long wait for the apartment to be ready, another year, then renovations... Anyway... I thought we could rent an apartment and start living together. We could live in a rented apartment for a year and then move into mine..."

I said the sentence with some difficulty, but firmly, because I had made up my mind.

"No, I don't think that would solve anything," Natasha said calmly, shaking her head and starting to wrinkle the back of the chair with her fingers.

It was like a cold snap. I realized that Natasha and I had chosen diametrically different ways to overcome the stagnation in our relationship. And I was immediately relieved. It was as if something imposed and written down in the important had suddenly fallen away for simple uselessness.

"Well... if you think so, then let it be as it is..." I forced myself to say, looked at Natasha and smiled. "I'll wait for you outside... get some air..."

The girl nodded sullenly and hurried back to her work. I stepped outside. The cool air blew across my face, making me shiver and shove my hands into my jeans pockets. I tucked my head into my collar and began to measure my steps on the crooked sidewalk tiles. "Maybe it's for the best," I thought, "it didn't work out again... the relationship has withered... and strangely enough, I don't want to fight for it... besides, what's the point of fighting alone? It's time to end this idiocy... strange... but what's strange? Neither I nor she loved each other in the first place... I don't know what I was expecting..."

The door to the pavilion swung open. Natasha and another girl stepped out and closed the pavilion. The shutters of the door crept down. Natasha stood under them and looked at me, I at her. The buzzing stopped, Natasha turned the key, took it out, said goodbye to her colleague, walked over to me and said: "I'm done."

"Good," I smiled. "Are you working tomorrow?"

"Yes, I'm working tomorrow too," she said, shivering from the fall chill.

"And the next day, Saturday?" I said, realizing that we just needed to formalize the outcome of the relationship somehow, like an honest conversation. I didn't want to do it like that... at the bus stop.

"Saturday is a day off..."

"So I'll see you Saturday night? I'll call you after lunch..." I said, grinning and carefully lifting Natasha's coat collar.

"Okay, call me..."

The bus arrived on time, so we did not have to think of unnecessary words. We said goodbye, Natasha got on the bus, and I, raising my collar and putting my hands in my jeans, walked around the back of the bus and crossed to the other side of the street without looking back. At home I opened my day planner and wrote: "09.11.06 111.720 7m² 60.89m²". I underlined all the lines and wrote "Total: 885284". I closed the planner, went to bed and started thinking about the day when the idea of buying an apartment came to my mind. I remembered my feelings and, already sinking into sleep, came to the answer – something inside me, strong and significant, made this decision for me, and I, only blindly and trustingly obeying this impulse, did not fail. I carefully remembered the feelings of that moment, so as not to miss them again, and fell asleep.

On Saturday, I met Natasha at the center around six in the evening. The darkness of the night was quickly extinguishing the fading daylight. Natasha's guilty look spoke for itself; I didn't want to know the details.

"What are we going to do now?" I asked, sitting at a table across from Natasha in a cafe. "Our relationship is really stuck... and... it seems to me... we are both okay with it..."

Natasha was silent, occasionally sipping a milkshake through a straw. I took two, one for me and one for her; I drank mine almost immediately, automatically stirring the rest with the straw just to keep my hands busy and fill Natasha's silence. At first it seemed to me that she was being stubborn and hostile, but after the first quiet "yes," I realized that she was confused and depressed.

"Yes? Yes what?" I asked quietly.

"We're okay with it," Natasha said, staring down at her feet and only shyly looking up at me.

"What are we going to do about it?" I said calmly.

"I don't know..." she said quietly.

"Then who knows?" I said. "You don't want to live together... I suggested. I don't know any other way to improve our relationship. You work hard and until late, we live in different parts of the city, and this way we'll live together, I think it's better than the way it is now..."

"Yes..." Natasha said softly again.

"Yes what?"

"Better..."

"But you don't want to..." I said without the slightest accusation in my voice.

"I don't want to..."

"My point exactly..." I exhaled. It was clear. I didn't want to suck the life out of the girl or myself. It was time to say the right thing and end it.

"So... are we done?" I looked at Natasha.

"Yes..." she said quietly and cried.

Please, no woman's tears! I immediately felt guilty of all mortal sins. I imagined the picture from the outside – a big guy, almost one hundred kilograms, almost one meter ninety tall, with a stern expression on his face, and a fragile, delicate blonde, just over one meter sixty... crying softly. Who's the asshole here?

"Natasha, why are you crying?" I said, the words caught in my throat, the sentence crumpled.

"I don't know..." she whispered.

"Don't cry..." I said, sighing heavily. "It's going to be okay... It didn't work out... it happens..."

Natasha wiped away her tears, reached into her purse and pulled out a cardboard box, handed it to me and said: "This is for you... Happy Birthday..."

I took it, opened it – a cheap brown wallet.

"About 300 rubles, bought on the run in a subway crossing," flashed in my head.

"I didn't congratulate you then, I didn't give you a present..." Natasha shed another tear.

I was confused. A gift six months later? For what?

"Thank you, Natasha, I'm pleased..." I forced myself to say.

"Uh-huh..." She nodded, wiping away her tears.

I gathered all my undeveloped cynicism and pressed those crumbs into pity, preventing it from doing the stupid thing of prolonging a dying relationship. I'd made that mistake more than once, and only now did I have the willpower and intelligence not to make it again. It was the lack of love that saved me. "It's better for both of us," I decided.

Natasha stopped crying. We finished our cocktails and said goodbye in the cafe. No negativity, we parted quietly. I knew we'd meet again. I was the first to leave, and I walked briskly, wanting the physical distance between us to match the mental one. Like a year ago, I walked down the avenue on a similarly chilly late fall evening. At one point I came to the "Clear Skies" sign and stopped. I looked at the front door of the club across the street and thought that it was at this very spot a year ago that Natasha had walked by like a glimpse and I had given myself a chance at another try at a relationship. I suddenly laughed, the thought seemed like a subtle joke of life – a year ago I had hopelessly thought that I would never have a relationship with such a gorgeous girl, and they had started right away. And ironically, I was the one who ended it.

At home, I took the gift out of my jacket pocket, twirled it in my hands, went into my room, opened the drawer of my desk and froze. In the drawer was the black wallet, a gift from Rita. "Also bought on the run," I thought. I was hurt. Rita, Natasha – that kind of "on the run" relationship. I threw the brown wallet in with the black one and went to bed.

The stupidest time in our area has arrived – late fall before the first snow. It's a terribly depressing time. I found an effective remedy against the snowless darkness of November – exercise. I continued to go to the gym – three times a week I carried barbells and dumbbells, which affected my health and appearance. Sergey squinted at my bearish movements, and my jeans jacket became tight. Within a year, I had gone from being a boozier, a smoker, and a clubber to a well-fed, rosy-cheeked big guy who weighed almost a hundred kilos.

Vovka had been in paternal joy and care for a month – Lera had given birth to Romka in October. I was really happy for my friend. It was nice that Vovka had finally found his hearth after so many struggles. I began to think philosophically about relationships with women – the lack of one is compensated by another. And so it was – our business took off. Every month the profits were put into our pockets with "bonuses". My future looked simple and pleasant – earn money in a year to renovate the apartment, do it, buy a car and drive to the new apartment in a new car. Wonderful! But I was more and more possessed by another thought – the same thought that had appeared in my consciousness with hundreds of visions during that painful night. And this thought was crushing the rudiments of material thought. I felt more and more strongly that what was happening to me was not the activity or the place where I would put down roots and begin to develop peace and family comfort. Something

was pushing me forward from within. At night, when I fell asleep, I replayed these flashes over and over in my memory, trying to understand their meaning, trying to build a complete structure out of the fragments, but I was only partially successful. I realized that the meaning was in them, but I couldn't grasp it yet. I trusted my intuition again. And all my thoughts began to flow in one direction. I felt that I wanted to grow as a person without wasting my energy in the comfort that was coming. And so I began to think about Moscow. The idea of moving was in my head. I turned it around in every possible way. "If I finish the apartment and sell it without repairs, I could buy a one-room apartment on the outskirts of Moscow. Shit... There's still some of my father's money there... Well, I'll make a deal with him, the company will work, the income will be there... I'll pay him off, that's all... and when I move out, my father and Sergey will stay and continue to work – everything will be fine, everyone will be busy... I'll put my share in my father's name. I don't think Seryoga will mind... After all, we started together... He doesn't care whether it's me or my father... Well, it's just for future reference..."

On the afternoon of Saturday, November 25, I was sitting on the couch in my room, thinking, when my father appeared in the doorway. He stopped dead in his tracks, his shoulder resting on the doorjamb, his hands in the pockets of his sweatpants, staring at me.

"You know what I think?" I said, deciding to share my thoughts with my father.

"I don't know..." He came into the room and sat down on a chair. "Tell me..."

"I was thinking, if I sell my apartment... now or when it's finished in a year, I can buy a one-room apartment in Moscow on the outskirts or just outside the Moscow Ring Road... it's about the same money... well, maybe I'll have to add a little more! But just a little..." I said, getting more and more excited at the thought of moving.

My father was silent. His face seemed frozen, and not a muscle moved. My father sat still with his elbows on the arm of the chair next to me, staring at me unblinkingly, and finally said: "But my share of the money is in there..."

"Yeah, well, it's not going anywhere... I'll earn it and pay you back, that's all..."

"How much are you going to pay me back?" my father had his eyes fixed on me.

"I don't know..." I was confused and spread my hands helplessly. "Well... there are three hundred of yours... but the price has gone up... I don't know how to determine the right amount..."

The delicate subject that Sergey had mentioned earlier had arrived – the moment of determining the amount of my debt to my father. For my brain, the situation was a stalemate. If I consider that my father lent me the money, then I had to pay him back only the original amount. If I consider that he bought a part of the apartment with his money, having invested it, then my debt had to be calculated according to the current cost of a square meter, then the amount of the debt became more than five hundred and fifty thousand rubles. In the first case I was stealing from my father, and in the second case I was putting the yoke of increased debt on myself. Since I could not find a solution, my morality was shimmering with tension. I realized that I should not harm my father's interests. I was left with the second, financially worse option – to repay the debt at its current value. My sense of justice cried out – unfair! After all, my father and I did not negotiate the terms of his money – I simply offered to buy an apartment, and he agreed. But if I had to choose between causing damage to my father and burdening myself financially, I was beginning to lean toward the latter. I saw the damage to my father as using him. I don't use people as a matter of principle. Especially my father, the closest person to me besides my mother. On the other hand, I realized that with the income from the company, I could pay off the almost doubled debt in a year. Or even faster. Everything became more or less clear in my head, I realized that I had no choice and I accepted it.

"But the apartment has gone up in price..." my father said insinuatingly.

"Yes, it has..." I nodded.

"So my share has gone up as well, right?" my father took the next step.

"Well... yes..." I said and tensed – my father's tone hurt. I knew that unhurried, insinuating intonation well. It was the way you would drive a crook into a corner, cutting him off in his attempt to fool you.

"And if that's the case, then give me back my share, and then sell the apartment and go wherever you want..." my father said, clenching his teeth so that his cheeks began to move, and his eyes became cold. That's how you look at your enemy. I was hit by a wave of anger and negativity from my father.

"Wait a minute... are you saying that you think I can sell the apartment and go to Moscow with your money???" I grew wary and stared at my father.

"Well..." without looking away, he avoided a direct answer. "Just give me the money back, that's all."

"No, wait..." my suspicions grew stronger. "Let's get to the bottom of this."

My father didn't say anything, so I started digging into the source of his words.

"I'm just sitting here thinking out loud in front of you and that's all..." I smiled, a shiver running down my spine from the bad guesses. "Do you really think I can sell the apartment and steal your money?"

My father was silent, but he didn't look at me as confidently as before – the hardness in his eyes turned to confusion. I pushed my father against the wall.

"If I wanted to do this, I wouldn't be telling you this right now in front of you... I'd just do it. Do you realize that?" I continued to push, seething.

"I do," my father replied dryly, still rigid. His eyes glowed with cold. I suddenly felt my father's deep, hidden hatred. And it hit me. It had been there for a long time, and it came out clumsily and suddenly.

"Then why would you say something like that to me?" I swallowed, worried and feeling myself start to shake. "Why do you make it sound like I'm trying to trick you? Do you really think I'm capable of that? Take your money and run?"

My father was silent, but his features quivered with hesitation. I was more angry that my father thought I was dishonorable, and I decided to find out the truth of the matter once and for all.

"Do you really think I'm capable of deceiving you!?" I said louder.

My father was silent. He hesitated at a point that only he knew.

"I'm asking you – do you think I'm capable of THIS???" I pressed.

"Yes! I do!" my father retorted stiffly, coughing to hide his excitement.

Something inside me snapped. I froze, stunned. My brain was trying to adjust to a new reality in which my father suspected his son of being a potential thief.

"How could you do that!?" I almost shouted in bewilderment. "I didn't do anything! How can you suspect a person of something he hasn't done, and hasn't even tried to do!? What makes you think that??? Have I ever stolen anything from anyone??? Have I ever stolen anything from you???"

My father remained silent, just stubbornly staring at me with a confused, unblinking stare.

"I'm asking you, have I ever stolen anything from you???" I began to shake harder. "Anything??? Even a penny???"

"No," my father swallowed loudly.

"And if I haven't, what makes you think I will!? What makes you think that!? Tell me! Where did you get that idea???" I was shaking.

My father was silent. I felt emotionally drained all at once, and I felt a rapidly growing emptiness, indifference, and frustration. These feelings were accompanied by abhorrence. I felt that something nasty and unpleasant had happened, something really bad. I was shaking and everything inside me was falling apart.

"How could you think such a thing?" I said tiredly, staring into my father's vacant eyes with growing disgust. His gaze was lifeless.

"Here's the thing..." I gathered my thoughts and exhaled heavily. "Since you think so much of me, I'll pay you back at the current apartment prices... I won't be able to pay it all at once, I'll gradually pay you as much as I can until I pay you back completely. And that's it! We'll have nothing more to do with each other! If you think I'm such a shit that I'm capable of stealing from my father, that's your right! But I'm not. I'm telling you right now with my hand on my heart, I've never planned anything like this, and I've never even thought about it. It hurts me to hear my father say that. I had no idea that you could think that of me. I'll pay you back and we'll go our separate ways, deal?"

"Deal," my father said dryly.

I stared at his face for a second, hoping for a flicker of regret or shame, an unspoken desire to turn around and take back what he'd said. No. Nothing. My father's face remained lifeless and rigid. I realized that he didn't regret his accusation against me. My father didn't believe me.

"Deal," my father slammed his palm down on the arm of the chair and stood up to his full height. "Well, I guess I misunderstood you."

"Well, I guess I spat at you for nothing," that's how I heard the words of my father, without apology, remorse, or regret. I turned to the window. My father walked out.

My father's accusation and the conversation was the turning point that changed our relationship forever. The fissure that had appeared only grew with time and affected it in the most fundamental way. In the days that followed, I thought about my father's words almost around the clock – everything inside me was seething and resentful. I burned out within a month and only calmed down more or less by the end of the year. My work saved me; outside thoughts during working hours took a back seat and gave rest to my self-chastisement. I went over my behavior toward my father from every angle, as if under a microscope, trying to see any signs or actions that might have caused my father to have such an opinion of me. I found nothing. Nowhere and never had I given him any reason to doubt my honesty. Yes, we often argued and even fought about things. But there was never a single disagreement between us about money. Before I bought the apartment, my father was in charge of all the money, I kept my half in my father's bank account, and I didn't even think it was in danger. Why would my father think that his money was in danger? If he was so worried about it, he could have registered his share of the apartment. It was possible. Why didn't my father do it? We would have avoided such a terrible fight. There was nothing to do now. It was all nonsense – searching for answers to obscure questions, self-chastisement and self-abuse. Ask anyone – would your father call you a future thief, without any fact of your past, just on speculation? Many will not even like the question. The bond between father and son, son and mother, are the two pillars on which the future of the entire lineage rests. My father, with his usual rigor, cut down one of them. The other one was destroyed by the mother.

I spent the last days of November brooding. The jumble of thoughts and nervousness caused stomach pains again, and the pains made me even more nervous. The vicious circle was restored, which I tried to loosen with alcohol by visiting "Clear Skies". There was nothing to do there, so I left the club an hour before midnight and went to the hotel. In the first shared taxi I sat down on the only free seat at the door with my back to the driver and went home. Red light, stop. Green light, go. We went through a big intersection and then slowed down in front of a bus stop. It was occupied – the shared taxis and buses ahead had

not yet left. We waited. There was a lot of space between the sidewalk and the "GAZelle" I was riding in – another one could easily fit, and it pulled up, trying to get to the stop first. Both "GAZelles", standing almost level, mine a little ahead by one meter, froze, waiting for a free space. I turned my head to the left and took a look through the open window of the door in the direction of the competing taxi. My glance through the same open window penetrated into its cabin and fell on the two seats closest to the window. Natasha was sitting there with a young man. The girl was holding the guy's hand, her face was happy. Natasha squeezed his hand the way you do when you like a guy – with affection. Our eyes met. I felt almost no prick of ego, I just nodded to Natasha, who nodded to me, confused. My "GAZelle" immediately darted forward, breaking our eye contact. My brain immediately registered the number of the shared taxi in the rear. "They go to my neighborhood too, so he lives near her store, probably went there to deposit money or buy something small... a lot of people go through there in a day... that's where they met... she liked him and he started coming regularly..." I figured it out and didn't develop the thought further, it was as clear as daylight. I smiled at the realization that everything in life is much simpler than you think. And once again, but already consciously, I confirmed the idea that whatever happens, happens for the best.

CHAPTER 42

"You look a little weary, don't you?" I smiled as Sergey and Vera entered the office and I noticed my partner's swollen face. He sluggishly said hello, sat down sleepily in the chair by the door and began to yawn, then, with difficulty pulling back the protruding lips, said unhappily:

"Roman, I'm just exhausted. All because of the preparations for my birthday..."

"Oh, it's your birthday!" I exclaimed, looked at the calendar hanging on the wall, found the month of December and the number "1", and added, "Tomorrow, right?"

"Yeah..." Sergey muttered.

"So where and how are you going to celebrate?" I shifted my eyes from Sergey to Vera.

"We just..." she brushed it off. "Stay at home... just spend some time with our relatives..."

"Yes, we decided not to throw parties for ten thousand this year!" Sergey splashed his hands, perked up, sniffed his nose. "We'll get together at home... join us if you want!"

"Nah, you better celebrate with your relatives..." I waved away, remembering that I always felt awkward and superfluous at such celebrations in someone's family circle. "I'll just congratulate you, give you some money... Vera, write off the five thousand bonus for me and Seryoga! Seryoga..."

I reached into my pocket, counted the money and handed it to my partner:

"Here! Happy birthday... Buy yourself something, treat yourself!"

Sergey said "thank you" with satisfaction, shook my hand, and tucked the money into his thick wallet, which seemed to swell more and more every day.

"It's right to celebrate at home," I said. "Why waste money?"

"Romych, it's not even about the money," Sergey said, leaning back in his chair and putting his clasped hands on the back of his head. "I just don't want it to be like that time – we're relaxing in a cafe, we go out on the street, and some drunks drive onto the sidewalk and almost knock you down! Then you have to punch these assholes in the face... chicks squealing! It all gets on your nerves and you can't have a good time!"

"Come on, nothing much happened there..." I waved complacently and was immediately jolted out of my memories. "But yeah, that asshole almost ran us over with the

car! Twenty centimeters more and he would have slammed my legs into the wall! Fuck, he was really shit faced! I don't know how he drove the car! He could barely stand on his feet when he got out. He couldn't even talk, man! You ask him something and he just mumbles back! Then you walked with him for another half hour, hugging him, I was freezing standing there... Ugh!"

"What do you mean, hugging!?" Sergey stared at me excitedly and threw his hands down from his head. "I had to throw punches there, and the next day my arms were swollen and sore!"

I was stunned for a second, because I had definitely heard something new.

"Seryoga, come on, throw punches!?" I stared at him in bewilderment, fighting back a smile. "You just walked there for half an hour, holding each other by the lapels, trying to prove something to him! And he couldn't even answer – he just moped drunkenly, that's all!"

"What do you mean, walked!!!?" Sergey jumped up from his chair and stood in the middle of the room, nostrils flared, sniffing noisily and giving me an indignant look. "Don't say what you don't know! I fucking hit him all the time, he was covered in blood, my fists were covered in blood, he was bleeding all over me when he fell on me on the stairs."

"Seryoga!?" I was almost speechless as I listened to the blatant bull story. "What blood!?? From whom did it bleed!?? What are you talking about? No one hit anyone! I was standing ten meters away from you, I saw everything! You just walked for twenty minutes holding each other, then you tripped on the stairs, you fell, he fell on you, then you pushed him off you, he grabbed your chain, I thought he was gonna break it... then you grabbed him, pulled him up, he got up, you started stomping again, holding each other's lapels... then you went to the street, you fell on him, you lay there for about five minutes, then everyone got tired of it, everyone was freezing, we separated you and went down to the cafe – that's it!"

"Why are you lying!!!" Sergey hovered over the tables and looked at Vera. "Don't say what you don't know!!! I went to the cafe later, my clothes were covered in blood!"

Sergey gestured, imagining bloodstains on his chest and shoulders. His speech was confused. Sergey's pauses were punctuated by anger, and he looked at Vera and me.

"What blood, Seryoga!?" I stopped being angry at such a blatant lie and began to enjoy the circus that was taking place. "You came back completely clean, you didn't have a drop of blood on you! Your clothes weren't even torn! Stop making things up."

"Who's making things up!!!?" Sergey almost shouted. "If you didn't see it, don't say anything!!!"

"What do you mean I didn't see it?!?!" I stared at him, stunned. "The three of us were standing there – me, your brother and that, what-d'ye-call-him... your buddy! That's why we were standing still, because there was no fight! There was a guy standing next to us who came with this drunk guy. He wanted to get in, I told him not to, and he stayed next to us..."

"Look, if you don't know how it was, don't say that!!!" Sergey continued to press, moving his eyebrows.

And I stopped talking – I didn't want to argue. After the surprise came confusion and not understanding what to do with this argument. It came to a dead end, to a point after which it threatened to turn into a fight. Sergey lied through his teeth and in spite of everything. And that confused me. Realizing that I would not be able to convey the obvious, I decided that it would be better to leave the situation as it was, smiled, spread my hands and said:

"Well, okay... If you think you hit the big guy, then so be it."

Sergey looked at me angrily, took a few steps around the room, returned to his chair, folded his arms across his chest, pouted, and, glaring at me, added:

"I know what happened and how! So don't say what you didn't see!"

My partner sniffed his nose and turned away nervously. The office became tense and quiet. After about ten minutes, we turned a new page in our communication, and the work

day came to an unnoticed end. Perhaps it was because of our quarrel that Sergey did not go home through my street and, after explaining the reason, took me only to the "Foster Home". There I waited for a shared taxi, squeezed into an overcrowded "Pazik" and, as it shook along the congested ring road, thought about the day's quarrel with Sergey. I found the situation amusing. I twisted it in different ways, but I still didn't understand if Sergey was lying consciously or if he was telling the story because he sincerely believed in his own view of what had happened. I replayed the argument in my head over and over again – it didn't get any clearer. At first I understood that Sergey was lying, and he was lying on purpose. The reason I saw was simple: he was holding up his brand of "real man" in front of his wife. But the emotion and pressure with which he defended his version of events confused me more and more. The version that Sergey himself believed was slowly winning out. But after reaching a certain point, the process of analysis stopped, leaving me in confusion – I still did not understand what was the main motive of this total lie. Lying to a witness of the events. Without solving the puzzle, I pushed it to the back of my mind and fell asleep.

The next morning I was the first to arrive at the office. The "Mazda" arrived at the beginning of ten. Vera came into the office, dressed in her thick, but not yet winter coat, followed by Sergey, his eyes shining. The coat suited Vera very well – soft pink color, it fit her figure, emphasized slenderness and grace. "And this in spite of having two children," I thought, slapping Vera's palm in our traditional greeting. Sergey put his briefcase on the chair by the door, took off his parka, hung it on the hanger, and began to work on the kettle. Vera, who had taken off her coat, turned on her computer and touched the battery pipe under the window with her hand. I touched the pipe from my side.

"It's not very good, is it?" Vera smiled, rubbing her hands together from the cold.

"Right, not so good..." I nodded, keeping my hand on the warm pipe. "Okay, but not hot..."

"A heater would be nice!" added Vera, shivering in her chair.

"You're right, Verok!" Sergey nodded vigorously, looking at me.

"I don't mind..." I shrugged. "We'll see... If we freeze with such batteries, we'll buy a heater..."

The kettle boiled lazily.

"All right, Verok, what about the e-mail?" Sergey began to work vigorously. "Are there any orders from pharmacies? Did 'Fort' send the leftovers?"

"Let me check, Seryozha..." she said.

Sergey just as energetically opened the briefcase, rustled around with his hands, closed it, went into the pocket of the parka. I was still in a half-sleep state, from which I was awakened by a sharp crack of some mechanism. I shuddered and raised my head at the sound. Sergey was standing in the middle of the room, holding a cell phone – an open Nokia clamshell.

"Did you buy it?" I asked.

"Yes!" Sergey exhaled with a satisfied look. "I decided to treat myself for my birthday! I am sick of walking around with that stupid phone!"

"Ah! And rightly so! How much is it?"

"Thirteen thousand seven hundred!" Sergey said and plunged into studying the phone's menu.

I suddenly thought that all the fiddling with the briefcase, the vigorous rummaging in his jacket pockets and, as a final flourish, the demonstratively loud opening the phone – Sergey had orchestrated all this as a prelude to the presentation of an expensive purchase. I even smiled, but immediately restrained myself mentally, deciding that with such a perception of Sergey's actions, it was not far to paranoia.

And on Monday, December 4, Sergey showed up at the office with a swollen face, uttering the hackneyed phrase that he felt "like a squeezed lemon after those celebrations". He had a strong smell of sour breath – the stench of alcohol. I realized that a lot of it had been consumed, and Sergey spent the day sluggishly, taking a pill of Citramonum to soothe his aching head.

The next day, Sergey and I received copies of Vera's monthly reports. With my usual meticulousness, I began to study each figure.

"Aren't you going to look at them?" I was surprised to see Sergey get rid of his copy of the reports without looking at them, shoving the papers into his briefcase.

"I'll look at them at home tonight," he waved and sat back in his chair.

I suddenly realized that Sergey would not look at the reports on principle. "If he does, it's just for a glimpse," I thought, and I discovered another peculiarity of Sergey: he was not goal-oriented. This discovery explained a lot about his way of doing things, his way of living. I realized that the meticulous zeal for work that I showed was not typical of Sergey. His attitude was superficial. From the category – the goods are sold, profits are growing, well, what else do you need, why sit and pick at some figures, if everything is good! And suddenly, for a moment, I imagined two trotters in a harness, pulling a cart, but one pulls as hard as he can, and the other pulls too, but just enough to keep in line, and just enough so that the harness does not tell the other that he is not working hard enough. And all these thoughts in a tangle of feelings and sensations swept through my consciousness and sowed confusion there. With an effort I returned to the reports and continued to study the rows, columns and numbers in them.

"Vera, why does it say 'Lobov S.M.' in the 'Suppliers' column?" I tore myself away from the papers and looked over at my partner. "Seryoga, we haven't owed you or me anything for a long time, have we? Some twelve thousand here... Do we owe you anything?"

"I don't think so..." He perked up, looked at me in surprise, then at his wife. "Vera, what is this debt the company owes me?"

"What debt?" Vera was also alarmed, frowning and tapping on the keyboard. "Oh, yes, there is... strange... The company doesn't owe you anything, right?"

Sergey's wife stared at both of us.

"No," I shook my head. "Everything was paid a year ago."

"Vera, fix it!" Sergey splashed his hands. "Romka says it right, everything was paid to him and me long ago. Make normal reports!"

"Oh, okay... I'll redo everything!" She fussed, and soon the printer whistled and issued new copies of the reports. "There you go, boys! Now everything is correct!"

On December 12, while Petya was loading for the first run in the morning, I spent an hour alone in the office, during which I had time to think about various things. I thought about how the apartment I had bought had turned from a shared success with my father into a stone of discord. My father's assumption that I could, in Sergey's words, "screw over" my father, made me resentful, and grievance seethed inside me. And that is why I was determined to prove to my father that he was wrong about me and to return the money to him in the agreed amount as soon as possible. And as soon as I had made up my mind, the image of Moscow, which was so close to me, receded from my mind.

"Well, I'll have to wait a few years," I decided.

The door to the room opened and Sergey rushed in, theatrically throwing a pile of papers on the table, making sure I noticed the move, smiling and extending his hand to say hello. Vera came in next.

"What's this?" I reached for the papers.

"Bank statements," Vera said, unbuttoning her coat.

"We barely got the statements, you know!" Sergey said and started to pour water into the kettle and pressed the button. "Who wants tea?"

"I do!" Vera squeaked.

"Everyone does," I added. "Why?"

"But our general director's term ended on December 10th, and no new one has been appointed!" Vera was ahead of her husband with an explanation that caused him to look at her with displeasure.

"And we have December 10th, right?" I said, digging into my memory.

"Yes, December 10, 2003, I was appointed for three years, and now I have to write a new resolution..." Sergey said, sniffing his nose. "Who wants sugar?"

"I don't..." Vera waved and started the computer. "I'll drink without sugar..."

"And you... deputy director!?" Sergey smiled.

"Give me five, I'll have some!" I smiled back. "I learned to drink it like that from you!"

"You will learn much more from me! Gah-gah-gah!" Sergey laughed and threw his head back.

After a few minutes, the cups were in our hands and the room was silent. The only sounds were the measured sips as all three of us carefully took in the hot water.

"So, Romych, we need to reappoint the general director and take this paper to the bank, because we can no longer work with the account," said Sergey, sitting in the chair by the door, holding a cup in one hand and a lump of sugar in the other.

"Let's do it..." I chewed off a corner of my sugar lump and took a sip.

"I mean, as agreed, we'll appoint me again, right?" Sergey nodded.

"Well, yes..." I repeated the bite and took a sip. "We agreed, didn't we..."

"Ah, all right!" Sergey leaned back in his chair. "I was just checking..."

I silently put the rest of the first lump of sugar into my mouth and drank it down.

"Vera, type the same kind of paper on the computer as we did back then..." Sergey looked at his wife.

"What kind of paper was it? I don't know, I don't have it!" she waved her hands.

"I'll give it to you!" Sergey reluctantly frowned, put the cup on the shelf of the cupboard, put the sugar next to it, took a sheet of paper from his briefcase and handed it to his wife. "Here, make exactly the same 'resolution', only number two... two copies... one for the bank, the other for us."

The keyboard rattled. Sergey and I finished our tea, and the document was ready. According to it, Sergey Mikhailovich Lobov was reappointed as the general director of the company for the next three years. I, as co-founder, signed the document, Sergey put his signature under mine, stamped both copies, and put them in his briefcase.

"Roman, are you okay with the appointment of the general director?" he said in a sympathetic tone.

"I'm okay with it..." I smiled.

"Well, you never know!" Sergey was overly tactful, which made his concern seem unnatural. After all, he was the one who had initiated the extension of his powers, in violation of our rotation agreement. So I cloaked my dissatisfaction in sarcasm:

"Well, I hope I can be the general director next time!"

"Roman, what do you need it for? You're already the gray cardinal here. Not a single decision is made without your approval anyway!" Sergey immediately covered my question with flattery and left it unanswered.

"Ha! Gray cardinal, you say? Interesting comparison," I smirked, looking away. "All right then, what can I do, I'll have to be the gray cardinal!"

I took Sergey's wish to be the director for the next three years in stride. It seemed to me frivolous and even childish, I did not attach importance to this fuss of my partner and therefore decided to give in and please his ego. "After all, not a single action can be taken in the bank without me, this is enough for me, if anything..." I summarized.

"We need to meet tomorrow morning at the bank, Romych..." Sergey continued the conversation after a pause. "We'll have to sign some papers about it, and about our signatures... we have two signatures... right, Vera?"

"Yes, Seryozha..." Vera said, not taking her eyes off the monitor, busy with her work. "And the signatures also need to be re-certified."

"Ah... signatures... right..." I nodded. "Well, then, tomorrow morning at the bank..."

"Listen, Romych, maybe we should register one signature at the bank, too?" Sergey straightened up in his chair, crossed his arms over his chest and looked at me. "Because why do you have to go to the bank every time for this second signature?"

"What's the difference?" I looked at my partner and shrugged my shoulders. "I don't go there so often because of it... sometimes it happens... No, let it be two!"

I waved him off and leaned back in my chair.

Sergey looked at me thoughtfully for a moment, sniffed his nose and said:

"Look, we'll be there tomorrow and we can register the signature at the same time, and then you won't have to go to the bank at all, Verok and I will do everything there ourselves!"

"No," I shook my head, "let it be two."

"Well, suit yourself..." Sergey pursed his lips. "I mean well, to make it easier for you, because you are without a car and run from one bank to another for the sake of some signature..."

"I understand, Seryoga, let there be two..." I nodded and looked at Vera, already used to the fact that clear answers to any questions could only be obtained from her. "We can always make one, right?"

"Yes, Roma, you can make one anytime," she said.

"Ah, well, if that's the case!" Sergey splashed his hands. "Okay, then tomorrow at the bank!"

Sales of perfume had already increased in the run-up to the New Year, and we were preparing to make a good profit. Sergey drew up the order and when he saw the amount, he gasped.

"Roman, the order is for eight hundred thousand," he stared at me confusedly, sitting at the table. Sergey's one hand held a pen, the fingers of the other hovered over the calculator, trembling. My partner stared at me for a second and started chewing his lip.

"So?" I shrugged. "Eight hundred it is! Will Moscow deliver it?"

"I think so," Sergey nodded.

"That's it!" I smiled. "They'll deliver it and we'll sell it and make a lot of money!"

"Everything's always easy for you, Roman!" Sergey looked at his wife and put a thick cocktail of emotions into the sentence. In it I caught indignation, admiration and envy of the ease of decision-making and confidence in success.

"Why complicate it?" I added. "We brought it, sold it, got the money – that's it!"

"I see!" Sergey nodded and exhaled fatefully. "So, shall I place the order? For eight hundred thousand!?"

My partner put his hand on the order sheet and stared at me questioningly. Sergey looked at me as if he understood that the order should be made exactly as needed, but if not

for my mood, he would have immediately halved the order to the amount psychologically comfortable for him.

"Yes!!!" I cut him off, placing my palms on the armrests like I was doing push-ups. "That's the order we're going to make!"

"Vera, here, place the order, send it..." Doomed, Sergey handed the sheet to his wife.

The perfume arrived on Monday, December 18, and we distributed it to customers in three days, selling three-quarters of what we brought in the first week and making over two hundred. There was nowhere to put the money. We paid for the batch and still had more than three hundred thousand rubles.

"Roman, what are we going to do with the cash?" Sergey said at the end of the same week, sitting at the table, holding the open briefcase on his knees and spreading wads of money on the table.

"Seryoga, fuck if I know!" I muttered, twisting in the chair by the door and laughing. He stared at me, biting his lips to keep from smiling.

"It's New Year's Eve in a week... holidays," I added. "So only after that..."

"Then we can put the money into the stab fund," Sergey suggested.

"What the hell is a stab fund?" I couldn't help myself and burst out laughing.

"Seryoga, have you been watching too much economic news?"

In those days, the word was constantly on television and in the newspapers, accompanying almost all economic and political news.

"No," he puffed up with indignation. "I'm just suggesting that the surplus cash be kept somewhere separate, so we don't have to split it in two and each of us doesn't have to keep two or three hundred thousand and carry it around with us all the time!"

"I don't carry it around..." I shrugged. "I leave it at home, and that's where it sits..."

"Well, you don't carry it! I have to carry it! I'm constantly paying for this and that out of the common fund!" Sergey added even more resentfully.

"Well, let's put it in the stab fund, it'll be more convenient for you, I don't care..." I agreed. "And where do you want to keep this stab fund?"

"We can open a bank account for one of us, or I can put the money in my account, I already have it in the same bank where our company account is..." Sergey said hurriedly. "If the company needs the money, I'll just take it from one window to the other..."

"Well, you can do that. No need to carry such sums in a briefcase," I nodded. "Better safe than sorry! All right, put the money on your account and then we'll decide what to do with it..."

The last week of 2006 was hectic – goods were being shipped at full speed and Petya was making two runs a day. We had not planned to go to work on the 29th, thinking that there would be no orders on the last working day. We were wrong. Petya made two runs again. As soon as he left, Sergey immediately fidgeted in his chair at the table and said:

"Vera, tell me the number!"

"Three hundred and twenty thousand!" she leaned back in her chair with satisfaction.

"Oh wow!" I was impressed. "Two hundred and twenty thousand net profit! Not bad, huh?"

"Yeah... not bad!" Sergey sniffed his nose, put his ankle on the knee of the other leg and started to kick his shoe.

Suddenly I wanted to go home, I was tired. We had a long holiday ahead of us until January 9th. We packed up, walked out into the snowy darkness and silence of the factory, got into the "Mazda" and drove home. Sergey slowed down at my stop, I jumped out and ran home. Nothing could spoil my mood. Not even the lack of holiday spirit in the family. It had

been several years since the Christmas tree had been decorated at home, and this year the lights were not blinking.

"Happy New Year, son," my mother appeared in the doorway of my room, looking disheveled. She was swaying, either from not feeling well or from a cigarette. Everything about her was the same, only her eyes had subtly changed. My mother smiled at me.

"Happy New Year, Mom," I said softly. "Should I buy some tangerines?"

"Do you want tangerines?" my mother smiled again.

"Yes! It wouldn't be New Year's without tangerines! Do you want some?" I offered.

"I do!" my mother said, squeezing her fingers together happily, her eyes sparkling.

"I'm going to the store!" I decided and hurried to get dressed. I wanted to believe that things would get better in the family. On New Year's Eve, you believe in the best. The next night I went to "Clear Skies". I took a chair on the dance floor in a cozy niche and watched the visitors for about five minutes, trying to catch that wave of mood, of feeling, that I sat in that place with just two or three years ago. No miracle happened – I did not step into the same river twice. None of the club regulars were there, there were other people around. I realized that very soon the moment would come when I would be here for the last time. And I might not even know that it would be the last time. I just won't be here anymore. I felt sad. I finished my glass and went outside, trying not to look anyone in the eye.

We started work on January 9th. We had barely worked a few days when the real frost set in. I had not remembered such a drop in temperature in ten years. The mercury in the thermometer outside the apartment window dropped to thirty below zero and stayed there. Everyone tolerated it for the first week. The creak of snow underfoot became a squeak. The snow-covered trees stood in ridiculous, twisted poses, as if frozen through. It was as if nature was enduring the frost as well as people. We immediately bought a heater for the office – a good oil heater. The room got warmer and the frost that came through the cracks in the old window stopped. Senya and his son would only come to the warehouse to work, and when they were done, they would immediately run to their cramped kennel and drink tea endlessly. Senya's glasses would become so covered with hoarfrost on his nose that the glasses would turn into two opaque white blobs, making Senya look like the cat Basilio, with white frosted hair under his nose instead of a mustache. Three times in a month Petya failed to start the "GAZelle" in the morning, which forced the company to take days off. My father waited out the frost at home, parking his "GAZelle" in the yard.

By the end of the month, the frost had thawed and the "stab fund" had accumulated a decent amount of money.

"Roman, what are we going to do with the money?"

"I don't know, Seryoga, we can invest it in business, we can still try to buy an office somewhere, because it's unrealistic to sit in this kennel forever..." I said.

"How are you going to buy an office?"

"I don't know, we could buy some non-residential space and move there... but we don't have that kind of money to put down the whole amount at once... it's a lot to collect." I thought out loud. "We could also invest money in the joint construction like I did, for example buy an apartment on the first floor and use it as an office..."

"Right, good idea..." Sergey thought and rubbed his lips with his fingers.

The three of us sat in the office and drank tea.

"To sign the contract, you only need thirty percent and that's it, sign it..."

"And the price per meter is frozen, right? Like it was with you?" Sergey said thoughtfully.

"Well, it used to be like that, how it is now, I don't know!" I waved my hands.

"Seryoga, we could go there right now and find out about the conditions!"

"Yeah..." Sergey said, perked up. "So? Let's go then!?"

We jumped into the "Mazda" and drove to the construction company's office. We parked.

"Roman, I'm not going, you know everyone there..." Sergey said. "You'll talk there, you'll find out what's what? And then we'll decide what to do, okay?"

"Yeah, okay," I nodded and walked into the office, leaving my partner in the car.

After talking to the manager, I found out that the construction company had removed the clause from the contract that fixed the price per meter until the end of the construction project. It had become like everyone else's – when the price went up, so did the price of the unbought meters. Price? Twenty-six and a half thousand rubles per meter. "I'll be damned, six months ago it was half that much..." went through my head.

"Bring the third part!" the woman added. "And we'll sign the contract with you!"

Having said that I wanted to buy the property not alone, but with a companion, and having taken time to "think", I said goodbye and returned to the "Mazda".

"Well?" Sergey looked at me impatiently.

"Well, a house is being built..." I said. "Here next door, right next to my house... a ten-story brick building... three floors are already standing. The house will be finished by the end of 2009."

"And what, are there non-residential premises on the first floor?" Sergey sniffed his nose.

"There are non-residential premises, but all of them have already been bought out... We didn't make it... There are three residential apartments..."

I unfolded the paper with the plan of the first floor of the house. It was built in the shape of the number 7. The inner sides of the house formed a courtyard. The sold non-residential units occupied the first floor of the outer side, the base of the "seven". On the outside of the upper part of the "seven" on the first floor were residential apartments. And all of them were sold.

"There's only one apartment left on the first floor," I said, pointing to the corner of the "seven". "Here it is... a two-room, sixty-two meters... One room overlooks the courtyard, right up to the entrance in the corner, and the kitchen and living room go out on the other side..."

"What's on the other side?" Sergey looked at the plan.

"Well, there's a house across from it, parallel... fifty-sixty meters to it..."

"And in between what?"

"Underground garages, I think... she said so... and that's it."

"Will it be possible to build an exit in their direction?" My partner expressed my thoughts.

"Fuck, Seryoga, I don't know!" I exclaimed. "We'll have to ask her, and you and I better go to the construction site and see everything with our own eyes... I already have a rough idea of what's there and how, but I'll go anyway, I'll take a closer look... And you should go there and see everything with your own eyes too..."

"Romych, what is there to see? Bare walls!? Just check it out and that'll be enough..."

"Seryoga, we're not buying a bag of sugar. If I were you, I'd still go and see everything in person," I said, feeling a little irritated that I seemed to be dragging Sergey into the deal. A strange pattern was emerging: I offer, I go to negotiate, I go to see the object on the spot... and he doesn't even want to make a move. And not for anyone else, but for himself. I didn't understand that approach. "Fuck, what a slacker, get off your ass, look at the apartment!" I got angry looking at my partner's bloated face.

"Seryoga, it's one thing for me to look at it, but it's another thing for both of us! We're both going to invest money, so we should both look at it," I said.

"All right, we'll go together sometime," he mumbled, getting annoyed.

"So what do we decide?" I said.

"Roman, let's think about it for a few days, we're not in a hurry, are we?" Sergey said.

On Saturday the 27th I went for a walk to a house under construction. It was conveniently located for me – right on the way from my parents' house to my house under construction. From my apartment to the house was a five-minute walk along a path through a pine forest. From my parents' house – a few stops, about twelve minutes on foot. There was a building boom in town. Houses in my neighborhood were springing up like mushrooms. I walked out into the street, past the hypermarket and along the road to the "seven" under construction. A large apartment complex was being built parallel to the road, surrounded by gray concrete slabs of a fence. Between the road and this fence was a temporary path of concrete slabs about a meter and a half wide. I followed it. The path was about three hundred meters long and took up almost half of the road. I passed it and stepped down onto the gravel. The house, shaped like a "seven", was also surrounded by a fence, over which I could see the floors being built. I walked along the fence, reached the corner of the "seven" and looked around. Construction sites all around... It was a weekend, silence, nobody, only the wind licked relentlessly at the hull of the building and the fence. With my eyes I found the windows of the right apartment. The garages ran parallel to the house, judging by the contours of their roofs, which rose two meters above the ground. Two of the apartment's windows faced them. The fence restricted the view. But I saw all I needed to see, and... I hesitated. "It's unlikely that an exit to the roof of the underground garage is allowed, it's probably forbidden by the building code..." I thought and walked back.

"So, Romych, are we going to buy the apartment or not?" Sergey said on Monday morning, when we had finished our current business and started drinking tea.

"What do you think?"

"I think we should do it," Sergey sniffed his nose, chewed sugar and sipped loudly from his cup. "Especially since your apartment is already being built there, you know everyone there, the company seems to be okay... Of course I don't know what's what, so I trust you in this matter..."

"Seryoga, you can trust me or not!" I spread my hands. "But I'm not the one who builds houses, I myself have signed the same ordinary contract..."

"But still... You have already blazed the trail... We can follow it now."

"By the way, I went to see the house this weekend..." I started, wanting to express my doubts so that we could make a well-considered decision afterwards.

"So what's up?" Sergey was all ears.

I told him what I had seen and expressed my doubts.

"Well, we just have to ask them if we can build there or not, and that's all," Sergey said, smacking his tea loudly, the sugar melting in his mouth.

"Yes, that's right," I nodded.

"Stop by on your way home from work today and find out," my partner suggested.

"Okay, will do," I nodded again.

So I did. But my visit didn't bring any clarity, and I was tired of all the fuss, so I agreed to buy the apartment and put off other matters for later.

"You said we only have five hundred thousand now?" Sergey asked me on Tuesday, January 30, when we decided to sign the contract for the apartment.

"Yes. At first the manager told me they needed thirty percent, I said we had five hundred and we would buy the apartment without any problems, and she agreed, she said, 'I know you, you're a careful investor, you paid for the previous apartment on time'. Anyway, we can go, she will sign us a contract with five hundred thousand down payment!"

After the phrase "you're a careful investor" Sergey grimaced, but said nothing. He never went to see the house. Strange. The man was ready to sign a contract for almost a million of his financial obligations for an object he didn't even want to see.

"So how are we going to draw up the contract, for two of us or one?" Sergey said as soon as we pulled up to the construction company's office and turned off the engine.

"What do you mean? For two, of course! What do you mean, one?" I was surprised at the question.

"I mean, not to deal with this division into halves, into quarters..." Sergey wrung his hands, "and to register the apartment for one of us and not worry! That it would be more convenient! We work together, Roman! We have everything on trust! That's why I propose to register it for one of us, so it will be easier, less all this paperwork!"

Sergey spun a wheel in the air with his hands, imitating "paper fiddling".

"I see what you mean..." I thought about it. "Only it is inconvenient..."

"Why inconvenient?" Sergey looked at me. "We know – the money is common and anyway neither you nor I will sell half of the apartment if someone wants to! We'll sell it as a whole. That's why I say, it's easier for me to register it for one of us!"

"Well," I said. "It's a bit easier, yes. But, for example, God forbid, of course, something happens to the person to whom the apartment is registered... and what? And then run to prove to his relatives that this apartment is half of your money? It would be a pain in the ass!"

"Why? What pain in the ass!? You think Anatoly Vasilievich or my Vera will not give the money?" Sergey was indignant.

"Seryoga, I don't know!" I began to get really worked up. "I can only speak for myself, and I can't speak for anyone else! What's the point of this coffee cup reading? Let's make it for two and that's it, let's make an agreement with you, for example – if one of us offers to sell the apartment, the other one automatically agrees! So that neither you nor I will hinder each other in this matter, and without any screw-ups. Agreed?"

"Roman, why would I stand you up or make any screw-ups?" Sergey sulked and made an insulted face.

"Seryoga, I am not saying that you will screw up! I mean the documents need to be done right so we don't think such shit about each other in the first place, get it?" I explained and found myself feeling guilty for suggesting such a thing, my tone was already apologetic, which only made me more irritated.

Sergey was silent and looked at me confused, as if he didn't know how to avoid my arguments.

"That's why it's better to formalize everything properly..." I added, smiling.

"Okay!" Sergey perked up, gave up and waved me away. "For two, so be it..."

"Then here is the deal – if one decides to sell his part, the second automatically agrees and does not interfere?" I said and held out my hand to Sergey.

He looked at me for a second, looked down at my hand, and snorted: "Shit, Roman..."

"Seryoga," I shook my hand in the air, calling for a handshake. "Deal?"

"Deal, deal..." he said, shaking my hand hastily, shaking his head and humming.

"Roman, things are so complicated with you..."

"What's so complicated?" I was surprised, and again I caught the notes of apology in myself, I got angry about them, not understanding why I was apologizing at all, because I only offered to draw up the documents correctly and fairly.

Sergey opened the door and got out of the car panting. I climbed out on my side. My winter clothes were in the way, so I rolled over on my side and threw my legs out into the

snow, caught the inertia and jumped out, glanced at my partner's angry face, and we entered the building.

"How much will you pay?" the manager said, putting her pen to the contract as we both sat in her office.

"Five hundred," I said calmly.

"Or even five hundred and ten," Sergey added hastily, taking the money out of his briefcase with shaky hands and looking at me. "I have a tenner in the common fund..."

"How much?" the woman said, looking between us.

"Five hundred and ten," I decided, not without pleasure, watching Sergey tremble in his chair like a lowly official who had been received by a big shot.

The contract was ready, all that remained was to sign it. I began to run my pen over the pages of one copy of the contract, watching Sergey. His hands were trembling, which made the signature that my partner was diligently writing on the other copy come out neat and tidy, with little curls in the middle and a modest tail at the end.

When we finished signing and paid an advance to the cashier, we got a copy of the contract and a check for two hundred and fifty-five thousand and returned to the car.

"How are we going to keep these contracts and checks?" Sergey was still sulking and gave me an angry look. "Together, or on our own?"

"On our own, why together? You have your copy of the contract, I have mine, you have your checks, I have mine – it's fine!" I said, putting the check and the contract in the file.

"And how are we going to pay for the meters in the apartment, together or separately!?" Sergey continued to radiate dissatisfaction.

"Doesn't matter..."

"I mean, are we going to pay equally, or someone faster and someone slower?"

"Equally, of course!" I was surprised to hear such a thought from my partner.

"Well, you never know!" Sergey splashed his hands. "What if you say, 'I'll pay for my half now, and you'll pay for yours later...'"

"Seryoga, I won't say such bullshit!" I hummed. "We bought the apartment together and we'll pay for it equally!"

Sergey remained silent, threw his file of documents carelessly into the back seat and started the car. We went back to work.

CHAPTER 43

"Seryoga, draw the order for the toilet water, and I'll draw for Krasnodar!" I said on Monday, February 12th. By that day our stock had dried up and it was time to bring a new batch of perfume for the upcoming holidays.

"What if the frost comes again?" he looked at me.

"It won't!" I said. "And nothing will happen to the toilet water, there is alcohol in it."

The printer produced two sheets of leftovers, and we got to work.

"Roman, I made a million here!" Sergey said, taking his stunned eyes off the paper on the table and turning them to me. "Look at this!"

"Well, good!" I nodded. "Cool, Seryoga!"

"Roman..." he paused dramatically and held up a finger. "A million!"

"So?" I was surprised. "A million, what's the big deal?"

"What's the big deal!?" Sergey was indignant. "We never ordered a million! The maximum was eight hundred thousand! Do you think they'll just send us goods for a million!?"

"They did it for eight hundred, didn't they? Why not a million?" I said calmly.

"Are you sure?" Sergey pressed with his voice.

"What's there to be sure about – send the order and we'll find out!" I said, but Sergey still looked confused, I continued. "We pay properly, there are no debts, we can even throw more money at them that they'll realize that everything is okay with us... Send the order and we'll know..."

"Vera, here... send it..." Sergey handed the paper to his wife, obviously overcoming his doubts, shook his head and added: "Shit, Roman, we are getting into some kind of ass..."

"What ass!?! Seryoga!" I was surprised. "There's an order for a million, well bring for a million, what's the big deal!"

"Well, I'd reduce the order!" he said immediately.

"Why reduce it when we can sell for a million!?" I stared.

"Because it's a lot of money!" he shouted almost desperate.

"So what???" I didn't understand, I even wanted to say – chickened out? but I didn't, I just added: "What does it matter how much it is? We'll order as much as we need, we know how much we sell... Don't sweat it!"

"I don't sweat it!" Sergey snapped at me.

"Then what are we talking about?" I spread my hands.

"Okay..." Sergey waved away, giving up.

The same day our order was accepted and the waybills were emailed to us.

"The whole order has been processed," Vera looked at us. "A total of one million eighty-three thousand two hundred and twenty rubles..."

"Well, what did I tell you?" I smiled at Sergey's pensive look. "They'll send it... The bigger the order, the bigger the client, the higher its value and they're more willing to send it... By a reversal of logic, Seryoga, you have to raise the rates, not lower them, got it?"

As I watched my partner's confusion, I laughed silently. Vera understood my mood, looked at me with flashing eyes and watched the events with interest.

"A fucking million!!! Holy moly!" Senya said, seeing the amount on the waybill through the frosted glasses and staggering out of the cold into the warehouse. The temperature was frozen at about twenty below zero and would not rise.

"Yep, Senya, a million!" I said cheerfully, turning away so as not to give myself away with a smile, looking at Sergey, nodding at the car that had pulled up to the warehouse, and suggesting to my partner: "Why don't we help them? We'll warm up too..."

"Nah, let's go!" He waved me off. "They'll manage on their own!"

Sergey turned around, found the storekeeper with his eyes and said without further appeal:

"Senya, go ahead, unload! Check the goods, bring the waybills to the office afterwards!"

"Okay, Seryozha!" Senya said, wiping the snot from his nose.

"Let's go!" Sergey punched me in the arm and jumped out of the warehouse. I followed.

On the twentieth, Tuesday, a truck arrived from Krasnodar – in the afternoon, shortly after two o'clock, a "MAZ" with a trailer brought us fifteen tons of goods. The truck drove through the loose snow along the slope of the warehouse, and when it started to back up to the warehouse gate, it got stuck in the snow.

"Fucking hell! It's stuck!" I said, spitting angrily.

Sergey silently stepped aside. I went to the cabin of the "MAZ". The driver opened the door and, hanging on his arm, pressed the pedal and looked at the wheels turning in place.

"Try to go forward a little and then backward..." I suggested.

"I wish I had some sand," the driver said.

"We have some sand," I said, remembering that I had seen a pile of sand on the corner in the summer.

I went back to the warehouse, found two shovels, handed one to Sergey, and walked to the corner. For the next ten minutes we carried the frozen sand under the wheels of the truck. Soon the hired loaders arrived – students, four of them. I immediately told them the reality of the situation:

"Guys, we have to carry it from there to the warehouse! The car is completely stuck there..."

Half past three. We started with the trailer. The loaders picked up the boxes and carried the goods into the warehouse. They formed a lively, ant-like line.

"Only twenty meters and already two more hours of work," I thought angrily.

The day began to pass quickly.

The trailer was finished in two and a half hours. The sun had set and it was completely dark. Not a single light was burning, only the light from inside the warehouse shone out onto the trampled ground, and the street lamp above the warehouse helped as much as it could through a blurred holder.

"Try it, maybe you can get going now," I suggested to the driver.

No use, the wheels were sliding helplessly on the ice. Besides, the batteries were dead.

"They should be recharged, at least for a few hours," the driver said. "Otherwise, I'm afraid they won't work next time..."

The nearest outlets were in the office building. The batteries are heavy blocks with handles on the sides, and carrying them a hundred meters in the snow to the office would be a challenge.

"We need a sled or we'll never make it!" I said and went to the gatehouse. I was lucky. Soon I returned with an ordinary child's sled. We put the two batteries in it and pulled it to the office. Me and Sergey. One pulled, the other pushed from behind. The thin rope cut my hands unpleasantly through my gloves. The sled, wobbling, slipped off the track and got stuck in the snow. Tired, we changed every ten meters. Suddenly I thought about how the first polar explorers must have felt, dragging their sleds with provisions up the hills. And not a hundred meters. And not in twenty degrees. The temperature dropped. "Twenty-five, I guess," I estimated. We pulled the sleds to the door of the building, brought in the batteries, and plugged them in. Back to the warehouse. The unloading continued. In an hour and a half we unloaded five tons from the "MAZ". I looked at the faces of the loaders, Senya, his son. Everyone was freezing, but the job was coming to an end, and they tried to be cheerful.

We brought the batteries from the office and installed them.

"If it doesn't work the first time, it won't work the second time," said the driver and got into the cabin. Sergey went to the warehouse. Up to my ankles in snow, I stayed near the truck, and then I felt how cold and tired I was. Seven hours in the cold. I was exhausted. The driver turned on the ignition. The starter cranked the engine pretty fast, two or three cylinders fired, the exhaust pipe blew a black cloud and... and that was it. The starter cranked for another five seconds and then gave up. The driver turned off the ignition. Silence.

"That's it, dead!" the driver said desperately as he approached me. "I have to sleep here in the cabin, charge the batteries and sleep overnight!"

"We'll try again!" I said determinedly. "Let's wait a while, let the batteries rest a bit, charge them, but not for a long time, so that the engine does not freeze, and try again, okay?"

"Okay," the driver nodded.

"Try it!" I said, feeling my own body, frozen to the bone, beginning to fall asleep from cold and fatigue.

The driver climbed into the cabin.

"God help me!" went through my mind in absolute desperation.

Ignition. The starter started. "Vzh-zh-zh!" it cranked the cold engine. Five seconds... silence... seven, the starter began to slow down, the cylinders were silent... vzh-zh-zh... nine... zh-zh... ten... the starter became exhausted, stopped. "Fuck, that's it!" I realized, doomed.

One second... two... total silence.

"Doo-doo-doo!" the diesel engine roared.

"Yes!!! We did it!!!" I shouted and jumped on the spot.

Sergey came running.

"What, started?" he said.

"Yes, it started! Fucking great! It works! Fucking A, Seryoga!" I kicked my partner happily. "Let's add more sand and make a better rut so he can get out!"

For the next few minutes we swung our shovels hard. When we were done, we walked wearily toward the warehouse. The "MAZ" roared. I turned around and stopped. The truck pulled the trailer, froze for a second, then slowly rolled forward at a slight angle and turned the corner. The trailer disappeared behind the truck in the shadow of the factory building, and all I had to do was follow the movement by sound. The car roared, the sound going off to the left. "Passed the second curve, now up through the snow," I thought, remembering how my father and I had spent the whole day clearing the snow from the road, shoveling a rut all the way to the gatehouse. The engine tensed, slowed, and continued to pull along the building to the end, where the snow was already smooth. Suddenly, the engine seemed to exhale after a long load and began to thump briskly and easily – the truck had broken through to the gatehouse. "That's it," I thought with relief and walked into the warehouse. Darkness all around. And silence. The rest was like a dream. I was tired and cold. We paid the loaders, closed the warehouse and went to the office with Sergey.

Soon we were on our way home in the "Mazda". The drive seemed endless. All I could think of was a hot bath. When I got out of the "Mazda" at the usual place, I went into the apartment, undressed and went straight to the bathroom. I turned on the hot water and the bathtub began to fill. I immediately climbed in, lay down with my back in a thin layer of hot water and closed my eyes. My heart was beating loudly and rhythmically. The heat didn't help. Even when my body was completely in the water, I was still cold. The bathtub filled. I turned off the water and lay still for about ten minutes until I felt the water get cold and I still wasn't warm. I turned the water back on. After about twenty minutes, the cold left my body and I became warm and languid. I could barely keep my eyes open, my body was sluggish, and I desperately wanted to sleep. I got to the bed, half asleep, lay down on it, pulled the blanket over me with the last of my strength, and passed out.

The next day the frost had thawed, and by noon it was already nine degrees below zero. "Just one day... Why couldn't they bring the goods a day later or the warming a day earlier?" I thought angrily, remembering with a shudder the day before. After the frost, it was as if a different reality had set in, as if winter had suddenly become not real, but something childish. It was no longer necessary to run down the street, thinking only of how to get inside as quickly as possible. And everyone felt that the city was suddenly softer and more relaxed, as if after a long siege there was a moment of silence and rest. And on February 22, Sergey returned from "Fort" with feverishly shining eyes.

"How much!?" I realized the reason for the glare.

Without saying a word, he handed me four sheets with the rest of our goods, the first one with "280000" written on the top.

"Two hundred and eighty!?" I lowered my voice to a whisper and stared at my partner.

Just as silently, Sergey placed the swollen briefcase on the table and began to take out the wads of money, laying them out in front of me.

"Not bad!" I shook my head. "Seryoga, this is a record!"

Sergey looked at me, chewing his lip, his nostrils flared like a stallion who had just finished first. In a moment he put the briefcase aside, shoved his hands into his pockets, spread his elbows wide and stopped in the middle of the room.

"Vera, write it down!" Sergey ordered his wife, who went to the table to get a notebook and immediately wrote down the number, pedantically asking to repeat it.

I stared at the wads of money for a while until I realized and said:

"Seryoga, put the money away! Senya or Petya will come in, see it, and go fucking nuts!"

"What should we do with it? Stab fund!?" Sergey said matter-of-factly, and began to shove the bundles back in with deliberately careless movements. "Or should we take it to the apartment?"

"To the apartment," I nodded. "No need for it to just sit there..."

"Well, let's not take it yet, there will be more payments! Next week too... Let me put this money into the stab fund for a month, and then we'll take it all at once in the same amount?" Sergey suggested.

"Okay, let's do it that way..." I shrugged, one month wouldn't change anything. "It's unlikely that the price of a meter will increase, usually the price goes up in April, before the summer," I thought and agreed.

This amount impressed me for another three days. I had the feeling that Sergey, too, had exceeded his financial expectations of our association. I remembered the feverish glow in his eyes, which only confirmed my hunch.

February was over, and during the winter "campaign" we sold the maximum amount of perfumes. We were also right about the salts – in March the remainder was as much as we had predicted. "Everything will be sold in March and April," the three of us estimated with satisfaction.

"Have you heard anything about excise taxes on household chemicals?" Sergey said as he walked into the office one morning in early March. The sun had already started to warm up noticeably, the daylight hours had increased, and I wanted to get rid of my winter clothes and get back into the hot summer. Sergey took off his jacket, hung it on a hook, and plumped down in the chair by the door.

I haven't heard anything about excise taxes.

"They said they would introduce some kind of system, like with alcohol, for example, if you sell household chemicals and there is alcohol in them, you have to work through this system somehow, pay some kind of excise tax..." Sergey filled me in as vaguely as he could.

"Really!?" I was surprised. "What kind of bullshit is that!? What for!?"

"How should I know! I just found out myself today!" Sergey chewed his lip in confusion.

We spent the whole day discussing the news, asking everyone we called for details. No one knew anything. We had big plans for the upcoming dichlorvos season, and our goal was to sell more of it than ever before. That summer, we managed to sell two and a half thousand boxes. Which, according to Sergey, repeated the maximum sales of "Sasha". I mentally wished that we had sold three or three and a half thousand. And then such news!

During the week the details became clear – it turned out that a special program would be created to record the movement of goods containing alcohol, and it would cost a lot of money and work in a complicated way. It would be created, because by mid-March it was not yet available. All over the country there was a stupid situation – there are goods containing

alcohol, but trading companies and manufacturing plants do not have the program, it is impossible to sell such goods without it.

"So what do we get..." I said. "We'll only be able to sell kerosene-based dichlorvos without this program, and that's it!"

"Well, it turns out that way," Sergey waved his hands.

"And 'Arbalest' has all the dichlorvos on alcohol, right!?" It dawned on me.

"Well, I guess so..." Sergey said after thinking about it.

"And if the program is not available by summer, then they will not be able to sell dichlorvos, right?"

"Theoretically, yes," Vera said, and we both looked at her, then at each other.

"Interesting situation," I said.

Polinka rattled out Natasha as soon as she saw me at "Clear Skies". I went there less and less. Only when I felt nostalgic. I was standing at the bar in the grotto when she appeared behind me from the darkness of the dance floor.

"Alone? Hi!" Polinka said, playing with an empty tray in her hands.

I nodded. We exchanged a few banalities, and Polinka began to tell me the key thing – she said that as soon as we broke up, Natasha started seeing a guy, that he lived in the same neighborhood as me, and that after New Year's, Natasha moved in with him, lived there for two months, and then he kicked her out. I listened half-heartedly, I wasn't really interested. My head was spinning with thoughts about female friendship and friends like Polinka, who would give up a more attractive friend at the first opportunity and continue to convince her of their friendship and loyalty. "There's a reason you're pimply and no one wants you," I thought, looking into Polinka's shifty eyes. She stopped talking. I was silent. Polinka hesitated beside me, perked up, and ran off to fulfill another order. I went out and walked home. Listening to myself, I tried to understand my reaction to the news about Natasha. I wasn't happy that she was free. I didn't feel any desire to get back together. I remembered Polinka's eyes, waiting for my reaction and never getting it. It is difficult to play indifference when it is not really there. But the turned page of life is easy to accept calmly.

"Look, Romych, why don't we register one signature at the bank?" Sergey suggested again, grimacing in a begging and pitiful way. "Two makes no sense! We are not hiding anything from each other, are we? Anyone can look at the bank in the computer at any time – you or I – and see what is there and when and where it was paid. It's just inconvenient to have to jerk you around every time they give us some papers to sign at the bank and you have to go from the right bank to the left bank to make some kind of scribble... What's the point? Vera also has to sign the payment every time in this electronic bank, first she inserts a diskette – she signs the payment with my signature, then she inserts the second diskette – she signs it for you! She could sign it once and send it! It's just that she has to insert these disks every time... I mean, if we have to, let's keep it that way. But I just don't see the point. Let's register the general director's signature, it will be valid for the accountant, and that's it. One disk – convenient!"

Sergey spread his hands and waited for my answer. "Basically, Seryoga is right, there is no point in having two signatures, no one is going to transfer money from the account somewhere else, you have to be a complete fool, everything is transparent, every payment can be seen at any time. We can remove the second signature," I thought and agreed. At the end of March we went to the bank and made the necessary changes. At the same time, Sergey withdrew the money from the stab fund from his personal account, and we transferred it to the account of the apartment we had bought.

"Nice!" I exclaimed with satisfaction as soon as Sergey and I returned to the "Mazda" from the construction company's office. "We paid for more than half of it! Almost thirty-five

meters! The summer will pass with dichlorvos, and we'll have paid off the second half! And the apartment is ours, we'll make an office there! Wonderful, Seryoga!"

"We don't have to pay the rest yet, we could bring the money just before the apartment is ready," Sergey said. "When will it be ready? At the end of the eighth year? Or the ninth?"

"At the end of the ninth..."

"All the more! There is no hurry now, Roman..." Sergey said thoughtfully.

"Seryoga, what's the point of keeping the money if housing prices keep going up? And we don't have a contract like I did. If the prices jump, we'll go into hock."

"No, I don't think they'll jump that much!" Sergey waved thoughtfully.

"I don't think they'll jump either! They will grow at the rate of inflation, no more, but still... why keep money if we are not going to use it anywhere else?"

"Why not? We are..."

"Well, we could certainly use it, get some good products... if that's the case, sure! Let's make more money!" I cheered.

"Yes, we'll think of something!" Sergey came out of his reverie, revived, slammed his palm on the steering wheel. "That's why I say, let's get through the summer and then we'll see..."

"All right, let's!" I nodded. "We'll see what's what..."

The dichlorvos season was approaching, but there was still no special program to track the trade in alcohol products. It turned out that it was possible to sell dichlorvos from previously imported batches, but there was no point in bringing in new batches. Thinking about all this, I came up with an idea and decided to talk about it – I sat down in the chair by the door and said:

"Look... None of our competitors can sell dichlorvos because they're all alcohol-based, right?"

"Well, I see what you're saying! You're suggesting that we bring in kerosene-based ones and sell them?" Sergey quickly interrupted me.

"Basically, yes, but not only... We sell a lot of dichlorvos for cash, we should calculate exactly and bring in alcoholic ones, but carefully... and basically yes, bring in kerosene ones and while everyone is stupid with this program, start pushing it to everyone... The demand for dichlorvos is not going anywhere!"

Sergey chewed his lip in his usual posture at the table – arms crossed over his chest and resting on his belly, bulging under his sweatshirt – thinking.

"Well..." he muttered. "And how many kerosene ones do you want to order?"

"I don't know... I'd bring the maximum, see how much they can give us... Listen, can your buddy at the factory get us a whole truckload before the season?"

"A truckload?" Sergey stared at me, scared and surprised.

"Yeah... It would be cool if we could get a truckload of them shipped right away. It's a confusing situation right now, and it's going to be a few months for sure... And in those months, everyone will start stocking up on dichlorvos for the season... My point is, while everyone is slow, we can sell a lot of our own... Everyone needs to sell, no one is going to wait for these alcohol based dichlorvos, everyone is going to immediately rush to find a substitute and we have some – no alcohol and as much as you want..."

"But why take so many? Let's take half, sell it, and then order more."

"No, you don't understand!" I added excitedly. "We can't order half, we have to take a truckload at once... If we order half, then in the middle of summer, when we sell it and need the goods again, we will be asked to pay for it, and the money for it will not be returned, and our own will not be enough, and we will end up without goods in the middle of the season... We should order a full truckload and sell it quietly until the end of the summer, sell the

maximum, and when the money comes back, we'll start closing the debt! We will even begin to close it earlier, so that we can pay part of it in advance, then even if part of it is overdue, they will not blame us, they will wait..."

Sergey chewed his lip and looked at me with glassy eyes.

"The main thing is that we get this truck delivered, Seryoga! Everything else is a piece of cake! We need to call your buddy and talk to him, tell him we want to order for the whole season. By the way, since it's such a mess, the kerosene in the factory might be sold out at once, and then there won't be any more... That's why we should get a truck right away! We'll stockpile dichlorvos and sell it quietly this summer! There will be a lot of hype, Seryoga, you'll see!"

Sergey stopped chewing his lip and mumbled after a few seconds: "Yeah..."

"Call your acquaintance today, say we want to order a whole truckload, probe him, see the reaction..." I nodded and pressed my partner's indecision.

Having made up his mind, Sergey sighed loudly.

"Call him today, talk to him!" I pointed my partner to the phone.

"Right!" he nodded and turned sharply to the right in his chair, and there was a thud.

"Aaaaah!!!" Sergey screamed, grabbing his left knee and slamming his head into the table.

"Aaaah!!!" he screamed again, clenching his teeth and holding his hands on his knee.

"Oh!"

"Aah!" Sergey rested his forehead on the table. "Aah! Mmm! Aah! Mmm!"

Everything happened too fast, and Vera and I sat there completely dazed.

"Aah, mmm..." Sergey mumbled, lifted his head, sat up in his chair and exhaled.

"Whew!"

Tears streamed from the corners of his eyes. Sergey hastily wiped them and his forehead with his hand.

"Phew," he said. "Even my eyes dimmed..."

"What is it?" I said. "Did you get hit or what? With what? Your knee?"

"Yes, my knee..." Sergey exhaled and wiped his wet forehead again.

"Yeah, it's painful..." I frowned sympathetically. "You should be more careful..."

"My knee is broken... cup..." Sergey said, wrinkling his nose.

"Your kneecap is broken???" I was surprised, remembering the information I had read somewhere that a broken kneecap causes the most pain, on a par with a stomach wound.

"I broke it a long time ago..." Sergey continued to hold his leg with his hand, rubbing it where it had been hit. "I have splinters there... and they move around... But when I walk it seems okay... But when I hit it, it's like this... everything goes black..."

"Ugh!" Vera shivered and looked at me.

"I don't get it... How can you walk? You need an operation, Seryoga..."

"Just like that, Roman..." he leaned back in his chair. "Phew, feels better now..."

The uncomfortable silence hung in the room for a minute. Two contradictory feelings arose in me – on the one hand, complete sympathy for my partner, and on the other, the thought that, according to his stories, there was hardly a place on Sergey's body without some kind of injury. Everything had been knocked out, dislocated, pulled or stretched, broken and burst.

"Hey. Wanna go to the movies?" I received a text message in early April. The number wasn't in my contact list, but I remembered it. I smiled, almost not surprised. "Movies... why not?" I thought, knowing that I had a lot of free time at the moment.

"Hey, let's go," I texted.

"Okay. See you this weekend then?"

"Yeah, see you this weekend."

"Bye."

"Bye."

Natasha didn't bother to call, and I didn't care.

We met on Saturday. We texted without calling. At seven in the evening I was at the cinema and Natasha came next. The stiffness of her movements and the tension in her face revealed her inner state. I bought tickets, a glass of coke and popcorn for two. We communicated poorly, exchanging only the necessary words. Without them, we would have already switched to sign language. The theater was half empty, we took our seats, the lights dimmed, the show began. I started with popcorn and cola. Natasha, sitting tense, only touched her glass of coke, took a few sips. I drifted into the movie and sat like that for an hour and a half. The movie ended and the lights came back on. Without exchanging a single word during the movie, we both got up and headed for the exit. We went outside.

"So, bye, Natasha... thanks for the movie," I said, waited for her one-syllable, blurry "bye," and walked across the crosswalk into the park. I didn't want to go back to her. "You have to respect yourself and not let them wipe their feet on you," I thought, realizing that I had to develop a stiffness that was not typical of me, or I would pay for my softness forever.

"Call him, Seryoga!" I said, as soon as all three of us entered the office on Monday morning, April 9th, I looked at my watch and took a chair by the door, Sergey sat down at the table with a disgruntled face.

"Wait, Roman! Let me come to my senses after the weekend!" he said nervously.

"What could possibly happen to you last weekend?" I sneered.

"Two kids happened, Roman!" Sergey retorted.

"Ah... If that's the case, then no argument here," I retreated, giving him credit for the witty answer.

Sergey was busy with some unimportant and non-urgent matters. I watched him in silence, clearly realizing that Sergey was playing for time and was not very eager to make an important call. Ten minutes, twenty. I waited. The time difference between the cities was pressing. When noon comes, it will be the end of the working day in Novosibirsk.

"Seryoga, you gotta call... It's almost noon..." I reminded him at eleven.

"Wait, Roman, wait, we'll sort out the current situation, Vera will deal with the bank and then I'll call him!" He pulled the hand supporting his head away from his forehead.

Half an hour later, with a heavy sigh, Sergey dialed the phone number of "Aerosib".

"Yes, hi... aha, hi, yes... Seryoga, yeah... good, yeah, yeah... the season of dichlorvos has already started... yes... we're going, aha... we've already sold everything left from the winter... yeah... we're here thinking of placing an order for you... yes... aha..." Sergey was terribly worried, rubbing the wire of the telephone receiver with his free hand, then he stopped, put his trembling finger on the button of the speakerphone and pressed it. The voice of the commercial director of "Aerosib" with a typical Armenian accent entered the room through the loudspeaker:

"Seryoga, you take the dichlorvos, take it... Seryoga, do you hear me? When are you going to make an order?"

"Uh-huh, yes... I'm doing it now, aha!" Sergey said, gave me a conspiratorial smile and pressed the button again, bringing silence back into the room.

"Ask about the truck," I said quietly but clearly.

"Uh-huh... yeah, yeah... look, I did the math here... aha... and I came up with fifteen tons... and I thought maybe we could order a full truckload... aha, yes, that's what I'm saying... the full truck, yes!" Sergey's index finger hovered over the speakerphone button, shaking, throughout the entire tirade.

"And ask about the price increase! The price increase!" I hissed, having remembered the important thing.

Sergey nodded automatically, not knowing who to listen to.

"Listen, when... when will you have the price increase?" he said, interrupting the flow of words from the tube. "Yes... price increase... when... end of April? Aha... Yes! Yes... here... yes... that's right... that's what I thought too, yes... aha, get dichlorvos for at the old price while it's still... aha!"

Sergey looked at me and I nodded as hard as I could, making my neck hurt. My partner's finger pressed the button – the voice said: "Seryoga, you do the right thing! Take a full truck right away, yes! The price is good! You'll sell everything! You'll pay us back later! Take it!"

"Aha, yes... I thought so too," Sergey nodded, wiped the non-existent sweat from his forehead, fidgeted, not knowing where to put his hand, and pressed his finger on the same button – the background from the speaker disappeared. I leaned back in my chair, relaxed – the necessary information was received, the truck was promised to be sent to us. Sergey finished and hung up. His hand reflexively wiped his forehead again, his face looked tired and devastated.

"So they're going to send us a truck, right?" I blurted out excitedly. "That's fucking great, Seryoga! Fuck, there will be a price increase, that's ten percent for sure! We have to hurry – we bring the goods and the price will go up immediately, you know! When do we send him the order, today or tomorrow?"

"Today we probably won't have time..." said Vera, looking at the clock on the monitor, then at me. "They close in an hour..."

"What did he say?" I looked at my partner. "When do we send him the order?"

"He said if we send it today, he will give it to the warehouse today and it will be loaded tomorrow, and if we send it tomorrow, it will be loaded the next day..." he said tiredly, as if being interrogated.

"We still have an hour!" I was soaked with adrenaline. "Seryoga, come on, make the request! How much can his car carry?"

"He said if we take a full truck, it's twenty-eight tons!" Sergey said sluggishly, resigned to my pressure.

"Great! Okay, we'll order an assortment for the summer and load the rest with kerosene!" I said, slapping my palm on the arm of the chair.

All the aerosols we needed for the summer were only three tons.

"Order kerosene for the rest of the weight, Seryoga!" I said firmly.

Vera's fingers broke away from the keyboard and fluttered over the calculator keys, and she immediately said: "That's four thousand nine hundred boxes!"

"What, are we going to order that much!?" Sergey almost shouted with a hint of panic, staring at me with round and confused eyes.

"Yes!" I nodded and smiled, the excitement of adventurism just flaring up in me. But it was a calculated move. In case of incomplete sale of goods during the postponement period, we lost nothing – the more you owe, the more willing they are to negotiate, to forgive late debts and to set new dates for their repayment. This is the law of large numbers. But if we were successful, we would make a decent profit. It was a calibrated cavalry charge.

"Who are we going to sell it all to?" Sergey said almost calmly, but there was panic in his eyes.

"Seryoga, don't be a pussy, we'll sell it, you'll see!" I hummed with a smile.

"I'm not!" he was indignant, immediately stopped being stubborn and looked at me resolutely with a deliberately stern look. "So, shall we order?"

I blinked affirmatively.

"Four thousand nine hundred boxes!?" Sergey signaled the seriousness of the moment. I blinked again and smiled excitedly.

"Vera, do it! Four thousand nine hundred!" Sergey said, almost jabbing his finger into the screen.

"Should I?" Vera looked at both of us confusedly and, realizing from my answering look that the question was unnecessary, tapped her fingers on the keyboard. "That's it! Done! Should I send it?"

"Yes, Vera, send it, twenty minutes left! Tell them to load it tomorrow morning!" I said.

The car arrived a week later.

"Holy moly..." Senya scratched the back of his head in amazement, staring at the open back doors of the truck full of boxes. "Roma, Seryozha, is it true that the whole truck is for us?"

"Yes, Senya, it's true," I nodded and entered the warehouse. "Come here. Look, the assortment will go first, carry it to the end of the warehouse, and then – kerosene. Put it here, right on the square at the entrance in a solid pile, but put the rows evenly so you can count it, because if we put it crooked, then we will not be able to count it later. There's a lot of money here!"

"Two million..." Senya muttered respectfully. "I've already looked at the waybill..."

"Yes, Senya, two million!" Sergey, who had come up, said boastfully with his hands at his sides. "You can see for yourself what volumes we already have! We're growing!"

The situation with the excise tax and its accounting program did not change – nothing worked and none of the wholesalers installed it. Alcohol-based dichlorvos disappeared from the shelves, which immediately affected the sales of our "kerosene" – the winter leftovers were gone in no time. The truck arrived right on time. We started unloading at ten. Within an hour, all the goods were moved to the back of the warehouse. It was the turn of the literally stinking dichlorvos. The acrid smell permeated the truck's trailer and flowed into the warehouse with the first boxes. Four hired loaders and Senya's son carried them. I, Sergey and Senya stood up to stack the boxes. We stacked them in rows, forming a square on a solid platform of pallets that had been moved. The boxes were covered with the same subtle black soot, as if coal had been mixed with talcum powder. Gradually and imperceptibly, with each box, it passed through the hands of all of us, settling on them and on our clothes. Gradually our hands became gray-black, as if they were unloading coal. The suspension was in the air, sometimes making us sneeze and rub our faces with our hands, which became stained and streaked, making us look like chimney sweeps. After working for an hour in the warehouse and making sure that the foundation was laid evenly, Sergey and I went to the office. On the way we stopped at the gatehouse and washed ourselves at the faucet in the wall.

"Vera, have you done a product evaluation?" Sergey said as soon as we entered the room.

"Yes, Seryozha, I did," she said and handed the report to her husband.

Sergey stared at the paper.

"Four hundred thousand," Vera said for some reason in a half-whisper, as if it were a secret.

"Four hundred!?" I was surprised, I was ready for two hundred.

Vera shook her head in satisfaction.

"Yes, Roman, four hundred thousand!" Sergey said, throwing the sheet carelessly on the table, looking at the water in the kettle, pressing a button on it, and plumping into the chair behind the table. "Come to think of it!"

"I did... but you were thinking about whether we should take the truck or not..." I said.

"I wasn't thinking about whether to take it or not! I was thinking about who we're going to sell all this stuff to!"

"Seryoga, we will sell it!" I said, not wanting to fall back into the viscous slime of my partner's doubts. "And what we don't sell will stay in the warehouse for the winter, and in the spring we'll revalue the dichlorvos and make a hundred or two more! You'll see!"

"What if they say – pay for the goods and we have half unsold!" Sergey still peppered me with his doubts.

"We will explain the situation, offer to mothball the unsold goods in our warehouse for the winter... Nobody will drag five or even ten tons back to Novosibirsk, it will cost a lot of money... Any normal person would think about it and agree," I said.

"What if they don't agree!?" Sergey started to annoy me with doubts again.

"If they don't, we'll send it to them! Wherever they say... But at their expense..." I spread my hands.

Sergey started chewing his lip, his face expressed confusion and indecision.

"Don't be such a pussy, Seryoga! Everything will be fine!" I said encouragingly, humming.

"Fuck, Roman, you sound so confident! And I'm not a pussy, got it!?" he grinned.

Vera looked between us with worried eyes.

"Seryoga, we brought the truck, we'll sell it and everything will be fine!" I said harshly. "We'll sell it and order more! And if we don't sell it, we'll put it in storage and make money on the revaluation! And if they tell us to give it back, we'll give it back! Nobody can make you pay for unsold goods! If they jump on us, we'll return the goods and that's it!"

I was angry, my face became stony. I noticed more and more that Sergey's indecision wasn't so harmless. He hesitated in every important matter. I had to persuade him, explain everything, spoon-feed him. Eventually he would agree, but it cost me energy. I felt that the only way to move forward in the business was to overcome Sergey's doubts that had entangled me. And these invisible chains were getting heavier every day.

An hour later, we returned to the warehouse. Work was in full swing, the contours of the cube of boxes were already formed – with an eight-by-eight base, it rose a meter above the level of the pallets.

"Roma, Seryozha, how are we going to stack them now, on top?" said Senya.

"Yes, Senya, lift them up. And stack them like steps, it will be more comfortable," I said. "When they're up to your chest, put the sheets on top and keep lifting!"

Sergey and I joined the work. The farthest third of the cube near the wall grew to chest height, and a binding pad of cardboard sheets was laid on the formed platform. On the sheets we began to place the second level. We finished half of it and covered it with sheets. The last level was left at a height of one meter, thus forming three large steps.

After working for a couple of hours and getting covered in soot again, we went back to the office and the loaders took a break for lunch. When we returned to the warehouse an hour later, the work was already underway. The cube was two-thirds complete. The loaders worked automatically. I understood them well, I knew from my experience of unloading a truck – the first fatigue comes in the middle of the work. The second half is unloaded mechanically, and then comes a sharp fatigue literally fifteen minutes before the end. The last two pallets are always the hardest. I went to the warehouse. The picture was grotesque – under the gabled roof of the warehouse stood a cube of almost five thousand boxes. It was as if it had not been assembled on the spot, but dragged in all at once.

"Where shall we put it now?" Senya looked at me and pushed two boxes to the top, completing the corner of the figure.

"How many more are there?" I looked at the loader standing next to me. The others were a little further away. The work stopped.

"Two pallets," he muttered.

"All right!" I shouted, feeling the fatigue in everyone. "Two pallets left! Let's get them out and stack them right here at the entrance!"

The guy grabbed the penultimate pallet with a dolly and dragged it from inside to the edge of the truck.

"Come on, everyone, throw the boxes down!" I encouraged the loaders, Senya and his frail son, who was completely dazed from the physical exertion. Ten minutes for each pallet and the job was done. The loaders walked tiredly to the gatehouse to wash up. I looked around the warehouse, it was filled to capacity. Skyscrapers of boxes went under the ceiling and stood in straight rows. The warehouse looked like a miniature metropolis – between the skyscrapers were parallel and perpendicular passages – avenues and streets. And above it all was a huge cube. It was a symbol of our hope. The cube could be our jackpot, or it could be our failure. I was determined to open this Pandora's box.

CHAPTER 44

In the middle of April I changed my mobile phone. A friend from another part of our huge country sent me a new one. The phone had a large screen, a stylus, slots for two SIM cards, and was quite heavy. It looked respectable and its two speakers screamed at full volume like a tape recorder. I opened the package at home, turned the phone in my hands, was impressed by its parameters and decided to keep it. I gave the old one to my father.

"Did you buy a new cell phone?" Sergey spotted it as soon as I took it out of my pocket and sat down in the chair by the door.

"Nah! I mean, almost... A friend from the Far East sent it to me," I said, sensing a hint of jealousy and competition in my partner's intonation. "How much do you think it costs?"

"How should I know!" He splashed his hands.

"Well, roughly, Seryoga... Just tell me at a glance – how much does such a phone cost?"

My partner crossed his arms over his chest, leaned back in his chair, exhaled noisily, and reached for the phone: "Let me see!"

I handed him the phone. Sergey began to turn the device in his hand, pulled out a stylus.

"This is for the screen, the touch screen," I explained.

"Yeah, I know," Sergey muttered, weighing the phone in his hand. "It's heavy."

"Yeah, it is," I hummed.

"Whose is it?" Sergey sniffed, shoved the stylus into the socket and handed the phone back.

"No kidding, how much do you think it could cost?" I insisted.

My partner wrinkled his nose and exclaimed discontentedly: "How the hell should I know!?"

"Approximately, Seryoga! Try to estimate," I pressed out of curiosity.

"Ten or twelve thousand..." He waved his hands and gave up.

"Right, I would say the same amount... about a tenner," I nodded, smiling at my own thoughts – I intuitively knew that Sergey would say an amount less than the cost of his phone. At that time, large touchscreens were just starting to be sold, and phones with two SIM cards were unusual. And such a phone was well into the thirteen or fifteen thousand range. I knew the competitive side of Sergey's nature and smiled at this knowledge. I immediately made a plan in my head – I decided to tease my partner.

"Do you know how much I really paid for this, Seryoga?" I said, narrowing my eyes, tilting my head to the side, and throwing the phone in my hands a few times.

"How much?" He exhaled heavily and folded his arms across his chest again.

"Just two and a half thousand!" I said, watching his reaction. "Nice, huh?"

"Yeah, not bad," Sergey nodded calmly, looking at me carefully.

"Not bad, you say! Of course it is! A tenner to save!" I said, keeping an eye on my partner. He blinked, sighed, turned his head towards his wife and said:

"Vera, did the pharmacies send us their applications?"

"Yes, Seryozha, they did," she nodded and waved. "I've already prepared the waybills."

I silently watched Sergey's reactions, only to be confirmed in my observation – he was really competing with me. At one point I had spent about seven thousand on my previous phone, and Sergey had bought a cheaper one. The phone annoyed him constantly and was replaced at the first opportunity with another one for thirteen thousand. And Sergey's soul returned satisfaction and peace of mind – his phone is more expensive than mine. And then I took the next step – I got a new phone. Sergey grabbed the only "straw" – said the amount below the cost of his phone, wanted to hear from my lips confirmation. And he did. But disappointment was waiting for him on the other side – I did not deal for a rise, but for a fall, saying that I saved a lot of money on the purchase. And Sergey's reaction was the same as if I had bought a phone more expensive than his last one – his mood turned bad and Sergey defiantly lost interest in the conversation. Economy, as well as boasting, although they are diametrically opposite values, were equivalent in the mind of my partner. I, having switched from raising the rates on the economy, downgrade, changed the direction of our "competition", which drove Sergey into a dead end. I stopped the game of raising and won the game of lowering. Checkmate.

"Whose phone is it?" After a minute, Sergey couldn't help himself and asked with feigned indifference. "Is it Chinese?"

"Yes, Chinese," I nodded indifferently. "Imagine, everything in the Far East costs a penny. I bought one for so much money, but if you buy a batch, such a phone will cost a thousand, maybe even less."

"Right," Sergey replied thoughtfully, sniffing his nose. "Look, I think we could sell these Chinese phones..."

"I guess we could... I was thinking about that too," I nodded.

"What do you think... this buddy of yours can organize all these deliveries from China?"

"I think he can... I'll ask him..."

"Yes! Ask him! It's an interesting idea. Maybe we can invest in it!"

"Okay, I will."

In the middle of the penultimate week of April, I found myself in the center of the city in the afternoon. The weather was glorious, the sun shining brightly, warming the walls of the buildings, the asphalt, and the patterned and sometimes scratched tiles of the sidewalks. All the snow had already melted, and the last drifts had left only dirty, shriveled piles of garbage that spread in streams along the sidewalks. The avenue was teeming with people, all in a hurry to get somewhere, dodging puddles and jumping streams. Remembering that I didn't have much money in my cell phone account, I jumped over one and walked a few steps to the cell phone salon. The door of the salon swung open and Natasha and Polinka came out to meet me. We greeted each other.

"Are you that way?" Natasha said, giving way.

"Yes, to put money on my phone," I nodded, overcoming my confusion.

"Where are you going after that?" Polinka chimed in, revealing her darkened teeth in a smile.

"Home," I said, glancing at Natasha, who was nervous but hiding it well.

"We'll wait for you here!" Polinka said suddenly.

I nodded, went into the salon, and while I was there I remembered everything Polinka had obligingly told me and wrinkled my nose. Soon I was back on the street.

Natasha squinted one eye against the bright sun and looked at me mischievously with the other. She looked gorgeous – a fresh, makeup-free, clean face, her white wavy hair pulled back in a bun. Sneakers, blue jeans, short black jacket. Natasha had that rare beauty that was self-sufficient. She didn't need all those frills, rings, necklaces and tons of cosmetics. The girl was formed by nature with true love.

I smiled at Natasha, she at me. Could we start over with her? Easily! I was sure of it. But there was a "but". I would have to betray myself. Life often gives us this choice. If you step over yourself once, it's easier to do it again, and it's no effort at all to do it a third time. If you don't step over yourself once, you won't be able to do it again, and the decision will be easier. And the third time there will be almost no doubt. And so on, until the state of not overstepping becomes a principle. Each person decides for himself which way to go. There was a beautiful girl in front of me. The kind of girl that makes people turn around. But Natasha didn't love me. My brain was working coolly and rationally at that moment. I imagined our future together – we were husband and wife, after a while Natasha had a lover, I found out, we divorced. We'll probably have a child by then. "No, thank you!" I almost said out loud.

"Are you ready?" Polinka said, already smoking a thin cigarette.

"Yes, I'm done," I nodded and looked at Natasha. "Where are you going now?"

"Home," she said.

"Uh-huh..." I replied, noticing that we were going in the same direction, and took a few steps forward, leaving Polinka a step behind, and coming close to Natasha.

"What are you doing tonight?" she asked.

"I don't know," I shrugged. "No idea..."

"Maybe we could go to the movies?" Natasha suggested.

"To the movies? No, I don't feel like it, thanks..." I didn't step over myself again, added a nonchalant "bye" and walked forward without turning around.

The situation with the excise tax on alcohol did not change. By the end of April, everyone had run out of last year's leftover dichlorvos, and the city was in a bit of a frenzy. Sales of "kerosene" tripled, everyone was buying it, even our direct competitors. The blueprint season was also in full swing, and other items were selling like hotcakes. The warehouse was overflowing with inventory.

"Vera, look how much stock we have left?" Sergey said at the end of the month.

"Four thousand eight hundred," she said nonchalantly, having quickly made a report.

"Is that in purchase prices or sales prices?" I clarified.

"Sales. Purchase – three and a half," Vera smiled, her cheeks flushing. The money fever that had seized me and Sergey had also taken hold of her.

"Not bad!" I whistled and looked into my partner's surprised and impressed eyes.

"Seryoga, a nickel in the warehouse, come to think of it! If we sell it all, we'll make a million three hundred!"

In the middle of the month there was a rumor that the factory had been sold to a construction company. As if to confirm the rumor, the owners suddenly developed a flurry of activity and began appearing almost daily in its territory, running back and forth with papers.

On the last day of April, we were sitting in the office as usual. Lunch time was approaching. All the work was done, the May holidays were just around the corner, and everyone in the company was in a great mood. My cell phone rang.

"Yes, hello!" I said.

The conversation was brief and seriously alarmed me. When it was over, I disconnected and froze in the chair by the door, thinking about the new information and looking at Sergey. He was sitting in the chair across from me with his arms crossed over his chest, looking at me expectantly.

"The secretary from 'Luxchem' called," I began, still in an anxious reverie, "she said that their new commercial director was traveling in our direction and would be visiting us after the May holidays... and 'Arbalest'. She said that he was going to a local friend of his who knows our household chemicals market well, and that he would take him around our big commercial companies to get acquainted with their management..."

I stopped talking. Sergey didn't answer anything, just started chewing his lower lip.

"Fuck... what is he going to do here!?" I added. "Why the fuck is he going to a friend who will take him to 'Arbalest!'?"

My partner was silent.

"That's so fucked up, Seryoga... They're going to take him to 'Arbalest' and make a quick deal for direct shipments. Fuck, they're just trying to outmaneuver us! Fucking assholes! They tried to get into 'Homeland', then they went quiet! I thought they calmed down! No, they're fucking coming back! Fucking hell, a new commercial director too!"

"Who was the previous one?" Vera looked at me perplexedly.

"They didn't have a fucking commercial director!" I snapped, feeling my thoughts, excited by the news, racing in my head at full speed, calculating all possible combinations. And no matter how fast my thoughts raced, the only realistic combination I could draw was that the employee was traveling to expand the sales market, traveling purposefully, wanting to get a second dealer in our city.

"Fuck, Seryoga, if they make a deal and there's a second seller in town, our monopoly is fucked! And our markup is fucked too! They'll break our prices, and we'll be using 'Luxchem' at fifteen or even ten percent!"

Sergey was silent, chewing his lip, looking at me with faded eyes and blinking.

"Fuck!" I cursed and put my hands behind my head, then threw them on the armrests.

"Yeah," Sergey broke his silence, "it sucks..."

"Of course it sucks!" I jumped up from the chair. "Let's go for a walk to the warehouse, think and get some air!"

We left the building, walked around the corner, and headed for the transformer box. I looked to the right – "Passionate about Dostoevsky" was standing at the gatehouse, smoking. The janitor, barely noticing us out of the corner of her eye, immediately turned away.

"What a cunt!" I hissed.

"Roman's still mad at that broad!" Sergey shook his head and held back a laugh.

"Fuck, I don't understand people like that, Seryoga!" I got angry. "They're made of shit! A normal person can't act like that! It's not normal, Seryoga!"

"Romych, do you know how many of these people I have seen? I grew up among them! You just lived a different life then – you went to school in your special class, then to a military institute, people there were normal! But I spent all my youth like that, at my place on the left bank... there are only such people there! When I was young, no one told me about any "Divine Comedy" or talked about art and movies. Even among my relatives – one brother was in prison, and the second, a cousin, is now in prison nearby... He's got about five years left. I even brought him a parcel once. And where I lived, they're all like that. As soon as you get there, they start telling you how to live, not according to the law, but according to the

criminal code. You know that according to the rules of thieves, you can screw over anyone but your mother!"

"What, your father and brother are allowed!?" I even stopped and stared at Sergey.

"Everyone! Except your mother... You can't screw over your mother," Sergey said.

"Some strange ideas, mother – well, it's understandable... But why are the others allowed? Would you be able to screw over your father or your brother?" I said, honestly trying to understand the rule, to find something reasonable in it.

"Roman, those are the rules!" Sergey splashed his hands. "This is what they taught me! That was my school of life! I changed later, with the birth of Lilka... Do you swear that you will never screw over your father or your friend Vovan!?"

"What does 'swear' have to do with it!?" I was completely stunned and confused.

"Real mature, swear or not swear! If a person is good, he does not have such thoughts at all, and he will not screw over anyone, no oaths needed!"

"That's right, Roman, never swear!" Sergey smiled mischievously.

"Why is that!?" I wondered, staring at my partner.

"It's one of the rules – never swear," he said, smiling and squinting at me.

"Fucking bullshit, stupid rules for imbeciles! I don't know who lives by them, but this is bullshit! You and I work together and what, you can screw me over!?" I said.

Sergey's brow furrowed dramatically, and he held back a smile, giving me a practiced, theatrical look of bewilderment. We approached the open gate of the warehouse. Petya's "GAZelle" was also standing there, its back half a meter inside the warehouse. The driver and the storekeeper, standing near the hood of the car, were smoking.

"What's up, Petya? Everything okay?" Sergey said cheerfully.

"Yes..." he replied, holding out the waybills. "All done... no cancellations..."

I took the papers and followed Sergey into the warehouse. The walls of the warehouse were still cool. As soon as I hid from the warmth of the sun's rays, it enveloped me, immediately creeping under my open denim jacket and sweatshirt, making my skin goosebumps and shiver. Sergey, with one leg slightly to the side and his knee tucked in in a feminine way, stood on the other, looking at the cube of dichlorvos. By the end of April, the figure had lost its contours, as if the edge closest to the entrance had been eaten away.

"We've already sold a thousand and a half boxes! Not bad, huh?" I said.

"One and a half!?" Sergey looked at me a little surprised and curled his lips, dropping their corners, which meant a significant impression of what he had heard.

"Yes, already one and a half... I checked the leftovers this morning... So we're doing pretty well so far..."

I looked to my left at the two blue pallets and immediately remembered the news.

"Damn, that fucking 'Luxchem'... pissed in our cornflakes!" I swore.

"Come on, Romych, maybe nothing will happen," Sergey sniffed.

"Even if nothing happens and they don't come to an agreement with 'Arbalest', it's only a matter of time... people will find out they're looking for dealers, and some jackass will call them anyway, and they'll bring the goods right away..." I brushed it off, resigned to the inevitable. "Douche bags!"

"Who are you talking about so nicely, Roman Anatolievich?" Petya's voice came from behind me.

"Petya, there are some... assholes," I smiled in response to the gap-toothed wide smile.

"They decided to cheat us... We have an agreement with them that only we represent their products here, and they decided to send a stool pigeon here to look for other partners..."

"Oh!" Petya made a long face, behind which Senya shuffled from foot to foot, listening to the conversation and blinking his mischievous eyes. "Not good!"

"Yes, Petya, you understand everything right!" Sergey chimed in, putting his hands behind his back and pacing up and down the aisle with a smug air.

Concern flashed in the driver's eyes, and I decided to answer it by saying:

"It's all nonsense, Petya! People who do that don't know a single rule..."

I kept up the suspense.

"What kind of rule is that?" The man was puzzled, and interest flashed in his eyes.

"You can only play a game with two people!" I said, raising my hand, making a "V" gesture with my fingers, and wiggling them like a cockroach with a mustache for good measure.

"Ahahahah! Hehehe!" the driver burst into childish laughter and covered his mouth with his hand.

"Roman Anatolievich, isn't that something?" Senya grinned.

"That's the rule, Senya," I nodded and looked at Sergey. "So, Seryoga, let's go?"

"Let's go!" He nodded, coming out of a melancholy reverie.

We walked around the "GAZelle", then Sergey turned and asked: "Senya, where's your son?"

"Um..." the storekeeper hesitated, blushed and lowered his voice, "there he is..."

Senya waved over his shoulder in the direction of the bushes at the back wall of the warehouse.

"His stomach hurts..." Senya explained with an apologetic smile. "Sitting there..."

"Is he shitting or what!?" Sergey blurted out.

"Aha..." Senya was confused and blushed even more.

I smirked, catching myself being embarrassed for my partner in front of these two simple people. We turned the corner of the warehouse and walked towards the office.

"Seryoga, are you seriously going to follow these rules you told me about?" I continued the interrupted conversation, wanting to find out everything to the end.

"Roman, I'm telling you, I'm a completely different person now than I was before! I used to be like everyone else there, and now... I have a family, kids, business..." Sergey said.

We walked a few steps in silence. The answer suited me, I heard in it a man who had grown up in a semi-criminal environment, but had rejected it and become wise in time.

"Do you swear not to screw me over?" I suddenly said jokingly, remembering the ban on oaths and wanting to tease my partner, so I laughed.

Sergey gave me the same playfully theatrical frown, caught the tone of the question, smiled, shook his head reproachfully, sighed and said ironically:

"Oh, Roman... oh, Roman..."

"Come on, I'm kidding!" I hummed cheerfully and patted Sergey on the shoulder.

"You don't have to swear. It's all nonsense. Oaths are worthless, Seryoga! A man either has morals or he doesn't! If he doesn't, no oaths will help..."

The "Luxchem" delegation arrived on May 3. That day I was the first to arrive at work at nine o'clock. I went into the office, put the kettle on and then my cell phone rang. An unknown voice introduced himself as the commercial director of "Luxchem" and informed me that he was on the territory of the factory. I looked out the window – there was an unfamiliar car in the front yard and two men looking around. I went out to them. One of them came up to me. A tall brunette in his forties, he introduced himself again and struck up a conversation. The dialogue was cautious – we both felt each other out. The guest spoke in generalities and tried to get specifics from me in return. I paid him in his own coin. The conversation confirmed my fears – the new employee had been sent to expand the sales market and bypass us. But in such a way that our company would not be offended and would continue to cooperate. I didn't care about that, the important thing was something else –

Aslanbek decided that we, as pioneers, had fulfilled our mission and could be neglected. Inwardly indignant, I began to get angry. The guest had already moved on to the hackneyed phrases about the development and success of his company. With my own thoughts in mind, I listened half-heartedly.

"Do you have any other large companies in your city besides 'Arbalest'?" the man asked tactfully. "I've heard there are other places... I could visit..."

"Let things be as they are... Since Aslanbek sent the commercial here and decided to look for more customers for his goods, nothing can be changed... After all, we've been earning good money with them for a long time... I guess it's time for this freebie to end... I should just mentally thank them for everything and keep working... Then again, they're not giving up on us... Well, yeah, the markup will go down, it will not be as profitable anymore... So what... Let it be... We'd found a replacement for their predecessors, we will find a replacement for "Luxchem" as well. About that..." I pondered, still looking past my interlocutor. The boldness with which the guest asked me to help him find a competitor for me irritated me; angry at the situation, I said reservedly:

"The secretary called me before you arrived and told me you were going to see a friend of yours who knows all the companies here... I take it that's him?"

I nodded at the other man.

"Yes, this is a friend of mine, we are old pals..." the guest started.

"Well, since he knows our market of household chemicals, I think he will show and tell you everything..." I interrupted and looked him in the eye.

The guest understood everything, was embarrassed and his face fell. We said goodbye and the commercial director of "Luxchem" left. As soon as I returned to the office and poured some tea, the "Mazda" pulled up under the window. Sergey got out of the car, looked at the window through his sunglasses, noticed me in the office, went to the trunk, pulled out his briefcase, slammed the trunk shut, and walked into the building. Vera followed him.

"So, Roman, how's it going?" my partner barged into the office.

"Hi," Vera slapped her palm on mine.

"Fine, Seryoga," I mumbled, thinking about the meeting.

"How did you spend the holidays? Did you hang out in clubs or probably work out?" Sergey said, smiling and playfully imitating a piercingly stern look – he moved his eyebrows, frowned and turned his head dramatically in my direction, freezing.

"Just resting..." I said, catching the slight teasing in my partner's tone and the smell of alcohol, sour, pungent, and unpleasant. A smell that came from a man who had been drinking heavily in the past few days. It wasn't the first time I'd smelled it on Sergey, but this time it was especially noticeable.

"Doesn't sound like fun..." Vera smiled and settled into her chair.

The brakes squeaked softly outside the window.

"Petya's here..." I looked out of the window, took the waybills from the table, looked at them briefly, and then at Sergey's wife. "These are the waybills for the first run, aren't they, Vera?"

There was a knock at the door.

"Yes, Petya, come in!" Sergey barked.

The driver came in, said hello, took the waybills, and left for the warehouse. The office was quiet again. I looked at Vera – she was buried in her computer.

"Let's go outside, Seryoga, have a chat!" I said, jumping up vigorously and walking out into the corridor. Sergey followed. We stopped in the middle of the central path.

"While you were out, this commercial from 'Luxchem' came on..." I said, telling him the whole dialog. "So they will try to get into 'Arbalest'..."

"Right, most likely they will," Sergey nodded.

"Exactly," I nodded.

"So what do you have in mind?" Sergey looked at me.

"Remember I told you about a similar situation with blueprint and 'Fluffy', when the manufacturer also started selling his product to others?"

"Yeah..."

"I think we should do what we did before – we should find another supplier of the same product and start selling it in parallel... we can't let 'Luxchem' twist our arms. If they make a deal with someone here, they can tighten our shipping terms. We can prevent that."

"What makes you think that?"

"Because if they try, we will say we will refuse their goods..."

"But we won't refuse, will we?" Sergey looked at me anxiously.

"No, of course not... why? But there is such a possibility, so we need a backup manufacturer so that 'Luxchem' does not relax," I looked at my partner. "Seryoga, do you know such a manufacturer? Did you work with one in 'Sasha'? We need a manufacturer of drain cleaner and blue! Everything else in 'Luxchem' is just shit!"

"We worked with a company from St. Petersburg at 'Sasha', we took drain cleaner from them..." Sergey suddenly perked up after a moment of thought.

"Oh! Great!" I grabbed the information. "We'll have to contact them, get the price, see what else they make besides drain cleaner! What else do they make?"

"Oh, it's all kinds of crap! I don't remember!" Sergey brushed it off. "I just remember that we couldn't sell their goods, and that's why we stopped working with them!"

"All right, let's call them!" I nodded to my partner and ducked into the building.

We called St. Petersburg, they promised to send us a price list soon.

"Oh, we have an answer!" Vera squeaked about five minutes later. "Shall I print it out?"

I blinked affirmatively and three sheets of paper came out of the printer.

"Hmm..." I said, studying the price list I had received. "There's nothing to buy there except drain cleaner. The price is okay, but it's expensive to bring it from St. Petersburg. We better figure it out..."

I pulled the calculator towards me, and Vera immediately put her fingers over hers and froze.

"Expensive..." I grimaced and calculated the shipping costs.

"To hell with it!" Sergey waved away, relieved. "Why the hell do we need such an expensive drain cleaner? We already have one, it will do... Don't bother, Roman!"

"No, not to hell with it, Seryoga!" I parried after thinking for a second. "We just have to get a good price for it, that's all... Vera, what kind of discount did they give us?"

"Nine percent!" Vera said, her eyes shining with excitement, she obviously liked my attitude. "But that's their maximum discount, Roma."

"Wait a minute," I said and started pressing the buttons of the calculator, finished and said the result. "This should be the price for us, so that we have drain cleaners from St. Petersburg for the same price as from Krasnodar..."

"Why do we need it if it's the same price?" Sergey pursed his lips in surprise. "We need it to be cheaper... What's the point of getting it at the same price?"

"Twenty-two percent discount!" said Vera, tapping her calculator.

"No one will give us such a discount!" Sergey waved away. "It's useless, Roman!"

I looked at Vera. She was still looking at me with excitement. I suddenly realized that she and I were similar in many ways, especially in our approach to life – we were both open to new things, hungry for the unknown, willing to get carried away, to take risks. We understood each other. I looked at Sergey – his almost colorless eyes looked at me tiredly, indifferent to the things around him. Suddenly, I felt, almost physically, the weight that

Sergey reluctantly carried, doing his half of the work in the company. For a moment, this impression thwarted my enthusiasm and almost forced me to give up. But the inner voice kept saying, "I have to finish the job, even if it seems useless, but I have to finish it, so that I can say with a clear conscience that the matter has been worked out and closed".

"Vera, send them a message – we're ready to sign a contract and sell their goods, we're okay with a nine percent discount on the entire price list, but we need a twenty-two percent discount on drain cleaner!" I said, pointing my eyes at the keyboard.

Vera, as if she had been expecting this very sentence, immediately tapped excitedly on the keyboard.

"Roman," Sergey grimaced in a lazy and martyr-like manner, "what's the point of all this? We already have drain cleaners... 'Luxchem' is not going anywhere, it will continue to supply us..."

"Seryoga, we need an alternative manufacturer!" I was adamant. "Let's work out the question to the end... To know for sure – yes or no!"

"Damn, Roman, okay, go ahead, do what you want," he brushed it off, crossed his arms over his chest, laid them on his stomach, and sank into a half-slumber with his eyes open.

The office phone rang, Vera picked it up and spoke briefly.

"Will they consider the discount?" I asked Vera as soon as she hung up.

"Yes, they said the owner would decide the issue and they would give an answer after noon."

Time passed quickly. When we returned from lunch an hour later, the phone rang.

"Okay, thank you!" Vera said in a ringing voice into the receiver at the end of the call, smiling conspiratorially at me. "Yes, I'll tell him everything! I think, yes, we will! Okay, goodbye!"

"St. Pete?" I smiled at her, expecting good news.

"Yes, they said they could give us a twenty-two percent discount on drain cleaner!" Vera looked at me happily and glanced at her husband. "Are we going to work with them?"

"Wonderful!" I said and started to turn around in the chair, looking at my partner happily. "Seryoga! It worked out! They gave us the discount after all! How do you like the news?"

"Yeah, not bad," he mumbled, blinking confusedly, sniffing his nose, thinking. "So, are you going to work with them? There's nothing to sell there but drain cleaner..."

"We'll see what we can get, Seryoga, but we have to work with them. We'll try to sell the rest of their goods, too," I said, feeling a surge of energy and strength.

"Shit, Roman!" Sergey snorted. "Now we're going to sell all kinds of crap..."

"We are, we are, Seryoga! We will sell everything! As you say – little by little, a little becomes a lot!? That's what we'll do!" I said enthusiastically, anticipating new things. My dissatisfaction with Sergey's sluggishness sank into the positivity that had taken hold of me.

The bet on kerosene-based dichlorvos was paying off more and more every day – the product was selling so fast that we barely had time to deliver it. By the end of the month, it turned out that there would be no program at all to track non-food alcohol sales. But the law was in force and supported our monopoly. By the end of May, we had sold another thousand eight hundred boxes. The poor remains of the cube stood against the wall.

"At this rate, Seryoga, it's only enough for a month," I said as soon as we entered the warehouse and stared in that direction.

"Yeah, well, we're doing fine so far," Sergey nodded smugly.

"So, when we sell the rest for June, will we bring another truck?" I said, smiling and looking into my partner's eyes with a hint of adventurousness.

"We'll see," he exhaled.

I remembered Sergey's offer to start trading with Chinese gadgets. In May, I got all the information on the range and prices, printed out a pile of sheets, handed them to Sergey in the office, and watched his reaction. My vague suspicion was justified – my partner twirled the papers in his hands, feigned a momentary interest, sighed, turned the conversation to another topic, and put the papers on the shelf. Sergey's eyes betrayed him completely – they showed no interest, were colorless, joyless, and for the first time I clearly saw in them the boredom of life. Our eyes met.

"Roman, it's an interesting idea with these phones, we could do it!" Sergey said, squirming in the chair by the door and crossing his arms over his chest.

"Yes, it is," I nodded, already knowing the emptiness of his words. In my mind, in a vague jumble of facts, a short connection of several facts suddenly appeared – it strengthened my hunch that Sergey was avoiding active business development. I simply thought – if we get the profit equally, then we should share the burden in the joint business equally. And at first it seemed that way... but was it? I went back two years. I realized that at that time I was so full of enthusiasm that I did not think about it at all and went forward all those years without looking back. Now it was as if I had stumbled over a pebble that was inconspicuous at first. Out of natural curiosity I studied him and saw that Sergey avoided working in the harness. And he avoided it so implicitly that I felt only a vague suspicion. The strap at his side was sagging again. I decided to double-check the intuitive feeling that had arisen, and concentrated on monitoring my partner's attitude. "Let these papers lie on the shelf, if Seryoga bugs me in any way about this matter, then we'll start working. And if he lets it go, so be it," I decided and smiled at him.

"Romych, what would you say if we raised salaries in our company?" Sergey suggested at the end of May, breaking away from the papers on the table and staring at me.

"I don't know..." I shrugged, looked at Vera, then back at Sergey. "What should I say? Do we need it? Don't you have enough money?"

"Well, I mean, I just thought that since we have such income, we could raise the salaries of our office a little!" Sergey splashed his hands and leaned back in his chair, sniffing his nose and crossing his arms over his chest.

"Seryoga, fuck knows. You've got me stumped. I have enough money... although we could raise it a little... How much do you want to raise salaries? And to whom? Me and you or all three of us? Vera too? What do you think?"

"We have seventeen and Verok has eight! We could add a nickel each and give her two thousand!" Sergey juggled his hands.

"Two and five... that makes seven thousand plus for your family budget, would that be okay?"

"Yes!" my partner reacted vividly. "You're alone, no family, no kids... And I have two! It would be a lot easier for me!"

"Seryoga, I don't mind," I said, thinking the suggestion feasible; after all, we were really beginning to earn more – our monthly profit was well over two hundred, and it would be quite easy and insensible for us to pluck even a tenth of that. "Let's just add eight thousand each for you and me, and make the salary equal – twenty-five! How about that? You and I, as founders, have added to ourselves equally, and it makes no difference to you and Vera – you have plus eight thousand for the family!"

Pause. Sergey blinked a few times, a shadow of confusion and surprise seemed to flicker in his eyes, but after a second he exhaled an answer: "Well... let's do it..."

"Agreed then – starting in June we'll get twenty-five thousand each!"

The rapid growth of the company also accelerated my life. I didn't notice much of what was going on around me. My typical day at that time – work until six, dinner at home, work out at the gym (every other day), a few hours on the internet, and sleep. On Fridays and Saturdays I would go to the club out of habit, but I was not having as much fun as I used to. I just didn't know where to spend my weekends. Everyone I knew had families and kids. I was the only one who hung around like a lost soul. My relationship with my father seemed to have normalized. I almost forgot his unkind words and, realizing the increase in income, rushed to pay off my father's debt for the apartment as soon as possible. My father received regular orders for transportation from a manufacturer and was engaged in the delivery business. Thus he reached a certain state of inner peace, which was regularly disturbed only by my mother. A new wave swept over her – my mother became aggressive again, withdrew into herself. I gave up all attempts to get in touch with her and became an unwilling spectator of the parental quarrels.

CHAPTER 45

"What are you thinking about?" Sergey looked at me through his sunglasses. It was summer – the heat had filled the city with hot air. We were sitting in the "Mazda" in a traffic jam.

"Never mind..." I muttered, turning my head away from the window. "I was thinking about women..."

"And what do you think?"

"I think about how the better you treat them, the worse they treat you... Like Lilya... I gave her flowers every day, went out with her, talked to her, never hinted at sex – basically, I acted like any normal guy who wanted to have a serious relationship with her, but I got tons of shit in return. Rita too. What the hell did she want? "Something wrong with you!" What's wrong with me? All right, maybe. I drank, I smoked. Whatever. Natasha... No fucking idea what happened either! I treated her well... I didn't even talk about sex for six months! Seryoga, six fucking months!"

I raised my index finger in indignation.

"You mean you didn't bang her for so long??" he looked at me through his glasses.

"Fuck, Seryoga, I didn't bang her and I didn't want to get her into bed as soon as possible! I was serious about her, I wanted to build a normal relationship! It's none of my business, but I guess you and Vera weren't in a hurry either..."

He hesitated and said after a few seconds:

"No... no, you're right, Roman! We also started in about six months..."

"You see!" I spread my hands. "We all did the same. Only Vera married you and Natasha bailed..."

I laughed silently and then stopped, my laughter tinged with bitterness.

"Roman, you see, you always invest in broads, but I never did. At most – a candy bar, a rose... Well, the biggest thing is a bottle of wine! That's it!"

"What do you mean, invest?" I was confused. "I understand what you mean, but damn it! How can you not invest? I don't really invest in them, I just spend some money... we go out, we sit in cafes... flowers... I wouldn't say I spend a lot of money. I've invested in Lilya all right, though, fucking big time!"

I let out another bitter laugh and shook my head as if to shake off an obsession.

"I remember how you used to fuss over Lilya! You came to work every day with red eyes and kept taking money from the common fund," Sergey perked up.

The cars in the traffic jam moved, the "Mazda" drove about three meters and then stopped.

"I only did it a few times! Fuck, I shudder to remember – some Lilya, I as the last fucker fussed around her, strained myself, cafes, clubs, bowling every day, and still she always made a dissatisfied mouth! Why the fuck did I bother, I don't know... I wince at the memories..."

"What's the point? You invested in her and it didn't work out..." Sergey stopped talking, turned his face to me and, trying to hold back a smile, added, "Did you at least give her the time?"

"No," I shook my head and turned to the window. "I had no such thoughts... Shit, Seryoga, I really wanted to build a relationship with her, I didn't go out with her just to shag her! You can get laid without these somersaults!"

The traffic jam came to life again. Sergey put the car into gear, we rolled forward and stopped almost immediately. Sergey leaned against the window, propped his head with his hand and said:

"I had this buddy, you know how he called such broads like your Lilya?"

I looked at my partner who, after a pause, said, "Buttheads!"

"They screw with your brains," Sergey explained. "But they don't let you screw them..."

"Ah... that's what you mean..." I nodded and grimaced. "Yeah, I get it..."

The traffic jam moved again, the dialog was interrupted. I thought about it, and after a minute of self-chastisement, I sighed heavily and said: "You know what the worst part is, Seryoga?"

"What?"

"The worst part is that I didn't love her at all!" I said, feeling the bitterness of disappointment drain out of me as I spoke the truth. I couldn't even tell if I was disappointed that it didn't work out with Lilya or that I didn't love her.

"But you liked her, didn't you?"

"I liked her, but that's it. I don't know why I was so obsessed with her back then!" I threw up my hands and turned to the window. I was in a state of confession. I didn't care if Sergey listened to me or not, I just had to get it off my chest. The series of failed relationships was beginning to weigh me down. I longed to talk about it and get rid of it. I immediately corrected myself, trying to build the right chain in the jumble of thoughts. "I mean, I know, of course! It's just that, you know, you're already at that age, almost thirty, and you don't have a family and kids, and everyone's already married... and you start thinking: stop fucking hanging out alone, you need to find a decent girl, marry her, have kids and live a normal life! It's all because of these thoughts, you know?"

"Roman, I hear you!" Sergey said, maneuvering in the fast traffic.

"Strange shit – you try your best, but it turns out to be worse... and so it was with Lilya. I'm like a fucking retard, I got hooked on her C-size boobs!"

"Gah-gah-gah!" Sergey's cynical, deliberately humiliating laugh rang out.

"Yes, Seryoga," I laughed too. "That's the fucking thing, believe it or not!"

"Roman, I believe you! Who would turn down good, big boobs?" he said, and after a pause he added, "I sometimes miss them myself..."

Vera's figure flashed before my eyes and I remained silent.

"Your Natasha has decent ones, too..." Sergey continued.

"Yes, Natasha has everything there!" I nodded. "Everything is perfect there! I'm very picky about women, but Natasha has a very chiseled figure!"

"Yes, your Natasha is a slim little thing! A woman should be smooth. Vera was like that when she was younger..."

"Seryoga, it's none of my business, of course, but your Vera has a good figure now..."

"Roman, you haven't seen Verok in her youth... Yes, Verok still looks very good for her age, I understand! But still... two kids... After Lyonka she had problems with her back, too..."

"You and Vera even look alike! One look at you and it's clear that you are husband and wife!" I expressed the emotion that remained in me from the first meeting with Sergey and Vera as a married couple, at my birthday party just after our merger.

"As for me, as soon as I saw her, I realized – that's my wife!" Sergey said, slowing down, we drove off the ring road, got into traffic again, stopped. My partner pulled his glasses up on his forehead, reached behind the seats, took out a bottle of water, sipped from it, put the bottle back, wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

"Really?" I was surprised, feeling a surge of interest in mysticism.

"Yes, I remember, we're sitting with the guys in one of the apartments, and some chicks come in, there was this acquaintance of this buddy of mine, she brought her friends with her, so they come in, and the last one to come in is Vera, and I'm like – that's my future wife!" Sergey snapped his fingers.

"What, you thought so?" I was almost childishly excited.

"Yes! I don't know why I thought it, but I did!" Sergey blinked and stared ahead, his eyes twitching with memories. "Actually, broads were always hitting on me! Me and my buddies used to get together at someone's house and call some broads we knew... And what do the women want? Pick up a guitar and play a little bit. My buddies used to say, 'We're not taking Lobov with us! If we did, all the broads would be his and we wouldn't get any. A lot of chicks were after me, but I didn't think of any of them as a wife, only Verok...'"

"Yeah, cool!" I marveled at the twist of fate. "I've never experienced that... or maybe I have... No, I haven't! Even when I loved this girl, I remember really loving her, but there was no such feeling... I mean, I wanted to marry her, yes! But... But that's it!"

"Have you ever felt like that? Have you ever loved?" Sergey leaned his elbow against the downed window, supporting his head with his hand. The cars in the traffic jam breathed with the heat, a haze hovering over the asphalt.

"I have, sure..." I nodded and looked out the window. "What's the point if there's no love, Seryoga?"

"Roman, I don't know what's better," he sighed. "I've always chosen women who liked me! What's the point of running around with this love... you're all crazy about her... and then she does some shit and your brain explodes!"

Sergey waved his hands, spreading his fingers sharply in front of him, imitating an explosion.

"Yeah, that sucks..." I shook my head. "And not knowing what to do... you like her... and you have to take it all..."

"Yeah..." Sergey perked up, twitched as if the topic of conversation stepped on a sore spot in his memory, "You go to a concert with a broad like that... The Palace of Sports used to host concerts by all kinds of celebrities, remember? I don't know if they still do or not..."

"They do, I guess..." I shrugged. "Did you go to a concert there?"

"Yeah... I remember this boy band came to us... 'Laskovyi Mai' or something... I'm not sure!" Sergey wrinkled his nose and waved his hand in front of his face.

"Yeah... girls like that music!" I smiled.

"Yeah... and you take her to this concert, she says she wants to go to the bathroom, and you wait for her in the foyer... And the toilets are down there!" Sergey dove into the invisible basement with his hand in the air.

"Yeah, yeah, you have to go down there, I remember!" I nodded vigorously.

"And you stand there and wait for her for half an hour, and she doesn't come back... and then you go downstairs, and there she is, in the toilet with someone..." Sergey nervously jerked his hands several times, imitating sexual intercourse.

"You're kidding, right?!!" I stared at him, stunned by what I heard.

"No... no kidding!" Sergey said emotionally and with pain in his voice.

"Fuck, that's rough!" I stared at him.

"Right, Roman, it's rough! That's life – you're all in love and they stick a pin in your head!" Sergey nodded and stabbed the air in front of him with his index finger, fell silent and after a moment put the car into gear and it rolled forward.

We drove silently for a while. Sergey's words shocked me and did not fit in my mind. I imagined myself in his place, shuddered and realized that I wouldn't want to be in a similar situation. We entered the "Homeland" area and the gravel rustled under our wheels. The "Mazda" rolled up to the red trucks and stopped.

"Everything looks normal..." I said, looking at the routine bustle of workers in the warehouses. "We should go up and take a look around..."

There were rumors around town that this company was going from bad to worse. Our trade with "Homeland" was small, but I didn't want to lose even that much money. We crossed the courtyard and went up to the sales room. Everything looked the same – the sales room was working, the managers were sitting at their computers. Soon we were back in the car.

"I don't know... it seems okay, but it's best not to take our chances..." I said.

"Yes, Roman, we have to deliver the exact amount, otherwise we could be screwed. We should not be the first to deliver, but only after they bring our order and then load the goods into their car," Sergey summarized, and we drove back.

"Fuck, Seryoga, how did you meet broads before, how did you choose them?" I blurted out, impatient with the pile of thoughts in my head.

"Roman, in different ways," he looked at me through his glasses. "For example, I always wanted to get to a broad's house unexpectedly, to see how she lived, if the place was clean, and if her mother walked around the apartment all disheveled in a greasy robe!"

I was stunned and surprised by the simplicity of his words. Sergey didn't go into long philosophical musings and theories, which always sound nice but are useless in life. He gave a clear practical technique that I immediately thought about.

"Shit, Seryoga, that's a smart move!" I exclaimed, looking respectfully at my partner. "I would never have thought of that!"

"Roman, of course it is! You should look at people in their normal state, not when they are trying to look better. Any chick can put on some makeup and clean up when you come... A chick should be all smooth, so you wouldn't be ashamed to go out with her..."

"Shit, that word – smooth! I've heard it so many times, but it still surprises me..."

"Smooth, I mean that she has a nice figure and..." Sergey started to explain.

"No, Seryoga, I understood the meaning! Just the word is so interesting..."

"Roman, this is life!" Sergey splashed his hands. "You're looking for a broad to live with, not just to fuck, right?"

"Right, of course," I nodded.

"Well, if that's the case, then you have to look at how she is in life – what kind of relationship she has with her mother, what kind of mother she has, how she behaves in the household... Family life is serious, Roman. Somebody has to wipe the kids' asses and keep the house in order... You're not going to do all that, are you?"

Sergey looked at me and took his eyes off the road for a second.

"No, I'm not..." I shook my head and smiled, having learned this simple lesson.

We finally left the city and drove straight into the village.

"I'm hungry," I said as the "Mazda" rolled past a fast-food kiosk.

"We'll pick up Verok from the office and go get something to eat... I'm hungry myself. I have a sick pancreas... And with a sick pancreas you can't go without food for too long..."

"Really?"

"Yes, you have to eat something every two hours..."

"Jeez... I don't even know where my pancreas is. But I have a sick stomach. To each his own..." I sighed, staring at the temple under construction, the "Mazda" turning left at the T-junction and rolling downhill. We left the asphalt onto a dirt road, bouncing over the bumps on our way to the intersection. I kept half lying on the seat, looking out the window. The crossing. A cabin at the crossing. A girl dressed as a railroad worker came out of the cabin and froze on the threshold, looking at the "Mazda". I stared at her in surprise, coming out of my relaxed state for a moment. What surprised me was the beauty of the girl. The tall, slender brunette met my eyes and, as if reading my thoughts, blushed embarrassedly and looked away. The "Mazda" rattled its wheels on the tracks and drove by.

"Yeah, smooth..." Sergey echoed my thoughts.

"Beautiful girl," I mumbled, and then I perked up, jumped up and turned around in the seat – the girl was looking after the car. "What is she doing here, Seryoga, at this crossing?"

I didn't hear an answer to this question, but I rather asked it to myself. And when the "Mazda" turned towards the factory, images appeared in my mind – flabby broads in winter coats at the crossing, and in contrast to them – a young, slender, beautiful girl.

"You have to get away from there, otherwise you'll be lost, you'll become the same old broad at this godforsaken crossing, and your life will be wasted!" I mentally admonished the girl, and the "Mazda" rolled into the factory.

"Verok, let's go to lunch," Sergey said as soon as we entered the office.

"Is it time already?" She took her eyes off the monitor after she had stopped typing something intensely.

"Yes, let's go because my pancreas hurts!" Sergey said impatiently.

"Seryozha, you need to sign the waybills, here, I prepared some..." Vera started.

"Vera, I'll sign them later! Let's go!" Sergey retorted.

Vera jumped up, quickly got ready and followed us out.

We returned an hour later. Sergey sat down at the table and put his hands behind his head, while I sat by the door and stretched contentedly.

"Seryozha... the waybills..." Vera spoke up.

"Ah, right, Verok!" he exhaled, threw his hands on the table and took a pen. "Give them here..."

A weighty stack of waybills moved from one table to the other.

Sergey began to sign – diligently, as if in a calligraphy class, his hand wrote two signatures on each waybill, put it aside and started the next one. Concentrating on the action, enjoying it, he made large scribbles and, flying his hand over the paper, completed the signature with a wide squiggle.

After finishing, Sergey said solemnly:

"That's it, Verok, para... pafa... pafaph..."

"Paraphed," I said, smiling.

"Yes! Done! Pafarhed!" Sergey said hastily, gathered up the papers and just as solemnly handed them to his wife, looking at me. "Nineteen waybills signed!"

"The office is sweating," I nodded and smiled again.

Business was booming. Kerosene-based dichlorvos was selling like hotcakes. We were even getting orders from companies that had previously only sold alcohol-based dichlorvos. Even "Sphere" – the big company we had been doggedly pursuing – started

ordering. Three hundred boxes with deferred payment in ten days – it was a stroke of luck. Sergey broke the news in the middle of the penultimate week of June, flying into the office in the afternoon full of joy.

"But we have to take them today... they asked for it!" he added.

"Petya has already left on the second run..." said Vera, looking at me questioningly. I looked at Sergey, who put his feet on the base of the chair and kicked them.

"Petya has already left..." Sergey said, crossing his arms over his chest and chewing vigorously on his lip. "What can we do?"

"Maybe Anatoly Vasilievich can do it?" Vera looked at me cautiously.

I looked at Sergey, who looked at me and kept kicking his legs.

"Could Anatoly Vasilievich come by? Isn't he busy right now? Is he working at all or not? What is he doing now?" Sergey asked me a series of questions.

"Well, actually he's working. Delivering semi-finished products to a company..." I said. "But I don't think he's too busy, I think if he's free today, he could help us..."

"Will you call him then?" Sergey's legs kicked again.

I called, my father was at home.

"I'll do it," he said hoarsely into the phone. "Now?"

"Yeah, come over now... okay, yeah ...see you," I said and disconnected.

"Will he come?" Sergey nervously chewed his lip.

"Yes, he will," I nodded.

The office became uncomfortably quiet. And then, as a relief, the phone rang. Vera took her cell phone from her purse. It was her brother.

"What did he want?" Sergey looked at his wife when she had finished speaking.

"Seryozha, we have to take Vanya with us today when we go to the dacha!" Vera said hurriedly, as if she was afraid of hearing a "no" answer. "He would stay there all week."

"Well..." Sergey splashed his hands. "If we have to..."

"Why, does Vanyok not work or what?" I asked.

"Not now, he's not working," Vera said with regret in her voice.

"He worked at his last job, all right..." Sergey waved away and sulked.

"What happened?" I looked from him to Vera, who was confused.

"Vanyok broke some beer at work, so they kicked him out... You know, when a car has beer in crates one on top of the other... and they were delivering it to the outlets, and Vanyok had to take off the top crates so they wouldn't fall, and he didn't... They drove off, the car started, and the crates all fell in the back..." Sergey pictured with his hand a vertical column falling flat on a horizontal surface.

"Ah-ha..." I said and hummed, remembering the same incident. "My beer fell down too... that happened... So now Vanyok has to pay for the broken beer?"

"He's already been deducted from his paycheck and fired... or not all of it... I don't know exactly," Vera dismissed the unpleasant talk about her brother.

"Vanyok is an idiot!" Sergey waved his hand.

"Seryozha!" Vera's cheeks flushed, and she looked at her husband judiciously.

"Why, Vera!?" He stared at his wife. "Vanyok is a fool! Driving during working hours and getting drunk on beer so he could sleep in the cabin – is that wise?"

"What, he drove drunk!?" I was surprised.

"Yes! He was pissed on beer and worked the whole day like that, even fell asleep in the cabin," Sergey waved again, the gesture reinforcing the hopelessness in his voice.

"Man..." I raised my eyebrows and looked at Vera. "Your Vanyok is something..."

I hesitated when I saw the shame on Vera's face. The room became quiet again.

"So, is Anatoly Vasilievich on his way?" Sergey said, glancing at the clock on the phone screen. He opened the phone with a crunch, gently wiped the inner screen against his pants, carefully closed the phone, admired it in his hand, put it in his pocket.

"Yes, he is," I nodded, my skin catching the air in the room as it began to tense. "Let's run the waybill, I'll go to the warehouse, give it to Senya..."

Five minutes later, I left the office. After another ten minutes, my father arrived, backed the "GAZelle" up to the warehouse, put on his work gloves, and climbed into the back of the truck out of habit.

"Get out, Dad," I said, remembering my father's bad back, and jumped into the back myself.

Senya and his son began handing me boxes, and I began stacking them in the back. Twenty minutes later, I jumped out of the car, and my father was walking around outside the warehouse, smoking.

"You'll give me the waybill at home tonight," I told him.

"That's it?" my father looked at me with a scratchy, scrutinizing look. "Can I go now?"

"Yeah, that's it," I nodded. "See you tonight, Dad..."

My father took a last drag, flicked out his cigarette and went into the cabin. I went into the office. The "GAZelle" started up behind me, overtook me and drove away. While the car was still in sight, I thought about my relationship with my father – had it recovered? My father's look was still in my mind. I also noticed that Sergey had not followed me to the warehouse.

"Man, we really did a good job with this merger! I didn't think we'd be so damn good at it!" I said aloud the thoughts that came over me as soon as Sergey and I got into the "Mazda" for another trip into town. The car dusted past the gatehouse, rolled out onto the dirt road and bounced over the bumps.

"You didn't!?" Sergey looked at me in surprise.

"I mean, of course I did!" I fidgeted in my seat, half turned to my partner, tuned in to the conversation; lately I had begun to enjoy our one-on-one communication, learning more and more new things for myself, discovering other facets of life through the prism of Sergey's experience. "I didn't even doubt it... But I didn't think it would be so cool, Seryoga! I calculated that 'Aerosib' will definitely give larger volumes than 'Luxchem', so we could merge... And you brought the rest, and everything is so cool now!"

"No, I thought we'd make it," Sergey nodded, looking forward and puckered his lips self-importantly. "We're doing fine so far..."

I looked at my partner. Sergey was driving the car, looking at the road, his whole image radiating confidence and determination. I was suddenly disgusted by such blatant boasting and empty posturing. I remembered another Sergey – a confused and frightened manager, suddenly out of work and not knowing what to do next in life. The picture I remembered was not the one Sergey had painted.

"So you were sure that we would have such sales and that everything would work out?" I couldn't hold back the sarcasm, but it bounced off my partner's puffed-up, smug look.

"Yeah, well, what's the big deal? We already knew each other, you had your experience, I had mine, we shook hands and started working. We got good contracts. That's what I thought. I wouldn't have teamed up with anybody else. I told you, I've had other offers. Yours wasn't even the most interesting. But somehow I liked you right away... you and Anatoly Vasilievich... I'll tell you the truth, I respected your father right away... even now I respect him... it's just his temper, I understand... it's difficult... But I still think I made the right choice by joining forces with you... We just liked each other..."

I shuddered at that last sentence. Every time I heard it, it bored my ears.

"What did you like about me?" Sergey added, waving his hand.

"Seryoga, you asked me that question a hundred times!" I said stiffly and without restraint of discontent, wanting to finally discourage the desire to ever ask this question again. "I'm telling you for the hundredth time – I haven't thought about whether I like you or not!"

"Yes, yes, I remember!" Sergey interrupted me abruptly. "You and Anatoly Vasilievich were thinking about 'Aerosib' and wanted to get it! And it doesn't matter who would have been there instead of me..."

The complacent expression on my partner's face vanished in an instant, and he smirked.

"Yes, Seryoga, that's right – I was specifically after 'Aerosib', and you had the contract! If someone else had it, I would have made them an offer!"

I turned to the window, irritated by my partner's insistence on a question that made no sense to me. Sergey reached forward, picked up the glasses lying on the panel and put them on.

The car rattled on the rails of the crossing and rolled back down the dirt road. We shook in the car and were silent. I thought about Sergey. About how some moments of his behavior, literally like a fly in the ointment, kept falling into my consciousness, leaving an unpleasant taste. I realized that all of us are not sinless, we all have worthy traits in our character, as well as far from the best. We live in society and we all have to put up with the character of other people. Sergey and I were united by common business, and we had to accept each other's personality traits. Another fly, having entered my soul, dissolved there only by my effort – I did it every time to notice the best in my partner and to dissolve the negativity coming from him.

"After all, Seryoga's a nice guy... yes, he has his faults, he's resentful, sometimes arrogant, snooty, indecisive, lazy... but... but... but we have a business together, and it's a good income. I don't want to give up the business I've been working on with my father for so long because I don't like something in Seryoga... It's all right. I have to earn as much as I can in this business, and then we'll see. I should go to Moscow. There's nothing to do here in our city... It's impossible to live with my mother. My father... We'll settle things with my father. I'll pay him back. I can even leave him my share of the business. After all, my father has every right to profit from this business... Yes, he was rude and refused to work, but still... We started together, we went through the hardest part together, and we both have the right to receive dividends from our labor... I do, he doesn't... About that... good idea – I can really just leave my father my half of the business when I get tired of it... And I would go to Moscow..." I thought, sitting in the car, which finally hit the asphalt and flew quickly through the village, and suddenly I felt unbearably drawn somewhere. The thought wandered vaguely in my mind, and all I could read in it, straining my senses, was: "I don't belong here, my place is there..."

"Seryoga, what does your father do, he's ex-military too, right?" I turned my head to my partner, burdened by the long pause in our conversation.

"What does he do... he works!" Sergey said with a heavy sigh.

"Where does he work?" I continued, suddenly realizing that I knew nothing about Sergey's father and had never seen him.

"At the market, as a security guard, a couple of days on, a couple off..."

"Why didn't he go into business or sell with your mother?" I wondered. "Your mother sells goods, they could have done it together..."

"Roman, how should I know why my father doesn't sell at the market with my mother?" Sergey reacted nervously. "He said he had enough and went into security as soon as he left the army... His pension is good and he gets some money at work..."

"I don't know, I just thought they could, like me and my father in our time, start a family business, especially since you have Romka, your brother..." I shrugged.

Sergey didn't answer anything. Later, when we returned to the office, he suddenly said:

"When we did business with my father, we almost crashed with him, you know?"

I was sitting at the desk, Vera at her place. Sergey stood in the middle of the room and, as usual, accompanied the story with florid gestures.

"You didn't say that you and your father did something..." I was surprised.

"Yes, we did something together," Sergey dismissed it. "And guess what, we drove with him at night, there was not much left to the city, about thirty kilometers... And my father was driving... So he's driving the car... and then I see these dividing lines suddenly start to shift... you know! I'm sitting there looking at the road, and the white lines are shifting to the left... and I realize we're going to the curb... and I look at my father... and I turn my head and..."

Sergey paused dramatically so that I could absorb the story, grabbed his head with his hands and, seeing my surprised face, continued, "...and I see my father asleep!"

Sergey took his hands off his head and grabbed the imaginary steering wheel, closed his eyes, paused again, opened his eyes and exclaimed:

"Imagine! Asleep! Sitting behind the wheel like that and sleeping!"

My partner froze, still clutching the wheel and looking at me with round eyes like an actor reaching the climax of his performance.

"Seryoga, I told you the story about my father falling asleep at the wheel," I said plainly, stunned to realize that I had just heard my own story.

"When did you tell me this story!?" Sergey "took his hands off the wheel", came out of the climax and gave me a surprised and dissatisfied look.

Surprised, I ingenuously recounted the original story briefly.

"Where were you then!?" Sergey muttered, glancing around the corners of the office in confusion.

"Well, my father and I were driving from Moscow! It was on the Moscow highway!"

"Ah, no!" Sergey brushed it off immediately. "We were coming from the Rostov side in our 'third Zhiguli'!"

"Aha..." I said, still bewildered by the blatant and insolent retelling of an incident from my life as his own!

Sergey stopped talking, sat down by the door and gave me a few puzzled looks.

The office phone rang. I picked it up.

"Catch the fax!" a cheerful voice commanded in my ear.

"Hi, Senya, catching!" I replied, jabbing my finger into the green button.

The machine squeaked and paper with the rest of our goods came out, with handwritten numbers at the end of each line – an order.

"Vera, do a quick report, please!" I said, continuing to track the growth of the company's money. The printer whistled and produced a sheet. I took out my calculator and started to add up the figures. Sergey, sitting in the chair by the door, gave me a curious look, immediately crossed his legs, kicked his foot and folded his arms across his chest.

"Seryoga!" I said happily, leaning back in my chair. "Congratulations! Two million!"

"Two?" he sniffed, kicking his foot harder. "One million for each of us."

Sergey looked at his wife and added:

"Imagine, Roman became a ruble millionaire at the age of twenty-nine!"

"Hah!" I chuckled, "You say that as if you didn't become one! We both did! So did you! And not at twenty-nine, but at thirty... I'll be thirty in a month..."

"No, at twenty-nine..." Sergey said with sadness in his eyes. "Still a month to go... and you've earned your million now..."

"And you became one in..." I narrowed my eyes and did some calculations. "Thirty-four... well, that's nice, too! Although you actually became one earlier! You have a car and," I almost blurted out in front of Vera that her husband had a stash in the bank, I hesitated, quickly thinking how to continue, "and an apartment. Actually, I bought an apartment too, but I still have to fix it up, and that's half a million, and you've already done that... So... you became one earlier, and I'm just catching up now..."

"No," Sergey grimaced and shook his head, as if something unpleasant had happened that weighed on him. "The apartment and the repairs are just expenses, things! It doesn't count."

"Well, I don't have a car!" I said.

"You don't really need it!" Sergey objected with a hint of irritation.

"Um, that's right... I don't need it..."

"Exactly! If you needed it, you would have bought it a long time ago. You're just fine with it as it is."

"Well..." I thought for a moment and nodded. "Actually, yes! I'm fine with it! I have an apartment, I don't need a car, the main thing is business, the company is working, I'm earning money, and I'll take money from the cash register any moment and buy a car!"

"You see!" Sergey summed up with a kind of sadness, and with pouting lips began to pick his finger in his sandal like an offended child.

"Am I not right?" I spread my hands. "What's wrong with it, Seryoga?"

"Nothing's wrong, Roman... everything is fine with you..." he sighed heavily.

A moment of silence hung in the office.

"And Vitya Butenko is already a dollar millionaire," Sergey said, as if thinking aloud. And I suddenly realized that Sergey was not so much envious as hopelessly sad. And this hopelessness was due to the fact that an ordinary guy like him had become a dollar millionaire. And that this amount was too much for Sergey to understand, so much that he would never earn it and would not be able to reduce the resulting financial gap.

Sergey sighed again.

CHAPTER 46

Sergey and I went to get the money.

"Seryoga, what would you do if you had enough money? Let's say we worked like this for a couple of years, we made enough money, the company grew, we hired people, and we had free time... What would you do?" Fidgeting in my seat, I prepared myself for a long, pleasant conversation. Half an hour round trip to "Fort" – I liked this route better than the others.

"Oh, Romych, well..." Sergey was confused.

"What do you like best, Seryoga?" I enjoyed the thought.

"Roman, I don't know... Let me think about it..." Sergey stopped talking.

"Have you thought about it?" I shook my partner.

"I like to cook!" he said. "I would open a little restaurant, so that it would be almost for my own people... And I'd cook there myself! I mean, not all the time, but when I felt like it, I'd cook there myself and serve the customers..."

"That's a good idea!" I exclaimed, realizing that I was pleasantly surprised. "I like it! We'll make money and you'll open your own restaurant! I'll come visit you!"

The "Mazda" rattled its wheels at the crossing.

"And I'd be making movies!" I dreamily threw my hands back behind the headrest.

"Movies!???" Sergey turned his surprised face to me.

"Yeah, why? I like it! Cool activity!" I continued, fantasizing about the future and seeing myself on the set of a great movie. "It's cool to be a director!"

"Why not an actor?"

"Actor? No, not interested! I mean... I could be an actor too! But... I'd rather be a director. An actor only if I'd get a really great script, not just as a profession – you act for ten years in some TV series, and then... maybe you get a good role! And the director is still the most important person on the set, he actually makes the movie... and the actors are no big deal..."

I brushed it off, the car rolled out onto the asphalt, and I was squeezed into the seat.

"Then you should go to Moscow!" Sergey said after a pause.

"I'd love to!" I shrugged. "But not so soon... we still have to develop the company here so that it works almost without us... and then I can go. It won't be that soon, Seryoga! Only when everything will be fine here and each of us will want to do something else!"

Sergey remained silent.

There was a pause in communication for a few minutes – we drove around the temple, through the village market – and then, as if thinking about the new information, Sergey said:

"Movies are a good thing! So go ahead, Roman, practice filming! I'll give you money then, I'll invest in it..."

Sales of dichlorvos set and maintained the pace. The remnants of the season's main product were melting away every day. By mid-June, there were about five hundred packs left.

"Seryoga, it's time to order a second truck!" I said, turning in my chair at the table.

"Come on!" he raised his eyebrows and clarified with surprise, "You want to order another truck!??"

"Yeah, do the math. We sell the first one at the end of June. So it'll be gone in two and a half months, by the middle of the season. And there are two more months, and if we're lucky with the weather in September, two and a half months of good sales..."

"No, Roman, what two months!?" Sergey protested. "July and two weeks of August, and that's it! A month and a half! What two and a half!?? No, what truck, what are you talking about!?"

"Seryoga, I understand that in September sales won't be so good, but the peak – the last week of July and the first week of August – is still ahead of us! And sales will be even higher! The peak will compensate for the decline... Think about it."

"No, Roman, this is reckless! I like what you're suggesting, but it's too much!" my partner shook his head. "Ten tons would be just right! But a truck – no, we won't sell it!"

"Seryoga, just think about it..." I decided to reach Sergey through his doubts with cold logic. "We'll sell half of it for sure... agree?"

"Yes," he exhaled loudly, folded his arms over his chest and nervously jerked his knee.

"That's two and a half thousand, and we'll sell them by mid-August when sales slow down, right?"

"Uh-huh."

"There will be sales for the rest of the warm season, right? We'll sell something by the end of September anyway..."

"I guess we will, yeah," Sergey nodded cautiously, thinking a little, as if he was afraid of making a mistake with every word he said.

"Well, how many more do you think we can sell in the meantime? Up to a thousand, right?"

"Uh... Seven hundred... Seven or eight hundred boxes or so we can sell..."

"All right, let's say seven hundred," I agreed. "A total of three two hundred out of four nine hundred..."

I looked at Vera who grabbed a calculator, poked at the buttons and said:

"One thousand seven hundred remains!"

"That's fine!" I waved my hands, satisfied with the calculations.

"And where are we going to put it?" Sergey either didn't understand or insisted.

"What do you mean, where? They will spend the winter in the warehouse! Let them stay until next spring... And during the winter we will revalue them and make money!" I added my argument.

"But we have to buy the goods!" Sergey stuck to his argument.

"Why? We'll see!" I sighed, feeling the growing fatigue of the dialogue; it was like wading through a swamp, losing strength with every movement. "It's not certain that we have to buy it, we'll try to negotiate to freeze the debt until spring."

"Naaah..." Vera frowned. "They won't agree... it's too much debt..."

"Vera..." I sighed again, as if I had fallen deeper into the mire, looked at my partner's wife reproachfully, gathered my patience and explained. "They will agree... And they will agree precisely because the debt is large... This is the law of large numbers! If the debt is small, they will demand it, and if it is large, it will be difficult to demand it. What's their choice? Take the goods back? Who will bring the goods back to Novosibirsk? It's too expensive and unrealistic in winter. And it would be unrealistic to get such a sum from us... It would be easier to freeze it. Okay, why are we talking about something that hasn't happened yet!?"

I was suddenly angry, I wanted to end the conversation with specifics.

"There is nothing to discuss yet, but I suggest we bring another full truckload. They'll send it to us, no problem! We'll pay for the first one, they'll be happy, and they'll send us the second one on the same terms. I think we should take it while they're giving it to us. And what's left over, if there's any left over, fuck it, we'll figure it out in the fall! If there is a problem, there is a solution! What's there to discuss!?" I waved my hands and stopped talking, realizing that I was almost exhausted.

"Roman, I guess we could bring a truck..." Sergey started, but suddenly stopped and immediately waved his hand, having resolved his doubts. "Yeah, I guess we could! Yes! Let's do it! I'm for it!"

The decision was made. We placed an order and sent it off that same day, leaving the number in the main column unchanged. The stakes went up again, the adrenaline pumped through my blood, and I was even more excited.

"I want to create a dynasty," Sergey surprised me as we began our next conversation in the car. We turned out of the factory gate and drove over the bumps."

"Create a dynasty!?" I stared at him in bewilderment, unable to believe my ears.

"Yes, a dynasty..." Sergey repeated, not catching other shades in my surprise.

"It is when you have your own house... such an oak staircase to the second floor... and along the stairs hang portraits of dynastic ancestors, right? And yours is the first, the most respectable, right?" I described the image that immediately came to mind.

"Well, yes, I would like that..." Sergey said quite seriously.

"That is, you would like your children and grandchildren to come up to your portrait and say, I don't know, to guests or relatives – here, they say, our grandfather! The founder of the dynasty. He started it all. He started the family business..."

I looked at Sergey's face, which was turned to the road, and I did not find in it the slightest hint of a joke, irony, or anything that would allow me to doubt the seriousness of his thoughts and words. No! He was speaking seriously!

"Yes, I would like that..." Sergey nodded, which sent me into a stupor. I suddenly realized how different he and I were. "Man, that's fucking bullshit... Seryoga is driven by vanity... I knew he was vain, but this much... What a joke. Doing something just so he can hang his portrait on the wall and have people pray to it... what a stupid and vulgar thing to do... creepy... ugh..." I shuddered, and the image of Sergey, which at first was almost in the sky, in a moment jumped the point of our equality, shrunk to microscopic size, and from that moment I began to look down at him. There, at my feet, stood the meager Seryozha Lobov, capriciously demanding from life a portrait of himself on the wall of achievements.

As we dangled on the dirt road, I silently pondered his words and the change that had occurred in me. As the "Mazda" roared down the asphalt, my thoughts stopped bouncing along with the car and my sarcasm was released from its chaos. I immediately recognized this transition, which had happened to me more than once in relation to people who had lost their authority and importance in my eyes. Sarcasm, like a hungry demon, slumbering but waiting for this moment, was released and immediately jumped on Sergey's pathetic personality, wanting to nibble it to the bone. And the process inside me, which had been sluggish before, suddenly accelerated and came out – I was thinking about the future of the company, about my place in it. I looked into that future through my consciousness and saw nothing there. The air castle floated away, and the company with Sergey lost the future. I was thinking. And my thoughts were accelerated by Sergey himself.

"Romych, what are we going to do with the money?" he said on another ride.

"Seryoga, um..." I exhaled, compiling my thoughts. In June we had a flow of money for the goods we had shipped earlier. This money had to be used wisely.

"Come on! For what?" Sergey frowned and turned his surprised face to me when I again mentioned new distribution contracts with larger manufacturers.

"We are doing well with our product, Seryoga! But we're almost at the maximum..." I waved my hands. "We can't squeeze any more out of what we have... If we want to develop, we have to think seriously about distribution... We need to hire a staff of managers who will work closely with retailers, and add more cars to Petya... And let them run around."

"Why do we have to do this, Roman?" Sergey's face grew even more displeased.

"Seryoga, there is no other way. We've already exhausted our wholesale potential. And that's not even the point. We use the barter system, and the barter sales are also wholesale, it will not last long... Everyone else like us is also pushing barter goods into the same depots, and they can't take it all... You see how the competition in 'Peresvet' has intensified... It's good, we have Senya in 'Mercury', it's quiet there, but Senya might not be there at any moment... and that's it. Where do we put the exchange goods? We're hanging by a thread, Seryoga!" I spread my hands again. "So I would go into serious distribution, take a few large factories, sign contracts with them and start using them... Yes, there will be the usual minimal profit... but that's not the main thing! The main thing is that such factories would pull us like a locomotive, and all our current goods would go like a trailer... And the markup on it would remain the same, you understand? We'd keep the markup on the goods at the expense of the 'locomotive'."

"What, you don't think we can keep it?" Sergey's look of surprise was mixed with worry and fear.

"Of course not! We'll be driven into a corner sooner or later. What we have is a freebie! It can't be considered normal. It just happened, we got lucky, just lucky! I told you when we merged, Seryoga, we'd mark up as much as we could and make money... Yes, we'd get nailed later, but the money would be in our pockets! And winners can't be judged!"

"I remember you said we would only work for three years, and that was it!" my partner snapped in an arrogant tone. "Well, we've been working for two years now, and our sales are only growing. I don't see anyone pushing us, as you put it!"

"Seryoga, you're right!" I began to get emotional. "I am surprised myself that we have been working for two years and no one has tried... None of our competitors have even checked our markups! I'm just amazed, to be honest, and surprised!"

I put my hand to my heart, letting him know that my words were sincere.

"What makes you think anyone should be checking our markups at all?" Sergey's lips curled up in an insult.

"Because I would!" And in this argument I repeated myself and smiled. "If I had my eye on a good that I could snatch for myself, I would check the office that sells it... And if there was a gap of more than twenty percent, I wouldn't hesitate to go there!"

Sergey was silent.

"And we have more than twenty percent everywhere, Seryoga!" I added.

"Fuck, we have more than thirty!" he cackled with pleasure.

"Exactly!" I hummed too. "And now the market will start to shrink, it has already started... The networks will only grow and crush retail. Wholesalers' retail sales will fall. Everyone will immediately go to the wholesale depots that we use... and the markups will go down... and everyone will look for more profitable goods, and we have exactly that... I don't think anybody's not going to start checking us... I'm surprised no one has done it yet..."

"What do you suggest?"

"I just told you!"

"Roman, what's the point?" Sergey twitched irritably, grimaced as if he'd heard obvious stupidity, and looked at me in surprise. "The wagon runs as it is!"

"Seryoga, all right, all right!" I said impatiently, holding back the anger that was about to break out. "I hear you! You do not want to invest in the development of the company, I see... What are your proposals then? What are we going to do with the profits?"

"I would buy plots!" Sergey said immediately.

"What do you mean, plots?" I didn't understand.

"Plots of land!"

"Which ones? There are different kinds of them – some for development, some for some kind of use... And we don't have enough money for them... These plots are measured in hectares..."

"No – dacha plots, plots for private houses... They're cheap now, they'll go up in price, you'll see... We could buy some..."

"How much do they cost now?"

"Roman, it depends! Here in Sladkovka a man sells six square meters for thirty thousand. Sladkovka is quoted, it's considered a good place! And he's been selling for six months, still no result. It's worth ten thousand! Buy a plot for ten or twenty and let it sit there, it won't ask for food. Keep it for two years and sell it for double the price, that's fifty percent profit a year!"

I thought about it. The thought dived into my brain, ran through its convolutions, turned into our hard-earned money, and was immediately scattered on plots of land around us. I wrinkled my nose – I didn't like the idea. It was a way to spread the money around, and I thought it was better to keep it in one or two properties. "We buy these plots... but how do we formalize them? Each plot for the two of us? That's nonsense! We'll drown in paperwork. We'll have to register one for me and one for Sergey... That's not an option either – the price of the land will be different... And it's not sure that we'll sell them all later. Half of them will be sold, half of them will stay, and that's all the profit... stays in the ground. Besides, I don't know much about land, how much it's worth... We'll buy it and then we'll be stuck with it for five years. No, it's easier to buy an apartment and have it built... It could get better for one and worse for the other, and all this crap will start – you bought the better land and I got the

worse... No... I don't need these squabbles!" I thought and even shrugged – I didn't like the idea that the plots might cause discord between us in the future.

"No, Seryoga," I wrinkled my nose and shook my head negatively, "I don't like this idea very much, we will scatter the money among the plots and then we won't be able to collect it!"

"Roman, why should we scatter the money!?" he exclaimed.

"Seryoga, I don't know about you, but I don't know anything about plots... What lands to buy? Where? No!" I shook my head resolutely and remained unconvinced. "I would leave the money in the company and sign some serious distribution contracts!"

"No, Roman, this is definitely not something we should do. We're fine the way we are. We're going steady. You said, of course, I remember, that we would close down in two or three years... But as you can see, we are not closing, we are working and only growing!" Sergey sarcastically brushed it off.

"Seryoga, I did not say that we will close down in two or three years, I said that in two years, maximum three, we will be driven into a corner and we will have to go down to the usual markups, and the freebies with big profits will end!" I resented the twisting of my words.

"No, Roman, I remember very well – you said we would close down!" Sergey said with pressure, raising his voice.

"Seryoga, I didn't say that, I said that we would be driven into a corner! I certainly did not say that we would close in three years!" I was stubborn.

"Roman, I still do not think we need to sign new distribution contracts and invest in them!" he snapped nervously.

"Seryoga, if you don't think so, it's okay... I'm not insisting... I just expressed my opinion..." I said conciliatorily, extinguishing the mutual irritation and dissatisfaction.

We both fell silent. Suddenly I remembered, and thinking aloud rather than admonishing Sergey, I said:

"When my father and I were busy with beer, our neighbors across the street were selling sugar..."

"Yes, you told me, I remember!" Sergey interrupted nervously, as if to nip the story in the bud. "You sold beer, took sugar from them and made more money with it than with beer! Well done, Roman!"

I turned a deaf ear to this sarcasm, caught a whiff of typical sharp envy, grinned and continued: "No, Seryoga, it's not about that... not about how wonderful I and my father were... These 'sugar guys' had loaders, young men about thirty years old... And one of them once told me that he was also in business with his friends and they had everything... they started earning good money... and then, as usual, parties, bashing, wenches, saunas... and they made their money away together with the business..."

I paused, noticing that Sergey was all ears and paying attention, and continued satisfactorily: "So the most important thing, Seryoga, is not to become like those guys who 'had it all'. Do you understand? We have a great opportunity to build a big company and a serious business. We're at our peak right now, we've got sales so hot we can't go any further... with the product we have. We need to move to a whole new level... we need an intensive step, now we are moving extensively... we have mastered this level, that's it, we can't squeeze more out of it... To make a qualitative leap, we need to invest... A qualitative transition implies a great expenditure of money and energy... But then it will be compensated by an extensive expansion at the new level... and it will be bigger than the current one... And then a new level... And so on and so forth. We must not blow our chance, Seryoga, lest we become the dudes who 'had it all'..."

"Roman, I got it!" Sergey said sharply.

By the third year of communication, I was well versed in the nuances of my partner's voice and intonation. I unmistakably recognized the sharpness and irritation in Sergey's last sentence – his unwillingness to listen to supposed moralizing, and his aversion to words found more in books than on the backstreet. I noticed that he was embarrassed by such words – he remembered them badly and inaccurately. Sergey deliberately inserted narrowly specialized words into his speech in order not to appear backward and thus increase the weight of himself and what he said in the eyes of the listener. But Sergey found it difficult to understand and work with such words. And people who did it naturally and easily caused him dissatisfaction. My father and I were often the source of this reaction. At first Sergey hid it, but the longer we communicated, the more often and vividly it appeared.

There was a long pause. I turned to the window.

"It won't do any good here... We should withdraw the money, accumulate it in one place, and then we'll see..." I thought bitterly. I knew that I could convince him if I wanted to. And Sergey would agree. But I had already studied him enough not to do that. I knew that all the fuss about the company's growth, hiring employees, their control, and in general – all the new problems – I would have to solve myself. Sergey would not refuse directly, he would only slack off. And this thought stopped me. At that moment, silently looking out of the window, I let go of the reins and left our business to the will of the current. I realized that I was actually spelling the death of the company. But I was no longer willing to paddle for two.

"We could buy another apartment and have it built..." I broke the silence.

"Another one?" Sergey woke up and looked at me in surprise.

"Yes... one room... we can make it, I calculated..."

"Where, in the same place?"

"Yes, in the same house! We can't afford a two-room, but a one-room is fine!" I nodded.

Biting his lips for a few seconds, Sergey mumbled: "Well, let's do it..."

"Okay. I'll go and find out what's what..."

"Yes, go and find out!" Sergey immediately softened. "You could do it today..."

"As for the plots, Seryoga, if you want, we can do it too! We can try. But I don't know anything about them, so if you want, look for plots, we'll check them, maybe we'll buy some..." I took a step towards my partner, and the feeling of guilt that had somehow arisen in my chest and weighed me down disappeared.

Our conversation almost immediately turned to other distracting topics.

"What kind of movie would you like to make?" Sergey suddenly puzzled me.

"Damned if I know, Seryoga," I shrugged. "I definitely wouldn't make a horror or comedy movie... I'd do some action or sci-fi maybe..."

"Yeah, I kind of thought you'd say that," Sergey said, adding after a moment of silence, "But why not comedy and horror?"

"Comedies are the hardest to make, they definitely need talent and desire, and I have neither of those things... Horror?" I grimaced and shrugged. "Ugh! No! Horror is definitely not my thing... Of course there are good horror movies that I like, but I wouldn't film them... It's on a subconscious level, you know... Sometimes you sleep and see some dreams, and I always have some kind of shooting, spaceships..."

"Is that what you dream about?" Sergey looked at me.

"Yes," I said, embarrassed.

"I see, 'Star Wars' in short!" Sergey smiled.

"Well, sort of," I smiled too. "I would make cyberpunk."

"What's that?" Sergey gave me a surprised look.

"Have you seen 'Blade Runner'?" I perked up.

"Yeah... It's cyberpunk or something!?" Sergey perked up too and playfully furrowed his eyebrows.

"Yeah, kind of... That's the style I like! I would make something like that!"

"I didn't like the movie at all!" Sergey curled his lips. "It's about nothing, pointless! Some robots running around, some guy running after them, catching them for some reason..."

"You just didn't understand the meaning of the movie, you looked at the picture, you didn't get the point..."

"Then what is the point?" Sergey immediately reacted sarcastically.

"It is a simple meaning, the meaning of the value of life. He, the replicant, didn't kill the hunter at the end because he himself had realized the value of life earlier and wanted him to learn it too, and the man realized it... when the replicant held his hand on the roof of the house and could let him go at any moment... He left in the finale with this secretary who turned out to be a replicant as well..."

"Really?" my partner looked at me surprised and confused.

"Yeah... you just have to look beyond the surface and understand the hidden meaning... Otherwise, yes – running around shooting... just an ordinary action movie, but beautifully filmed."

"Someone comes up with such things, right?" Sergey shook his head.

"I think such things are usually not invented, they just pop out of the subconscious somewhere in a dream!" I waved my hand. "You sleep, and there you go! Get it and go filming..."

"I only have nightmares!" Sergey said in frustration.

"What do you mean, nightmares? What kind?"

"Oh, Roman, different things!" Sergey brushed it off. "Some creepy things – blood, I'm killing someone, cutting someone, someone is chasing me, I'm covered in blood, blood and guts all over the place..."

"Wow!" I almost whistled. "That's quite a dream you have!"

"Yeah, I'm telling you, they're horrible. I don't sleep well. I fall asleep and then sleep in snatches."

"Nah, I sleep like a baby!" I smiled. "I hardly dream about anything... just rarely. I go to bed and pass out immediately and am gone until morning!"

"Here's a good plot," Sergey said on the morning of Monday, June 18. He had brought a stack of fresh newspapers, spread them out on the table, and ran his eyes over the pages.

"Call them, we can take a look," I said, relaxing in the chair by the door with the remnants of the sleep.

Sergey looked at me carefully, sighed, and began to press the fax buttons with his finger. As I learned from the conversation, the land was outside the city in the north, fifteen kilometers away. The owner wanted fifty thousand rubles for it.

"There's another one not far away!" Sergey said. "We can look at it."

"Call them, we'll go there too!" I nodded, stretched and crossed my arms over my chest.

Sergey called and arranged to look at the second plot.

"So, let's take a look?" he suggested, getting up from the table.

"Let's go!" I cheered and jumped up.

"Vera, you'll manage here, if anything, okay?" Sergey took the phone from the table.

"Okay, Seryozha," Vera said without pleasure.

We went outside and approached the "Mazda". The side of the car reflected the glare of the sun, revealing long, wavy scratches.

"Wow!!! Seryoga! How did you end up like this!?" I stopped and wrinkled my nose in pain.

"Melyokha, Fedot and I had a retreat on Saturday!" He splashed his hands. "We drove through the forest in our cars. Fedot ahead in his jeep, me behind... Almost got stuck there, had to wade through the bushes!"

"Sorry about that..." I said, seeing that the scratches were deep and had damaged the protective coating down to the paint.

"No big deal, when I sell it – I'll have it polished and that's it!" Sergey waved and ducked into the cabin. I walked around the car and saw the same thing on the left side, shrugged, went back and sat down in the salon. Inside, everything was to match – the floors, the panels of the car were smeared with dirt in places, as if several people had galloped all over the cabin and the seats. We drove off. I suddenly realized that Sergey's carelessness had finally affected his car. The "Mazda" he had bought two years ago, when it was seven years old, and which had looked literally new with a neatly preserved interior, now looked noticeably shabby and worn. I looked around meticulously and squeamishly.

"It's nothing, Roman, never mind!" Sergey brushed it off, noticing my look. "I'll have to tell Verok, she'll clean up here, wash everything..."

"No, no matter... But it's obvious that you've been partying hard this weekend..."

We drove north. We touched the city on the ring road and got on the highway leading to Moscow. In another half hour we were there. The land was not far from an abandoned village with a few houses. Despite the fact that the village was on the highway, it was clearly dying out. "A dead place," I thought, and gave up on the plot.

"So, Roman, let's have a look?" Sergey said cheerfully.

"Let's go," I nodded and jumped over the ditch after him.

Behind the planting of trees we discovered a field divided into plots – a dacha settlement. The settlement looked as deserted as the village. Most of the plots were not even fenced, just marked with crooked sticks sticking out of the ground. The plot we were looking for was in the second row. We walked past the first row and stopped at a stick.

"It looks like this one, huh?" Sergey looked at me.

"Yes, this one," I looked at the grassy rectangle of land.

"So, what do you think?" Sergey looked at me with a sour face.

"I don't know... I don't like it, I wouldn't buy a plot here... Some abandoned dachas."

"Yeah... I don't like it either..." Sergey looked at me carefully, sadly. "Let's go to another one? Or to the office?"

"As you wish, Seryoga," I shrugged, showing complete apathy. "We can check it out, it's not far."

"Let's go then!" He cheered up.

After a dozen kilometers to the north, we found ourselves in a large settlement. The second plot turned out to be the same – a weedy field on the outskirts of the village. Even the markings were missing. Sergey began to call the owner, trying to understand the boundaries of the plot. I walked back and forth beside the "Mazda" with a detached look.

"Let's go, shall we?" Sergey suggested sourly.

"Yes, let's go," I nodded and got into the car.

We drove through the streets of the village and in five minutes we were back on the highway.

"When are you going to ask about the apartment?" Sergey said, making me realize that the topic of plots was closed. I showed no interest, and his enthusiasm had dried up in half a day.

"I can come by tonight..." I said, looking out the window. "What, you want me to check out the conditions and look at one-room apartments?"

"Yes, we'll buy another apartment. Have it built..."

In the evening after work, I went to the construction company's office.

"Five hundred thousand down payment and sign the contract!" the manager said as soon as I mentioned the purpose of my visit.

"We don't have five hundred, we have three hundred," I said.

The woman ran her fingers over the calculator buttons and said:

"Could you at least pay four hundred – thirty percent?"

"We don't have four hundred now, we only have three hundred," I repeated. "Don't worry, we'll definitely buy the apartment before the end of construction, it's still two and a half years away! Our business is doing well, the income is good!"

The manager hesitated.

"But if it's a matter of principle, I can come back in a month – it'll be four hundred..." I retreated, having calculated the maneuver.

"Please sit here, I'll ask the director!" The woman reacted and stamped her heels down the corridor. In a minute she came back, sat down in the chair, put the contract on the table and said with feigned seriousness: "All right, the director authorized it, I took the responsibility for it! You are a disciplined customer, in good standing with us! But remember, if anything happens, the director will hang me!"

"Don't worry, everything will be fine. We won't let you down. Okay, then we'll come to you next Monday and bring the money."

The woman froze and looked at me questioningly.

"I will not buy the apartment alone, my partner and I will register it for both of us, one second for each of us," I explained, removing the question with a counter look.

"Ah, well, come back on Monday and we'll sign the contract then!"

"Uh-huh," I nodded, said goodbye, and walked out. The weather was beautiful and there was no rush, so I walked home, pondering a thought. The guilt I felt for my father weighed on my mind. I knew it wasn't my fault that he left the company. Even when my father tried to blame me for what had happened, I didn't accept his arguments. But I felt it in my gut. I looked for ways to get rid of this crushing feeling. And... I think I found it. I decided to register my half of the apartment to my father. With a distant goal in mind.

"If the company does well, I can buy the other half and leave the apartment to my father... as compensation for the money he didn't earn in the company... and so he won't think I'm such a bad son..." came to my mind.

The next day I suggested to Sergey that the apartment should be registered to my father and Vera. He immediately agreed, which even surprised me. On Monday, June 25, we signed a joint construction contract for a one-room apartment of 49.16 square meters in the same building where the previous apartment was built.

CHAPTER 47

"Vera, is this for me? To sign?" Sergey looked at his wife in surprise and took a thick stack of waybills from the table.

"Yes, Seryozha, sign them, we have to take them to the accountant at the end of the week..." Vera said, freezing her fingers on the keyboard for a moment, then continued typing.

"Shall we go to lunch?" I grimaced, feeling a growing hunger.

"On foot?" Sergey looked at me.

"Yes, I'd like to... Vera, what do you think?" I looked to the left.

"Okay, let's go on foot, it's more entertaining..." she finished typing, stretching as if she wanted to drive the sleep out of her body, which was stiff from sitting for so long. "Take a walk..."

A week ago, for the first time, we walked to the factory canteen instead of riding. It quickly became a ritual. I had always loved to walk, and was glad to have the opportunity to walk to the canteen and back, to stretch and relax from the boredom of the office. Leaving the factory, we followed the path to the railroad tracks and walked the ties to the crossing. Holding hands, Sergey and Vera walked ahead of me. It was touching, and I immediately thought of all my failed relationships.

"Roman, why don't you say something?" Vera said mischievously, not turning around and dignifiedly walking the ties with her sandals. "Why are you so quiet today?"

"He's thinking about his broads!" Sergey waved his hand and chuckled.

"I'm not thinking about them," I replied languidly.

"Roman, take it easy!" Vera continued. "You just didn't live with them and you had nothing in common, so you broke up with them all so easily! Natasha was a good girl, I liked her, it's a pity that you broke up. If you had lived together for a while, you wouldn't have broken up!"

"Maybe," I shrugged.

"Seryozha and I decided from the very beginning to do everything together! Right, Seryozha?" Vera added.

"What do you mean, do everything together?" I didn't quite understand.

"Well, we never went anywhere without each other," Sergey said. "If one of us was invited somewhere, we always went together. And if we couldn't go together, we didn't go at all..."

"Good rule, I like it..." I was impressed and lifted my head. The sky was soft blue and cloudless, with two small fleeces in the west. I looked up at the sky – the air was so hot that it flowed to the ground in a haze, accompanied by the crackling of grasshoppers in the tall grass. I was wearing light linen pants and a black sleeveless t-shirt. The air was pleasantly warm against my arms. The sun baked my shoulders and face. I walked the ties, enjoying the constancy of the heat and the silence. My consciousness was saturated with thoughts of peace, in the waves of which I walked to the brick factory, passed the gatehouse, entered the canteen, washed my hands, took a tray, stood in line and began mechanically placing food on the tray, pushing it closer and closer to the cash register. I was thinking about the future, the unknown future. So far I had imagined it, and the future fulfilled all my wildest expectations. Teaming up with Sergey with the expectation of a quick business leap worked, and all my expectations were more than fulfilled. Without investing a penny, we made money almost out of thin air. I was soaked in the business – I thought about it, cared about it and lived it. And I felt that we were almost at the peak, close to the point where the tension of all the threads of the business would be maximized.

"Seventy-seven, come here!" A voice commanded, bringing me back to reality.

I turned at the sound and Vera laughed. The cashier looked at me.

"Me?" I poked myself in the chest with my finger, looked at her and down at the number "77" on my pants. "Ah-ha... I'm coming!"

I took my tray to the cashier and she started to calculate my lunch.

"Verok, write off one hundred and ninety rubles from the common fund later, please!" Sergey paid for all of us, and after we sat down at a free table, we began to eat.

The way back was the same – through the hot haze of the air, thick smells of herbs and mixed with them ethers of railroad ties soaked in oil to blackness.

"When are you going on vacation this year?" I said. "July or August?"

"When do you want?" Sergey turned around, I walked behind them again.

"I don't care... I'll go to my relatives in the village for a week, that's all..."

"We'll probably need a week too, won't we, Seryozha?" said Vera, watching her footsteps. We walked along the narrow path by the road – Sergey, Vera and I.

"Right. Romych, I think we'll be the first to leave in a week, okay?" Sergey also bowed his head, looking down so that his oversized shoulders overhung the rest of his body and his short legs seemed to be pressed into the ground.

"Seryoga, go ahead, I'll take a week when you get back..." I said.

Fifteen minutes later, we ducked into the cool of our office.

"Whew! It's a little hot, isn't it?" Vera looked at me and exhaled.

"Yes, it is," I said, and seeing a pile of waybills on the table, I remembered and nodded to my partner. "Seryoga, sit down! The general director has a lot of work to do here!"

"Yes, Roman, that's for sure!" He smiled and settled happily into his chair. I sat down by the door. Having made himself comfortable, Sergey started to work – the pen was running on the first waybill. I watched him – smoothly and broadly Sergey wrote his signature and finished it with the same big monogram at the top. He put the waybill aside, the pen moved to the next one. I looked at Sergey's face. An impression of solemnity and peace appeared on his face, which made his hand movements even more expansive and unhurried – Sergey was enjoying himself. I was lulled into an after-lunch sleep and closed my eyes.

"That's it!" my partner shouted, forcing my eyelids open. "I even got tired!"

"Pafarhed?" I smiled.

Our eyes met, Sergey was beaming.

"Forty-three waybills!!!" he exhaled tiredly and happily. "Just imagine!!!"

I smiled, feeling how much Sergey liked being an executive. It was in the formal manifestations of this position. A chain of several separate fragments suddenly formed in my mind – Sergey signing waybills, receiving money from the cashier, visiting the bank, negotiating with the delegation of "Luxchem". Through all the parts of this strange film there was one thing – Sergey enjoyed all these actions, they reminded him of who he was in his position and social status. "A show-off," my mind flashed, and I reflexively wrinkled my nose. Another fly in the ointment.

The truck of dichlorvos arrived at the end of the month, and within half a day an exact copy of the previous cube was in place. The truck arrived on time because there were only two hundred boxes left. The weather, after a few cloudy days in the middle of the month, as if to help us, was clear and hot, not even a hint of rain.

July 2, Monday. In the morning I took the waybill for the first run, prepared on Friday, and went to the warehouse. Senya was smoking at the open gate, his son beside him. I handed the waybill to the storekeeper and stepped into the cool of the warehouse – the dichlorvos towered twice as high as the piles of other goods. I stared at the cube and froze. "If we sell the second truck, that would be unrealistically cool! Even if we sell half of it, it's still more than enough!" I thought, realizing that my intuition had not failed me again.

The sound of Petya's "GAZelle" came from outside the warehouse and began to grow. The car rolled onto the lot in front of the warehouse, backed up against it, pushed the cover into the gate opening and fell silent. The car door slammed, Petya entered the warehouse and barked: "Good morning everyone!!!"

We said hello.

"Do you have anything to load?" Petya lowered his voice.

"When have we had nothing to load, Petya?" Senya waved his hands.

"That's just me!" He waved his hand and chuckled. "You have the waybill? Can we start loading?"

"Okay, load, I won't bother you," I said and left the warehouse, heading for the office, at the transformer box I met Sergey who was walking towards me.

"We made a waybill with Verok, all the dichlorvos in 'Fort' are sold! All gone! I put in more, twice as much!"

"Great, let them sell it," I nodded.

"Will you come to the warehouse with me?" Sergey smiled.

"I just came from there, Seryoga... All right, see ya," I said and went back to the office.

A few minutes later Sergey returned, and immediately Stepanov Senya called to place another order. The time until lunch passed quickly. After walking to the factory canteen and back, all three of us sat down in chairs. I sat at the table, Sergey at the door, and as if he remembered something, he opened his phone with a crunch and said:

"I filmed Lyonka the other day! He was eating dumplings. Want to see it?"

I nodded, said "Sure!", stood up and walked over to my partner. Vera came out from behind her desk and stood on the other side of her husband. Sergey started the video and immediately let out a chuckle:

"Man, how Lyonka ate those dumplings yesterday..."

I leaned closer to the phone screen.

"What's that smell on you, Roman?" Vera looked at me.

"Perfume... Armani..." I explained.

"It smells nice," Vera said.

"What? Armani?" Sergey perked up.

"Yes, Armani... Armani Glam..." I nodded, looked at Vera and said philosophically, "The girl disappeared, but the perfume remained..."

"Are we going to watch the video or discuss who smells what!?" Sergey said annoyed. "I've been holding the phone for half an hour already..."

"We are, Seryozha, we are," Vera calmed her husband and leaned down.

"We are, Seryoga, start!" I added, kicking the armrest of his chair with my thigh.

Sergey restarted the video – in the kitchen, Lyonya was sitting at the table in his underwear, a deep plate in front of him, filled to the brim with dumplings. A thick layer of mayonnaise covered the dumplings. Looking into the camera phone, Lyonya melancholically shoved one dumpling after another into his mouth and slowly chewed them. Lyonya's blue eyes looked at the camera with indifference, as if to say – whatever, it does not bother me, I eat and it tastes good, so it does not matter whether you film me or not.

The video ended, Sergey pressed a button, and the next one began – Lyonya was sitting in the same place, but the plate was almost empty, with five dumplings at the bottom.

"Imagine, Roman, he ate the whole... the whole plate! There were twenty-five dumplings!" Sergey said, still holding the phone.

"Nice!" I nodded, impressed. "The boy has a good appetite!"

"Very good!" Vera snorted sarcastically.

I looked back at the phone screen – Sergey's hand appeared and pulled the plate with the rest of the dumplings towards him. Lyonya's face showed concern and he grimaced. His hands grabbed the plate from his side. Sergey continued to pull the plate toward him. The forces were not equal. Lyonya noticed this and it was immediately reflected in his face. The child squirmed more, and fear replaced anxiety. Lyonya began to sulk and sob a few times, warningly. Sergey's hand froze and immediately resumed the effort. Lyonya howled. The hand let go of the plate. Lyonya stopped crying, jerked the plate back with his hand, stuck the fork into the dumpling, put it in his mouth and began to chew convulsively.

I caught a thought in my head, grinned and straightened up.

"And he ate it all, for crying out loud!" Sergey said in surprise and turned off the video.

"Good appetite! Not every adult can eat that much," I said and returned to my chair. Vera sat down at the computer. Sergey slammed down his cell phone.

"You know what I call him?" he said, looking at me. "Lord!"

I smiled. I wanted to say "spitting image," but I kept quiet and looked away.

"On the weekend, we came home from the dacha..." Sergey continued. "To sleep in normal beds, to wash ourselves and the children... Verok bathed Lyonya, I took him and carried him to the couch... wrapped him in a towel. He sat down... opened the towel... and spread his doodle all over the place... took the remote and turned on the TV."

Sergey cackled, spread his arms and legs, pretended to be his son, sitting relaxed and masterly on the couch, cackled again and returned to his normal posture.

"Sitting like this, enjoying himself, watching TV..." Sergey said. "Lilka came over... wanted to sit next to him on the couch... Lyonya pushed her away with his foot... Lilka got up, stood there, looked at him in surprise, and left!"

"Yeah..." I stopped myself from making a harsh comment.

"Like I said, a real lord!" Sergey nodded, leaned back in his chair with a satisfied look and spread his hands.

The next day I was the first to arrive at the office, at five past nine.

"What's up?" said Sergey, who appeared next, opened the door with the usual theatrical movement and, holding out his hand, froze in the middle of the room.

"Not much..." I shook his hand and greeted Vera. "I just got here myself."

"Aha..." Sergey said, putting his briefcase on the shelf, opening it and diving in with his hand up to his elbow. "Petya hasn't arrived yet?"

The familiar sound of an engine came from outside the window.

"He's here," Vera said, sliding into her seat.

Sergey took a bottle of blue perfume from his briefcase, brought it to his neck and pressed the sprayer several times. The air of the room was filled with a rather pleasant smell of freshness, but too strong.

"Did you buy it?" I wondered, as I had never smelled perfume on Sergey before.

"Why buy it?" he defended resentfully. "I've had it for a long time. It's just that I brought it here for the first time. I always use it."

"Ah-ha..." I said, still surprised but not understanding what exactly.

Sergey put the vial in, pushed the briefcase back where it belonged, sat down in the chair by the door, crossed his arms over his chest and pursed his lips.

"Still, it turns out that you should choose a woman not only for feelings, but also..." I hesitated for a moment, trying to find the right word, "but also for practical reasons?"

"Roman, of course, how else?" Sergey reacted. "You are with her to raise children, to build a family! You don't meet her for one night, just to fuck and that's it..."

We were on our way to "Fort" to get money.

"Seryoga!" I didn't let up, painstakingly penetrating the essence of my partner's approach to communicating with women. "Okay, I understand that! But in addition to seeing Vera and realizing that she was your future wife... other than that... what things led you to determine that?"

"All sorts of things. I remember sleeping with her at my place. She and I had been together for a long time, and everyone knew I had Vera, and my parents and her mother... and we practically lived together... and we slept in my room most nights. We have a four-room apartment where Romka and my parents live now... So we sleep together one night... and the room is so small. There was a bed and a wardrobe in the room and that's it! Nothing else! And there was no more space! If you opened the door to the room, it would only open

halfway – it would rest against the back of the bed... And here we slept with her, it was one of our first sleepovers, it was a day off, there was no hurry. And Verok jumped up at eight in the morning, grabbed my underwear and dragged it to wash it! And I thought at the time, "That's what a good wife would do!"

Sergey finished, I remained silent. My brain, having received the next portion of the necessary food, stirred and began to analyze it thoroughly.

"Hmm, that's nice..." I was surprised. "You're right, Seryoga..."

"Roman, of course I am! You just have to watch the broad! How she behaves at home, as a guest, how she treats you... It's all important."

"It is indeed..." I agreed aloud, more to myself, with my own thoughts swirling in my head with double the excitement, and then I objected. "Fuck, but it's hard! She has to be attractive and practical at the same time! Usually she is either beautiful, but such a bitch! Like that cunt Lilya! Or some gray blur... she is practical for sure, but almost always ugly!"

"Gah-gah-gah!" Sergey laughed his animal, cynical laugh. "You still can't forget that Lilya!"

"No, Seryoga, I don't give a damn about her, she hasn't bothered me for a long time!" I shook my head and tried to express my feelings as close to the truth as possible. "It's just that this example is so vivid! A very good lesson for me... Remember I told you that she said that thing – "I'm a beautiful girl, that's how you should treat me!"

"Yes! I remember!" Sergey nodded, savoring my words with his whole face.

"Fuck! I wanted to fucking hit her then!" I said, immediately feeling relieved, as if in confession. "Right there! In the street! Just hit her in the fucking face! And walk away! And never see her again."

"Gah-gah-gah!" Sergey laughed.

"I could barely contain myself, I didn't hit her. If she had said something else like that, I probably couldn't help it... But she didn't. She just smirked, and that was it."

Feeling the blood rushing through my body and wanting to calm down, I added:

"Fucking shame you can't hit women... Some of them just ask for it..."

"And you've never hit a woman?" Sergey looked at me.

"No, not even once... No way, Seryoga..." I shook my head and frowned. "No, hitting women – that's the worst. I understand, I want to sometimes and I even should, but... I prefer to just walk away, that's all... I don't see the point. When a woman behaves so disgustingly, it's easier and better to leave! What's the point of hitting her? If you hit her, it means you don't respect her, and if you don't respect her, there can't be any love there... It's not a relationship anymore..."

We turned onto the ring road and drove faster. The hot air poured in through the open windows, swirled in the confined space, and settled somewhere in the back seats.

"Roman, open the glove compartment, my glasses are there, give them to me!" Sergey said, squinting at the brightness of the sun. I looked at the dashboard, where Sergey's glasses usually were, but there were none, so I opened the glove compartment.

"There are only these here..." I said and took out other glasses, very simple in design. "There are no others..."

"Yes, these," Sergey took the glasses from my hands and put them on.

"And where are your glasses?" I was surprised.

"My glasses have a broken temple, it happened on the last outing... Melyokha sat on them with his ass, they were on your seat... and he broke the temple! I had to buy new ones!"

"That sucks!" I said, looking at the new glasses. Dark green-black glasses with chrome rims matched Sergey's face as well as anyone else's who had any idea about the combination of facial lines and glasses.

I was disappointed to see that the magic the glasses had created on Sergey's face was completely gone. Now he was just a man in simple sunglasses – an average picture.

"Those glasses looked good on you, Seryoga!" I continued. "They fit you perfectly! It was as if they were made for your face! And these aren't... they're ordinary."

"Oh, yeah?" my partner gave me a quick look and bit his lip.

"Yeah. They were fucking great. They fucking fit like shit! You looked fucking good in them! You're dark, and they had brown glasses and gold frames – a perfect match for your dark skin! And these... plain," I finished with sadness in my voice.

"Fuck, Roman, Melyokha broke them, what can I do?" Sergey said nervously. "I liked them myself! But I had to buy new ones... I cannot be in the bright sun without glasses, my eyes are starting to hurt..."

"Where are they now?"

"At home..." Sergey said sadly.

When we arrived at "Fort", we parked in front of the main entrance.

"Are you staying here or coming with me?" Sergey clarified.

"No, I'm going to the showroom to look at the displays," I said.

We got out of the car, Sergey took his briefcase out of the trunk, and we walked up the stairs and into the coolness of the showroom. Sergey went to the cashier, I dove into the rows of display cases and began to study the goods and prices by ingrained habit. Sergey returned in about five minutes.

"You got it?" I said.

"Yeah, I got it," he said, looking at the windows. "What's here?"

"Everything seems to be the same..."

"Aha... Let's go, shall we?"

"Yeah, let's go."

We left the building, got into the car, Sergey handed me the sheets with the rest of the goods.

"Fucking great!" I said when I saw the number 320000 on the last one.

We put two hundred into the company's account, and the rest went to pay for the apartment under construction

For the next week I worked alone – Sergey and Vera were on vacation. Our business had settled down so well over the past two years that it worked almost automatically – every morning I handed over the day's waybills to Senya, and then collected the customers' orders for the next day. I spent no more than two hours doing this, and the rest of the time I sat in the office alone with my own thoughts.

Saturday, July 14th was my birthday. At noon, the mood was irrevocably ruined by another scolding between my father and mother. "Moron!!! Bastard!!! Miser!!!" she shouted at him at the top of her lungs. "Fool of a woman. Crazy bitch," my father muttered, pacing around the apartment and finally retiring to the balcony with a cigarette, as usual. Fed up with it all, I went to the center, where I wandered aimlessly until dark. The summer day, which was at its zenith, was fading for an unbearably long time. Knowing that people wouldn't come to "Clear Skies" until after ten o'clock, I couldn't stand it any longer and went down to the club half an hour earlier.

The place was empty, the waitresses hanging around lazily to the soft background music. I leaned against the small bar as usual.

"Why so grumpy?" the bartender said.

"No reason..." I shrugged, realizing that I had been walking around all day with a sullen expression on my face, replaying my parents' fight in my head. "Do you have any whiskey?"

The bartender nodded, and in a few swift moves he made whiskey and coke.

"Cheers!" I lifted the glass and took a big swig. My stomach clenched, but I didn't care. As soon as the alcohol hit my bloodstream, I felt an inner relaxation. The DJ emerged from the darkness of the empty and silent dance floor.

"Oh, look who decided to show up!" He held out his hand, and I shook it.

"What's up?" the DJ asked the routine question.

"Not much... It's my birthday today. How about that?"

"Wow!" he acted surprised. "And how old are you...?"

"Thirty," I nodded philosophically.

"Oh! Congratulations from me! I'll play something for you, I already have an idea!"

"I look forward to it," I nodded, the DJ made a fuss and disappeared.

I looked into the empty glass.

"One more?" the bartender grinned.

I nodded and got a second glass of booze, took a sip. The whiskey didn't seem so strong anymore. A slight euphoria washed over my body after the alcohol. The DJ walked by in the opposite direction. Moments later, the dance floor came alive and music blared out of the darkness. I moved slightly to the beat, feeling a rush of good vibes. As if drawn by the sound, customers streamed in. Half an hour later, the club was more than half full. My ears picked out the beginning of a new track from the music stream:

The sun has lit up the horizon bright,
Morning broke my sweet sleep with its light,
I woke up and felt a sudden fright,
Years have taken their toll, it's not alright.

As never before I saw the light,
As never before I felt warmth so right,
Years have caught up, though I'm not old quite,
Today I turn thirty, what a sight!

I tensed, the glass frozen in my hand. The words penetrated me and I moved my lips to sing along. The song caused a wave of euphoria – feeling myself in the center of the words, I began to let each one pass through me.

On this day I was born into this world,
On this day I was wrapped in a blanket curled,
On this day your warmth around me swirled,
Today I turn thirty, my flag unfurled!

On this day I'll say to life "Hello!"
On this day I'll take a ticket for grown-up show,
On this day even vodka won't be a foe,
Today I turn thirty, watch me go!

Suddenly, anger rose in me, and I took a big gulp to try to extinguish it. The feeling boiled over instantly, and I only had time to realize that it was a dark anger, caused by people from the past, that had suddenly built up and stirred. I took another sip and scanned the faces of the visitors – the vast majority of them were younger than me. Much younger. "Twenty to twenty-five years old," I estimated the age of the club's audience. I looked around for people my age in the crowd. There were none, only very young faces flashed in front of me.

Suddenly, at that very second, I realized that my time and the time of everyone I had known in "Clear Skies" was over. It was as if someone invisible had turned the page of life, pushed us thirty-somethings out of the colorful window called "youth," and let in the loud, energetic, and frivolous twenty-somethings. Their eyes burned with the lust for life, sparkling and beating with energy and health. Our thirty-year-old eyes had already partially switched to energy-saving mode and looked at the world around us through the squint of wrinkles.

"I need to get out of here! "I must get as far away as possible! I have to live, start living, not languish here and waste time! It's slipping away! I'm wasting my time here! Life is passing. To live it like this, with a glass in my hand in some club... Ugh... No!" alcohol-fueled thoughts raced through my head.

I drank the contents of the glass in two gulps and sprinted out into the street, crossed it, and stopped when I calmed down a bit. I turned around. For the umpteenth time I stood in the same spot and stared at the sign of the club. And then I felt a tremendous longing in my soul. A lump in my chest stopped my breathing and tears came. I almost cried.

"I'm thirty years old! Thirty! Just yesterday I was twenty-nine, twenty... twenty! And now it's thirty! I will never be twenty-two, twenty-three, not even twenty-nine! I'll only be thirty... three, five... nine! Nightmare!" I almost panicked, trying to calm my twitching mind. Suddenly, I realized this simple thought so clearly. It was as if I had stepped forward on the day of my birthday, and a door immediately slammed behind me. "Decade of twenty pears" – was written on it. I pulled the handle, but the door wouldn't budge. I pulled harder and harder, but the door wouldn't budge. The way back was cut off forever...

"This is it! This is the end! I'm never coming back!" Something in my chest throbbed, a lump rose to my throat again, and I almost held it back with an effort of will. My eyes moistened. The past decade flashed through my mind – leaving the army, my first job, graduating from the institute, starting my own business. It was as if I was looking at myself from the outside. Twenty years old – quite "green", tall, thin and awkward. Twenty-six – energetic and mature. Twenty-eight – a little tired, asking myself more and more questions. And... the movie stops at thirty. And all the moments of the past decade became unbearably dear to me. The bad and the good – I didn't want to part with anything. All these events were stored in my memory like photos in a family album. The good and the bad, the torn, the worn, the crumpled... all kinds of things. They were my life album. I loved them all, every picture of those days of my life. Cars rolled down the avenue, people walked by, and I was still standing, looking across the street at the neon sign. I looked and realized that a part of my youth was now forever connected to that place. And that connection was quickly receding into the past. The page of life called "Clear Skies" – bright and real – had turned forever. I turned and walked away. The next decade stared back at me in the darkness of the streets. I walked and stared with my mind forward into my future, but I saw nothing of what I was doing and living. I saw a future that was completely different from reality. And I felt that there was a gap between the present and the future that I would have to overcome in the next ten years. Time, which had been passing by carefree and unconcernedly during the previous ten years, suddenly became tight – it was running.

I shook my head to get rid of my heavy thoughts, took my hands out of my pockets and walked faster, as if determined not to miss the years to come.

CHAPTER 48

On Sunday I went on vacation to my relatives in the country and spent the whole week at the river, sunbathing and idling. It took me a while to free my mind from thoughts of work. I closed my eyes, lay down on the sandy beach and continued to collect orders and order goods. It was not until the third day that I could break away from work. My head

immediately felt lighter, the heaviness of my thoughts disappeared, and I stopped counting the days.

"So, how are you doing here, tell me!" I said impatiently and happily, after showing up in our small, uncomfortable office on Monday, July 23rd.

"Oh, Roman got a tan! Rested!" Vera smiled and immediately slapped my hand.

"Hi, Seryoga!" I held out my hand cheerfully.

"Hi," he murmured, coming out of his thoughts, no longer wrapping his arms around his head, looking at me absent-mindedly, and responding sluggishly to my handshake.

"Why are you so grumpy?" I said cheerfully, sitting down in the chair by the door.

"Why... It's a screw job! Those intercity salt guys are not going to work with us anymore. The network where they pushed our salt is selling their stores... so they're done with the salt."

"Shit, that sucks!" I said, and thoughts of work immediately took over my brain.

"Temp's is about to close too. The owner said they'll work until the end of the summer and that's it," Sergey added, leaning back in his chair and staring at me with a distracted look.

"Well," I spread my hands. "Actually, he had said before that he would close down. It's a pity, of course, he used to take goods from us quite well at the beginning... But not now... But the news about the salt is really bad! We made good money with it, didn't we?"

I looked at Vera, who was clicking her mouse.

"Seventy percent," she said.

I turned my eyes to Sergey, who remained frozen, staring at me in confusion. It was as if an unsolvable question had arisen in his head, causing confusion and stupor.

"Come on, Seryoga, we'll find more clients," I said optimistically, trying to cheer him up. He blinked, looked away, then looked at me again.

"Aha, my ass..." Sergey muttered and sighed.

In the last week of July we signed a new lease with the new owner of the factory, a construction company. The conditions remained the same – we had to pay fifteen thousand a month to rent 242 m² of warehouse space. At the end of the week, a black "BMW X5" rolled into the factory in the morning. The car stopped in the front yard and the former owners of the factory got out. An hour later the car left and almost immediately the "Mazda" came to the front yard. Sergey took his briefcase from the trunk, entered the office and put it on the chair by the door. Vera came in next, holding a pile of papers in her hands.

"Did you see those guys?" I smiled after the greeting. "The former owners..."

"No, why, did they come here or what?" Sergey smiled.

"No... They came on 'X5'!" I said and then paused. "They bought it!"

"Well... They sold the factory and bought a 'BMW'! Everything as it should be!"

Sergey waved his hands, cackled, put his hands in his pockets, spread his legs like a divider, stood in the middle of the office, sniffed his nose, stuck out his lower lip. "That's good! They didn't even surprise me..."

"Who was surprised?" said Vera.

All three of us laughed.

"What's in the bank?" I looked at Vera and squinted at the papers in her hands.

"We took the statements and put the money in the account!" she said and sat down in the chair. "Oh, and here! You have to fill out a paper, they have some changes in the bank, you just have to fill it out, confirm your details and account information and that's it..."

Vera held out a two-sheet form, glanced from Sergey to me and back again.

"Let Romka fill it out!" Sergey said, sniffing his nose. "He has a beautiful handwriting, not like me, I write like chicken scratch..."

"Come on, Seryoga!" I was surprised. "Your handwriting is good!"

"No, Roman," he said. "You have beautiful handwriting.

I shook my head, surprised at the argument, took the form and began to fill it out.

"We have to go to 'Fort' today to get the money..." I remembered and looked at Sergey. "We also have to take the money to the apartment... because we promised to pay up to half of it... and we haven't even been there yet..."

"Roman, we also have to pay our debt for the dichlorvos!" Sergey got serious.

"We'll cover that too... You put the money in the bank, so we'll make the payment... We planned it that way, didn't we?" I said inwardly tense.

"It's not much! Only one hundred and twenty thousand! And we have until the end of the month... let's pay at least two hundred thousand!" Sergey stared at me.

"Today we'll get some money from 'Fort', we'll add it... we'll pay everyone we need to pay, and the rest we'll take to the apartment..." I said, catching my partner's mood.

"Roman, we have big debts!" he was indignant. "We have to pay them off!"

"Seryoga, what has that got to do with it??? We pay our debts properly, the goods sell well, no one keeps money, everyone pays... I don't understand why we shouldn't bring the money for the apartment, especially since we promised to pay up to 500,000 as soon as possible... within a month or two!" I was surprised and outraged.

Sergey sat down in his chair, leaned forward, rested his elbows on the armrests, stared at me with an attentive gaze, and began to chew his lips through clenched teeth.

"Seryoga, this woman was only willing to help us because I've never let her down before," I continued. "Since I have made such an agreement with her, and you and I have decided to sign the contract under this condition, it is necessary, Seryoga, to keep our promise... I don't want to disappoint her, because the next time we ask her for something, she will refuse..."

"Okay, I get it!" Sergey grimaced unhappily and jerked his foot. "We'll see what we get at 'Fort' and then we'll decide!"

"But we have to bring her some money by the end of the month!" I specified.

"We'll see," Sergey mumbled, barely hiding his irritation, and looked down at the floor.

The tension that had arisen between us hung in the room and imperceptibly dissolved into work. At half past eleven, Sergey and I left the office, got into the "Mazda", and drove to the "Fort" to get the money. Sales in this company went so well that the weekly receipts from May confidently exceeded two hundred. In June they reached two hundred and fifty thousand, and in July they approached three hundred. The most important three weeks for dichlorvos were coming up – the last week of July and the first two weeks of August – the peak of the season.

"So you and Vera never had a fight when you were together?" I asked, the first of a thousand questions running through my head. "How long did you two date before you got married?"

"We got married quite early, Roman!" Sergey said as if he had jogged a memory. "I was what? twenty-three... Verok was twenty... We did not hesitate! Sometimes it happens – you meet for a long time and then you part! I had such acquaintances, even a buddy of mine – he and his girl dated for five years, didn't get married... And then they had a fight and broke up. They looked like a good couple though – loved each other, but... Who knows, Roman. Marriage is such a thing. Verok and I were separated too, I let her go out for a year to see how she'd behave. Then I asked my friends if she'd been out with anyone... They said no, she stayed at home, didn't go anywhere with anyone..."

"And then you two started dating again?" I asked.

"Yes, we started dating again and then got married after a year or two... I don't remember exactly... but we got married quickly. I had known Verok for a long time! We started dating when she was eighteen, but I'd known her since she was sixteen."

We drove in silence for a while, I was thinking my own thoughts and analyzing what Sergey had said, trying to understand where I had gone wrong in my relationship. After all, the result spoke for itself – there was Sergey sitting next to me, who had a relationship and a family and children, and there was me – the polar opposite of him.

"So you didn't fight with Vera?" I continued my self-exploration aloud. "When you were together. She seemed to have a good temper... not quarrelsome."

"Romych, all sorts of things happened!" Sergey sighed loudly. "Don't be fooled, Vera is no gift either! I suffered enough with her... What do you think, I boned her right away?"

Sergey again made a gesture with his right hand, as if he was piercing something with his index finger from bottom to top, and added:

"We dated for six months before I could put a finger in her! And only halfway..."

I was embarrassed, my ears flaring with shame. I realized that there is such a thing as "locker room talk." And it is often cynical and direct. But I couldn't say "boned" about my wife if I were Sergey, after all, I see Vera every day. "Too much," I decided and shook my head, pushing away such unpleasant thoughts.

"But... why did you wait so long?" I pushed out my embarrassment with a new question.

"I wasn't in a hurry! I knew that everything was fine between us and that we would fuck sooner or later! Roman, the main thing is to relax a broad, you'll always manage to bone her!" Sergey waved it off carelessly.

My brain froze, trying to make sense of that last sentence. Some words like that, spoken in between, actually have great significance in life. I grasped the importance, but I didn't fully grasp the meaning. I understood it, but I didn't realize it. Much later I figured out the meaning of the phrase, but at that moment I turned it around in my head for a few minutes and forgot about it – we hit a dirt road and the car started shaking, forcing me to forget our conversations.

As soon as Sergey came out of the "Fort" cashier, I realized that he had received quite a lot. My partner's face was burning with adrenaline, his eyes were shining with money fever.

"Well, how much?" I lowered my voice as we headed for the exit of the sales room.

"Let's go," Sergey hissed excitedly, the swollen briefcase in his hand.

We got into the car.

"How much did you get?" I repeated impatiently.

"Three hundred and sixty!" Sergey whispered conspiratorially.

"Fucking hell!" I said. "Three hundred and sixty!?? Let me see the leftovers!"

I took the sheets from my partner's hand and ran my eyes over them feverishly – sales were huge, everything was sold. And the dichlorvos and especially the kerosene sales were off the charts.

"We dropped off three hundred boxes of kerosene here last week, and they're all gone. And next week should be the same..." I said. "It's selling great! Here's the money for the apartment! We can take it right now and close the deal!"

"Roman, we need the money to pay for the goods!" Sergey was stubborn.

The bickering began. Sergey wanted to pay as little as possible for the apartment under construction, while I offered to pay the maximum. We had the money, and I didn't understand why Sergey was so stingy.

"Come on, that chick can wait! Nothing will happen if we pay her next week! You agreed with her that we would buy half of the apartment by the end of the summer, right?" Sergey said irritably.

"Fuck, Seryoga, I promised her we would get the money as soon as possible!" I started to get annoyed, feeling the resistance again. "And if I promised, I have to keep it! She only signed the contract with us because we have a good relationship and she knows I'm no shit! So why ruin it?! What if we have to ask her again? That's not even the point, she's a nice woman, so why shit on her?!"

"Who shits on her? Roman, you always say things like that."

"Seryoga, if a person trusts us, it means that trust should be justified, not taken advantage of! If we screw up the situation, we won't go near her again..." I tried to keep my anger down, but I couldn't. My instincts suggested a bad explanation for Sergey's typical behavior – he didn't consider my obligations as ours and tried to avoid his half of the responsibility. It looked like a set-up. If I didn't fulfill the promises I had made for both of us, only my reputation would suffer. And Sergey understood that very well. A cocktail of feelings boiled up inside me: regret that I had dragged Sergey with me again; disappointment at his behavior; anger at someone, more at myself, at my softness. Suddenly I felt that the burden we were carrying was getting heavier and heavier. Again, I felt physically that I was the one pulling it with more effort. I was taking on more and more obligations, which entangled me, while Sergey treated his share of obligations superficially, often trying to escape from them. And I had to constantly remind him of them, almost force him to fulfill them, admonish him about the need for mutual decency. I was like a babysitter, spending a lot of energy just to keep a troubled teenager on the right path, who was eager to dive into the darkness of bad deeds. And this man is five years older than me. The disappointment took away my strength and enveloped me more and more. The conflict of two states, two realities of life, became apparent in my soul. One – the business we had together – it was working at full speed, giving me a lot of money every month. The other was my feeling and understanding of Sergey. The man with whom I was united changed before my eyes, revealing to me new facets of his essence. And these facets disappointed me more and more and forced me to think seriously about the future.

We argued for a few more minutes, and I partially succeeded – we decided to pay the forty thousand for the apartment. We immediately went to the construction company and got stuck in a huge traffic jam on the ring road for an hour. We arrived at the construction company's office completely exhausted and angry.

July was over. After receiving my copy of the reports, I began to calculate the profits.

"Seryoga, it's a record!" I said sitting at the table, and when I had finished writing my calculations on the top sheet, I looked at Vera. "Five hundred and eighty thousand rubles profit! Minus a hundred – expenses, the total – four hundred and eighty net profit! Half a million, Seryoga!"

He took my calculations to himself and began to copy them down diligently.

"Vera, how much kerosene did we sell in July?" I said.

"Two thousand two hundred!" she said at once, as if expecting my question, looked me in the eye with excitement, and added, "Two thousand seven hundred left! Will we make it?"

"I don't know," I smiled. "It would be cool..."

"We won't have time to sell everything!" Sergey said, not taking his eyes off his writing. "We're definitely screwed with the dichlorvos!"

"It doesn't matter, even if we sell half of what's left, it'll be cool..." I waved him off, inwardly shuddering at yet another defeatist statement from Sergey. I suddenly realized that he and I looked at the world differently – he thought about having as few bad things happen in his life as possible, while I thought only about the best.

"I don't know what to take from them in exchange!" Sergey said, throwing his pen down on the table and collapsing irritably in his chair. "We have enough of everything, we don't need anything from them..."

It was a simple situation – we worked in barter with a company from Kursk, in the summer due to dichlorvos supplies has increased dramatically, and the goods that came in exchange, sold at the usual rate and accumulating it in the warehouse was not desirable.

"Seryozha, you also have to sign the waybills," Vera reminded him. The printer had been whistling almost nonstop for the last hour, producing a decent pile of sheets.

"To sign all that!?" Sergey stared at the papers. "Again!?"

"Yes, again," Vera said calmly, barely smiling.

"What a job I have!" Sergey was playfully indignant. "If I keep this up, I'll soon be signing and stamping in my sleep!"

"No big deal," Vera said.

Sergey sighed, lazily pulled the pile of waybills to himself and began to stamp and sign each one. He was done in about ten minutes.

"That's it, Verok, here!" Sergey handed the papers to his wife.

"One more from the bank," she slipped him a new one. "Just a signature and a number."

Sergey lifted the paper over the table and said reluctantly:

"Where am I supposed to sign???"

"Seryoga is like a general," I looked at Vera. "We have to tell him where to sign, he can't find it himself..."

She smiled and reached for the paper.

"Down there..."

"Ah! That's it! Found it!" Sergey perked up, scribbled a signature, handed the paper to his wife. "Here! That's it!?"

"That's it, Seryozha," Vera said calmly, took the paper, pedantically put it in the folder, and, having a habit of not missing anything in her head, looked at me and said, "So, what have you decided about Kursk?"

This ability of hers to steer things in the right direction, implicitly pushing Sergey and me to fulfill them, struck me every time. I realized that it had developed over many years of married life.

"Let them send us their whole price list, we'll pick something out," I said, and an hour later I was holding a thick stack of papers in my hand and scrutinizing them.

"We can take Gardie air fresheners," I circled part of the sheet with a pencil. "The price is all right, the range too... Spread them around the depots, let them sell..."

"Let me see!" Sergey held out his hand and added a minute later, "Yes, we can take them! We'll take some, see how they go..."

And so we did, we brought in the new products in a few days and put them on sale in three wholesalers. A week later, the result was surprising – the new goods sold well everywhere, but especially in "Fort". We breathed a sigh of relief, the problem was solved.

On August 2, we paid another seventy thousand for the apartment.

"I'm coming to the warehouse..." Sergey began, entering the office and barely holding back his laughter. "I'm taking the waybills to Petya for the first run... I come out from around the corner, and Petya and Senya are smoking... Petya explains something to Senya and says... He shows two fingers like this..."

Sergey made a "V" with his fingers, pointing them at me, and continued:

"And he goes – you can always play in... two games! Just imagine! Hee-hee!"

Sergey burst out laughing. I laughed too. Vera stared at us incomprehensively.

"You got it!" Sergey laughed, wiping the corners of his eyes.

"I got it," I waved my hands and burst into laughter again.

"Roman..." Sergey looked at his wife and started to explain. "We were in the warehouse once... And Roman said to Senya – you can only play a game with two people! And Petya didn't remember the exact expression... and today he tells Senya something and adds – you can play any game... any... two games!"

Vera immediately burst out laughing, which made us laugh again.

"Man, Petya..." I laughed and started to wipe my eyes as well.

"Two games!" Sergey laughed again.

We laughed for about ten minutes until there was a knock on the door, the handle turned and a curly head looked in.

"Oh, Alexey Semyonovich! Come in!" I said happily, waving my hands.

"Hello, Roma!" he held out his strong, wiry hand, and I shook it.

"Hello, Seryozha!" the ritual was repeated.

"Did you bring something, Alexey Semyonovich?" Sergey said, putting his hands behind his head.

"Yes, I did! Is Senka in the warehouse?" he corrected his cap, pushing it further back on his head.

"He is," I nodded. "Loading Petya."

"Ah, well, shall I go then?" The driver hesitated at the door.

"Yes, of course, Alexey Semyonovich," Sergey murmured, nodding.

The driver went out.

"Fuck, I have to call Ilyukha at 'Arbalest'!" I got excited. "Get an order from him."

I pressed one of the speed dial buttons.

"Yes, hello," came the familiar voice of the manager.

"Ilyukha, hi!" I picked up the phone. "Do you have an order for tomorrow?"

There was silence in the receiver.

"Roma, we will no longer take goods from you, we have started working with 'Luxchem' ourselves, and they are now shipping directly to us..." came after a pause.

"Ah... I see..." I forced myself to say, stunned, desperately trying to find the right words. "So you won't be working with us anymore or only regarding 'Luxchem'?"

"Only 'Luxchem'..." the manager said with a note of apology.

"So, if we have an interesting product, we can offer it to you?" I partially recovered from the news.

"Yes, of course, you can offer it," the embarrassment left Ilya's voice as well.

"Well, then, when we have something, I'll call you?" I said neutrally.

"Yes, call me... of course..." the manager said dryly.

We said goodbye.

"Fuck!!!" I blurted out as soon as I hung up the phone, leaning back in my chair and looking at Sergey and Vera, who were frozen in alarm. "Arbalest will no longer take Luxchem products from us, they will take them directly!"

Sergey and Vera remained stunned and silent.

"Here we go again!" I added angrily. "Fucking A!"

Two pairs of worried eyes still stared at me in silence.

"This is fucked up! There's three or four hundred sales there! And their goods for 'Mercury'... fuck! And we have nothing to offer them... Listen, Seryoga, we'll have to talk to your manager who took the dichlorvos from us, so we can give him the rest of 'Aerosib'... okay?" I looked at my partner and tried to calm my inner anxiety.

There were many managers in "Arbalest", and they all managed their own groups of goods. If you stopped working with one, you had a chance to strengthen or start working on other goods with another.

"We can talk to him, can't we, Seryozha?" Vera looked at her husband timidly.

"Yes, we're gonna have to, Vera!" he reacted irritably. "What else can we do? This Kazlabek has set us up in such a mess!"

I already understood the cause and effect of Sergey's behavior. By deliberately misspelling the name of the owner of "Luxchem", he showed maximum displeasure and contempt.

"Call this acquaintance of yours from 'Arbalest'!" I said impatiently. "Just tell him we can offer the full range of 'Aerosib'... what will he say?"

Sergey stared at me thoughtfully for a few seconds, the reluctance to call running through his face with barely perceptible spasms.

"All right!" He made up his mind, and with a jerk of his legs he rolled his chair up to the table, picked up the receiver of the fax machine, and dialed the number. Vera and I froze, our ears perked up.

The conversation was short, but the result was even more puzzling. It turned out that a supplier of "Aerosib" products had appeared in a neighboring region, and "Arbalest" had started buying goods from this supplier. We requested and soon received a payment order for this supplier. We also found out their prices – the supplier was selling "Aerosib" goods at seven percent.

"Payment order number one..." Sergey muttered, looking at the sheet. "I've never heard of this company..."

Everything turned out to be simple: one of the managers of "Arbalest" decided to make money with the goods of "Aerosib". Since our company had an exclusive contract with "Aerosib", the clever people bypassed it by simply moving the goods to a shell company in another city.

"Well, that's a good idea!" I said. "Tight as a fish asshole... Now the cheap dichlorvos will come out in all directions. That's half the problem. The deep shit is that these fools will destroy our prices, we will have to lower our own... This season is unlikely, but next season we won't have such a fat mark-up... What date is the payment?"

"The first of July," Sergey mumbled, chewing his lip in silence the whole time.

"When was the last time they ordered dichlorvos from us?" I looked at Vera, who immediately tapped her fingers on the keyboard and clicked her mouse.

"They only took one batch... in May... a hundred boxes and that was it," she said.

"That's the answer! They ordered a test batch, found out the prices, calculated the difference, and were fucking shocked at our markup – forty-five percent in barter and thirty-five percent in cash! I would be shocked too... They collected the money, paid for the goods and brought them themselves... and like all idiot managers, they let the goods go through seven percent."

Sergey was silent and looked at me confused.

"That's why there were no more orders from them... Good that they just paid on July 1st, which means that they received the dichlorvos recently, somewhere in the middle of July... And most likely they will distribute it to their branches and not sell it to others..." I thought aloud and calmed down a bit. "So they won't be an obstacle for us this year, but we'll lose 'Arbalest' eventually, I think... That's fucked up... such a fat piece..."

I took a few seconds to detach myself from reality and fall into my senses. Our business appeared to me as a rather spacious and bright room. Where we lived comfortably. And after a series of events – the arrival of the commercial director of "Luxchem" in our city, the arrival of their goods in "Arbalest", the refusal of the latter to work with us on the goods

of "Luxchem" and "Aerosib" – the walls of our room trembled and slightly compressed. This compression was so subtle and insignificant that I felt it at the level of my sixth sense. I realized that the process of compression of the common living space with Sergey had begun and was irreversible. I don't know if Sergey felt something similar or not. I looked into his colorless eyes and saw only confusion and fear. Did Sergey realize that what had happened was not an isolated fact, but the beginning of a chain of inexorable events, and how did I know? I didn't know the answer to either part of the question. I felt it intuitively. I wanted to awaken my partner, to spur him into action, but I restrained myself. Two years of business together led me to an unhappy conclusion – Sergey is not a locomotive, he is a trailing car. And he won't pull it. I'll have to pull for both of us. This thought, which I had realized much earlier, reappeared and extinguished the desire to begin the important and vital transformation of our company. Two people were fighting in me – a man of action and a man of experience. The first wanted to carry the burden, even if it was for two people, as long as the company did not disappear. The second one grinned and convinced the first one that it was unreasonable to work for two, because then you'd have to work like this forever or until you got bored... and sooner or later it's bound to get boring. So why go down this dead-end road? And in the struggle, neither of them won. The struggle in the balance began to exhaust and irritate me. The worst choice is the illusion of choice, when in fact there is no choice. I mentally went back in time – for about six years we had built the business from scratch with my father. Over the next two years, with Sergey's involvement, the business quickly grew to a mid-sized company. We were one step away from becoming a major wholesaler. And that step was blocked by Sergey's laziness and self-indulgence. We didn't take that step, and the consequences didn't last long. The company froze at a point of illusory equilibrium and, lo and behold, the first signs of the forces of reverse growth appeared. We stood at a point of equilibrium, and we could have stood there for a year or two, who knows how long... but that's the rest of the dead. The peace of the living is constant movement. "I don't want to pull for two!" I made the hard decision, and the thought moved on, agonizingly searching for a way out. "What is left to do? There is only one thing left to do – to go on by the reel, by inertia, until the business meets such an obstacle that it can no longer overcome it. That would be its death. Business is like a child. You raise it long and hard. And to stop raising it, to stop taking care of it, means only one thing – its death in the future. To condemn your "child" to death, ugh... a terrible choice. The mechanism of fighting for the future of our business was reactivated in me.

"Seryoga, let's go to the warehouse!" I jumped to my feet and blurted out, unable to sit idly by. "Let's take a walk, get some fresh air, and bring the waybills to the warehouse at the same time!"

My partner stood up immediately, as if waiting for a command to act."

"Fuck, I wish 'Arbalest' didn't use this 'Luxchem' on the other companies!" I said, angrily pushing the door of the building and finding myself outside. "They're going to start coming in everywhere and destroy all our prices!"

I followed the path along the wall, Sergey walking silently behind me.

"Listen, Seryoga," I continued, seething inside and unable to hold back my emotions, "It turns out we lost 'Arbalest'... And it's unlikely that anything will work with them on this product... We have to figure out how to make up for what we've lost... Find additional sales or add new distribution like I told you before!"

"Roman, where are we going to find new sales?" he asked sharply. "Everyone is closing down now! 'Temp' is closing, 'Fort' is closing its shop, leaving only one depot..."

Sergey named a number of other small and medium-sized businesses that had already closed or were on the brink. He was right, the trend of the last two years was inexorable – the retail chains, growing like mushrooms after rain, were devouring the market, leaving smaller

companies with less and less room to live. The laws of business were relentless – the weakest were the first to die.

"Well, that's true..." I nodded. Trying to expand sales in a shrinking space would be a temporary success, but no more. Such a direction of effort was unpromising. Trying to enter the emerging market of chain stores? It was possible, but only as a temporary measure. Retail networks and manufacturers themselves would come together directly in a short time, eliminating all intermediaries. I had no desire to do the work of others. The only option left was to draw from the dwindling reservoir of the old market as quickly as possible, so that by the end I would have a decent reserve of cash for further action.

"Seryoga, the only thing left to do is to find some more goods!" I said, trying to corner my partner with obvious facts and force him to act.

"Roman, what goods can we find?! We've already tried everything! We even brought those canisters that are still in the warehouse, just wasted money!" he brushed it off.

I clenched my teeth as if I'd been punched in the guts, and I seethed with anger. It was a strange tendency – Sergey never missed an opportunity to tease me about the failed operation with the canisters, more than a dozen of which remained in the warehouse as dead weight. Nobody wanted to sell them. My father retreated. Sergey, as I suspected, thought it was my job. I didn't mind his attitude, but there was an interesting peculiarity. Sergey considered my successful business moves as our joint success, and my unsuccessful ones as my mistakes. One thing I was glad about was that the operation was the only such mistake. It would not have happened if I had not wanted to somehow compensate my father for leaving the company. I took a conscious risk and did not absolve myself of responsibility. But Sergey's periodic poking of my nose into the stuck goods began to irritate me. I had no desire to take any new steps. I swallowed Sergey's next attack and said deliberately calmly:

"Seryoga, we can get some 'Gardie'... These air fresheners sell well. "

"Roman, what the hell do you need those 'Gardie' for? If we bring them in, what's the point? They'll just cover the 'Aerosib' fresheners, that's all. What's the point!?"

I wanted to go on, but we approached the warehouse. Petya's "GAZelle" was parked with its back to the warehouse. We squeezed between the side of the car and the wall. Petya, Senya and his son were sitting on boxes in the warehouse and talking. I looked into the back of the truck – empty.

"Roma, Seryozha, we're about to start loading!" Senya immediately jumped up and galloped away.

"Two thousand two hundred sold, two thousand seven hundred left... a little less... will we make it or not? Probably not. But we still sold a lot. Great! Everything turned out just right," I thought, standing in the middle of the warehouse and looking at the remaining half of the second cube.

"So, do you think we'll manage to sell it?" Sergey said, coming over and looking at the same place.

"We will, we definitely will!" I replied, deliberately confident, actually I did not have this confidence, but I wished that our luck would not stop and everything would last.

"I don't think we'll sell it," Sergey grinned and went out.

"How interesting a man's gait changes," I thought, smiling as I watched Sergey walking deliberately relaxed towards the "GAZelle". His gait would be perfect for a millionaire – a man who had enough of everything, of money, power and other advantages of life, who had lost interest in the business that had grown to a huge size, who had seen everything, who was no longer happy about anything. That's how Sergey behaved. I knew him well enough to feel the act. Sergey, with the face mask of a tired baron and his hands in the pockets of his shorts, staggered up to the rear wheels of the "GAZelle", kicked the outer wheel with his foot and said carelessly:

"Hey, Petya, is your crooked-legged cielito still running?"

"Pha-ha-ha-ha-ha, he-he-he!" Petya burst out laughing, the way a subordinate laughs at every joke of his superior. Petya was also acting, I could feel it. If Senya sometimes allowed himself to be deceitful, thinking that his deception was harmless, and when he was caught in it he confessed his plan with good-natured honesty, Petya convincingly played the part of a kind of country bumpkin, simple, doing what he was bound to do by duty and asking no unnecessary questions. But Petya's sharp eyes missed nothing, and he was no fool.

"Sergey Mikhailovich, what are you saying?" Petya reacted playfully. "Why do you insult my beautiful girl like that? What a thing to say!"

I grinned and smiled, a funny scene played out before my eyes. I wasn't interested anymore. I squeezed back outside, the heat of the August sun splashing against me, stopped about five meters from the warehouse and drifted away, the sounds outside fading. I froze. A mixture of irritation, anger, and contempt bubbled up inside me. I tried to deal with it, feeling this concentration of negativity eating away at my strength. In an attempt to focus on the positive, I squeezed my eyes shut and raised my face to the sun.

"Why are people so inert? Why do you always have to overcome their resistance? Why do they have such a negative attitude towards new initiatives?" I asked myself these and similar questions, which went round and round in my head, remembering how I used to have to constantly nudge my father to encourage him to do something new in our work. Now I had to overcome the same pile of doubts and reluctance from Sergey. The more I dug into my memory and analyzed, the more irritated I became. My thoughts came to the conclusion that Sergey's doubts were not only due to prudence, but also to simple laziness.

"So, shall we go?" his voice sounded behind me.

I turned, nodded, and followed Sergey, catching up with him, lazily walking, near the corner of the warehouse. We exchanged a few irrelevant sentences on the way back to the office. I sat down by the door and Sergey squeezed in behind the desk.

"Vera, nobody called, no news?" he exhaled loudly as he sat down.

"No, Seryozha, all quiet!" Vera reported.

My partner leaned back in his chair, crossed his arms over his chest, and looked at me intently like an important official. His nostrils flared like a horse's before the start, his lips puckered in thought, his eyes played with a mischievous glint. I knew this state of Sergey: he had something in mind.

"Roman, what if I'm in another business at the same time, eh?" He fixed his curious gaze on my face, studying the slightest expression. "Well, apart from this... ours..."

"You can't do anything like that!" I said flatly.

"Why not!?" Sergey's face fell in surprise.

"You're too lazy to do another business yourself!" I retorted, feeling the steam of irritation find an immediate outlet.

There was a heavy silence in the room. I was so relieved by what I had said that I didn't even bother to sugarcoat the effect of my words – I didn't care. I hit him again with what I thought of him. I understood why I'd done it – Sergey had wanted to plant doubts in my mind, to test me, and had been rebuffed. I could feel the air of silence thick with his resentment. I looked at my partner. His face was suddenly slack and weak, his eyes looked at me confused and uncertain. Sergey's arrogance was gone all at once.

CHAPTER 49

Every Thursday I loved this day of the week more and more. The sums of money in the cashier's office of the "Fort" grew and beckoned magnetically. The bundles of money that went from the cashier's window to Sergey's "suitcase" became a measure of our good mood.

Just as the summer reaches its zenith in July, our company reached its highest point of development.

"So, Seryoga, shall we go to 'Fort'?" I said impatiently as soon as the clock on my phone read "11:30". My partner relaxedly took his cell phone from the table, wiped the outer screen with his finger, yawned and mumbled: "Yeah, let's go..."

We got into the "Mazda" and drove past the gatehouse.

"Roman, look at my CDs in the glove box!" Sergey stretched his hand to the right.

I opened the glove box, a dozen CDs and the broken glasses looked at me.

"You haven't fixed the glasses yet, have you?" I pulled them out.

"No," Sergey grimaced. "Give me those, by the way!"

My partner took the glasses from my hands and placed them on the dashboard in front of me.

"When did you manage to buy all this?" I was surprised, I raked and took out all the disks and began to go through them in my hands, reading the names of the artists.

"I decided to buy a few disks from what I listened to in my youth," Sergey said, seeing one of the CDs in my hand, and added. "Yes, let's have this one, aha!"

I opened the case and put the disk into the slot of the stereo – floating sounds came from the speakers, the intro, the music started abruptly, beating the rhythm with drums.

If I were born in North Korea's land,
I'd likely join the police band,
Or maybe drive a rickshaw, true,
Or even be Kim Il Sung, too.

The rhythm of the music was reckless, vibrant. I started tapping my hands on my knees to the beat. Sergey looked at me with a satisfied look and said cheerfully:

"Yes, Roman, that's how we were in our youth!"

The man's voice began to blast the second verse, and I smiled at Sergey's words, which immediately refreshed my memory of all the stories he told me about his youth – how he used to hang around the streets of their neighborhood with a group of boxer friends; how he used to travel back and forth to Bulgaria with goods in the early "nineties," sitting in a compartment with a lot of money, trembling for them and the goods, while racketeers and border guards walked around the cars and collected the bribe; how he burned down the kiosk of a businessman who didn't want to pay the tribute; how he cut the throats of stray dogs, putting one hand under their jaws and swinging a knife from underneath with the other; how he fought with guys from other districts; how he ran away from a police raid in the backyards; how he flew in a plane with a bag full of money; how he and his friends beat up seven men in threes; how he was beaten by five men, lying on the ground and curled up.

The razzle-dazzle of the song played in my head over these stories and automatically caused a fit of euphoria and admiration for Sergey. "What an interesting, dangerous and bright youth he had, the complete opposite of mine – the youth of a model child," I thought bitterly, nodded, smiled and said: "Yeah, nice song! Tough..."

If I become a star of rock,
I'd shine so bright, I'd never stop.
Escaping loneliness that takes its toll,
I'd find three ways to feed my soul:
Sloth, boozing and debauch, you see,
Rock 'n' roll will set me free!

I kept the rhythm until we rolled off the dirt road and onto the asphalt. Sergey pulled his glasses over his eyes and stepped on the gas. The glasses looked at me with the disabled side without the wishbone, and Sergey's face almost returned to its former image.

At "Fort" we got over three hundred again – dichlorvos sales had passed their peak, and it was time to prepare for their decline. Back at the office, the three of us went to lunch.

"Seryozha, let's go to the dacha and pick up Vanya at the circuit," Vera reminded him in the evening.

My partner grimaced and nodded weakly. We left work early, at five. Vanya was standing on the side of the circuit. We drove up to him. Vera's brother climbed into the empty back seat and immediately filled the car with the smell of alcohol. Being drunk, he smiled stupidly with faded eyes, said "Hello!" and slammed the door. The "Mazda" jerked back into the stream of cars. I looked at Vanya – light summer pants, ironed to the pleats; a light shirt with an unobtrusive pattern, tucked evenly under the belt; short blond hair combed neatly to the side; a plastic bag in his hand. The images of the alcoholics who walked past my house every morning to get a fresh dose – well pressed, well slept, neatly combed – flashed before my eyes. The whole time Vanyok turned his head and smiled stupidly, answering Vera's questions. Only his sister spoke to him.

After killing twenty minutes in another traffic jam on the ring road, we got out and arrived at the construction company's office at a quarter to six.

"We'll be back soon, Vera!" Sergey said, sighed heavily, took off his glasses, put them on the dashboard and got out of the car with me.

"9.08.07 38.000*2" – I made an entry in my planner that evening.

It was not the first time I had the idea of practicing martial arts. And if before it was weak and inarticulate, now it became obsessive and I saw it as true. I realized that barbells and dumbbells only gave me strength. I was restless because of all the skirmishes in which I participated and did not show myself in the best way. These cases ate my consciousness and did not want to be forgotten. It's foolish to keep silent about something that bothers you. It is useless to lie to yourself. I decided to start training at the end of the summer.

"Seryoga, what else made you want to marry Vera?" I continued my interrogation. On Friday, August 10, we were alone in the office. Vera had been staying at the dacha with the children and her mother since Thursday. Sergey had asked me the day before to give his wife the day off, and I agreed. We had prepared the waybills for both runs in the morning and were basically idling in pleasant relaxation. Time seemed to stand still and we enjoyed every minute of the day before the weekend.

"Roman, different things!" Sergey exhaled, leaning back in Vera's chair, we were sitting at the tables opposite each other. "It's just that we were together all the time... We went through everything together, experienced everything... I've been watching her for a long time. Verok, she's always been like that. She graduated from trade school with honors and was a dancer... And she started touring Europe with her company..."

"Really???" I was surprised.

"Yes! She danced professionally! She's been to Spain and France! Verok – she's good!" Sergey nodded.

"Wow! Why didn't she keep dancing!?"

"Roman, she has a family. She had to choose between family and career. Verok chose family. She told me the other day that she wants to focus on home, on her family, and get away from the business, and that I'll manage here myself... Family is more important to her. And someone like your Lilya would choose a career. Everyone's different."

"Right," I nodded, remembering Lilya's icy eyes.

"Well, you see..." Sergey waved his hands, picking up a pen from the table and twisting it between his fingers. "She gave up dancing because of me..."

"Man, seriously..." I nodded, filled with more respect for Vera.

"Yeah, seriously! Roman, family is serious!" Sergey nodded. "It's just that you're not married yet, your own master... And family means duties... You have to endure, adapt..."

I was silent for a few seconds, organizing and digesting the new information.

"Seryoga, but what other things happened that affected you?"

"Roman, I don't really remember. There were many things. One time we went on a camping trip... you know, tents and all... stuff like that. And... do you remember they used to sell alcohol in these big liter bottles?"

"Oh yeah, I remember!" I nodded. "But it didn't last very long..."

"I'm not sure!" Sergey demurred and smiled. "And then we got drunk there with my buddies and fell asleep in the tent... And woke up in the morning... We went on a two-day trip! Well, for the weekend... So we woke up and there was no vodka! We searched and searched... Vera said we drank it all in the night... We had to spend the second day sober..."

Sergey was silent for a moment.

"And then it turned out that while we were sleeping, Vera had quietly poured all the alcohol into the fire!" he smiled.

"Huh, well done!" I exclaimed, not realizing the depth of such an act at first, but feeling its significance. "Clever idea..."

"Yes," Sergey continued, playing with a pen between his fingers. "And there have been many such cases. I once sold cassettes on the market... Well, from such a high stall, you know?"

Sergey traced the outline of what looked like a door in the air with his hands.

"Aha!" I nodded, having vividly recalled in my memory the kind of stalls with audio and video cassettes, and later CDs, that once flooded the city. "I remember those."

"I traded on the left bank, and she lived on the other!" Sergey raised the pen in his hand to emphasize the distance. "And back then there were no shared taxis... there were only buses, trams and trolleybuses... and Vera would go to the market every day, bring me lunch, feed me... I would stand at the stall and eat, and Verok would stand next to me and wait for me to eat..."

Sergey started to use an invisible spoon, said something else, but at that moment his voice was drowned in my inner exclamation. I was almost stunned and visualized the described picture very clearly. A resentment stirred in me. I tried Vera's act on myself and suddenly realized that nothing like it had ever happened in my life. "And if it had happened, maybe I would have been married long ago..." I ended the thought with bitterness, did not develop it and returned to the dialogue.

Our leisurely conversation went on all day, interspersed with visits to the warehouse and a lunch break. We talked like old friends, with nothing to hide from each other, just reminiscing about the past as if to make sense of it. But Sergey was just killing time before the end of the work week. I, on the other hand, was doggedly digging into his past, trying to put Sergey's personality into my head, trying to understand the part of my life that had left me with more questions than answers.

"Roman, do you wanna know how much we made on the sticky tape?" Sergey said on Monday, sitting in his wife's chair after lunch and poking his fingers into the keyboard.

"Did you make a report?" I looked at him from across the table.

"Aha! So you want to know?"

"How much?"

"Three hundred thousand!" Sergey said, nibbling his lips excitedly and happily.

I thought about it.

"We sold a thousand packages!" Sergey sniffed his nose. "Imagine that!"

"How many did you sell in 'Sasha'?"

"No, we didn't sell that much!" Sergey turned down the corners of his lips. "Three hundred! Well... three hundred and fifty is the maximum! And here – a thousand... Nice..."

"Hey, Seryoga..." I formulated my thought. "We made three hundred thousand on some shit this summer! Tell anyone, they won't believe it."

"Why shit?" he frowned. "Good product."

"The product is good, yes! I'm not arguing! That's not what I'm saying. It's a little thing, this tape. It's worth a penny. A ten kopecks here and there on it, no one will notice... But it has an immediate effect on profits! We did the right thing, remember, I told you not to be petty, but to make a big markup... And we did the right thing, otherwise it would not be three hundred thousand profit now, but one hundred and fifty, we made money out of nothing," I said, leaning back in my chair with satisfaction.

"Roman, what are you trying to say?" Sergey grinned reluctantly, "That you knew we'd sell so much of this tape?"

"What's that got to do with it, Seryoga?" I was surprised. "I didn't know how much we'd sell, I just said that we should mark it up properly to make money on the product, not sell it for three kopecks, so that the work is for the work's sake!"

"Come on, Roman!" Sergey brushed it off. "You and Anatoly Vasilievich always know everything and have an answer for everything!"

I was stunned and, not understanding the reason for such a verbal outburst and rebuke, stared at my partner in surprise for a few seconds. "Why distort everything?" I thought, painfully feeling the reproach.

"Seryoga, you're talking nonsense. What does that have to do with anything? I don't understand you..." I shrugged my shoulders and looked at Vera, who was sitting in the chair by the door with a cup of tea in her hands, listening attentively to the dialog. Sergey's wife smiled tactfully and immediately looked down.

"I just wanted to say – it's nice that the decision we made was the right one, it worked and made the company money... that's all..." I said.

"I see!" Sergey replied irritably, chewing his lip and jerking his knees under the table.

The room grew awkward and quiet.

"How many dichlorvos did we sell?" I said, not wanting to prolong the uncomfortable silence. "The ones on kerosene... and in general..."

"I don't know!" Sergey twitched, but then, as if overcoming his irritation, he added, "Shall I check?"

"Let me see!" Vera's voice rang out, she got up and came to her husband. "Come, Seryozha, I'll have a quick look..."

My partner stood up and sank into the chair by the door with a disgruntled face and pouting lips. Vera crept to her desk and fluttered her fingers on the keyboard.

The preliminary results of our daring adventure were as follows: out of nearly ten thousand boxes of kerosene-based dichlorvos, a quarter of them were in our warehouse.

"What are we going to do with such leftovers?" Sergey looked at me unhappily and muttered smugly.

"We'll sell some by the end of September, the rest will be stored..." I shrugged, not wanting to react to my partner's mood.

"And you are sure that they will allow us to leave such a quantity in the warehouse and not force us to buy it out?" Sergey continued.

"We have to negotiate... If they don't allow it, we'll send it back... But I think they will!"

Sergey frowned silently, studying my face with his eyes.

"We'll sell something for August and September, we can sell a thousand and a half. We can even buy the rest, if anything..." I brushed it off and smiled.

"And in October there will still be sales," Sergey murmured after a short pause, as if he was expressing the results of his thoughts.

"Even more so..." I nodded conciliatory.

There was a knock on the door.

"Yes!" Sergey barked.

Senya came in, shuffling from foot to foot, and said that his son would only work for us until the end of the summer, and then leave with the start of the school year.

"Okay!" Sergey grumbled with an angry face. "I see, Senya..."

Sergey was silent and remained sitting as he was, not turning his head even a centimeter towards the storekeeper, making it clear with his whole appearance that the conversation was over.

"Seryozha..." he began to shuffle from foot to foot again, wiping his lower lip with his fingers. "I was wondering... are we going to hire a new loader or what?"

Senya spread his hands, and his unclenched fingers trembled. "I wonder if they're trembling because Senya used to drink a lot, or because he hasn't drunk for a while?" I was puzzled, distracted by Sergey's ugly farce.

"We are, Senya, we are!" he said, locking his fingers.

The storekeeper hesitated, did not go away.

"Anything else, Senya?" Sergey murmured, turning his head slightly, looking at the storekeeper from under a raised eyebrow.

"Not really," he said uncertainly, looking at me confusedly.

"We'll find someone, Senya, of course!" I nodded and made my words firm. The storekeeper calmed down immediately and went out. I thought about it and looked at my partner:

"Listen, Seryoga, we should look for a loader... It's just that when it rains, it pours..."

"We're not going to look for anyone, Roman, calm down, don't make a fuss!" he brushed it off and wrinkled his nose as if I had suggested something stupid.

"What do you mean, we're not?" I was stunned and stared at Sergey. "Is Senya going to carry and load everything alone?"

"What is there to carry? Twice a day to load Petya and once to unload Alexey Semyonovich!?"

"Fuck, Seryoga, that's a lot! You go and try!" I started to get angry.

"Roman, I've carried no less than you and I know what it's like!" my partner bombarded me with negativity. "I've unloaded trucks in 'Sasha' too! You're not the only one who's done it!"

"Then you should know that it's a fucking lot! And Senya can't do it alone! He'll quit after three days of such work, and he won't work alone! I wouldn't!"

"You wouldn't, but I think Senya can work alone. We can go and help him if anything!"

"Fuck, Seryoga, what's the point of this?!?" I didn't understand. "Why for God's sake should we work without a loader and carry the goods for him??? Let a new loader come and work!"

"Roman, why give five thousand every month to some loader when we sit here on our ass all day and can go and help unload one load a day... not even every day!"

"Seryoga, it's not about sitting, it's about degrading! It's a step backward! Why are we doing this? We can afford a loader. We make enough money. Why are we downsizing? Just because we're sitting on our ass doesn't change anything. If you think we have a lot of free

time, let's make the most of it by looking for customers, new sales... not running around in a warehouse carrying boxes. That's the wrong choice, Seryoga. We're managers of a business, no matter how small. And we have different functions than the movers and the storekeepers. We have to do our jobs."

"Roman, you can say whatever you want, but I think we can do without a loader!" Sergey cut me off.

As if I had stumbled over his sentence, I hesitated for a few seconds and added one last thing:

"What if Senya leaves? Doesn't want to work alone and leaves... Our actions?"

"Roman, Senya isn't going anywhere!" Sergey said irritably and brushed it off.

"Where would he go?" Vera said, I looked at her in surprise, Vera continued, "Who needs him? As a loader, if only. He won't be hired as a storekeeper. At least I wouldn't take him..."

Perhaps Vera's words were decisive, because I stopped my efforts.

"Do what you want," it went through my head, leaving a residue of bitterness.

"All right, so be it..." I nodded and pointed my index finger in Sergey's direction.

"Then explain to Senya yourself why we didn't hire a loader as promised..."

Sergey looked at me intently, but said nothing.

"Listen, uh, I have an indiscreet question, Seryoga... have you ever cheated on your wife?" I asked the question, knowing the answer in advance and not caring about the fact of the answer, namely the reasons. We were driving the "Mazda" through the city center in the heavy midday traffic.

"Roman, there is no way not to cheat!" Sergey said, relaxedly driving the car with one hand. "It's just physiology... I remember once I came to work on Monday... It was at Davidych's place, when we had not yet moved to the garden! I came in and I felt like I wanted to fuck so bad. And I had sex with my wife just before I went to bed... literally just now... So I'm sitting there, I can't think of anything, I have a boner and that's it."

Sergey imitated an erection by raising his clenched hand into a fist. I laughed, Sergey laughed too, and continued: "Yeah... and I'm sitting there in agony, and this buddy of mine who works with me, also the same... So he and I waited until lunchtime, got in the car and drove to the monument... You know, there are always broads standing at the Monument..."

"Yeah, I know," I nodded, having heard about that place as one of the places where prostitutes work. "They stand there, I saw some of them a couple of times... walking around."

"Yes! They walk along the street or sit on the benches!" Sergey nodded. "So we drove up, there was one... We agreed on a price, she sat down with us, and we drove on... towards the park, where there is a forest by the road... We arrived. So it's time to start. And she goes, 'Do you have any drinks and snacks?' We rummaged around in the car, found a piece of lard, but there was no drink... We went and bought some cheap vodka at a kiosk, came back, drove off the road into the woods... Fuck, I cringe at the memories – she's sitting there, holding a full glass of vodka in one hand and a piece of lard in the other! Ugh!"

I imagined the picture – I also got a twitch, I smiled and shivered.

"And she drinks this glass..." Sergey continued, widening his eyes in surprise.

"All of it!?" I grimaced.

"Yes... all of it! Imagine that! All of it! One hundred and fifty or two hundred grams of vodka was there! She drinks it and takes a bite of this piece of lard!" Sergey grinned and imitated a bite with his jaw, which made me cringe again. Lard... greasy white mass. Ugh!

"So she's drunk on this glass of vodka, she's lying on the back seat on her side, mumbling something like – come on, guys..."

"And you?"

"We pulled her pants down and went ahead... one after another." The car stopped in traffic, Sergey slapped his forehead with the palm of his hand, shook his head, burst out laughing. "Fuck, I shudder to remember it! And we, fools, were running after her in the woods, trying to catch her... with these... uh... with our dicks sticking out! With condoms on them!"

Sergey laughed even harder, put his hand to his crotch and moved his finger, imagining his dick dangling as he ran. I blushed and laughed. The story seemed so stupid and ridiculous that it was definitely real.

"How many times did you cheat on your wife?" I calmed down and said.

"Roman, I haven't done it in two years. It used to happen. Not now..." Sergey hesitated. "I just know that I have a body that does everything I need! But sometimes I want something else... It's just that after someone else you get on your own more cheerfully!"

"I have a body that does everything I need... A body... I have a body that... Vera... A body that does everything I need," floated through my head and registered in my memory. The phrase cut into my ears, but I remained silent, turning over my past relationships and realizing that I had no such desires – the girls I dated I genuinely liked, and I didn't think about sex with others. On the other hand, all my relationships didn't last long... I kept thinking, "I have a body that does everything I need." We drove over the bridge over the railroad tracks and ducked into more traffic.

In the second half of August, sales of dichlorvos decreased and even stopped for a whole week, only to resume towards the end of the month.

And what I had feared happened – "Arbalest" started offering "Luxchem" products to other companies in the city, our customers.

Roma, "Arbalest" offers us "Luxchem" here," Misha, the manager of "Mongoose", said apologetically when I called him again, "and the prices are lower..."

A shiver ran down my spine and my brain immediately began to scramble to find the right solution. Over the years, I had developed an honest relationship of trust with the manager of "Mongoose", and that helped. I found out the competitor's price, calculated the markup, and told Misha that we would deliver the goods for a few percent less and fix such a discount for him for all future deliveries. I eagerly promised him the new terms and he kept us as their supplier. The situation was saved.

"It's good that Misha is a good guy!" I said as soon as I hung up the phone and leaned back in my chair at the table, looking at Sergey, who was chewing his lip nervously.

"Otherwise we would have lost 'Mongoose' right now! Such a piece would have fallen off..."

"Yes, you had a good talk..." he sniffed his nose and kicked his leg.

"Well, you heard Seryoga! From now on we'll sell drain cleaner to 'Mongoose' at this price. The money will be less, but we've kept the market, so it's okay. Let's keep it that way. Vera, make a note of this markup on the drain cleaner for 'Mongoose'."

"Yes, Roma, I got it!" she snapped out of her stupor when I looked at her.

Sergey continued to jerk his leg and chew his lip. As if in a slight stupor, he looked at me with a blank stare.

"You bought a fishing rod!?" I was surprised, half-heartedly listening to my partner one day, but the word "rod" caught my attention; Sergey had never been a fisherman, I knew that for sure, and his choice surprised me very much. "What do you need a fishing rod for, Seryoga???"

"What do you mean, what for, Roman?" he was even a little offended. "To catch fish! I'm going fishing! You work out in the gym, you have a hobby! I'm going to have a hobby!"

"You wanted to work out too," I smiled. "You bought a barbell for the dacha, you said so yourself... By the way, how is it, do you use it?"

"I do!" Sergey muttered sharply.

I looked at Vera, met her smiling eyes, noticed how she hid the sarcasm in her smile, and understood everything. We were sitting in the office as usual.

"Seryoga, you never cease to amaze me – you bought a fishing rod!" I hummed and shook my head. "How much did you pay?"

"Seventeen thousand!" he said immediately, cheerfully, as if the magnitude of the sum would eliminate all questions at once.

"Seventeen thousand!!!??" I rolled my eyes, my eyebrows creeping up almost to the back of my head in surprise. "Seryoga, that's fucking crazy!!! Seventeen thousand!!! Why is it so expensive?!"

"Roman, maybe I'll start fishing seriously. You always start with questions."

"Seryoga, I'm just wondering... I think if I decided to go fishing, I'd buy a cheap fishing rod first, get my hands on it, gain experience, and then it would be clear which rod to buy better... You paid so much money, what if it's not exactly what you need... there are different rods out there. I don't know anything about it, though... All right, never mind!" I dismissed it.

"Roman, I bought a lot of things for that money!" he began to justify himself. "I also bought a special box where all the sinkers and hooks are, all different sizes, all in their places..."

Sergey began to explain the peculiarities of fishing, I listened without paying attention, just shaking my head, smiling and occasionally looking at Vera.

"Why, I'll go fishing too!" she said suddenly, as if to support her husband's decision. "You'll take me with you, won't you, boys?"

"Who is he going fishing with, Vera?" I nodded at Sergey.

"There's this inveterate fisherman who lives next door," Vera wrinkled her nose, brushed it off and smiled.

I tried to compare Sergey and fishing, but I couldn't and shook my head again. The idea seemed so ridiculous that I didn't even bother to look for an explanation.

Sergey and I added another seventy thousand to the payment for the apartment, and that was the end of it. We paid about half the price for both apartments under construction and, at Sergey's insistence, froze the payments for a year.

"Roman, what's the point of paying the full amount now if we can spin this money for another year and make money on it?" Sergey gave the strongest argument. "There are still two and a half years until the end of construction. I suggest that we don't take the money there yet! Apartments are not rising in price so fast now, so there is no hurry. And somewhere in a year before the end of construction, we will start to carry money there and buy the apartments in full!"

Sergey insisted, but stopped talking and looked at me questioningly.

"Well, if apartment prices go up again, we'll quickly bring in money and buy them out!" he added.

I agreed.