

The lost family

The lost Family

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This is a literary thriller with historical facts here and there.

All characters in this story were invented by the author and any resemblance to living or dead figures is purely coincidental. The geographical settings are also invented. Some backgrounds are real, although some of the establishments described in this book are fictional.

History consists largely of miseries brought upon the world by pride, ambition, greed, revenge, pleasure-seeking, rebellion, hypocrisy, fanaticism, and every other kind of unbridled desire.

Edmund Burke
(English politician and philosopher 1729-1797)

This story is divided not into traditional chapters but into five elements of the Chinese martial art Xing YE Quan and his resting points in this story. The sixth, the Rong, is fictional.

Pi *Metal, force that splits apart like the falling of an axe*

Zuan *Water, force that drills its way through something*

Beng *Wood, force that reaches out and breaks things*

Pao *Fire, force that strikes explosively hard and fast*

Heng *Earth, force that pushes itself through with a sideways movement*

Rong *Salamander, the avenger of injustice*

For Elena

'I have an undefined feeling but I don't know exactly what it is. Maybe it's her who makes me insecure. She keeps appearing in my dreams. In her soft white wedding dress she floats silently towards me and sits on the edge of my bed. Her lips move but I hear no sound. I want to kiss her, but then she disappears without saying goodbye.' He blows his nose.

"Oh, darling," she says softly to him, "your mother is dead and all she wants to tell you is that you have to learn to live without her." He sobs at these sweet but hard words.

How do you know? She was just torn from my life without saying goodbye, without a kiss or a soft pat on my head. Never again that cup of tea with such a deliciously fragrant gingerbread,' he says to her while tears stream down his fiery red cheeks. She looks at him a little bored and thinks: damn, are we going to get this crap again? Is it still so superficial that he has to cry every time he thinks of her?

With the back of her hand, she brushes a lock of dark red hair from her face as she sits down next to him and hugs him tightly. She considers asking the question she's asked several times in their seven-month, two-year relationship, but decides to do it simply and in a typically Irish way: 'what's the craic, darling?'

He looks at the freckles on her face in a way that makes it seem like he's counting them one by one and says with some doubt in his voice: 'Yes, I'm sorry, it still bothers me a lot. That powerless feeling blocks the opening to a free life without question marks.' He blows his nose, again.

She reacts surprised but also immediately shows her displeasure: 'okay, I want to see you happy without that pebble in your shoe, so tell me everything that's bothering you for once.' She's not stupid because she already knows his answer but now wants to hear from him how he sees it in order to come to a solution. I'm not a psychologist, but I love him too much to leave him in the pit, she thinks as she waits with some interest for his reaction. And he knows very well that by saying sorry he will achieve the opposite with her.

He admits that she is right and mumbles: 'well, darling, that's the way it is, but anyway it remains a deep open wound for me. She sits down next to him and listens attentively because he has never told her the details of his deepest secret before. At least she hopes that he will open his box completely now.

When he shifts, the wooden chair makes a disturbing creaking sound, he waits a moment, clears his throat and then begins to tell: 'At the time, we only heard from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that the plane she and her friends were in crashed in China shortly after take-off in very bad weather in an impenetrable mountainous area where it was impossible for rescue teams to approach the wreckage. Attempts to try again later were unsuccessful because there was no trace to be found. The local search services lacked many resources which made the search so difficult that they quickly gave up. The area was also much too large and impenetrable.' He adds: 'The international press picked up on the dramatic accident at the time and even published a front-page article because my mother's friends came from different countries. Some were well-known in their countries, one woman was even a bit famous. They were on a culinary voyage of discovery to the origins of a dish, which had been organised by an Asian woman, a good friend of my mother.

My father soon gave up the fight to find her and because I was too young to take action, it kept me occupied for a long time, with the result that my grief ended up in the wrong box. The loss has therefore never diminished, in fact, it became so strong that it started to dominate my life. Attempts to reduce the problem in my head and by three psychologists came to nothing. They concluded that I am, as it were, stuck in a revolving door.' He looks at her with something in his eyes that she did not know about him. Fire.

And she is startled when he calls out, very emotionally and with a fighting spirit: 'I have decided to go and look for her!' After this battle cry she closes her eyes, folds her hands together and turns her face to the ceiling and speaks to herself words of thanks to God for this miracle.

'You really mean it, don't you?' she says in a euphoric mood, because she can't believe her ears. He, the sweet good guy, is going to do something. When she hugs him she says to him: 'I think it's very cool and brave that you're going to look for her. But it's going to be a real challenge to go there in the Far East and look for her when you don't speak the language or the customs and even less the exact location.' He nods and realizes that she's right. With fire in his eyes he stands up and tells her that he wants to start gathering information about the disaster and that he'll ask his father to help with that.

To which she reacts quite strongly: 'your father? Your father can go to hell with his negative and selfish attitude.' And: 'don't pay any attention to him and go your own way. We have to try to avoid another argument with him. And now you have to let everything go and try to relax, because you have neglected your girlfriend and your hobby quite a bit lately,' she adds with a mischievous wink.

He responds like an arrow from a bow: 'I have to ask him things because he has documents from that time that I would like to have. And, sorry, relax, relax now? No!' He stands up, straightens his green checked pyjama jacket, wipes away his tears and says: 'Are you crazy, I'm going to get started right away!' With a smile she turns around and walks out of the room, swaying her hips. On the landing she stands still for a moment and looks out through the misted window with a dissatisfied look and thinks with a deep sigh: with or without rain, it remains a boring shitty village. Then she strolls to the stairs and goes downstairs. On her way to the kitchen she looks into his study and sees that it could really use a tidy up. She shrugs her shoulders and walks into the kitchen and makes a move to make a pot of tea when she hears him walking on the stairs.

"I'm going to make some tea, would you like a cup too?" she calls.

He doesn't answer and she calls out again. And again no answer. She looks into the hallway and sees no one, but hears some

shuffling in the study and goes over and finds him standing on a chair next to the bookcase and with a book in his hands.

"Hey, I asked you something," she says to him.

He looks up, disturbed, and says, "Oh, sorry, my mind was on something else."

She: 'Yes, I see that. Do you want tea, yes or no?'

He answers her question affirmatively with a strange and bewildered nod that she did not know yet. Because they do not live together permanently, she has not yet discovered all of his craziness. She has her own apartment in Dublin, because she is a city person and partly because of the fact that immediately after her work, which has irregular hours, she prefers to get into her own bed instead of having to drive to this, in her experience, musty hamlet on a cold, damp, stinking city bus.

Well, the morning starts nicely, she thinks as the kettle in the kitchen sounds that the water is boiling. She takes after the pot is filled with hot water and some loose tea leaves. The tin in which he keeps the gingerbread cookies only contains a few crumbs. She sighs and puts the tin back in the cupboard. With two large mugs of steaming tea she goes to his study where he is bent over a book and gives him his cup. She herself sits on the windowsill and looks outside where she sees the neglected back garden with an old rabbit hutch in pouring rain. Desolate.

She makes no bones about it and has made it clear to him that she does not intend to stay for more than seven days at a time and certainly not to live there. My clothes and personal belongings will remain in Dublin, she had told him.

And that got through to him all too well and he is torn, because he actually thinks it's not that bad and he doesn't have much contact in the village. The café. Yes, that is a nice place. She has given him time to think about it properly. Because, he thinks, living in Doughaby isn't that bad. Dusty, yes, and rich in history.

Well, this village has a rather rich if naughty history and is located in rural Ireland and is named after one of its founders: Doughaby. But more on that later.

Plume clouds gather over the sea, soon to dump a huge amount of rain over several small hamlets surrounded by green fields with rocky hills and small sparkling streams.

Life starts like any other day because today it is rainy and cold. This Tuesday could have been Friday. The streets paved with black basalt cobblestones exude peace and contentment because there is no one who dares to go outside.

The houses, built with red bricks, have been leaning against each other for at least a hundred years, which creates a picturesque atmosphere. Woolly smoke from the chimneys spreads a fragrant scent of pine wood and lies like a blanket over the village, which resembles the drawings of Anton Pieck. Formerly owned by important families from the big city, these houses were originally intended as country houses. It was no secret that the man of the house made more use of them than his family, because he received his mistresses there. Toys for the gentlemen, men of standing, married to a sturdy woman and a nest full of screaming children. Their rich lives caused a yearning for young ladies, because there was not much more distraction than cigars, whisky, football and horse racing at the time. And there was a sector that took advantage of this: detectives. Because many women noticed that their husbands were looking for entertainment outside the home and hired a private detective. The first detective in the village was called Doug and was extremely successful, after which the city council, which consisted of a majority of women and in honor of this man, changed the name of the village Haby to Doughaby. It was not surprising that unemployment arose among the whores and the result that the market attracted not only detectives but also lawyers. The confessional in the church remained miraculously empty during that time, in contrast to the church where an ancient priest draws full halls with his fantastic sermons that are often discussed in the adjacent café. The atmosphere in the local café can often be called great, because the visitors, mostly regular customers from the village but also people from surrounding villages like to come here because there is a piano. A false one, that is. He has lived here since he closed the

door of the parental home behind him after a fight with his father. He hardly has any contact with him anymore. He spends more time reading and his hobby than his work, because that is not going well and his red-haired girlfriend, a nurse in a hospital, regularly encourages him to move in with her. But he is not ready for that yet, he says.

Conor, his father and retired police officer, is unlike his son a big, tough man with a black beard and lives in a modest house on the edge of a good residential area of Dublin. His questionable decision had consequences for the relationship with his young son. As time went by, the tension between father and son increased and a serious conflict had been in the air for a while when it recently came to a serious clash with the result that they no longer wanted to see or hear each other. Stubbornness and selfishness are inappropriate in a situation where intense grief plays a major role.

He was just fourteen when it happened and was then raised with the help of Zayna, a Pakistani woman. His father had the excuse that he was busy at work while he was a police officer in an office job from nine to five. After work he would drown his frustration mixed with sadness in a local pub instead of going home to play with his child or help him with his homework. Conor was fine with Zayna's presence and slowly the distance between him and his son grew. This allowed Conor to do his own thing, watch football and go out with his mates when he felt like it. It was his way of coping and he refused to talk to a psychologist. The boy lived in seclusion and preferred to play alone and read a lot. First comics and later books that often had travel as a theme. Travels to faraway countries, which he dreamed of and knew would remain that way.

At school he repeated a few times and for good reason. He was not a real bookworm and did not have the ambition and lacked an example to study.

It was Zayna who made him enthusiastic about reading and she had once brought him a book from the library. And to her surprise he was immediately absorbed in Gulliver's Travels in which the

Irish writer, Jonathan Swift in 1726 actually intended to write a satire about English and European society, the court, science and human morality. The parody of the phenomenon of travel stories was an even greater success, especially with children. For that, less decent scenes had to be removed from the first two parts. The boy had said to Zayna, after he had read the book five times, what Gulliver has done I want to do later. Nothing came of that traveling because a few years later he felt that detective work suited him and started an education and became a detective. He immediately received small assignments and rented a house in Doughaby because it was much cheaper to live there than in Dublin. Later he understood why the house he wanted to rent so much had been empty for a very long time and the landlord was so happy when he had signed the lease.

It took him a long time to make a move into the social life of the village. Only after a year did he join the church choir and register for the billiards competition in the café. The latter was not a success.

Shortly after, he received an invitation to join in a game of football on the lawn behind the church, but soon noticed that this way of moving was not his thing. The men completely agreed with him. Because he had absolutely no feeling for a ball.

He started looking for another way to spend his free time because in silences he fell back into memories with intense sadness as a result. He often thought of a Chinese proverb: if you want to hold on to something very badly, you must first learn to let it go. And Luke did not master letting go. But that changed when, in one of the rare moments, he was out with his father and visited a butterfly exhibition in Dublin. He, always in the same gray pants, blue shirt and a sloppy vest and raincoat, stood still at the table where Orchid Butterflies were displayed and fell in love.

This expensive hobby had a profound effect on his life, and his wallet. He had to economize on almost everything, which didn't affect his clothes because he didn't care about them anyway. As long as it's not worn out, don't throw it away, was one of the

many sayings of his Grandma that he could remember. And you can't see holes in your socks when you're wearing shoes. And darning them is quite easy. That Grandma.

That he fell back into a valley of sad silence he realized later. On the other hand, the white butterflies gave him support and comforted him because of the loss of a special woman. He loved her dearly.

It wasn't the red-haired Irish woman who crossed his path like an angel from heaven at a particularly inopportune moment. No, but she did have almost the same cheerful and down-to-earth character as his mother. His mother. His girlfriend is also crazy and quite recalcitrant. He is in love with her from the first moment.

He will never forget their first meeting. Well, they met in a public urinal next to a bus stop in the centre of Dublin. He had just finished peeing, zipped up his fly and pulled out a bit of skin. He screamed in pain. She happened to be walking by when she heard his scream and didn't hesitate to come to her aid. And when she saw him standing helplessly with tears in his eyes and both hands over his fly, Cupid struck mercilessly. And the fact that he noticed that she worked in a hospital was an added bonus. They have been together ever since and their love grows with just a few more ups than downs. In any case, he has become more careful about zipping up his fly.

She took him to a clothing store a few days after the incident and bought a new pair of pants.

A light beige corduroy with a fly with buttons.

He was very careful with this new garment and never wore the trousers when he went to the pub. Something she found ridiculous and could not convince him that it is okay to dress neatly, even in a pub. Later, she secretly took two old trousers of his from the closet and threw them in a garbage container. And on his birthday, the first one they celebrated together, he got a gift voucher from her that was enough to replace and supplement his wardrobe. He wore a checked jacket with a real Irish cap almost every day after that. And the two trousers all had button fly. He does not want to risk such an extremely painful experience as that

one. Incidentally, it has been repaired without visible scars. She is also very happy about that.

Sometimes he catches himself standing in front of the mirror and thinks: Mom, you should see me. I've become a real gentleman.

Look at your son!

Then he feels her eyes piercing into the mirror ...

Pi

Metal, force that splits apart like the falling of an axe

Wednesday

Humming, the burly woman dressed in a faded purple jumpsuit wipes the legs and bottom of an abandoned desk with a rag. The user of that desk had handled several hundred files when a cardiac arrest ended her life.

The unprocessed files were distributed after her death to the department that is part of a regional branch of the social surveillance service that is tasked with keeping an eye on citizens. It is a small office located south of the Russian capital. The office will be moved. As she works, she feels a piece of cardboard. She sees that something is wedged under the third drawer. When she pulls out the drawer, a crumpled file folder lies there.

Her discovery immediately reached her boss, who in turn deposited it with the boss of this office.

After skimming the folder, he personally took it to the headquarters in Moscow the same day. The crumpled folder landed with a thud in the mailbox of the KGB Committee.

It was not long before it reached his desk, for an official of the Service assumed that its mysterious contents made it necessary to show it to him.

Just reading the label makes his eyebrows frown and lines appear on his forehead as he opens the folder.

FILE -J.Kreisner-Baumgartenstrasse 57/3g Undertal- as well as a number and date stamp from a few years ago. And the first thing he finds remarkable is the strange combination of the two documents.

The heavily built man, with a bald head, bushy eyebrows and a coarse mouth from which an unsavory cigar protrudes, puts the yellowed sheet of paper, numbered five, and a note from a doctor back in the gray folder and slams it shut in irritation and shouts something. The sound carries far enough to reach his secretary. The floor of the Directorate of Special Operations, part of the KGB, has heard it too: 'pizda, pizda i yeshche raz pizda!' It is clear to everyone that Wladzk is not complaining about the quality of the pizza that was just delivered, but has something much more

important to say. A courageous civil servant walks into her boss's office and is immediately criticized.

Like a rude, barking bulldog, he screams, "This is the umpteenth time I've had shit on my desk." And, "I'm not a trash can. May I know what goddamn stupid asshole kept this file for so long without doing the obligatory closing action?" White-hot with anger, he walks through his room with the gray folder in his hands and slams the door shut, nearly causing the glass with the engraving GLAVNYY 24 (chief of the 24th ^{department}) to jump out of its frame.

She calmly tells him that the perpetrator is buried in a cemetery somewhere in the south of Russia.

He calms down after her answer and asks for clarity. She walks away and returns a moment later with an explanation. Which makes him look doubtful because now he knows that years ago the regional office was absorbed into another district because almost all the staff had died of old age.

The civil servants in the windowless room, coldly lit by blue-white lamps, hardly dare to show their faces and shift uncomfortably in their pre-war office chairs. It becomes quieter in their boss's office.

Then the silence is broken as the secretary leaves the room.

A phone rings on one of the desks and a girl answers it, listens, makes a note on a notepad and puts the receiver back on the gray phone. She tears the sheet of paper from the notepad and walks with it to her boss's office and taps softly on the door, opens it and comes back later without the paper and sits down in her place. She does not exchange a word with her colleagues and stares ahead with a look in her eyes as if she has seen a ghost.

In the room she just left, Wladzk reads the note and reaches for the phone. After a short conversation, he quickly walks out of his room and grunts something to a staff member.

Wladzk is on his way to his direct boss, Joris, who has his office three floors up. Once there, he puts the file on the table, explains it briefly and waits tensely for the reaction.

'Put the stutterer on it, and ask him to find out as quickly as possible whether this is rubbish or a jewel,' says Joris. He seems impressed by what is written on the paper. He finds the doctor's note unimportant. And he responds with: 'this is really something for him because after that fuss last week he will like this,' he says laughing and shows Wladzk the door with an unsympathetic gesture. Which confirms that they are not good friends.

Thursday

Pjotr, how he got the nickname 'the stutterer' needs no explanation, was pleasantly surprised with this assignment because after the enormous disillusionment of a research he did on unstable military software he had become pessimistic about his future with the Service. He opens the folder and starts studying the paper that is numbered with a five. What he finds surprises him because it is not his field of work but decides to start quickly. After about an hour of struggling and juggling something catches his eye. Something that seems familiar to him. He finds it strange, coincidental, and something that leans towards implausibility. He walks to another department and asks for a file. Leafing through that file he goes back to his room.

An hour later he looks at the result with narrowed eyes. His suspicions seem to be correct when he places sheets of paper with a jumble of numbers next to each other. He checks the markings in the corners and carefully slides them over each other.

With a proud smile he sees that the markings coincide but that does not surprise him. I am a genius, he thinks when he sees his real discovery. And concludes that the missing pages will not form a different image.

And he immediately wonders who on earth comes up with such a complicated construction to tell something? And, what the signs mean is a bridge too far for me. There are specialists for that.

He grunts out loud: 'What do you have to hide, smart friend, and who are you?' He shrugs his shoulders because he doesn't expect an answer and isn't interested either.

The realization that he can do no more than this is fine with him and he looks at his watch. He has to hurry and pushes the chair closer to the table and types furiously as if he is playing a sonata with a lot of staccato. Fifteen minutes later he is done and with a sigh he puts his hands on his neck and with a satisfied look he leans back and loses his balance and with a big thud he falls to the floor, landing unluckily against a steel filing cabinet. With his hand on his head he crawls back into his chair and feels something warm running down his cheeks. Blood.

He quickly takes a tissue from his pocket and presses it on the wound, calling for help.

After his secretary has put a large plaster on his forehead, he sends his report to the client by internal mail and makes a certified copy that he adds to the file. Then he takes his coat from the coat rack, turns on the light and closes the door behind him. Two rooms further he puts the folder at the reception who deposits it in the mailbox of his client, the boss and Comrade Gregor Wladzk.

The biting cold outside makes him decide not to go straight home but first to Herzok, his local pub. A stiff drink would ease his headache. His oblomovschina life had suddenly changed recently. And because of that he had to say goodbye to his Russian laziness or marmot life. The purchase of a heavily loss-making nightclub gave him a lot of work but also a huge challenge. Moreover, he still has to arrange things because the opening is soon. He was able to take over the establishment for a small price and together with a few friends he transformed it into a nice nightclub in a short time. His budget was minimal and he will still need his job at the Service because his piggy bank is almost empty.

The moment he sits down at a table and orders a beer with vodka, a courier to the office of the Committee for State Security (Komitet Gossoedarestvennoj Bezopasnosti, or the KGB) and delivers an envelope. Comrade's secretary Gregor Wladzk, receives it. A moment later Gregor takes out a stack of papers. On the front

page, attached with a paperclip, is a black and white photo of a grim grey concrete building, with a window on the third floor circled with a red felt-tip pen. He puts his glasses, with thick lenses in a black frame, on his nose and begins to read attentively. On some pages he makes a line and a cross with a soft pencil. It is already past eight o'clock when he puts the folder on the desk of Joris, his boss and director of the department.

Friday

The next morning Joris reads it straight away and puts his mug of coffee down next to him with a thud and shouts so loudly that everyone in the rooms next door is shocked: 'We have a case with high priority!'

His secretary immediately jumps up as if a spring in her chair has given way and runs to his office where she is given short but clear instructions. As the door closes behind her he puts his feet up on the desk and looks at the silver-framed photo of what could be his wife. A beautiful and charming woman in her forties, dressed in a black dress and a double pearl necklace around her neck that gracefully emphasizes her modest cleavage. He looks worried, to put it mildly, because the discovery of Pjotr and the impending divorce are weighing heavily on his scales.

While there is a lot of phone traffic and walking back and forth in the hallway, he looks at Pjotr's report which confirms what he fears: extremely complicated digital break-in with something that looks a lot like a hidden message. More and more questions pile up and with his experience he feels that this is something big. Because that there are hackers who are able to climb over our firewalls and then mess around in our digital safe is completely unthinkable.

Even impossible, he thinks and asks himself the questions: how many pages are there? And what do they add to this one? And what is written? He ponders and lets his brain cells do the work as he opens his eyes wide.

He says out loud, "Who can translate this and is this only aimed at us?" At which point a girl appears around the corner of

his bedroom door and asks if she can help. He completely ignores her.

He himself answers the question of whether Russia is the only victim of this intruder. The leaders of America and China will not cooperate and will answer negatively whether they are bothered by this intruder. Moreover, Joris thinks, it could just be America that is sabotaging us. It would not be the first time ...

He looks gloomily outside where snowflakes are busy darkening the window. His thoughts are already wandering and he is looking at the possibilities to get a quick promotion. Because two years in this position has been enough now, he wants to move up the ladder. The President has hinted that there are possibilities if he performs a feat, because one because of the relationship with his niece was already exceptional. Now he had to prove himself for the next step. He longed for a top position in the Kremlin and was prepared to do anything for it. Anything.

Now he was faced with a case that could get him that job.

the idea of talking to world leaders, because in this time that already has enough political tensions, working with America is a bad idea and his President will certainly not welcome that because a second cold war is not convenient now. He has to smile at the thought that they are also the victims and that we are the only ones with this valuable information. He looks at the report for a moment.

He grumbles: 'That stutterer,' and: 'He's both an idiot and a genius.' With a rough smile on his square face, he turns off the screen and takes off his glasses when comrade Gregor Wladzk enters. Joris looks at him questioningly. Gregor tells him that he had put the file down and asks if he has read it. Joris nods and points him to his desk where the file is and then points with his hand towards the door. Wladzk has understood the signal, turns around and walks away while he thinks: that Joris is an upstart idiot who owes his job to his wife, the President's favourite niece. Wladzk has a different view on things and this time he hopes that his boss will fall flat on his face with all his arrogance. I'll see, he

thinks as he walks to his own room at the end of the corridor, next to the coffee machine, and greets a passing colleague in a friendly manner. He has his doubts about Joris' approach.

Two ranks above Wladzk, and as KGB director in charge of national security, Joris Gdemstov calls his secretary and instructs her to call the President's office for a personal meeting of high urgency. A moment later she tells him that the President is at his country house and that he is available. She also tells him that they are preparing the helicopter.

Joris, suddenly nervous about being taken to the presidential holiday residence by helicopter, stands up, grabs his hat, wraps a blue cashmere tie twice around his neck and puts on his wool coat. He pushes the seven ivory buttons into the buttonholes one by one as he walks to the elevator. At the sixth button he notices that there is a hole missing but because the elevator doors are already opening and two security guards are standing ready to escort him to the entrance where three black cars are parked in front of the building he forgets to button it up.

He gets into the second car and under police escort the three vehicles drive to the airport where a helicopter is waiting to take the delegation to the president's country house. The journey takes about three hours and the helicopter lands in an open space and its passengers walk to a waiting black bus. Joris takes off his coat because the sun is shining brightly here and it is considerably warmer than in Moscow. After a few minutes the bus drives through the gate of the dacha where they are checked and carefully frisked by two heavily armed commandos. He trusts no one.

Friday

The sixty-two-year-old Russian President Leonard Potki, ex-commando, ex of a French model, and ex-KGB agent, is not really looking forward to an interview with this department head because he thinks he should have replaced this middle-class windbag who was pushed up by his father-in-law long ago. But he still needs that father-in-law for another case.

In the garden of their dacha, which is partly in full sun, they are still trying to enjoy the peace and quiet and ice-cold vodka mixed with fresh orange juice when her phone rings. She picks it up and walks towards the shade, at the edge of the property, while talking. Lana, Leo's wife, fifteen years younger than her, ex-hostess and private Spanish teacher for a select group of partners of political leaders, had also imagined something different for this day of rest with her husband and now walks grumpily to the swimming pool where her husband is swimming laps after playing judo. She had a chat with her twenty-two-year-old daughter, who is studying in Lausanne. And it was anything but an amusing chat. She is angry. The girl, Ana, told her mother that she had decided to quit her studies and is planning to go on a backpacking trip with a shady boyfriend.

Her daughter with a Frenchman in his forties who is unknown to her and a backpack around the world. He must have dirty long hair and bad breath. The idea alone makes her furious. How happy Leo will be when he hears about his daughter's plans. The problem with their son Kevin has just been solved and now this. Children. She decides to wait with telling him because a sudden visit from one of his staff leaders during a rest day usually doesn't mean much good. A little further on he climbs out of the pool and dries himself off, and walks over to her a bit nonchalantly and gives her a kiss.

He mumbles: Honey, are you okay? And: You look rather angry.

She reacts indifferently and looks at the sun with her hand above her eyes: 'no, nothing special going on.' And she looks at him as she whispers softly in his ear: 'we'll talk tonight.'

And with a kiss on the hand she turns around and unfastens her top, throws the garment carelessly back and lies down with a deep sigh as he walks in and changes into a more informal but businesslike outfit. He shamelessly lost the judo match with a ten-year-old judoka in possession of a second dan while he himself has a sixth. He is annoyed by this, because the word 'losing' is unknown to him.

He is also upset about the developments in Ukraine that threaten to escalate there because of a new leader who has been helped into the saddle by a power that is still unknown to him, but he strongly suspects that America is behind it and also those ever-disturbing experimental weapons tests that are slowly draining the state treasury. It all bothers him.

And then his faithful right-hand man, the prime minister, is on holiday this very week. He thinks: let Joris' visit be serious. The clock in the hall strikes eleven as the black bus drives up the driveway at high speed with a splash of gravel, the driver braking just as vulgarly as he drives. The rear door flies open before the driver has a chance to operate it properly and according to protocol. The chief executive, Joris, storms out of the vehicle and with military steps he enters the home of the feared head of state, ignoring four heavily armed guards. Leonard, wearing white trainers, black silk tracksuit bottoms and a grey polo with a skull on it, is already waiting for him with a look in his eyes that tells enough about the relationship he has with this person. My cousin's husband is a jerk who cheats on her and cheats on her every time, he thinks angrily.

He says loudly and clearly enunciating: 'let it be important that you honor me with a visit, Comrade Joris Gdemstov.' And: 'follow me.' He follows his boss and takes two men with him, who are however forced to stop on the threshold of the office by a large guard with an appearance and body that strongly resembles a brown bear.

"Sit down." He always speaks first. With a flushed face, the man nods and sits down on an uncomfortable wooden chair.

He says when President Potki is sitting behind his desk and looks at him menacingly: 'Yes, I think I have some important news that I need to tell you.' Then the man, panting, tells the facts and theories and finally hands over a document with a summary. A sheet of paper, of which there is no other. Protocol. The President of Russia immediately shows why he holds this position because he studies the document very quickly, thinks about it and finally writes two names on the back, grumbles something under his

breath and then hands it back with the words: 'put these two agents on it. And make sure that the document is translated as soon as possible. I am afraid that we now have an important indication that there is sabotage at the highest level that is putting the political relations on edge.'

And adds: 'I wouldn't be surprised if the Yankees are behind it and are using some kind of Chinese cover. Same old song, only the melody is different. Ummm, catch the troublemaker better today than tomorrow!'

Just as Joris wants to walk away, Leo calls after him: 'How many pages were actually found?'

Joris answers: 'One, numbered as five, and we don't know how many there are in total. These two officers will have to find out, and he taps the paper in his hands.'

Leo: 'Let them do that first, because I want to see the whole picture.'

And then he turns around like a soldier and disappears into one of the rooms of the dacha. The interview has not even lasted six minutes, which is longer than one is used to. The first thing he does after briefly thinking about the disturbing news is to close the room behind him and immediately pick up the red telephone with the aim of talking to the American President. The time difference leaves him cold and he presses key number 5.

He plans to inform his colleague of the fact that sabotage activities have been traced and wants to hint that Russia has indications to suspect America of it following a seemingly innocent incident. He does not tell what he has actually just heard from Joris, because you should not play your trump card. He wants to wait for the reaction of the American President first. He clears his throat when the phone is answered on the other side of the Ocean after six rings

*

America, Washington, it's still dark there because the sun can't be everywhere at once

His wife is terrified when the phone starts ringing. And after five rings, she pushes the thing against the head of the man who is snoring next to her. Heavily disturbed, he looks at her first and then at the red telephone receiver, and only then pulls the bright orange earplugs out of his ears. He takes the thing from her and calls out: 'Yes?' He knows that it is his colleague in Moscow, because he never pays attention to time zones.

Leo chooses his words carefully and gives the impression that his spy service has made an important discovery. He wants to know if America is also a victim of sabotage. He emphasizes that he is not happy about the diplomatic incident that recently took place in Madrid.

"Hey, uhh Leo!" he says sleepily, and answers diplomatically and with a good dose of sarcasm that things sometimes go wrong in America but are not important enough to call someone in Russia out of bed about. He has to laugh at his own snappy remark but at the same time realizes that Russia also suffers from digital bullying.

A moment later he disconnects the call with the words: 'If I can help you with anything, just call. And: the vodka was top quality this year.'

Leo responds modestly: 'Thanks Jim, and yes, I will certainly do that.' While he thinks to himself: haha, you thought so, stupid Yank, the vodka comes from a supermarket.

When the American President hands the receiver back to his wife, he gets out of bed and thinks about the incident in Madrid. During a diplomatic party at the Russian embassy there, someone from the American delegation made an inappropriate joke. Who was that idiot? He thinks, because it goes without saying that he informs his staff of this conversation, the timing is somewhat unfortunate.

He now speaks with a slightly raised voice: 'it's that time again, we are now accused by Russia of sabotage.' He slides his drawer open a little and sees a bottle of vodka lying there and thinks: that stuff is undrinkable by the way.

In the meantime, the heads of various intelligence services are called in and an activation action takes place so that secret networks focus not only on the suspicion but also on the failure of tests in the military sphere. No reaction comes from China after the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs has asked the Chinese ambassador to respond to this. Of course not, they will never tell how worthless their tests are. The Chinese do things differently. Very differently, without emotion, in silence and always nod in friendly confirmation. Even if that means a denial.

They calmly watch from a distance in the company of a cup of Da-Hong Pao tea the cat out of the tree, without actually having any idea how many cats are in the tree. In turn, Russia has expanded its espionage activities to that country and noticed quite quickly because things are not always going well there either with testing experimental ballistic missiles. The Pacific is not littered with wreckage, but there are increasingly more Chinese missile parts in the fishing nets, which is a thorn in the side of the Japanese fishermen.

The American President closes the drawer and looks less gloomy as the Vice President and two officers report for an emergency meeting.

He begins: 'What worries me most is that Russia is apparently being attacked by someone with a strong arm. Because Leo not only indicated that an American diplomat had let slip something along those lines, but also the fact that the Russians had managed to find an American criminal organization that was carrying out suspicious activities on the arms market under an Asian guise.'

The VC asks him: 'Can you explain that?'

He answers: 'Yes.' And: 'Drunk and intended as a lame joke, an American diplomat accused a Russian colonel of amateurism in the field of launching rockets at a party at the Russian embassy in Madrid. That remark obviously went down the wrong way with all the consequences. In addition, Russia has concrete evidence that sabotage is being committed during their weapons tests. I also heard that he was curious whether we also suffer from sabotage.'

The Russian president only said that it had a 'Chinese touch'. Something that surprises me.'

VC: 'and are there any other facts known about that criminal gang? And my second question is whether we are also under fire from that saboteur?'

President: 'That's a bit more complicated because we haven't mapped out all the failed tests yet and the names of those criminals are rather vague. We will have further research done on that.' And finally: 'VC will provide a plan of action and the diplomat must be transferred.' As soon as everyone has been informed to their satisfaction, they leave the Oval Room. The smell of fear sweat remains lonely behind.

*

At the same time, Leo is thinking about how to deal with these problems and quickly comes up with a scenario that, given his experience as a KGB agent, works much better than, for example, as a civil servant or history teacher on a job carousel.

The active working of his brain also visibly excites him and he walks through his room to the window and looks out with interest and sees that his wife is at that moment bending over at the edge of the pool with her phone in her right hand. The rather provocative attitude of her makes him decide not to waste any time in going to her. Once there, he does not hesitate for a moment and grabs Lana from behind, throws her phone in the grass and tears down her panties after which a fierce lovemaking session follows in which, judging by the sounds, she has multiple orgasms or perhaps even fakes it cleverly. In short, it is an extraordinary achievement for a man in his sixties with only a sixth dan.

The security, muscular men and women one by one, had a smile on their faces for a long time. After all, there are cameras and microphones everywhere, but of course not a word is said about it. The last thing they see is the two of them embraced intimately and their bodies covered in green traces disappearing from view to freshen up a bit in one of the private rooms. But this time it takes longer than usual, because when they sit down together again, completely exhausted and in silk pyjamas at a candlelit

table to have dinner, there is a knock on the door and one of the security guards enters with the request to come to his office because of an urgent matter.

He: 'What now?' is his reaction when his wife tells him to be quiet.

He stands up in annoyance and, pulling his leg, follows the muscle man in the black suit to his room, where he finds one of his secretaries with a smile on her face.

He asks, "What's wrong?"

She: 'Sorry to disturb you during dinner but we have news that will delight you.'

"Huh," he says, somewhat surprised, because that's fast. "What's the news then?"

She: 'We have received information from our spy network that it is likely that both China and America are suffering from a saboteur. And the good news is that we are the only ones who have the information about what could possibly be the source. They have no leads. They have no Johann there.' She smiles and adds: 'The word probably still worries me.'

He doesn't seem surprised, and with a wrinkle of pleasure around his mouth he says, "So?"

She replies: 'There is a saboteur, and a very big one who may not be targeting us alone. It may be a saboteur with a global target. And with the material we have at our disposal, we have a head start on catching them.' She smiles as if her bingo card is full and she is waiting for the grand prize.

He says, "Great, thank you. Can you have us look into what that global goal might be?" And he nods and turns and walks back into the dining room and just hears her say, "I'll pass that on, and have a nice evening, Mr. President."

After dinner it was still late into the night before they decided to go to bed. There was so much to discuss and they actually had not yet figured out how to talk their daughter out of the idea of going on a trip with a complete stranger, an unemployed French guy. He was much tougher in this than his wife, who suggested that they talk to her the coming weekend. He thought that was a

good idea, because the sabotage business kept him busy. His stay in the dacha of five days was shortened to three. The muscle pain and his wife stayed a bit longer.

After the meeting with his President, a cold return trip by helicopter and on the way to the Kremlin, Joris Gdemstov picks up the sheet of paper on which the two names are listed who are charged with the investigation into the saboteur and he is not really surprised that the President has chosen them. They are by far the best, although many people in the Service disagree with him and especially regarding the man in this duo. The woman has a clean file and has not dropped a stitch since her first job interview, and that will never happen, as far as she is concerned. She is dangerously good. He does have a note in his file, and is dangerous and often very good.

Nicolai Vlindyski and Sasha Petrofska.

Both are good friends and enjoy the Russian chief's complete trust, which is rare for this fanatical but exceptionally intelligent ex-KGB officer. But why he has chosen two who have been at odds with each other since an incident is not clear to him and he does not really care, as long as they do their job. He does not notice the smile of his driver, who has been able to follow the button incident and sees that two slots are now empty, because he is busy on the phone with his department.

When the limousine stops in front of the gray building, the security guards jump out of the cars and open the door, after which Joris steps out and walks bravely with his chin up towards the stairs.

Angry and irritated, he jerks the expensive coat when he gets into the elevator and sees in the mirror that his coat is crooked. He jerks it so hard that a few buttons pop off. Arriving in his room, he throws the coat on the floor and sits down and sees a registered letter on his desk. A law firm with a summons for the divorce that his wife has filed for. He grabs the silver picture frame and breaks it in two and throws it in the trash. Furious, he walks out of his room, stops in the hallway at the soda machine, pulls out a cup and fills it with water. And spilling all over the carpet, he returns

to his room and slams the door behind him. It was already getting dark and the staff were leaving when it was still quiet in his room. He was the last to leave and didn't bother to turn off the light in his room.

Saturday

The next morning, it was almost seven o'clock, he was the first on the department and saw out of the corner of his eye that the weekend team was coming in. He ordered one of the people to call the two officers. Impatiently and half an hour later he asks the same employee if the officers involved have already responded to the call.

The employee looks at a screen, nods and raises a finger.

Joris: 'and who?'

"Sasha," is the employee's answer.

"Goddammit," he grumbles, "it's always the same old story with Nicolai." He bellows with a series of vulgar curse words that also makes female civil servants who are sitting within earshot shiver in their seats. What he spews out is actually nothing new to them, nor is what follows.

He: 'you can guess what he's doing. He's fucking whoever!' He spits his bile and the involuntary listeners look at each other in shock. And he continues with: 'they should have gotten rid of him last year, with his sex addiction you can't do this dangerous job properly.' He is undoubtedly very angry and highly frustrated. But he can guess right, which is not surprising, because Nicolai is indeed in bed with a beautiful Asian woman and is fucking her passionately and hard. ... and it's not surprising that he doesn't hear his phone. At that moment, his head is wedged between two creamy-soft female thighs in a luxury hotel in Moscow. Because this happened an hour earlier:

The nostalgic alarm clock, a hideously ugly thing with two bells on top of the clockwork, starts producing so much noise at exactly half past six that it drowns out the traffic noise on the stately Tolstoy Street in freezing cold Moscow. With difficulty but effectively he slams the device into another world with his right

fist and turns over in the large bed. He presses his lower body against the soft flesh of the woman lying next to him and deftly pushes his thing in between her buttocks, after which she reaches a rather exaggeratedly loud orgasm. Then she clamps his head between her legs and in this position his phone on the dining table starts to ring annoyingly. A message follows quickly as soon as the ringing stops.

Before he left his house early this morning he whispered to his wife, 'I have to get an early start and I think I'll be home for dinner.' She is a successful lawyer and looks at him dreamily as he sneaks out of the room after a tender goodbye kiss and throws a kiss on the hand to his sleeping children through the cracks of the open doors, then goes outside where a taxi is waiting to take him to a hotel where an exotic woman with a slightly tinted skin color is waiting for him.

A moment later he rolls off her sweaty and gives her a firm slap on her bottom. With his muscular arms, he can easily lift four puds (a pud is a Russian weight of forty pounds), he slowly pulls her up and lifts her and carries her to the bathroom covered in pink Italian marble and puts her down in the shower where they wash each other. Afterwards and with a soft white towel he dries her carefully and kisses her neck and pushes her roughly onto the bed and buries his head between her spread legs when his phone buzzes. She has become so wet that he slides his tongue up slobbering, along and teasingly bites her nipples. She moans loudly as he thrusts his stiff member hard into her and after two times he comes growling like a horse. Then they stay like that for a while until he goes limp and slides out of her. What she would like now is a cigarette, but she stopped smoking a while ago. But right now I'd kill for a cigarette, she thinks. He stands up and walks to the table and grabs his phone and is shocked.

After which he immediately dresses hastily without saying a word.

Sweaty and wrapped in a towel, she asks in an oriental accent: 'Nicolai, what's wrong?'

He doesn't answer and continues dressing. She knows something is wrong because she knows him well enough and the first thing

she thinks: his wife has discovered us. And that would not only be a personal disaster but also have far-reaching consequences for his work.

She twitches her lip in a restless and irritated manner and shouts, "I asked you something!"

He grunts and looks around hastily and says, "They've discovered something that's apparently important enough to ruin my mood, and I need to get to base right away." He throws the towel on the bed in a fit of rage and jumps when there's a knock on the door.

She sees his reaction and thinks: I've never seen him startle before. Provocatively swaying her hips, she walks to the door and sees that it's room service with their breakfast. On the trolley decorated with orchids is the zavtrak. A Russian breakfast with kalatsch (white bread), sausage, cheese, jam, rice with a meatball, and oladjis filled with honey and sour cream. A bottle of champagne, not her brand, a small jug of vodka and a crystal carafe of freshly squeezed orange juice, a can of Beluga caviar and napkins with silver cutlery. They quickly eat something else and before she has filled the first glass with bubbles he gets up and makes to leave. She is thirsty. He is in a hurry. She is crazy about Nicolai because he is strong and has a special sense of humor. However, she doubts whether she is in love with him because he is not pure to the bone. The kinky sex with him is actually a carnal need and the only thing they share together.

She: 'Will I see you today or tomorrow? Because then we can continue where we left off.'

He seems irritated and reacts curtly: 'well, I have no idea what awaits me, but I will let you know soon. In any case, I want that too, so see you soon.' And grabs her head and gives her a kiss on the mouth and tastes her sweet sensuality.

The muscular and impressively trained handsome man, forty-five years old with dark brown wavy hair and a scar above his right eye, leaves the hotel room in a hurry after a quick kiss, a sandwich with caviar in his hand, sloppily dressed in an expensive suit. The chambermaid, who is vacuuming in the hallway, looks at him

flirtatiously. He looks past her and she is immediately disappointed because she would like to have sex with this handsome man for an hour.

Special Agent Nikolai Vlindyski steps into a taxi waiting in front of the majestic hotel a little later. He sits down, closes the door and the vehicle starts moving. He quickly realizes that he has forgotten his phone. He thinks: Damn it! And when he also spills caviar on his pants, he almost jumps out of his skin with anger. The driver is startled and looks anxiously in his mirror. The time pressure forces him to make a decision very quickly and orders the taxi driver to drive on. When the car stops in front of a gray building with few windows, he quickly gets out after paying the driver and accelerates his pace towards the stairs. In the hall he immediately orders the receptionist on duty to pick up his phone at a hotel, the name of which he writes on a piece of paper. Then he quickly walks to the elevators and stands still as if petrified when he sees her. A slim woman with reddish brown hair, in a dark gray tight-fitting suit that shows off her cleavage and black shiny pumps with high heels. His eyes focus almost immediately on her breasts and then up to her eyes. He is almost drooling. She recognizes his gaze and automatically pulls her coat closed and stands like a cool businesswoman looking at him with a look as if she is on her period.

She snaps, "Are you looking for my cross?"

He: 'you what?'

She: 'My gold chain with a cross that I often wear between my tits. It's still on my nightstand, because I was woken up by our boss and went straight here. As protocol dictates. And if you want to know, I slept naked and alone.'

He: 'Well, you haven't changed at all. And do you sleep alone?'

She: 'You haven't changed a bit either. And yes, I can control my desires better than you.' He is immediately one zero behind, and knows from the past that winning an argument with Sasha remains a challenge.

Ping.

After almost two years, they are facing each other again and immediately have an argument. In an elevator. He presses the button with nine and meets her finger in the same place. She pulls hers back irritated. Floor nine, not yet the highest but where the highest bosses have their offices.

During the journey up they barely look at each other and don't speak a word. He looks nonchalantly in the mirror and fiddles with his hair. She checks whether the manicure has done its job properly.

Ping.

Both follow the same route and she walks a few meters ahead of him, and when they stop at the same door at the same time they realize that there is a chance that they have been called for the same assignment. Her look makes you suspect the worst. He looks different and somewhat pleasantly surprised.

She clearly finds the meeting with him uncomfortable. He takes the initiative and makes a blunt attempt to be friendly, which misses the mark completely because she reacts irritated. He knocks on the door and opens it to let her go first, which she ignores. He steps in first, greets a heavy-set man in an impressive uniform covered with medals and decorations, and his short-cropped gray hair and a few scars on his cheek suggest that he is a great military man. Behind gold-rimmed glasses are cat-like eyes that light up when he looks at Nikolai, and soften when he directs them at her. He begins to explain in a tone of voice why he has invited them with the utmost urgency. He has reserved an hour for this and afterwards they shake hands and are about to leave when he asks Nicolai to stay a little longer.

When he closes the door behind him a little later with a red face, he sees her sitting in the hallway. She has been waiting for him and knows that he has been called to account for the fact that he responded too late to the call, which will undoubtedly earn him a note in his file. The second.

He whispers to her: 'That Joris is a filthy bastard who always walks around with a hard-on and is horny for more power. Which makes him blind when it comes to important decisions.'

She laughs heartily and says: 'Yes, you think like a stupid guy Nikolai. Those macho men want more power and often have a hard dick in their pants that they don't just put in their own wife.' She winks but sets the tone.

She asks him with a sarcastic melody in her voice: 'so? Was it worth fucking a baroness, a lady or a slutty whore this morning, Nikolai? Or was it a boy this time?' After which he looks at her like a child who has been caught stealing an apple. He mumbles something unintelligible and looks uncomfortably the other way. Together they then walk silently through the hallway and stop at a room with number 423. Gallantly he holds the door open for her and they take a seat in the room where gray metal filing cabinets and a steel desk with three bright blue office chairs are. Two cans of energy drink, a notepad and two pencils with sharp points lie on the cold-feeling desktop.

He is still unshaven and looks a bit haggard with part of his shirt hanging out of his pants and smelling of a combination of hotel shampoo and an expensive brand of women's perfume, which she recognizes immediately. She is groomed to perfection and you can see that she exercises a lot. As always. Relatively little is known about her other than that she is an orphan of forty-one, five feet seventy-six, an oval head with beautiful wavy, medium-length reddish-brown hair, green eyes, high cheekbones, small ears, pointed nose, white but not bleached teeth, full lips and a divine body that needs no further explanation. How she lost her parents and family is known only to the head of the Service. She belongs to the top who masters the Eastern martial art IAI-DO and can perform all four elements in this branch of sport flawlessly. She blocks any possible intimate contact with him to protect herself but also not to threaten his marriage to Olena because she detests that. The filthy bastard just cheats every day, she thinks. And not only that.

She will never forget the look in the eyes of the six-year-old boy who accidentally walked past him when he pulled the trigger, and she has never forgiven him for killing that child. The scars on her