

PUZZLED

by

Seraphina Michelina Aurelia Bogomolova-Huotelin

Author: Seraphina Michelina Aurelia Bogomolova-Huotelin
www.seraphimabogomolova.com

© Copyright 2015-2025 Seraphina Bogomolova

Prologue

I've made a wish: if we ever meet again, I'll tell you something. Something I meant to tell you, but I hadn't. I guess, I was afraid...

Chapter One

'There is a distance, a veil between us.'

- Erich Maria Remarque, All Quiet on the Western Front, Ch. 6

Episode 1 – Acquaintance (Lina)

Notting Hill, London, UK, 6 June

It is summer but the rain drizzles tirelessly, all day covering rooftops and pavements with its shimmering net.

I get out of the tube, open my umbrella and hurry off along the High Street. Reaching the entrance of the café, I stop and peer in - the place seems deserted. I push the door and walk in. Inside, small round tables line up along the walls. I choose one close to the bar counter. Placing my umbrella on the floor, I sit down, perching on the chair.

I'm five minutes late. He couldn't have left already, could he? I take my raincoat off and look around – the cafe is not only bare of clients, but waiters are also nowhere to be seen. 'What a strange place', I wonder and sit down, this time, trying to take on more confident posture.

Some time passes.

Outside, the rain is still drizzling. I pull my smartphone out and put it on the table. Thoughts - one strangest than the other – start whirling in my head. I grab the menu and stare at it. Running my eyes over the list, I try to take my mind off *him*.

Out of the unseen depth of the cafe a waiter in a white t-shirt and shabby blue jeans appears.

'Are you ready to order?' he asks and stares at me.

Startled, I stare back at him.

'Not yet.' I reply after a pause.

The waiter shrugs indifferently and disappears, leaving me alone again.

I put the menu down and look at the clock hanging above the bar. Almost an hour has passed since my arrival. 'I must have mixed up with the dates', I think and call *his* number. Something clicks and an automated message informs me: '*The number is out of reach.*'

Episode 2 – Nicolas (Lina)

London, UK, 24 December

Outside, big fluffy snowflakes silently swirl in a magical dance. In the windows of an Edwardian house across the street a tall Christmas tree is visible. Hanging on its prickly paws are golden apples and walnuts, red bows and coloured nets with sweetmeats. Glittering in its glory, the tree twinkles merrily at me.

The church bells chime in the distance. I move away from the window. An aroma of a pine tree and oranges wafts in the air. I throw a pleased glance at the Christmas tree, flickering in the dimness of my living room. A big shiny bauble on a lower branch catches my eye. The snowy Rockefeller Square¹ is skilfully depicted on it. Looking at it, I think of my friends scattered around the world. ‘What are they up to right now?’ I ponder and, taking my iPad, curl up on the sofa.

My inbox has new messages. I scan them quickly. Mostly Christmas wishes but one email stands out. Intrigued, I click on the message. It opens up.

The doorbell rings. I leap off the sofa and rush out into the hall.

The door opened, a frosty wind blows a handful of prickly snowflakes into my face. At the doorstep Nicolas stands, a Russian *ushanka-hat* on his head and a bottle of French wine in his hands.

‘Hey, you’re early.’ I say.

‘Right on time, as agreed, at seven,’ he replies, presenting me with the bottle.

‘Thanks. I must have been in my dreams then.’

‘Yeah, you must have been. The happy don’t keep account of time, as one of your Russian classics said once.’

‘Do you mean Alexander Griboyedov²?’

‘Yes,’ Nicolas says, pulling his hat off, and walks in, ‘that phrase is the only legacy left to me by my ex, a devotee of Russian classics.’

‘And the hat?’ I ask with a smile.

‘And the hat too ... ’

¹ Rockefeller Square is a complex of 19 commercial buildings covering 22 acres (89,000 m²) between 48th and 51st streets in New York City, United States. Built by the Rockefeller family, it is located in the centre of Midtown Manhattan, spanning the area between Fifth Avenue and Sixth Avenue.

² Alexander Sergeyevich Griboyedov (January 15, 1795 – February 11, 1829) - a Russian diplomat, playwright, poet, and composer.

I leave him in the hall and head to the kitchen.

Episode 3 - What Girl? (Luke)

Monte Carlo, France, 24 December

Before me, the sea stretches out into the horizon. Above it, the dark purple clouds hang low in the sky. I hear gusts of wind, crashing against the French windows of my room. With every gust the glass trembles and sweats down glistening droplets of rain.

I sit at the desk, cocooned by the soft glow of the candle standing by my laptop. The sound of rushed footsteps and lifted voices is coming from downstairs. Tonight, *maman* is throwing a big reception: her annual Christmas dinner. If it were for me, I wouldn't attend it. I really hate 'talking' to the girls of her friends, pretending to be interested in nonsense they utter at me.

Directing my thoughts towards more positive subject, I Google the name, which by now has become so dear to me, and scroll through the links. A site that seems interesting catches my eye. I click on the link and start reading an article *she* has written.

The door opens and in marches *maman*.

'Mum, why on earth you can never knock?' I cry out, deleting the page from the laptop screen.

'What an annoying habit to sit in darkness,' she says and turns the light on.

I squint.

'*Chéri*³, why are you sitting at your desk, not ready? The guests will be arriving in half an hour and, apparently, you haven't been to shower yet!'

'I can't care less for your ludicrous guests,' I say.

'These, as you call them, ludicrous guests are the most influential families of Monaco. At your age, I was already engaged and you don't even have a decent girl!'

'What girl?' I reply.

'Don't play stupid. You know what I mean!'

'All-right. But what has it got to do with anything?' I ask, stand up and turn the light down.

'It has to do with everything, because all you do is stare into your stupid computer and listen to your stupid music,' she cries out, her diamonds fiercely sparkling in the candlelight.

³ Chéri (French) - dear, darling.

A furiously sparkling Christmas tree ... I turn away, trying not to burst into laughter.

‘Luke, you don't listen to me at all!’

Episode 4 - The Number of The Beast (Lina)

London, UK, 24 December

‘Shall I keep my shoes on?’ Nicolas shouts to me from the hall.

‘As you wish,’ I shout back, ‘but if you decide to take them off, I have some slippers you can choose from ... ‘

‘Do you need any help?’ he asks, walking into the kitchen.

‘No, thanks, it's fine. Mum's cook took care of everything this afternoon. She said just to heat it up whenever we wish,’ I reply.

‘I’ve got a little present for you,’ Nicolas hands me a shiny red package, tied up with a golden ribbon.

‘Thank you, I’ve something for you too,’ I say and take the present to the living room, putting it under the Christmas tree.

Coming back, I find Nicolas sitting at the bar-table, studying his reflection in the polished pans, hanging above his head.

I peek inside the oven. The roasted duck is warming up nicely. I take out plates and start arranging steamed vegetables and boiled potatoes on them.

‘Do you know anything about *The Number of The Beast*?’ I ask Nicolas, finishing with the vegetables and moving to French cheeses.

‘What do you need that for? Are you into occultism now?’

‘No, I’m not, just being curious. I heard about it once from an acquaintance of mine. ‘

‘I see,’ Nicolas nods, ‘well, as far as I know, ‘*The Number of The Beast*’ has got something to do with the name of the Antichrist that corresponds to a certain numerical value. The ‘mark’ can be identified by either the beast's name, or the numerical of his name. For example, Friedrich von Hezel believed that Napoleon Bonaparte ⁴ was such a ‘beast’.

‘Are you sure?’ I ask.

‘Sure, about what?’ he looks up at me.

‘Well, you know, about the ‘beast’ thing ... ‘

⁴ Napoleon Bonaparte - born Napoleone di Buonaparte, (15 August 1769 – 5 May 1821) was a French military and political leader who rose to prominence during the latter stages of the French Revolution and its associated wars.

'Oh, it isn't I it is gematria⁵. But, personally, I'm more inclined towards an idealist view,' Nicolas replies.

'And what that would be?'

'And that would be more of a symbolic, figurative, meaning. The common suggestion is that seven is a number of completeness and is associated with divine and six is a number of incompleteness. In other words, the number of the beast can represent an individual's incomplete or immature spiritual state.'

'What about the value itself?' I ask.

'What about it?'

'Well, what's the number that represents the numerical value of the *'beast'*?'

'The triple 6,' he replies.

'Do you mean 6-6-6?'

'Yes,' Nicolas nods.

⁵ Gematria - an Assyro-Babylonian system of numerology later adopted by Jews that assigns numerical value to a word or phrase in the belief that words or phrases with identical numerical values bear some relation to each other or bear some relation to the number itself as it may apply to a person's age, the calendar year, or the like.

Episode 5 - Cross My Heart! (Luke)

Monte Carlo, France, 24 December

The argument with *maman* leaves me no time for shower. I quickly brush my teeth and gel my hair, trying to style my waves into something that can resemble a gentleman's look. But instead, make it worse: the hair becomes sticky and greasy. I curse and pull on my tux, the starched collar of my shirt biting beastly into my neck. Grabbing the white bow-tie, I fix it as I run down the stairs.

In the hall, lit by the crystal chandelier, *maman*, the most charming smile attached to her rouged lips, greets arriving guests. I try to slip by her unnoticed, but fail.

‘Luke, darling,’ she catches me halfway, ‘would you please say hello to Baron Von Witte. He hasn't had the pleasure of seeing you recently.’

Reluctantly, I approach a group of newly arrived guests. Having shaken hands with the Baron, I plan on a quick escape, but *maman* grabs me by the arm and pulls me aside.

‘What's wrong with you?’ she whispers, glancing at my hair.

‘Nothing, unlike with some of your honourable guests,’ I reply, nodding in the direction of one of the Baron's daughters.

‘Please, behave!’

‘Yes, sure.’

She gives me a disapproving stare.

‘Mum, honestly. Cross my heart!’ I say.

‘Stop this nonsense at once, will you!’

‘Mum, relax, it's just a ...’ I begin, but at this moment another group of guests arrive and she rushes towards them, leaving me alone.

I breathe a sigh of relief, straighten my bow-tie and head to the reception room, open and decorated for the tonight's festivity. Flames glaring on guests' faces, the fire crackles merrily in a huge fireplace. Beside it, a tall Christmas tree is erected. The colourful baubles shine on its fluffy paws. A scent of expensive perfumes mixed with the smell of cigars and pine tree wafts in the air.

I grab two glasses of champagne from a waiter's tray and gulp them down. Immediately feeling better, I throw a curious look around the room, but find little of interest: all the same faces, nothing of stimulating or inspiring nature.

‘Excuse me,’ I hear somebody's mutter behind me.

I turn around meeting the eyes of a skinny girl, wearing some ridiculous haute couture dress.

‘Yes?’ I say.

‘Would you mind if I take a picture of you?’ she utters.

‘No, I wouldn’t,’ I lie.

Episode 6 - To Love (Lina)

London, UK, 24 December

I put Christmas dishes out on the table, place snowy starched napkins by our plates and light up candles.

We sit down. Nicolas takes a bottle of red wine in his hands.

'Why are you alone this Christmas?' he asks, inserting an opener into the cork.

'I'm not alone, I'm with you.'

Nicolas looks up at me.

'Are you flirting with me?'

'No, just poking fun at you. But seriously, I just thought that, for a change, I could spend Christmas here in London,' I say.

'What about New Year's Eve? Set for Russia?' he asks.

'Missed again. French Riviera.'

'Didn't know you had friends there,' he says, his eyebrows arching in surprise.

'I don't. At least, no one I can call that really. Just couple of people I'm acquainted with.'

Abruptly, he pulls the cork out and spills some wine on his jeans. I throw my napkin to him. He catches it and starts vigorously rubbing the stain, only making it worse.

'Here,' I say, pushing salt to him, 'spice it up, it should work better.'

'I doubt it.' Nicolas says gloomily.

'Oh, really?' I smile, 'any evidence to proof otherwise?'

He sends me a glaring look and throws my napkin back at me.

'Any good toasts in store?' he asks, pouring the wine into our glasses.

I think for a second then say: 'Let's drink to sparkles in the eyes, to soft vibrations of the heart, to gentle kisses in the moonlight, to tight embraces of the loved ones. In other words, to love, the one that is heavenly, but true and real.'

'Beautifully said, I have nothing to add'.

We raise our glasses and bring them together. Clinking, they meet in a crystal kiss.

Episode 7 – An Old Friend (Luke)

Monte Carlo, France, 24 December

The room is now filled up, an invitation to dinner is announced. The red dots of their cigars flickering and the diamonds sparkling, laughing and chatting, *maman*'s invitees start flowing into the dining room.

I find my place and sit down. Thank God, this year the 'honour' of being seated next to the Von Witter daughters has been passed to somebody else. I glance to my right, where an elderly gentleman, cigar in his mouth, sits. I look discreetly at his card. It says: 'Monsieur Moreau'.

The gentleman smiles and gives me a slight nod.

The chair on my left is unoccupied. I hope that it will stay this way for the rest of the dinner, but out of curiosity check the name of the missing guest on the card. It reads: 'Mademoiselle Du Monde'.

'May I introduce myself?' I hear the elderly gentleman on my right addressing me. Not waiting for my reply, he extends his hand to me and adds: 'Jacques Moreau.'

'Nice to meet you, Monsieur Moreau.' I reply, taking his hand.

He gives me a firm handshake.

'And you must be Luke Edward Allen, the son of our marvellous hostess,' he says.

'That is right. But how do you know?' I ask, surprised.

'Well, firstly, your name's written on your card, and secondly, you're an exact copy of your mother, whom I've had the great pleasure of knowing for years.'

'How bizarre ... She's never told me about you.' I mutter.

'Nothing is bizarre about it, *mon ami*⁶. There are certain things that parents prefer to keep to themselves.'

'Like what?'

'Like the fact of our friendship,' he replies.

'But this can be regarded as a lie!' I cry out.

'Yes, perhaps it can be. But permit me to note that your mother, like you or anyone else, is entitled to her own private life.'

'Oh yes, but why then, entitled as she is, she nonetheless has seated you and me together?' I say, annoyed.

⁶ Mon ami (French) – my friend.

'Well, perhaps, because she wanted two of us to finally meet each other,' he replies and takes a deep draw on his cigar.

Bottles in hands, waiters begin their rounds, pouring red and white wine. The sound of exited chatter, laughter and clinking of crystal glasses flows across the room.

'*Mon ami*,' says Monsieur Moreau, raising his glass, 'may I suggest a toast?'

'Sure,' I nod.

'Let's drink to the essence of all essences without which our life would lack true meaning.'

'And what would that very essence of all essences be?' I enquire.

'And that, my dear boy, would be love.'

Episode 8 – Perplexed (Lina)

London, UK, 24 December

Savouring another piece of pudding, I think how lucky I am. If it were not for Nicolas, I'd sit here all alone, stuffing myself with the Mum's cook culinary work of art.

I hear the deep resonating sounds of the church clock striking midnight.

'It's late. Fancy staying over?' I say to Nicolas, stretched out on the sofa before the fireplace.

He nods.

I make his bed in a guest room, hand him a towel and, wishing him goodnight, go back to the living room. Blowing candles off, I come to the window and look out. The Edwardian house is now enveloped in darkness. The inhabitants must have gone to bed already. In the dimness of the room, broken by the glinting of the Christmas lights, I peer out into the night and think of *him* again.

Months have passed since our 'date', but I'm still perplexed in regard to why *he* stood me up. After all, it was *he* who had arranged the rendezvous.

The answer must be dead simple, staring me in the eye. But with so much time spent trying to figure it out, I still don't see it.

After the 'date', *he* wrote a rather strange email to me, mentioning '*The Number of The Beast*', and then disappeared into nowhere as quickly as *he* appeared from somewhere. What does this number have to do with our date anyway? Suppose, it refers to some biblical apocalyptic beast, suppose, it even identifies the Antichrist, and what?

Anyway, why does it still bother me so much?

The church clock strikes the hour. The midnight mass over, devoted parishioners are flocking out of the church onto the street.

I watch snowflakes dance in the dim light of street-lamps for a little while then come to my Christmas tree. Taking the present Nicolas has brought me, I look at it, tempting myself. 'I could open it right now', I think. The Christmas Day has already arrived. But then I change my mind. What am I? A kid? Surely, I can wait till breakfast. I put the present back under the tree and walk out of the room.

Episode 9 - The Possible and The Impossible (Luke)

Monte Carlo, France, 24 December

The dinner is in full swing, but the place of ‘Mademoiselle Du Monde’ remains unoccupied.

An odd thought flashes across my mind: ‘What if we are somehow connected?’ I glance at her chair again. But what is there to be connected to? The chair? Or the black card with her name embossed in gold? Besides, I’ve never seen her in my life and most likely will never see her in the future. And yet, her absence seems to hold some power over me.

I must have drunk too much. Or it must have been the toast about love that Monsieur Moreau intrigued me with. Either way, I keep on thinking of possible ‘what if’ scenarios.

‘My dear Luke, you appear to be tormented by something.’ I hear Monsieur Moreau addressing me.

‘No, why?’ I reply, trying to focus on my dessert, a *crème brûlée*⁷ that I can’t stand.

‘Forgive me, but I couldn’t help but notice that while talking to me you kept throwing rather interested glances at the chair on your left.’

My cheeks turn red.

‘I didn’t know you could read people’s mind,’ I say.

‘I can’t, but it is written all over your face.’

‘Really?’ intrigued, I look up at him.

He meets my eyes and, drawing deeply on his cigar, lets the smoke out through his nostrils.

‘Yes, really,’ he nods.

Putting his cigar aside, Monsieur Moreau takes up his coffee cup and raises it to his lips. A diamond of his cufflink flickers knowingly at me.

We sit in silence for a short while. Monsieur Moreau finishes his coffee then says: ‘If I were you, I’d take the card and would find out as much as possible about this

⁷ Crème brûlée, also known as burnt cream, crema catalana, or Trinity cream, is a dessert consisting of a rich custard base topped with a contrasting layer of hard caramel.

mysterious guest... In fact, I'd find everything possible and even the impossible about her.'

With these words he stands up and stretches his hand out to me. Jumping to my feet, I give it a shake, then grab the card and slip it into the pocket of my trousers.

Episode 10 - Déjà Vu (Luke)

Monte Carlo, France, 24 December

It is midnight. Finally, *maman*'s guests start leaving. The dining room deserted, the only signs of their presence left are the unfinished wine in crystal glasses, heaps of creased napkins, and remnants of melted candles on the tables.

I go up to my room. The storm has calmed down, but the droplets of rain haven't dried out on the windows yet. I take off my tux, untie the bow and undo the collar of the shirt, finally freeing my neck from its starched clutch.

Lying down on the bed, I take the card out and study the name written on it. 'Where could I have possibly heard it before?' I think. But no matter how much I try, I don't seem to be able to recall anything of relevant nature. Yet, I somehow feel that I know the woman whose name is embossed in gold on the card. Though, I don't think I've ever met anyone called '*Mademoiselle Du Monde*', at least not at the dinners, suppers or balls that have been organised by *maman*. And even outside these 'festivities' I don't remember meeting such a person. Unless, without me having realised it, our life paths happened to cross somehow.

I, of course, can enquire about it of *maman*. But chances are, she will misinterpret my intent. I'd better deal with it myself, I decide.

Hearing the knock on the door, I slip the card back into my pocket. The door opens a crack and in peers *maman*.

'*Chéri*, are you asleep?' she asks.

'Not yet.'

She enters the room.

'You've been such a darling tonight,' she says.

I give her a grin.

'You know, Monsieur Moreau is quite taken with you!'

'Likewise. By the way, why haven't you introduced him to me before?' I ask.

'Oh, there hasn't ever been a right moment. He travels a lot, you know, and doesn't visit Monaco often ...'

'I see,' I mutter, not looking at her.

She comes to my bed and gives me a kiss on the forehead.

'Good-night, sweetheart.'

'Good-night, Mum.'

She leaves the room. I turn the light down and, staring into the darkness for a while, listen to the silence of the house, pondering over the name of the stranger who seems so familiar, then pull the blanket over my head and fall asleep.

Chapter Two

'It's just a drop in the ocean

A change in the weather

I was praying that you and I might end up together.'

- Ron Pope, A Drop in The Ocean

Episode 11 - Santa Claus (Luke)

Monte Carlo, France, 25 December

The curtains undrawn, the bright sunlight is flooding into my room.

Stretching, I throw the blanket on to the floor and spring off the bed. In the bathroom, my sleepy face, the hair is sticky and dishevelled, glances back at me from the mirror. I turn away and, pulling my clothes off, step under the shower.

In the dining room, *maman*, as fresh as daisy, sits at the head of a large walnut table, polished to a gleaming shine. On her right, Monsieur Moreau is seated. It seems he has never left the house.

'Good morning, darling,' *maman* greets me, a wide smile attached to her lips.

'Good morning,' I reply and seat myself opposite Monsieur Moreau.

My appearance seems to have interrupted their somewhat intimate conversation. Shunning their gazes, I pour myself some coffee and start on my bacon and eggs breakfast.

'Did you sleep well?' *maman* breaks the silence.

'Quite well, merci,' I answer, not looking at her.

'*Chéri*, I've invited Monsieur Moreau to spend Christmas with us. Hope you don't mind.'

'No, not at all, on the contrary ... It'll break our usual routine.'

'Luke, dear, what on earth do you mean by that?' she cries out.

'I think Monsieur Luke might have meant that guests bring an element of a surprise into family holidays, making them more delightful,' Monsieur Moreau joins in.

I nod in agreement.

The rest of breakfast passes in a solemn silence. Finished, we move into the sitting room where a glitzy pyramid of gifts towers under the fluffy Christmas tree, a miniature version of the one in the reception room.

Maman sits down on the sofa, her legs crossed. I flop into an armchair. Monsieur Moreau, cigar in mouth, comes and stands by the fireplace.

'My dear Rosalinda,' he addresses *maman*, 'may I take on a role of Santa Claus in this house today?'

'But of course! I'd be delighted. Usually, I'm the one who have to play this role.' she replies with a laugh.

'Very well,' he says, 'then I'd like to start with Monsieur Luke Edward Allen.'

Episode 12 – Classic (Luke)

Monte Carlo, France, 25 December

Approaching the Christmas tree, Monsieur Moreau reaches out behind it and draws out a box, in height levelling his chest. His arms wrapped around it, he comes over to my armchair and places the box before me.

'Here, my dear friend,' he says, 'I hope this gift will mark the beginning of your journey in the fascinating world of music.'

Intrigued, I examine the box, then rip the golden wrapping paper off it and open it. Inside, I find a Fender electric guitar, brand new, still smelling of fresh lacquer - a real classic. Carefully, I pull it out and, laying it on my lap, stroke it gently.

'Thank you so much, Monsieur Moreau,' I say full of delight. 'I've always wanted to have one just like that ... '

He smiles and goes back to the Christmas tree.

Soon, the pyramid of now-opened presents is transferred onto the sofa and the Persian carpet in front of the fireplace becomes littered with colourful sparkling bits of wrapping paper.

'And now, time for a glass of sherry,' *maman* announces and gets up.

She walks out of the room, leaving me *tête-à-tête* with Monsieur Moreau. I take the opportunity and venture out with a question: 'Monsieur Moreau, why are you being so kind to me?'

'Well, *mon ami*,' he replies, 'firstly, because you're Rosalinda's son, and secondly, I find a great pleasure in pleasing others, if I may say so.'

'Are you saying that you've given me this guitar purely for the pleasure of pleasing my Mum?' I ask.

'No, of course not, I was trying to say that ... ' he begins, but falls silent, as *maman* walks in, followed by a maid, carrying a tray with three sherry glasses on it.

We each pick a glass, filled with golden brown liquor.

'Merry Christmas!' *maman* intones, raising her glass.

'Merry Christmas!' we echo in unison.

Episode 13 - A Snapshot (Luke)

Monte Carlo, France, 25 December

I drink up my cherry, take the guitar and leave, releasing Monsieur Moreau and *maman* from my presence.

Back in my room, I lean the precious instrument against the wall and open my laptop. Scanning new messages, I look for *her* reply. Not seeing it, I look over the messages again, this time, going through them one by one, but still no luck. Just to be sure, I also check my spam box. Nothing there either.

I begin to jump aimlessly from one social media site to another. Landing on my Facebook page, I pause and scribble a sentence about the best Christmas present ever - my Fender guitar. 'I'll post a snapshot of it later', I think, reading comments and updates of my Facebook 'friends'. I'm about to leave the page when a photograph tagged with my name catches my eye.

'What the heck?' I stare at it in disbelief.

The photograph pictures me locked in an embrace with that same skinny girl, who begged me for a mobile snapshot at yesterday's dinner.

The image must have been photoshopped ... Below it, her comment is attached. '*My beau Luke. Together forever*', I read and break out in a cold sweat.

Is she out of her mind?

I attempt to raid her Facebook profile, but it is locked for 'non-friends'. Her name doesn't look familiar, so I Google it. The girl turns out to be a 'bikini model', whose photos occasionally end up on the covers of FHM and other mags of that ilk.

What on earth possessed *maman* to invite her to the Christmas reception? And I? What was I thinking when I let this 'bikini girl' take a picture of me?

I groan and drop my head into my hands, tears welling up in my eyes. Grabbing my jacket, I dash out of the room and down the stairs.

The library stands open, the voices of *maman* and Monsieur Moreau wafting out of it. *Maman's* milky highland terrier rolls out of the room, rushing towards me, his tail wiggling.

'Mum, I'll take Domino for a walk,' I shout and sprint out the house, slamming the door behind me.

Episode 14 - The Magician (Lina)

London, UK, 25 December

I wake up, tiptoe to the window and peer out. The frosty city, painted white, greets my sight. The air is clear and still. It seems the '*Father Frost*⁸ has done his job and retired for the day. I throw a glance at the Edwardian house, checking for my friendly tree in its windows. It is there, flickering ever enthusiastically at me.

After breakfast, I remind Nicolas it is time to open our gifts. Not that there are awfully many, just two, his and mine. My Mum never got used to celebrating Christmas and true to her Soviet past still prefers to exchange presents on the New Year's Eve instead of Christmas Day.

'Who will be the Father Frost?' I ask.

'I suppose, I ought to gentlemanly pass this role to you,' Nicolas replies.

I come to the Christmas tree, pick up a box from the floor and hand it to Nicolas.

'Here is one for you. You know, from the Father Frost,' I wink, 'I had a teeny-weeny peek inside and hope you will like it ... '

He takes his present and, carefully unwrapping it, gets out a deck of Renaissance Tarocchi cards. His face lights up. I take it as a sign of him liking my present. Fanning the deck on the table, Nicolas fishes out a card and proclaims: 'And here's your Arcana for the next year! Or should I say a divinatory significance?'

He turns the face of the card to me. It depicts the Magician in a long red robe, a wand raised towards the heaven in his right hand, the infinity symbol over his head, and an ouroboros⁹ belt on his waist. The figure stands amidst flowers. On the table in front of the Magician are laid out a Cup, a Coin, and a Sword.

'So, what does this all mean, then?' I ask with a smile.

Nicolas turns the face of the card back to him and studies it thoughtfully for a little while.

⁸ Father Frost (Ded Moroz in Russian) - is a Slavic fictional character similar to that of Father Christmas. The literal translation is "Old Man Frost," often translated as "Grandfather Frost." Ded Moroz brings presents to children and often delivers them in person on New Year's Eve.

⁹ Ouroboros – a tail-devouring snake, an ancient symbol depicting a serpent or dragon eating its own tale.

'Well, it means that there's a certain cyclicity in the manifestation and cultivation of your desires. Beware! You have a tendency of overdoing on self-reflexivity.'

'Really?' I say with a laugh and get my present from under the Christmas tree. Last night, when examining it, I had already guessed what it was. The shape of the present hinted at a book.

I rip the wrapping paper off it and get out a volume in a dark-green velvety cover. Its title reads: '*The History of Metaphysics and The Life's Great Mysteries.*'

Episode 15 - My Dearest (Lina)

London, UK, 25 December

'What a wonderful present! Thank you so much!' I say, flipping through the book, 'I love books and this one seems to be a special one.'

'Oh yes, it looked like it,' nods Nicolas, 'I saw it in one of the antique shops and thought you might like it ... '

He collects his Tarocchi cards from the table and stands up.

'I must go.'

I take Nicolas to the hall and kiss him good-bye. His bristled cheek gives me a tickle. He puts on his Russian *ushanka-hat* and starts out, slowly walking away. A ribbon of fresh footprints trails behind him in the snow.

'Merry Christmas!' I shout after him.

Turning around, Nicolas waves and shouts back: 'Merry Christmas!'

I close the door and stand a little while in the hall then head to the dining room and start clearing the table. As I'm arranging plates in the dishwasher I think of what Nicolas half-jokingly has predicted for me. What did he say? 'Overdoing on self-reflexivity?'

I suddenly remember that I haven't had a chance to read the email that caught my attention before the arrival of Nicolas yesterday.

I take my iPad.

The message is dated the 24th of December. I begin to read it but stop and double-check the name at the end of the letter, then the email address that it's been sent from. Apparently, it's no hallucination.

It's *him*.

But why now, why after months of silence *he* suddenly decides to reconnect with me?

I read his letter again but it doesn't become any clearer.

My dearest, been thinking of you again. Yours L.E.A.

What on earth does *he* mean by 'been thinking of you again'? How could *he* have been thinking of me again, if we haven't been in touch for months? And, for that matter, have never seen each other either.

Episode 16 - Hush! (Luke)

Monte Carlo, France, 25 December

I walk slowly along the street. Before me, Domino treads, stopping occasionally to examine lamp-posts. The sun shines brightly, caressing my face, but my thoughts are far from springy.

What am I to do now? The stupid photo must have been hanging on the Facebook since yesterday. By now, the whole of Côte d'Azur knows 'the news'. Though, this isn't what worries me most. There is another thought that drills through my mind: what if *she* comes across the bogus image? If *she* does, *she* might misinterpret it. Perhaps, *she's* already seen it and thought of me as a complete idiot and that is why *she* hasn't responded to my email yet.

I reach the beach. Domino begins to jump excitedly around me. Seeing no reaction, he growls and tugs me by the jeans towards the edge of the water. Reluctant, but infatuated by his enthusiasm, I give in.

The sea is calm, but the shore is littered with washed out driftwood, sticks, fancifully knotted weeds, and even somebody's blue snicker. I pick up a small stick and throw it into the water. Plunging into the sea, Domino dashes after it. Playing, we spend some time on the beach.

On returning home, I feel much better. Yet still not in the mood to talk to anyone, I plan on quickly sneaking back into my room. But as soon as we enter the hall, Domino explodes with loud barking.

'Hush! You, stupid creature!' I say, but he doesn't stop.

Monsieur Moreau appears in the doorway of the library.

'Have you had a good walk?' he asks.

'Yes, I have,' I reply, not looking at him.

'Monsieur Luke, is everything all-right?'

His question catches me halfway to the stairs. Surprised by his shrewdness, I freeze for a second. Seizing the moment, Monsieur Moreau takes me by the arm and gently leads me into the library.

'Come, *mon ami*, let's have some coffee and a good chat ... ' he says.

Episode 17 - Cigar Case (Luke)

Monte Carlo, France, 25 December

We walk in. I flop onto the sofa. Monsieur Moreau sits down next to me. Crossing his legs, he turns to me and studies me for a little while. I shift uncomfortably but say nothing. Monsieur Moreau reaches into his pocket, gets a cigar case out and hands it to me.

'*Merci*, I don't smoke,' I say, throwing a curious glance at the cigar case.

'I'm afraid, you've misunderstood me,' he replies, smiling, 'I'm not trying to turn you into an avid smoker. I'm offering you to experience life sensations.'

He takes my hand and puts his cigar case in it.

'Really? And how would you suggest me do that?' I ask, feeling the cold metal against my skin.

'How else but by senses, *mon cher ami*¹⁰!' he replies.

'Yes, but how can I experience a sensation of smoking a cigar merely by holding your cigar case in my hand?' I ask, bewildered.

'And who's told you there were cigars in it?'

'But, this is a cigar case, isn't it?' I say.

'Yes, it is,' he nods.

'So, then it must contain cigars,' I insist.

'Well, that's what you think, but this alone doesn't prove it actually does.'

'But, if there are no cigars in it why then have you given it to me?'

'For you to experience life sensations,' Monsieur Moreau replies.

I look down at the cigar case in my hands. It has four cigar channels, engraved with floral scrolls. I touch them, feeling their curviness under my fingers. The case is in a pristine condition, no rubbing or scratches on it. The cartouche has a monogram, two intertwined letters: 'J & M'. They could very well stand for Jim Morrison¹¹. But I don't think he smoked cigars, though. Or maybe he did?

I open the case. The strong scent of tobacco hits my nostrils, but the four cigar channels are empty. Inhaling the tobacco aroma emanating from the cigar case, I

¹⁰ *mon cher amie* (French) – my dear friend

¹¹ Jim Morrison - an American singer, songwriter and poet best remembered as the lead singer of The Doors.

admire it for a few more seconds, pondering over life sensations that Monsieur Moreau mentioned to me, then close it and hand the cigar case back to him.

'You know, ' he tells me, sliding it into the pocket of his tweed jacket, 'when I was your age I also jumped to hasty conclusions and often ended up being tricked.'

'Especially, in those cases that concerned women,' he adds after a pause.

I blush.

Episode 18 - The Source of Wisdom (Lina)

London, UK, 25 December

Not quite knowing what to make of *his* letter, I stare at the screen, then re-read *his* message one more time and start on my reply. I don't wish my message to be formal, but, at the same time, try to avoid sounding as if all I have been doing is eagerly awaiting *him* to reconnect.

Finished, I read through my letter and satisfied, press 'send'. An image of a dove, slashing through the virtual space, taking my message to *him*, comes to my mind.

Though, I have never met my mysterious 'admirer', I have a feeling I've known *him* for centuries, as if *he* has come to me from my past life. The life I don't have a recollection of but nonetheless have a distinct memory of a person who once was part of it.

I put my iPad aside and pick up the book on great mysteries of life. Here we go, a source of wisdom that seems to have solutions to the perplexities bothering minds of living creatures. I wish I had it some months ago. Then, perhaps, I would have already found the answers to my questions.

I run my fingers across the dark-green cover. The short thick pile of its velvet tingles my fingertips. I open the book and leaf through pages, pausing on illustrations depicting some mysterious symbols, magicians, and castles. The answers to my questions don't seem to jump at me, at least not for the moment. I press the book against my chest and close my eyes.

A town spreads out before me. The sun shines brightly upon it. A light scent of lilies of the valley wafts in the warm spring like air. I find myself walking along one of the town's streets. Approaching an antique bookshop, I stop and look at the window display. A huge book in the velvety cover, lying there, catches my eye. Intrigued, I study it. Under my gaze the book comes alive and opens up. Its pages start filling with lines of text. Attempting to read it, I press hard against the shop window and the next moment I find myself standing on one of the book's pages, huge neon letters pulsating under my feet. I try to make words out of them but the pulsating letters cascade downwards, flowing into the book.

I hear a loud chime. The letters crumble and disappear. Tearing hundreds of pages, I fall into the bottomless depth of the ancient manuscript and wake up.

The sitting room is dark except the twinkling lights of the Christmas tree. In the distance, the sound of chiming can still be heard. I realise it must be the church clock striking the hour. I count the chimes. Midnight!

Leaping off the sofa, I dash into my room. My plane to Nice leaves early in the morning and I haven't packed yet.

Episode 19 - Any Plans? (Luke)

Monte Carlo, France, 25 December

I grab the coffee pot and start pouring coffee into our cups.

'I hope you will forgive an old man's curiosity, *mon ami*, but ... ' says Monsieur Moreau.

My hand betrays me and I spill some coffee onto the tray. The brown substance spreads out and forms a stain, resembling a heart. Monsieur Moreau takes the coffee pot from me, dries the stain out with his napkin, then hands me a cup of coffee and says: 'Do you have any plans for the New Year's Eve?'

'Nothing of definite nature ... ' I reply.

'I hope you don't mean that you wish to spend it all by yourself?'

'No, of course not,' I mutter, 'I'd like to spend it in a company that is stimulating in all senses.'

'Of course,' he nods, 'and such a stimulating company would be your girl-friend, I assume.'

'Well ... I'd have been delighted ... '

'Pardon me, Monsieur Luke, but why do you say, 'would have been'? Has she got some other plans for the New Year's Eve?'

'No, she hasn't. The thing is she doesn't exist ... ' I murmur.

A short silence falls between us. I stare into my coffee cup. An antique clock ticks.

Monsieur Moreau gives my shoulder a light squeeze. I feel a sudden pang of sadness. Stay his hand a little longer on my shoulder I would have burst into crying before him: the only person who has ever taken an interest in my void of any private life existence.

'Well, that's quite all right, *mon ami*,' he says, 'it's merely a matter of time. Such a handsome man like yourself won't be left without a girl for long.'

'You see ... ' I begin but fall silent, scared of my own daring.

'Yes?'

'Nothing, I'll tell you later,' I reply, getting up.

In the hall, Domino breaks into loud barking. *Maman* must have just returned from her visits.

Episode 20 - Bye for Now (Luke)

Monte Carlo, France, 25 December

I slip past *maman* and, taking the stairs two at a time, go up to my room.

'*Chéri*, the dinner is served at seven tonight, not eight,' she cries after me.

'Yes, fine by me!' I shout back and close the door behind me.

Coming to the window, I swing it open and let the cool evening air in. At the horizon the sea and the sky have become one in a scarlet kiss. Struck by the beauty of the moment, I stand by the window, admiring the sunset.

The dusk falls, enveloping the room in soft darkness. I slip my hand into the pocket. My fingers meet a pack of cigarettes and a box of matches.

I wasn't quite honest with Monsieur Moreau, when I said I didn't smoke. Well, technically I don't, but I'm fascinated by the elegance he does it with. So, I've decided to practice on cigarettes and then move to cigars. If I manage it, I could make an impression in a club. Though, I'm not sure whom I want to impress there, certainly not those annoying the Von Witter daughters or others of the same ilk. I just wish ... Oh, well, never mind.

Taking the matches out, I light up a candle on my desk, then take my laptop and flop onto the bed.

As usual, my inbox is full of spam. I have to change the filter settings, I think as I check through new messages. Suddenly, amidst advertising and spamming emails I see *her* reply. My heart jumps. I bring the cursor over and freeze.

A breath of sea air comes in through the open window and lightly touches my forehead. I draw in and click on the link. *Her* letter opens up. It is short, just a few lines.

Dear L.E.A., thank you for your email. Hope to meet you soon, after my trip to Nice. Wishing you Happy New Year! Bye for now, Lina.

Chapter Three

'Maybe, I don't cry but it hurts

Maybe, I won't say but I feel

Maybe, I don't show but I care.'

- Vitor Mota

Episode 21 - A Charming Stranger (Lina)

Nice, France, 27 December

The window of my hotel room is wide open, letting a light sea breeze in.

I stand over my suitcase and bewildered stare at its contents. Here we go, a beaming example of hasty packing, piles of evening dresses and nothing decent for every day, just a pair of jeans and a sweater. Uttering a sigh, I pull them on and go downstairs. In a modestly appointed room overlooking the sea continental breakfast is being served.

I sit down, order a cappuccino and look around. My eyes single out a young Arab with a plate of croissants on his table. Picking his croissants, he spreads lumps of marmalade over them and sends the croissants into his mouth. His eyes half-closed, he chews on them, slowly and thoughtfully.

Trying not to stare at him, I focus on my New Year's Eve plans or rather on the absence of such. The idea of going to Nice came to me just a few days ago. Considering its spontaneous nature, I have really had no time to check on the plans of my few French acquaintances and, to be honest, have little inclination of doing so. I somehow feel my uninvited spontaneity will not be appreciated.

Finished with his croissants, the Arab gets up and walks to the exit. Leaving the room, he throws a hungry look at my table, perhaps in search of something else of edible nature. The French, like their breakfasts, always leave you with a slight cramp of dissatisfaction - delicious, yet not enough. I drink up my cappuccino and decide on a morning walk.

Throwing the coat on, I grab my mobile and get out. Outside, the sun shines brightly, sending merry sparks across azure waters of the sea.

I cross the street, go down the embankment a few steps and find myself right on the beach. It is still early. There aren't many people around. Just dog owners, walking out their fluffy friends.

Inspired by the moment, I take my mobile out, frame the view and take a picture. The phone clicks and captures a local morning scene: a charming young man, his hair ruffled by the wind into wavy locks, plays with a little dog on the gravel shore of the Côte d'Azur.

Episode 22 - A Situation (Luke)

Monte Carlo - Nice, France, 27 December

I wake up and think of *her* again. Soon, she'll be here, just some miles away in the neighbouring Nice. *She* will walk the same streets as I do, and breathe in the same air as I do, and admire the same views as I do ... Only, in that email of hers, *she* hasn't mentioned the date of her arrival, but I imagine it must be any day now.

I listen. The house is quiet. It must be early or else *maman* has decided to sleep in today. Monsieur Moreau, perhaps, too. I get up, throw some clothes on and tiptoe down the stairs. Whistling Domino out of the library, I grab the keys from my all-time favourite Porsche 911 and head to the garage.

I get in the car, lower the rooftop and, lightly pressing on the gas, drive out onto the street. The weather is perfect. The sun shines brightly, casting its warmth over the city, illuminating everything around.

There is no traffic and soon I find myself driving on the picturesque *Moyenne Corniche*. Pressing on the gas, I whizz along the coastal road towards Nice, and in twenty minutes arrive at the *Promenades des Anglais*¹². As soon as I park the car, Domino jumps out and dashes across the promenade. Stopping by the stairs leading to the beach, he turns to me and wiggles his tail.

I catch up with him and go down.

Taken by the beauty of the day, I walk slowly along the edge of the sea, admiring the shimmering of sunny sparks on the water. Excitement brimming over, Domino runs back and forth, occasionally plunging into the sea and bringing his finds to me.

Getting out of his jaws yet another treasure, a small stick this time, I straighten up and look around. My eyes catch a sight of a young woman in a white coat. Smiling, she checks something in her mobile. The woman seems familiar. As I play with Domino, I observe her discreetly. She raises her eyes, catching my gaze for a split of a second, then slides her mobile into the pocket of her coat and walks past me. I instantly go weak at my knees, as I recognise *her*.

Stunned, I stare at *her* back, trying to figure out what to do next. Meanwhile, *she* slowly walks away from me, moving in the direction of '*Le Negresco Hotel*'. Finally

¹² The Promenade des Anglais (Niçard: Camin dei Anglés) is a celebrated promenade along the Mediterranean in Nice, France.

getting out of my stupor, I decide to act on a hunch and follow after *her*. Calling Domino, I try to put his collar on him, but, offended, he growls and puts up a fight. I lose my patience, gather him up and hurry after *her*.

Episode 23 - A Tail (Luke)

Nice, France, 27 December

Unsuspecting, *she* walks along the beach, stopping occasionally to take a picture. As *she* reaches '*Le Negresco Hotel*', *she* goes up the stairs to the promenade. I follow after *her*. But suddenly *she* stops and throws a hesitant look around. Standing just a few steps behind *her*, I hold my breath. *She* hesitates for another second or two then makes a move towards the Old Town.

I go up, wait until *she* crosses *Promenades des Anglais*, then continue my tailing. Domino attempts to break free from my arms but, though sympathising, I don't let him go. Right now, I have more important stuff than his immediate comfort to attend to.

Following after *her*, I pray for *her* not to suddenly turn around. But *she* doesn't, not a single time, in fact. It makes my tailing easier, for there is literally nowhere for me to hide. At this hour there aren't many people out on the streets and shops aren't opened yet.

Finally, we reach the Old Town. *She* slows down, pulls her mobile out and takes some more pictures. Tired of holding Domino in my arms, I let him down but, just in case, have him on a short leash.

After an hour of walking *she* comes to the *Cours Saleya*¹³ market, lined with colourful fruit and vegetables stalls and cluttered with huge buckets of fresh flowers. My stomach grumbles, reminding that I haven't eaten since six in the morning.

Manoeuvring between the stalls, I pretend to be looking at displays and, at the same time, try not to lose sight of *her*. But mesmerised as *she* is by the tempting displays, *she* seems in no hurry to leave the market. Having visited every stall and taken dozens of snapshots, *she* comes to a flower seller. I stop at a stall next to his. Picking through mandarins, I try to listen to their chat, but can make out very little of it except that the seller attempts to compliment *her* in his broken English.

¹³ Cours Saleya hosts four different markets. The most well-known is the Marché aux Fleurs, or Flower Market. It's actually a combination of the flower market and the fruit and vegetable market but the name, Marché aux Fleurs is commonly applied to the whole thing. The fruit and vegetable stands pack up by 13.30 in the afternoon but the flower stalls stay open until about 17.30.

'Monsieur, you've already picked through my whole box of mandarins! Are you looking for some special one?' an elderly market-woman at the mandarins stall addresses me.

'Oh, pardon me. I must have spaced out,' I mumble, turning red, and move away from the stall.

Meanwhile, having exchanged pleasantries with the flower seller, *she* buys a huge bouquet of chrysanthemums from him. Pressing the flowers against her chest, *she* leaves the market, strolls along the *Quai des Etats Unis*, and, reaching the entrance of the '*Swiss Hotel*', walks in.

I wait, then go in and walk up to the reception desk.

'Bonjour, I'm looking for Mademoiselle ... ' I begin but stop short.

'Yes, Monsieur?' the receptionist says.

I stare at her for a few seconds in bewilderment then finally utter the name. The receptionist types it in, studies something in her computer for a few seconds then replies:

'I'm sorry, Monsieur, but there must be some mistake. There are no clients under this name registered in our system.'

Episode 24 - A Holiday Fling (Lina)

'Swiss Hotel', Nice, France, 27 December

I get into the hotel elevator and bury my face in the chrysanthemums' heads, one of my favourite flowers. Don't even know why. It might be just because I've always loved the time of late autumn, or maybe, just because the yearly appearance of those fragile yet long lasting flowers announces, so beautifully, the arrival of winter magic.

Back in my room, I look for a vase. Not finding one, I call the reception, and soon, an artful arrangement of flowery tenderness comes into an existence on my night table: a welcome kiss of the Côte d'Azur.

Lying down on the bed, I look through photographs taken during my morning walk. The ones of the beach and the market seem to be especially good. I choose some and upload them on Facebook. Instantly, a comment from Nicolas arrives:

'Is it your take on 'the lady with the dog'¹⁴? Only in this instant the lady takes a pic of the dog ... And who's that guy next to it, your holiday fling? :-)'

I type: 'Ha-ha, have you been thinking of your literary ex again? Yes, my holiday fling. Are you jealous? :-)'

I wait, but he doesn't respond and, logging out of Facebook, I go to my 'inbox', checking for the reply from my electronic 'admirer', but no luck there.

I throw a glance out the window and see a patch of sky, the bright blue. A sun ray falls onto my face. Caressing, it warms and lulls me at the same time. I close my eyes.

Hearing a knock at the door, I listen, but all is quiet. It must have been my imagination.

I get up and come to the French windows. Before me, a shimmering ribbon of lights winds away into the night. Admiring the view, I stand by the window a while, then swing it open. A breath of cold air enters the room, giving me goose bumps. Humid, the air smells of seaweeds and salt. The next moment, somebody's arms are thrown around me and I'm locked in a warm embrace.

'Chérie ... ' whispered into my ear.

¹⁴ The Lady with the Dog (Russian: Dama s sobachkoy) is a short story by Anton Chekhov first published in 1899. It tells the story of an adulterous affair between a Russian banker and a young lady he meets while vacationing in Yalta.

The embrace seems so cordial, so invigoratingly familiar. Trying to grasp the fleeting yet persisting memory, I'm about to turn around, but hear a loud knock at the door, then a key inserted into the lock.

I open my eyes and see a chambermaid walking in.

'Pardon, madam,' she says, startled, 'I've knocked, but there was no reply. I thought the room's empty. Would you like your bed to be turndown?'

Episode 25 – Obviously (Lina)

'Le Negresco Hotel', Nice, France, 27 December

I send the chambermaid away and get ready for dinner. As it turns out, lunch I have missed already. Suddenly, I feel like going somewhere chic, a gourmet establishment of some sort with white crisp table cloths, polished silver wear, menus bursting a variety of French delicacies, and accommodating staff. Inspired by the painted image, I think of an appropriate place - *Le Chantecler* restaurant in the opulently elegant '*Le Negresco Hotel*'.

I don't have a reservation, but it doesn't discourage me. I call for a taxi and go downstairs. The hotel is just a fifteen-minute walk away but tonight I'm in the mood for a bit of indulgence.

At the entrance to the restaurant, a headwaiter greets me. A sound of clinking and clattering flows out of the Dining Room. Schooled waiters move swiftly between the tables, serving their high-end clientele.

'Bonsoir, Mademoiselle, do you have a reservation?' the maître d'hôtel asks.

'As a matter of fact, I don't ... ' I reply.

His eyebrow flies up.

'The thing is ... ' I say.

'Pardon, Monsieur, it's my fault. I haven't told Mademoiselle about the reservation. It's under my name - Mohamed Al Murshidi,' the young Arab, I watched this morning at breakfast, joins in, unexpectedly appearing at the entrance.

The maître d'hôtel marks something in his list and motions us to follow him.

The Arab lets me before him. The Dining Room is full: the devotees of French gastronomy made up of families, couples, and groups of friends, seem to occupy each and every table.

Mohamed's table is set for one but this 'slip' is instantly corrected. The maître d'hôtel waves his hand and as if by magic a second set appears on it.

We sit down.

'Thank you very much. It's most kind of you,' I say, 'I'm afraid without your intervention I wouldn't be able to dine here tonight.'

'My pleasure, but, honestly, even without my intervention you'd be perfectly fine tonight,' Mohammed replies, his English impeccable.

'Well, I don't know ... In this case, you might be slightly overestimating the power of feminine charm,' I say, throwing a look around. The restaurant is fully booked for tonight.

'I'm afraid, it has nothing to do with feminine charms, but with money,' he replies with a grin.

'Do you mean that I've got enough money to go around and bribe maître d'hôtels in such restaurants like this one?'

'Yes,' he nods, 'I dare say that even if you didn't, you'd still find a way to accommodate in your budget for such an occasion.'

'Really? Why so?' I ask, surprised by his shrewdness.

'But it's obvious,' Mohammed replies.

'What's obvious?'

'Well, that you're an assertive and rather determined woman ... '

Episode 26 - Bar Menu (Luke)

'Swiss Hotel', Nice, France, 27 December

I couldn't have been so mistaken. The woman who has just walked into the *'Swiss Hotel'* is undoubtedly *her* and no one else. I know perfectly well how *she* looks and what *her* name is. Perhaps, *she* is just visiting someone in the hotel, I grasp at the thought.

But what am I to do now? Surely, I can't spend all day, watching the entrance of the *'Swiss Hotel'*. What if *she* stays over and leaves only tomorrow morning?

Perplexed, I stare at the receptionist. My stomach growls loudly.

'Excuse me,' I say, coming out of my bewilderment, 'is there a restaurant in here?'

'No, there isn't, I'm afraid. But we can offer you a bar menu,' the receptionist replies and pushes the menu to me. I take it. A big choice of alcohol drinks but nothing of a substantial nature to eat, it seems...

I order a beer, some olives and canapés. Not much, but better than nothing. I sit down at the bar so that I can observe the entrance to the hotel and wait. Soon, my order arrives. I throw a piece of canapé to Domino. He sniffs at it, then probes it cautiously and, finally, refuses it. I gulp some beer down and, in one go, finish the canapés and olives.

The two hours have passed, but still no sign of *her*. Now, I'm sure *she's* come here to see *her* lover. I should have guessed it really.

The dusk falls. I order more beer and get the pack of cigarettes out, just the right moment to smoke my first ever cigarette. I light up and inhale deeply, but at once explode into coughing.

Bewildered, Domino looks up at me. I make another attempt. This time, I take short, cautious puffs aided by frequent sips of beer. I throw a glance at the clock: it's six o'clock.

Finally, I decide to leave. Domino, his tail wiggling, follows me; the leash trails behind him. Taking the collar off him, I head towards the parking spot where I left my car. But Domino seizes me by the jeans and tugs me back.

I stop and give him a stern stare. Undeterred, he turns his head towards the *'Swiss Hotel'* and bursts into loud barking. I glance in the direction of the hotel entrance and see *her* in a dark purple evening dress, walking out and getting into a taxi.

Episode 27 – Sea (Lina)

'Le Negresco Hotel', Nice, France, 27 December

The waiter brings our orders, a beefsteak for me and a vegetarian risotto for Mohammed.

'Are you a vegetarian?' I ask, curiously studying the culinary creation presented on his plate.

'No, I'm afraid, not. You see, when in Europe, I don't order meat in restaurants,' he replies and thrusts his fork into the rice tower.

'Why so, if you do not mind me asking?'

'That's because I'm a Muslim from the Emirates, under Islamic Shari'ah we're allowed only halal meat.'

'Oh, I see,' I say, suddenly feeling guilty for the display of my not very halal habits in front of this mysterious Emirati.

'Please, don't shy away from eating your meal. There is no reason why you shouldn't enjoy it,' he says, noticing my hesitation.

I relax and start on my dinner.

'May I ask you a question?' he asks.

'Yes, but nothing personal, please,' I say.

'What brought you to Nice in the middle of winter?'

'Indeed, what', I think. Neither friends, nor work ...

'Well, to be honest, I haven't the foggiest idea,' I reply.

'How come?' Mohammed inquires, surprised.

'I haven't really thought about it, just acted on my spontaneous decision. A day or two before Christmas an idea of going to Nice came to me. I booked a flight, packed my bag and came ... '

'Oh, I see, you mean you had no initial intention for the trip, right?'

'Well, yes, but do we always have to explain every action by some sort of initial intention?'

'Of course not! Sometimes, the most unintentional actions contain the deepest meaning.'

'And you? Are you here on business?' I ask.

'No, I'm not. In this sense, I'm more like you, just enjoying the French Riviera. You see, I'm forever in love with the sea of here.'

'But don't you have one back home?' I ask.

'Yes, but it's different ... Seas aren't alike.'

Mohammed takes his smartphone out and looks something up there, then hands it to me.

'Have a look,' he says.

I take his phone and look at the display. A turquoise calmness of the sea softly meeting the white sand unfolds before my eyes.

'But ... ' I say, mesmerised by the picture, 'is it not beautiful or bright enough for you?'

'Bright - yes, beautiful - yes, but it is void of passion, of emotion ... Such beauty can be monotonous and even boring. And the sea of here isn't like that. It's ever changing, so multifaceted and emotional, it can never bore me!'

Episode 28 - It's A Given (Luke)

Monte Carlo, France, 27 December

On the way home, all my thoughts are of *her*. *She* seems so close: within my reach, yet so unattainable: *she* isn't even aware of me being so near *her*. Well, *she* isn't aware of many other things about me either. In fact, *she* knows nothing about me.

Unlike *her*, a famous journalist, I'm nothing really. What have I achieved except those things that others have already achieved for me to rip the reward off? Besides, what do I have that can be of interest to *her*?

My connections? But what is *she* to do with them? *She* doesn't write for tabloids. My wealth? But *she* isn't impoverished either. My inner-world? Only, I'm not sure if I have one. My talents? But do I really have any?

With no answer at hand, tired and hungry, I finally arrive home. Breakfast I didn't have, lunch I've missed and for dinner I'm terribly late. I go straight to the kitchen, open the fridge and peer inside.

'Bonsoir, Monsieur Luke,' our cook, Maria, greets me.

'Bonsoir, Maria.'

'Would you like me to warm up the dinner for you?' she asks.

'Yes, please,' I reply, grabbing a can of Cola from the fridge.

Turning the hob on, she places a frying pan on a ring. The kitchen fills with the tantalising aroma of beefsteak.

'Maria ... ' I say.

'Yes, Monsieur?'

'What do you think I have that can look attractive to a girl?'

She puts out two steaks on a plate and places it in front of me.

'Well, it's hard to say, Monsieur. I'm no longer a girl,' she replies, then adds:

'Would you like some salad with your steaks?'

'Yes, thank you. Well, and what about a woman, then?' I ask.

'I guess your looks ... '

'My looks?'

'Yes. For me, you're a very handsome young man.'

'Maria, for a god's sake! What sort of virtue is that?' I cry out.

'And why not?' she shrugs.

'Because it's given!' I reply.

'Yes, but a given that very few have.'

'All-right then,' I give in, 'anything else?'

'Well, I wouldn't really know, Monsieur, I'm just a cook in your house,' she replies.

Episode 29 - Friends We Are Not (Luke)

Monte Carlo, France, 27 December

I finish the steaks and go up to my room. The light off, I come to the window and stand there, peering into the night. My gaze is fixed on the blinking dot of a lighthouse in the sea. Its rhythmical signals, echoing in my heart, inspire and instil hope in me.

I hear a knock on the door.

'Yes?' I shout.

Cautiously, the door opens. A ray of light falls into the room, accentuating a silhouette of *maman*.

'May I come in?' she asks.

'Yes,' I nod and move my eyes back to the 'blinking dot' of the lighthouse.

She walks in.

'Sitting in a complete darkness again?' she asks, but I don't reply.

'*Chéri*..., ' she says, 'have you been out?'

Silent, I keep staring out the window.

'We were worried about you, didn't know what to think ... something's happened?'

'Nothing's happened. I was in Nice, took Domino for a walk' I finally reply.

Maman comes close and stands behind me.

'You could have let us know that you'd be late,' she says.

I feel her hand on my shoulder and shrug it off.

'Mum, I'm not a kid anymore and I don't have to report back to you on my every step.'

'But we worried about you, tried to call you on your mobile, but you didn't answer it. We didn't know what to think, where to look for you.'

'I've left it at home. And anyway, why to look for me?' I ask, annoyed.

'But *chéri*, before you never disappeared for a whole day.'

I don't respond.

'Luke, dear, I do understand ... '

'What do you understand?' I look at her.

'Well, that you have a girlfriend in Nice ... ' she replies.

'Mum, I don't have any girlfriend there!'

'*Chéri*, it's absolutely fine with me if you don't want to talk about it. But you both look gorgeous on that photograph.'

'What photograph? What are you talking about?'

'Don't play innocent, you know what I'm talking about. The photograph of you two on your Facebook profile. '

I dash to my desk and open the laptop. Going to my profile, I see the same bogus photo that threw me off balance just a few days ago. Really, that's too much! I delete the image and change my privacy settings, locking my profile for 'non-friends'.

Episode 30 – Harmony (Lina)

'Le Negresco Hotel', Nice, France, 27 December

Leaving the restaurant, we come out into the lobby. Amidst its eclectic opulence some papier-mâché sculptures stand out. Coming up to one of them, a female bather, Mohammed studies it for a short while.

'What do you think about modern art?' he asks, gazing at the thighs of the sculptured woman.

'I think that art's a form of self-expression and modern art has many tools that help artists mould their self-expressiveness into a variety of forms.'

'And what forms are close to *your* heart?' he asks, flickering his dark camel-like eyes at me.

'Any form that's harmonious,' I reply.

'In other words, a perfect form?'

'Something like that. You see, I believe that harmony of the heart breeds perfect artistic creations.'

'What about this bather? Is she perfect?' he points at the sculpture.

I look at the bright yellow figure of the woman. My eyes glide over her plump knees, her voluptuous body, squeezed into a tight blue swimsuit, her full breasts, hugged by the red cups and, finally, her arms, one of which is thrown upwards.

'Well, she surely attracts one's attention, even captivates the viewer, but I wouldn't call her perfect.'

'Because of her voluptuousness?' he asks.

'No, because of the lack of harmony in this voluptuous body. It seems to emanate a splash of inharmonious happiness that an artist tries to attract us with.'

Mohammed looks at the sculpture again, then nods and heads for the exit.

'Let me give you a lift to your hotel,' he says, glancing down at my feet.

'I thought it was your hotel too,' I reply.

'Not mine too. I sometimes come there for breakfast. Love their croissants.'

A valet brings Mohammed's red Ferrari to the entrance. We get into the car.

'What are your plans for tomorrow?' he throws at me, starting his red 'monster'.

'No plans at all, but this may change overnight,' I reply with a smile.

'In this case, let's change it right now.'

'All-right,' I nod.

'I'm going to Saint Tropez tomorrow. Would you like to join me?' he asks, staring somewhere in front of him.

'Why not,' I respond, scrutinising his Arabic beaked profile in the dim light of the car salon.

Chapter Four

'I love you as certain dark things to be loved, in secret, between the shadow and the soul.'

- Pablo Neruda, 100 Love Sonnets

Episode 31 – Proposal (Luke)

Monte Carlo, France, 28 December

My attempts to dissuade *maman* bring no results, for the bogus photograph on the Facebook screams out a different truth.

Where has this ‘amorous’ model come from anyway? It’s so unlike *maman* to invite unfamiliar people to her soirées. She always picks and mixes with such a great care. Perhaps, the ‘bikini girl’ is an acquaintance of one of her friends’ daughters. But still, it’s unclear what this girl aims at achieving by her pestering. For friends we are obviously not, common interests we don’t have, models don’t attract me, besides asking for a permission to take a picture of me she hasn’t spoken to me at all, having spent the whole evening at the other end of the table.

My stomach grumbles. I get up, pull my t-shirt and jeans on and go downstairs.

The breakfast’s being served in the dining room, but I don’t go there. I don’t wish to face *maman* right now. Convinced in her righteousness, she’ll be throwing meaningful glances at me. Instead, I head to the kitchen.

Improvising on what I find in the fridge, I gather some breakfast for myself. But as I’m about to leave the kitchen, I bump into Maria at the door. I try to squeeze by her, but fail. Her imposing figure fills in every bit of the doorframe.

‘Are you having breakfast in your room today?’ she inquires, examining the tray in my hands.

‘Yes,’ I mumble, still trying to find a gap between her and the doorframe.

‘Why didn’t you ask me? I’d bring it to you myself,’ she says, not moving.

‘I didn’t wish to bother you with it. You have so much to do,’ I reply.

‘If you all start cooking your own breakfasts, I’ll have nothing left to do in this house,’ she proclaims.

‘Maria, please, what you’re talking about ... ’

‘I know what I’m talking about! Your Mother’s told me everything. Now, that you have a girlfriend, she’ll cook for you, and there is no need for Maria!’

‘Maria, honestly, I don’t have a girlfriend ... ’ I say.

‘Monsieur Luke, no need to pretend! It’s no secret no more, the whole of Monaco knows about it. Even Rosa!’

‘What Rosa?’ I ask, startled.

'Well, the cleaner of this, what's his name, this Finnish racer!' she blurts out and, finally, removes herself from my way.

Leaving the 'news' without any comment, I go up the stairs to my room and see Monsieur Moreau, lingering there by the door.

'Bonjour, Monsieur Moreau,' I greet him.

'Bonjour, *mon ami*. I've got a proposition for you,' he says with a smile.

'Which one?' I reply, pressing on the door handle with my elbow.

'I'm going to Saint-Tropez. Do you fancy joining me?'

'Saint-Tropez?'

'Yes, I have a yacht anchored there that I'd like to show to you ... '

Episode 32 - A Flight of Fancy (Lina)

Nice – Saint-Tropez, France, 29 December

By the hotel entrance, Mohammed waits for me. Leaning against a Morgan roadster,¹⁵ he smokes a cigarette and stares at the sea.

'I see you have a habit of changing your vehicles ever so often,' I say, coming up to him.

He smiles, puts his cigarette out and holds his hand out to me.

'Good morning.'

'The morning is indeed good. The sea looks especially beautiful today,' I reply, shaking his hand.

'Yes, it is,' he agrees, then opens the door of the roadster and motions me in.

The car smells of leather and some expensive cologne that Mohammed has sprinkled all over himself. He gets into the driver's seat and puts his sunglasses on.

'Do you collect cars?' I ask, studying the chrome custom-made dashboard of his Morgan.

'Oh, no, I drive them,' he replies.

'But, is one car not enough for you to drive?'

'You see, for us, Arabs, car driving is like horse racing. And what kind of a stable is it with just one horse?'

'Yes, indeed,' I say, nodding to my own reflection in his sunglasses.

We come to the motorway. Turning the radio on, Mohammed presses on the gas. The car gives a roar and 'gallops' forward with the double force. Out of the radio a soft French melody is flowing. It makes me wish for the 'charming young man', the snapshot of whom I took during my walk on the beach, and not Mohammed to be sitting next to me.

I instantly picture him: his hair ruffled by the wind, his locks falling across his eyes. He shakes the locks off, flickers his blue eyes at me, and smiles. Before us, the road spreads out into the horizon, touched by the scarlet sunset. The twilight, falling softly, whispers a promise of tender moments ...

¹⁵ The Morgan Roadster is the latest car model produced by the Morgan Motor Company. It was introduced in 2004 replacing the Morgan Plus 8.

'What are you thinking about?' Mohammed breaks in with a question, 'you know, one of my Russian friends says that if a woman's silent she has a lot to say.'

'Your friend's quite right,' I say with a laugh, 'but, I'm afraid, in this case, what I'm thinking about would be of very little interest to you.'

'Why?' he asks, turning to me, the chocolate glazing of his sunglasses reflecting my smile.

'I'll explain you later,' I respond.

Episode 33 - The Double (Luke)

Monte Carlo – Saint-Tropez, France, 29 December

What does Monsieur Moreau need me on his yacht for? He will have a far better day out if he takes *maman* there, I think, but instead of inquiring into the might be reason of this sudden gesture of goodwill, nod to him in agreement.

Finished with my improvised breakfast, I put my sweater and wind jacket on, call Domino and go downstairs. In the hall, Monsieur Moreau waits for me. I notice a leather *sac de voyage* ¹⁶in his hands and offer him my help. He smiles, but declines it politely.

'What's in the bag?' I ask, intrigued.

'Just a few things that I might need ... '

'But aren't we just visiting the yacht?' I ask.

'Yes, but not just,' he replies.

I'm about to enquire what this 'not just' means when we approach a cobalt blue convertible Morgan. The thrusting forward hood of this automobile brings an image of a clown's boot to my head. A car and its owner ... I smile and throw a glance at Domino.

The cockpit with two low seats seems rather small. There is no boot to store baggage either, just some metal rails attached at the back. Placing there his *sac de voyage*, Monsieur Moreau secures it with belts and gets into the driver's seat.

'*Voilà, mon ami!*' he says and points to the seat next to him.

I take Domino in my arms and squeeze into the car, my knees meeting the dashboard.

'Monsieur Moreau, are you sure that this remarkable automobile antiquity will get us to Saint-Tropez?' I ask, trying to find a better sitting position.

'*Mon cher ami*, what seems an antiquity to you is, in fact, a replica of the Morgan Plus 8, circa 1966, that was assembled two years ago,' he replies.

'Really? Who could have imagined,' I murmur.

¹⁶ *sac de voyage* – (French) – travel bag

Monsieur Moreau starts the car. We get out of the town, come to the highway and speed up in the direction of Saint Tropez. The cars, whizzing by, appear cutting edge 'monstrosities' comparing to our seemingly classic 'antiquity'.

Domino on my lap, I relax into my seat and fix my eyes on the road. Suddenly, a vehicle, very similar to ours except tinted windows and a covered top, catches my sight.

'Looks like our double,' I say, pointing at it.

'Yes, in fact it is,' Monsieur Moreau replies, 'It's a Morgan sports model, Aero Coup. Very good on long distance rides.'

Gazing at the speeding away 'Aero Coup', I feel a pang of sadness and think of *her* and of how nice it would be to have *her* sitting in her white coat beside me right now.

Episode 34 – ‘Rosalinda’

Saint-Tropez, France, 29 December

We park the car at the *Passage du Port* and head to the port where the yacht of Monsieur Moreau is anchored. Though, ‘port’ is too grand a word for this place. To me, it looks more like a small harbour, crowded with all sorts of boats and yachts. Perhaps, it's the Tropeziens, proud of their fishing village, where painters and writers used to seek inspiration, had nick-named it a ‘port’.

Following Monsieur Moreau, I try to imagine what kind of yacht he might have. Judging by his car, it should be something of a Robinson Crusoe brig.

‘Here we are, *mon ami*,’ Monsieur Moreau says, stopping before a masterpiece of modern shipbuilding, a white Princess V72. On the side of his yacht the name ‘Rosalinda’ is written in huge letters.

Stunned at the sight, I freeze.

‘Monsieur Moreau! Good day to you!’ I hear a hoarse greeting, uttered at us.

‘And a good day to you too, Monsieur Gaspard,’ he replies, turning to a tanned man in a bright wind-cheater.

‘What, came to check on your beauty?’ Gaspard asks.

‘Yes. Decided to take my young friend out on a little excursion,’ Monsieur Moreau responds, introducing me to Gaspard.

We shake hands.

‘I see. And I've been called to check on that yacht,’ says Gaspard, waving in a direction of a black yacht, anchored on the other side of the boardwalk, right opposite ‘Rosalinda’. ‘The owner is going to throw some grand New Year's Eve party on it in two days, you know.’

His mobile rings. Glancing at its display, he nods us a quick good-bye, then presses his phone to his ear and runs up the gangway of the black yacht.

Monsieur Moreau gives me a smile, then puts his hand on my shoulder and steers me towards the ‘Rosalinda’.

Episode 35 – ‘Boreas’ (Lina)

Saint-Tropez, France, 29 December

Mohammed parks his roadster at the car park by the port. Gently steering me towards the harbour, he suggests have a look at another ‘toy’ of his, a forty-meter yacht ‘Boreas’.

His polite insistence annoys me. Though, I’m not new to Saint-Tropez, I’ve never had a chance to fully immerse into the charms of this Provençal fishing village: stroll its narrow winding streets, examine the ruins of the Saracen fort, or sit in a cafe, watching the world go by. Somehow, I always seemed to pass through it in a rush.

‘All-right,’ I agree reluctantly, ‘but what a strange name to choose for a yacht.’

‘Why strange?’ he asks, surprised.

‘Well, you come from a hot sunny country with no winters, and Boreas is the Greek God of the cold north wind and a bringer of winter ... ’

‘Yes, correct!’ He exclaims, his eyes shining.

‘I’m sorry, but I don’t quite get it ... ’ I say, perplexed.

‘But it is simple, the very reason for calling it after the bringer of winter is because back home we don’t have one!’

‘Oh, I see,’ I reply, ‘it seems your yacht is an expression of you craving for what you can never have ... ’

‘Maybe so,’ he replies suddenly looking thoughtful.

We come to a huge three-level black yacht. On its lower deck the figure of a man in a bright wind-cheater appears. He sees us, waves and runs down the gangway.

‘Bonjour, Monsieur Al Murshidi!’ the man greets Mohammed, a wide smile on his tanned face.

‘Bonjour, Gaspard,’ Mohammed responds and, taking my hand, leads me up the gangway aboard.

Episode 36 - Taste of Life (Luke)

Yacht 'Rosalinda', Saint-Tropez, France, 29 December

Monsieur Moreau unlocks the door. We enter. I note that the interior of his yacht, unlike the ultramodern exterior, displays more conservative style. The colour palette and the choice of yacht furniture, like the classic Morgan of Monsieur Moreau, reflect the taste of a true gentleman.

He shows me around then brings to the deck salon, overlooking the water. If it weren't for the proximity of other yachts, I'd think that we are out in the open sea.

I take my jacket off and sink into one of the deep broad sofas. Domino lies down by my feet.

'How about an *apéritif, mon ami*?' Monsieur Moreau asks, coming up to a cocktail cabinet.

'Thumbs up,' I reply, studying the photographs, displayed on a shelf by the sofa. From one of them, *maman*, her head slightly thrown back, a large bouquet of white roses nestled in her arms, shines at me with her dazzling smile.

For a moment, I see her through the eyes of Monsieur Moreau - extraordinary magnetic and beautiful woman whose presence, even on the photograph, fills the room with a sense of love and purpose.

'Have you known my Mum long?' I ask.

'More than twenty years,' he replies, handing me a glass of Campari¹⁷.

I look at the photograph again.

'Has she been on this yacht yet?'

'No, not on this one, but on the other ones,' he replies.

'But, how many do you have? I ask.

'Oh, just this one, *mon ami*,' he says with a smile, 'I meant my previous yachts, this one's brand new.'

'Monsieur Moreau, I'd like to ask you a favour ... ' I turn the conversation, thinking of how to correctly verbalise what has been preoccupying me recently.

'Yes, of course,' he nods.

¹⁷ Campari is an alcoholic liqueur, considered an *apéritif*, obtained from the infusion of herbs and fruit in alcohol and water. It is a bitter characterised by its dark red colour.

I fall silent, gathering up my courage.

'Can you teach me to smoke cigars, please?' I breathe out.

He looks at me, then takes out his cigar case and puts it down on a black table-cube.

'Monsieur Luke, if you don't mind me asking, why are you interested in smoking cigars? As far as I've understood, you don't even smoke cigarettes.'

'You see ... ' I begin, 'I'm not quite sure, how to say it ... '

'Well, say it as it is.'

'I think that a man who smokes cigars appears more masculine ... ' I reply.

'Do you wish to say, *mon ami*, that a non-smoking man is less of a man?' he smiles.

'No, not quite,' I respond, struggling to phrase my thoughts.

'Perhaps, then, you think that a skill of smoking cigars will make you more attractive?' he helps me out.

'Yes, I suppose you can say so ... ' I murmur, 'You see, what I mean is that I like to experience a taste of life!'

Episode 37 – ‘First date’ (Luke)

Yacht ‘Rosalinda’, Saint-Tropez, France, 29 December

Monsieur Moreau nods, gets up and says:

'Well, in this case, *mon cher ami*, I can offer you a sweet.'

'What sweet?' I stare at him, baffled.

'I'm afraid, quite an ordinary one, something like an ice cream,' he winks and heads to the stairs, leading to the lower deck.

'Monsieur Moreau, wait! You've got me wrong!' I cry out.

But he doesn't stop, just smiles and walks down. Bewildered, I try to figure out how to correct this misunderstanding but nothing ingenious springs to mind. In a minute, Monsieur Moreau returns, holding two small bowls with scoops of chocolate ice cream in them.

'Monsieur Moreau ... ' I say, picking up his cigar case from the table.

'My dear Luke,' he interrupts me, 'I understand you perfectly. I'll say more, to smoke the first-ever cigar is very much like to have the first-ever date.'

'But what does ice cream have to do with it all?'

'Everything! You shouldn't smoke cigars on an empty stomach. Your head will spin.'

He puts the bowls with our ice cream on the table then comes to the shelf, where the photograph of *maman* stands, and, opening a mahogany humidor, peers in.

Following his advice, I start on my ice cream.

'Since it's your first one, I think the best would be to start with Cohiba Siglo I,¹⁸' he says, taking a cigar out of the humidor.

'Yeah,' I nod, fishing out the last scoop of ice cream from my bowl.

He comes to me and hands me the chosen cigar. I take it. Its shape reminds me of a torpedo, a pointy tip of which is encircled by the black and yellow paper ring.

'Why is there a profile of an Indian on here?' I ask, intrigued by the image on the ring.

'Well, that's because the brand name of this cigar is Cohiba - the word, which the Taino Indians of the Caribbean used to call the tobacco leaf. But despite its name,

¹⁸ Cohiba Siglo I - The smallest of the Siglos, an authentic appetizer.

Cohiba is a relatively young Cuban brand. Officially, the production of these cigars started in 1966. Besides Fidel Castro himself, the only people who could taste Cohiba were heads of foreign states. They used to receive these cigars as an exclusive gift.'

'I see,' I mumble, not quite knowing what to do with this exclusive gift.

Seeing my hesitation, Monsieur Moreau pushes his crystal ashtray to me, takes a cigar lighter out and says: 'To properly light up a cigar is an art in itself, which I'm sure you will master later, but right now to aid the process, I'll do it for you.'

He strikes the flame and brings my cigar to it. Meeting it, the tight layers of tobacco leaves redden and quickly form a perfect glowing ring.

Episode 38 - An Invite (Lina)

Yacht 'Boreas', Saint-Tropez, France, 29 December

Opulence of Mohammed's yacht stuns me but can't hide the lack of imagination and taste of its owner from me. I feel as if being on board of an expensive yet faceless hotel ship.

Though flattered by Mohammed's attention and willingness to showcase his status symbol to me, I find myself unimpressed with it. In my career as a journalist I've seen many a yacht like his. Bored, but not wishing to hurt his pride with my indifference, I respond politely to his excited utterances and explanatory comments.

Fortunately, oblivious to my inner struggle, his eyes sparkling, he keeps showing me numerous *en-suite* cabins and rooms of his naval 'palace'.

My eyes gliding over polished, gleaming surfaces of his yacht, I search for something that could help me channel our conversation into more emotionally engaging communication. But find nothing: not a photograph, not a single piece of art, not even a book.

Finally, I give up and think that perhaps a walk around the picturesque village of Saint-Tropez will lift up my spirits, and I'll soon forget all about my visit to 'Boreas'.

'I'd like to ask something of you.' Mohammed addresses me.

'Yeah?' I reply absentmindedly.

'I'm throwing a New Year's Eve party here, on my yacht ... ' he says.

'Splendid idea,' I reply, thinking of the impending walk.

'Glad, you think so. I'd be delighted if you could attend it.'

'Yes, of course,' I agree.

'Perfect! Here, take it,' he says, handing me an envelope.

'Thank you,' I say, putting it into my handbag, 'And what's this?'

'An invitation to the party.'

'Oh, yes, of course!' I say with a laugh.

His mobile rings.

'I have to take it, I'm afraid,' Mohammed throws and disappears into one of the rooms.

I go out on to the deck and light up a cigarette. Smoking, I flick my eyes over the neighbouring yachts. The one, anchored right opposite 'Boreas', a name 'Rosalinda' written on its board, catches my attention. How poetic: a yacht-flower, I think, gazing

at it, admiring, wondering what kind of a man owns it and why he has chosen the name 'Rosalinda' for it.

A man in a white sweater comes out of the glass doors on to the yacht's deck. Not wishing to appear curious, I turn away and pretend to study radar installations on the roof of the 'Boreas'.

Episode 39 - A Figment of Imagination (Luke)

Yacht 'Rosalinda', Saint-Tropez, France, 29 December

Acting confident, I take the first puff on my cigar and feeling the bitterish taste of smoke in my mouth delight at knowing that my 'first date' has finally taken place. An image of my first-ever cigarette, smoked in the lobby of the '*Swiss Hotel*', springs to mind. I couldn't have imagined that smoking a cigarette and smoking a cigar would differ so much. Seemingly both made of tobacco leaves but their tastes are virtually incomparable.

Proud at my achievement, I take some more puffs, each time inhaling deeply, and get mouthfuls of smoke into my lungs. My head starts spinning. Placing my cigar in the ashtray, I lean back and close my eyes.

'Monsieur Luke, are you all-right?' I hear the worried voice of Monsieur Moreau.

'Yes, very much so, heavenly actually, but my head just spins a bit ... ' I reply.

'In this case, that's quite enough for the time being,' he says, putting a cushion under my head.

I nod.

'Have a rest. I'll pop out to the shop to get some snack for us.'

He takes Domino with him and goes out.

I stretch out on the sofa and try to relax. But my every thought turns to *her* again. It seems since *her* arrival to Nice I cannot not think of *her*, literally every second feeling *her* everlasting presence. Maybe, this is it, the very thing that's called love? Although, what do I really know about it? I don't recall having similar kind of attraction to anyone before. In fact, I don't think I have ever been in love either ...

Feeling a sudden spasm in my chest, I decide to take some fresh air. I get up, come to the glass doors of the salon and slide them open. Stepping out onto the deck, I take a deep breath and freeze in astonishment. On the deck of the yacht moored opposite the '*Rosalinda*' I see *her*.

I go weak at my knees and have to lean against the door of the salon. Not quite believing what I'm seeing, I close my eyes then open them again. But the 'figment of my imagination' is still there, on the deck, ever persisting, outlined with even more clarity and precision. *She* brings a cigarette to her mouth, takes a short puff, and turning away, stares at something on the roof of *her* yacht.

Episode 40 - A Figure of Speech (Lina)

Yacht 'Boreas', Saint-Tropez, France, 29 December

My head thrown back, I keep scrutinising the radar installations, yet, at the same time, realising how silly of me it is. After all, the object of my interest lies elsewhere or rather stands elsewhere - on the deck of the neighbouring yacht.

Finally giving up on the radars, I glance in the direction of the man in the white sweater and, to my utter surprise, recognise the 'charming young man'. My heart thumps with delight.

I raise my hand, wanting to wave at him, but freeze, remembering that we aren't really acquainted. He isn't even aware of my taking a picture of him on the beach in Nice.

As it happens, for me, he's a personification of the Côte d'Azur romance. For him, I'm just a stranger. So, my waving will surely appear out of place. Besides, he might misinterpret it. He might think I want something from him.

Yet, I can't just stand and gape at him. So, I smile. But, unaffected, he keeps on leaning against the glass doors. Perhaps this isn't quite the right moment, I think.

Having finished my cigarette, I am about to leave the deck when the 'charming young man' suddenly comes to life, raises his hand and waves at me.

'Excuse me,' he says.

'Yes?' I respond.

'Is this your yacht?' he asks, pointing at Mohammed's yacht.

'No, it isn't.'

'What a pity ... '

'Why?' I ask with a smile.

'You see, I thought it was you who was going to have a New Year's Eve party on it ... '

'How do you know about the party?' I say, surprised.

'Well, heard from an acquaintance ... ' he responds.

'Are you going to attend it?' I blurt out.

'Only if you're attending it.'

'Oh, I see ... You are even more charming than I've imagined,' I say.

'Than you've imagined?' he echoes.

'Well, it's just a figure of speech, you know ... ' I reply.

I hear a dog barking and see a handsome elderly man in a tweed jacket, a silk scarf elegantly tied around his neck, walking in our direction. Some feet before him, a small terrier, his tail wiggling, treads on.

'I have to go,' the young man says.

'It was nice meeting you,' I reply and wave him good-bye.

He smiles at me and hurries away.

Chapter Five

'You're just like in my dreams,

Like in my albums,

Where I drew your face with gouache...'

- From the song Search, lyrics by Zemfira¹⁹

¹⁹ Zemfira - Russian rock musician. She has been performing since 1998 and has been popular in Russia and other former Soviet republics. To date Zemfira has sold over 3 million records.

Episode 41 – Muchness (Luke)

Yacht 'Rosalinda', Saint-Tropez, France, 29 December

My face flaming, my heart racing, I run into the salon, grab the glass of Campari from the table and gulp it down. I must calm myself down before Monsieur Moreau sees me! I dash to the lower deck and bump right into him, almost knocking him down.

'Are you all-right?' he asks in bewilderment.

'Yes, I think I'm,' I blurt out and dart into the bathroom, slamming the door behind me.

Turning the tap on, I bend over the sink and splash cold water on to my face. But my attempts bring no result. My face is blushed as ever; my heart's still racing madly.

I straighten up and throw a look around the bathroom. My eyes stop on the shower cabin. I pull the sweater off, turn the shower on and stick my head under the stream of icy cold water, feeling instantaneous relief.

Hearing a knock on the door, I turn the shower off and listen. The water running down my face drips onto my shoulders and chest.

'Monsieur Luke, are you all-right?' Monsieur Moreau asks, his voice muffled by the door.

'Yes, all is well,' I respond, plucking a towel from the shelf.

He falls silent for a moment.

Quickly, I dry my hair with the towel, pull the sweater back on and unlock the door. In the doorway, startled, Monsieur Moreau stands.

'Voila,' I say, smoothing down my hair, 'Just freshened myself up a bit ... '

'Yes, I see,' he replies, giving me a scrutinising look, 'hope you feel better now.'

I nod.

'Well, come have something to eat, then.'

We go back to the salon and into the dinette. On the table, amidst crystal glasses and porcelain plates, as if a celestial body landed from outer space, a box with a huge pizza lies.

'Monsieur Moreau, I had no idea you are into pizzas,' I say, taking my seat.

'Well, *mon ami*, I believe certain occasions call for certain food,' he replies, opening a bottle of red wine.

'Agreed,' I nod.

'To your 'first date'!' he says, raising his glass.

'By the way, Monsieur Moreau, do you know who's the owner of that black yacht, the one anchored opposite 'Rosalinda'? I ask, taking a sip from my glass.

'Do you mean the yacht that Gaspard's come to check on this morning?' he asks, putting a slice of pizza on my plate.

'Yes.'

'As far as I know, it belongs to the son of the Ambassador of the United Arab Emirates – Mohammed Al Murshidi.'

'Never thought that sons of ambassadors can afford such yachts,' I reply, starting on my pizza.

'My dear Luke, it isn't a matter of being in the diplomatic elite, it's a matter of money.'

'Is he a relative of the sheik Mohammed, then?' I ask, surprised.

'No, I don't think so. Besides sheik Mohammed wealth, there is enough richness out there. I'd say even muchness of it ... '

'But Monsieur Moreau, is there such a thing as much-richness?' I say.

'Oh, yes, there is, very much so. That's when "much-richness" becomes too much to bear.'

Episode 42 – Infatuation (Lina)

Saracen fort, Saint-Tropez, France, 29 December

Strolling along side Mohammed, I can't stop thinking of the 'charming young man'.

Back in the car, I didn't think my romantic fantasies would ever materialise. But, apparently, they did. Though, perhaps, my encounter with the 'charming young man' in the harbour of the posh Provençal village wasn't quite what one would call 'romantic', but it certainly was real.

And what if our incidental meeting wasn't coincidental? What if it was written in the stars?

Well, it's a shame really that I don't have a yacht of my own anchored in the harbour of Saint-Tropez. If I had I could have thrown a New Year's Eve party on it and would have invited the 'charming young man' from the wonderful 'Rosalinda' to it. I just wonder in whose honour he's called his yacht? Perhaps, in the honour of his girlfriend, one of many romantic infatuations of his, but more brilliant and intense than others ...

We walk up the hill and end up in the old chestnut tree garden where peacocks unhurriedly stroll. Their extravagant eye-spotted tails lightly rock back and forth against the sea breeze. Admiring the peacocks, I suddenly think of their resemblance to Mohammed. An idea strikes me.

'Do you know who's the owner of the yacht, anchored opposite yours?' I ask Mohammed.

'Which one?'

'"Rosalinda"...' I say.

'"Rosalinda"?'

'Yes. You know, the small one, but modern and very elegant ... Somewhat resembles a white swan ... '

'A white swan... Why the swan?' he asks, surprised.

'Well, as gracious,' I reply.

Mohammed falls silent for a moment, then gets his smartphone out and punches in some number.

'Gaspard,' he throws into the phone, 'do you know who's the owner of the 'Rosalinda' opposite us?'

Hearing the answer, Mohammed turns to me and says: 'Your 'white swan' belongs to some Monsieur Moreau.'

The name isn't at all what I've imagined. But then again, when do all our fantasies precisely match the reality?

'I'll send an invitation to him. Let's see what this 'white swan' of yours is all about,' Mohammed mutters and strides away towards the exit.

Episode 43 – ‘And I Love Her’ (Luke)

Monte Carlo, France, 30 December

Lying on my bed, I stare at the blue patch of the sky and think of my unexpected encounter with *her*.

A mere thought of having the courage to speak to *her*, like I did, makes my heart race with exhilaration. Again, and again evoking the moment of *her* smiling at me, I think that it must have been some sort of divine intervention. For, if *she* hadn't smiled then, I would have just stood there, rooted to the deck of the yacht.

I take the Fender guitar and run my fingers across its strings. Trembling lightly, they produce a vibrating sound that echoes in my heart with a gentle melody. What if I write a song? But what about ...

I remember a poetic diary I kept once in the Berklee College of Music, in Boston. Actually, my studying there was purely thanks to *maman*. It was her who persuaded me to go there. Though I quite enjoyed studying, I was never sure if it was because of my musical talent or because it just grew on me. Sometimes, I think that except looks and money I'm pretty useless at everything else.

Pulling a drawer of my desk out, I look through its content and find my diary: a plump notebook in a leather cover. I flip through it, pausing on a random page. My eyes meet the lines of the Beatles song, ‘*And I Love Her*’:

I give her all my love

That's all I do

And if you saw my love

You'd love her too

I love her.

I stare at the excerpt. Is it really incidental, me opening this very page? My heart skips a beat.

The words of Gaspard about the upcoming New Year's Eve party swim into my mind. Though *she* didn't really mention whether *she* was going to attend the party or not, something tells me *she* is. If so, then I must attend it too.

But how can I get an invitation to the party?

It's a shame I'm not acquainted with that son of the Ambassador. Of course, I can ask *maman* for help. But I don't wish to share my New Year's Eve plans with her, for she is convinced that I am dating the model from Nice.

Thinking it over, I open my laptop and log into my Facebook profile.

Episode 44 – Daydreaming (Lina)

Nice, France, 30 December

It seems my ‘trick’ on Mohammed has worked well.

I hope, as promised, he will send the invitation to the owner of ‘Rosalinda’. Though, him sending the invitation doesn’t mean the ‘charming young man’ accepting it. He might have some other plans for the New Year's Eve. Most likely he will be spending it with his girlfriend, that same Rosalinda in whose honour he has called his yacht. If so, then my ‘trick’ as well as Mohammed's invitation will have no effect at all.

Despite my chances of meeting the ‘charming young man’ again being rather slim I still keep picturing our next rendezvous in all details. So much so that in the end I convince myself I’m bound to see him at Mohammed's party. I log into my Facebook, hoping to chat with Nicolas, but find him off Facebook. His status has not been updated for some days. He must be busy, or else, has found a girlfriend, finally. Leaving a message in the chat for him, I notice a new ‘friend’ request, flashing at me.

I click on it. It’s Mohammed.

Accepting his ‘friendship’, I go to his profile. The wall is covered with images of sports cars, some sayings in Arabic, and photos of models. I check out his ‘friends’ - the same ‘authentic beauty’ ... I seem to be the odd one not matching at all the type of women he is inclined towards. Does he bring all the girls he likes to his yacht?

I leave his profile. Back to mine, I upload some photographs I’ve taken in Saint-Tropez. The first ‘likes’ arrive, all from Mohammed and all concerning the photos of his yacht. I chuckle.

Deciding to check out the Facebook profile of the owner of the ‘Rosalinda’, I type ‘Jacque Moreau’ in the Facebook search but it returns no relevant finds. ‘Considering his looks, he must be registered on the Facebook under some other name’, I think and run a search on him in Google. But again, I find nothing.

I check my inbox: some messages from my editor and the usual spam ... I shut the laptop and return to my daydreaming, picturing my next rendezvous with the ‘charming young man’.

Episode 45 - Va Banque! (Luke)

Monte Carlo, France, 30 December

The remains of the day I spend surfing social networks, trying to figure out who might have an invitation to that son of the Ambassador's party. But all in vain. Those who might have been invited are the ones who are well acquainted with *maman* and might spill out the works to her. And the ones who aren't acquainted with her don't seem to have even heard about the party.

I run through the list of my social 'friends' once again and realise I have exhausted my options. But I have no intention of giving up. Not now, not when I believe there is a good chance of seeing *her* again.

If I can't get hold of an invitation then the only thing left to do is to go '*va banque*²⁰' and crash the party. Though, I have never done anything of that sort before. Thanks to *maman* my name has always been on the lists of all notable events of the Cote d'Azur. But this time, I have no choice really.

Crashing the party is rather risky, as I don't have a foggiest idea whether there will be a red velvet rope at the entrance or not. If there is none, then getting through will be a cakewalk. But then comes a question: how well does the host know his invitees? Can they bring guests to his party?

A sudden idea strikes me. First, I can watch the entrance from the yacht of Monsieur Moreau, get an idea of what sort of party it is and then, depending on how it all goes, choose the right moment and join in.

I run down the stairs to the library, knock on the door, then open it and peer in. Sitting in the armchair by the fireplace, Monsieur Moreau is reading a book. I glance at the cover. The title reads – '*One Hundred Years of Solitude*'.²¹

'May I?' I ask.

He lifts his head, lowers the book and looks over his glasses at me.

'Yes,' he replies.

²⁰ '*Va banque*' is a risky strategy deployed most commonly by emotionally unstable or inexperienced players. In essence, it means risking the balance of one's capital on a single card.

²¹ '*One Hundred Years of Solitude*' (Spanish: Cien años de soledad) is a 1967 novel by Colombian author Gabriel García Márquez that tells the multi-generational story of the Buendía family, whose patriarch, José Arcadio Buendía, founds the town of Macondo, the metaphoric Colombia.

I come in and sit down on the sofa. Staring at the floor, I try to gather my thoughts. Patiently, Monsieur Moreau waits. Loudly, the clock ticks on the wall.

Finally, I clear my throat and say: 'Monsieur Moreau, I'd like to spend the New Year's Eve on your yacht.'

'Really?' he says, 'I was under the impression that you'd rather spend it in a stimulating company.'

'Yes, well, that's why I'd like to be on your yacht,' I reply.

'I'm flattered, *mon ami*. I couldn't imagine my yacht would touch you so deeply,' he says with a smile.

'You see, I'd like to meet one person, but have nowhere else to do it in private,' I venture out.

'Yes, I see.'

'But please, not a word to my Mum about it,' I add quickly.

'Of course, Monsieur Luke,' he nods.

Episode 46 - Que Sera, Sera (Luke)

Monaco – Saint-Tropez, France, 31 December

I start on packing. First, I spend ages choosing the bag that won't raise *maman's* suspicion. Then, I can't make up my mind on what to pack.

With no invitation at hand I have no clue about the dress code for the party. After all, I've never attended an Arabic New Year's Eve party before. But do they really celebrate the New Year? Perhaps, it's just that the son of the Ambassador has decided to dazzle his Western friends with Arabic hospitality. Either way, I have no intention of standing out at his *soirée*. Yet, I would still love to look my best for *her* ...

Having gone through various rucksacks, suitcases and bags, I pick a medium size travel bag, capacious yet not flashy. I open it. In goes my wash bag, couple of shirts, velvet jacket, jeans, and tux. I add a pair of binoculars and pause. Most likely, the outcome of my amorous adventure will be modest. And what if not ... though it's the first time I've ever dared thinking of *her* in this way.

And *her*? Well, *she* just saw me yesterday for the first time in *her* life ... Besides, *she* isn't even aware of me being me. For *her*, I'm just a stranger. So, I doubt our brief encounter has instantaneously fired up her passion. Though, there is this phrase *she* uttered, something about me being more charming than *she* had imagined. What was that about, I wonder ...

Walking into my bathroom, I open a cabinet door and stare at the two shiny square packets lying on a shelf. 'Oh well, '*que sera, sera*'²²', I think, grab the packets, and slide them into my pocket. Back in the room, I throw my leather jacket on, put the travel bag over my shoulder and go downstairs.

In the hall, *maman* and Monsieur Moreau are standing, waiting for me. *Maman* thinks I am going to spend the New Year's Eve with my pals from Berklee, who, as I have told her, unexpectedly flew in just a couple of days ago. Thank God, she is not acquainted with any of them. So, the chance of my lie being accidentally uncovered is rather slim.

²² Que Sera, Sera – a line from the song 'Whatever Will Be, Will Be', first published in 1956, written by the Jay Livingston and Ray Evans songwriting team.

Having wished *maman* and Monsieur Moreau a great New Year's Eve, I get in the Porsche and start the car. My heart thumping, I drive out of the garage and press on the gas.

The plan is to get to the harbour of Saint-Tropez before six o'clock. This way, I shall be able to sneak unnoticed in to the yacht of Monsieur Moreau and have plenty of time to decide on my 'watch post' within it.

Episode 47 - An Envelope (Luke)

Yacht 'Rosalinda', Saint-Tropez, France, 31 December

As expected, at this hour the car park at the port is deserted but I am still on edge, fearing that if I linger there too long, I am bound to meet one of *maman's* plenty acquaintances. And I'd really hate it. So, keeping my head down, I briskly walk along the boardwalk, ending up almost running. Though, I do realise it looks suspicious and is likely to attract somebody's attention, I can't help it.

Reaching the yacht of Monsieur Moreau, I run up the gangway and take the key out. But as I am about to insert it into the lock, I notice something white, tucked between the doors of the glassed entrance.

My first thought is that someone has got to the yacht before me. But as I look closer, I realise that the white thing is just a plain envelope. Taking it, I open the door and step inside.

Looking around, I decide on my 'watch post'. The best option seems to be the cockpit salon. Its large windows offer an unobstructed view of the entrance to the yacht of the Emirati.

I go up and, dropping my bag on the floor, flop onto the sofa.

The envelope still in my hand, I look at it. The name of Monsieur Moreau is written in a bold handwriting on its front. There is no return address or whom it might be from indicated on the back of the envelope. It might be a message from a neighbour or a friend of Monsieur Moreau from Saint-Tropez. Though curious of the envelope's contents, I don't dare look inside and put it aside.

Sitting up, I throw a glance outside. Before me, silhouetting in the twilight, radars, masts, and swaying flags run far into the horizon. Their merged-in outlines resemble rooftops of some magical marine city, my secret rendezvous place ...

I draw my attention to the black yacht. All of its three decks are lit up. In the windows I can see the silhouettes of people, moving up and down, must be the Emirati's crew preparing the yacht for the tonight's festivity. On a lower deck two men are installing huge speakers. I watch them for a little while.

There is still plenty of time for a snack, I think and go down to the lower deck.

In the fridge I find butter, some cheese, a jar of olives, and a bottle of Bordeaux. Rummaging the cupboards, I come across a packet of crisp breads. Not much, I think, wishing for a piece of yesterday's pizza.

Improvising, I make myself some canapés of what I have found. Placing them on a plate, I take the bottle of wine and come back to my 'watch post'.

Episode 48 - A Chance (Luke)

Yacht 'Rosalinda', Saint-Tropez, France, 31 December

As I watch the yacht, I finish all of the cheese, olives, crisp bread, drink up the bottle of Bordeaux, treat myself to the remains of the chocolate ice cream in the freezer, and even have a couple of glasses of whisky.

The night falls. But I don't turn the light on. I fear it might give away my 'watch post'. Besides, there is no need for it. The plentiful lights of the black yacht, beaming far into the night, illuminate everything around it, including the cockpit salon of the 'Rosalinda'.

I glance at the watch: eight o'clock.

The first guests, a group of Arabic women in bright evening dresses, appear on the boardwalk. I point my binoculars at them. Laughing and gesticulating, women walk one after the other up the gangway. There are some white cards in their hands. The cards must be their invitations to the party, I guess. The dress code is clear too.

I flop down onto the sofa. My eyes searching the room, I catch a sight of the envelope addressed to Monsieur Moreau. I take it. Turning it in my hands, I think.

An idea strikes me.

What if I try to sneak aboard the yacht in one of such groups? The more people in a group, the less attention will be paid to who has an invitation and who doesn't. To look more convincing, I can hold something white in my hand like a card, a folded sheet of paper or an envelope.

I look at the envelope I have been fiddling with. The shape and size of it seem to be identical to the invitations that I have just caught a glimpse of.

I sit up and point my binoculars at the entrance: a steady stream of guests is now running along the boardwalk towards the black yacht. Putting the binoculars down, I pick my travel bag from the floor and, unzipping it, shake its contents out onto the sofa.

I quickly try some clothes on and choose a white shirt, a pair of tux trousers and a dark-blue velvet jacket. Hip and stylish.

Finished, I run my fingers through my hair. It is better not gel it. Slight untidiness will give it a more innocent look, hopefully increasing my chances of success.

I slide the envelope into my pocket and go down. Coming to the glass doors, I pause, throwing a look at the black yacht. Another group of guests, moving slowly along the gangway, ascends it.

I pull my jacket straight and venture out.

Episode 49 - It's A Sign (Lina)

'Swiss Hotel', Nice, France, 31 December

Deciding on my outfit for the party, I try on the four evening dresses I have taken with me to Nice.

At noon, still at it, undecided what dress to choose I hear the chambermaid knock on the door. I send her away. In what seems like no time she knocks again. I send her away a second time. She goes and doesn't return.

Once more I try on my dresses but still unable to come to any decision, give up, take my iPad and log into Facebook.

Nicolas has updated his profile: he is going to spend the New Year's Eve in Spain.

'On a quest for a bit of romance? ☺' I comment.

'More like for a bit of sunshine ... Fancy a chat?' he replies.

I turn the chat on.

'How's Nice?' he blurbs at me.

'Pleasantly warm and romantically pleasing!' I type.

'Have you converted into poetry or fallen in love?'

I stare at the screen; my eyes fixed on 'in love' words. Can this be an explanation of my eager interest in the 'charming young man'?

'Ha-ha, anything's possible!' I reply.

'Possible or certain?'

'Certainly converted into poetry ☺ '

'What are your plans for the New Year's Eve?' he turns the conversation.

'Going to a party ... One Arab throws it at his yacht ... '

'The West meets the East - handle with care!' he replies.

'Thanks for caring ☺ I've a dilemma of another sort, can't make up my mind on what to wear ... ☹ '

'Are you friends with him on Facebook?'

'Yes, why?'

'Go browse through his photos ... '

'What for?'

'For figuring out the style he fancies ... ☺ '

'OK,' I agree but leave out the fact that it's the 'charming young man' and not Mohammed that I'm after.

Have I really fallen in love? I don't recall being bothered much with fashion 'dilemmas' before. But now I seem to be rather concerned with impressing some stranger I took a coincidental picture of. And what if it wasn't coincidence at all?

'Nicolas, do you believe in coincidences?' I blurb out.

'There are no coincidences ... '

'And what, then?'

'Signs.'

'What signs?'

'Signs that offer a glimpse into unfolding of your future, a sort of tangible extension of your intangible inner world. Materialisation of your thoughts, as you wish.'

'So, you think coincidences are some sort of fragments of our subconscious mind materialised into being?' I sum it up.

' Yes ... And what do you think?'

'I don't know ... '

'Then go and read that book I gave you ... '

'I left it in London. There was no space for it in my suitcase ... ☺ '

'I see, and now you're suddenly into signs ... ☺ '

Not signs, the 'charming young man', I think to myself.

Episode 50 – Style (Lina)

'Swiss Hotel', Nice, France, 31 December

Still, in search of 'stylish' inspiration, I follow Nicolas' advice and go to Mohammed's Facebook profile. There is no lack of photo albums there. Among them there is one that contains snapshots from different parties, the ones he has thrown and the ones he has attended.

I tap on the album and go through images. Skipping group ones, I pause on those where he is pictured with girls. Most of them seem to be of Arabic origin, happily showcasing their voluptuous forms in rather unorthodox outfits.

There are also photos of Western beauties and Slavic models, dressed in skimpy garments, all of the same type, keenly parading their long legs. Having looked through the images, I get an idea of Mohammed's preferences. But this doesn't help me at all in solving of my own 'dilemma'.

I browse through the images a second time. My eyes single out a skinny girl, wearing a somewhat different looking dress. I study it. Though unusual the garment looks quite pretentious and doesn't become the girl, failing to match her own individuality or rather the absence of it.

As a true 'connoisseur' of female beauty, Mohammed tags every girl he has been photographed with. Curious, I tap on the face of the skinny girl. A name tag pops up: 'Debbi Amore'. What a strange name ... A nickname, perhaps? Though, it sounds very much brothel like. Intrigued, I go to her profile.

As a 'friend' of a 'friend' I am entitled to just a glimpse of her life, which includes her modelling photographs of dubious nature.

Her status has been updated recently with some photos taken at a fancy event. I check them out. My eyes catch a snapshot of a young man in a white tux. His face seems strangely familiar. I zoom in and freeze in astonishment.

From the photograph my 'charming young man' looks at me. A line of text runs under the image: '*Mon beau Luke. Ensemble à jamais*'²³.

²³ '*Mon beau Lukka. Ensemble à jamais*' (French) – 'My beau Lukka. Together forever.'

Chapter Six

'I want to do with you what spring does with cherry trees.'

- Pablo Neruda, *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*

Episode 51 - What's in My Name to You? (Lina)

'Swiss Hotel', Nice, France, 31 December

Bewildered, I stare the photograph, then tap on the face of the 'charming young man'. The name tag pops up - 'Luke Allen'. The name, although I like it, doesn't match the one of the 'Rosalinda's' owner, and the bony Debbie Amore doesn't resemble an image of graceful Rosalinda that I have painted in my mind.

I tap on the name tag 'Luke Allen'. But his Facebook profile is locked for 'non-friends'.

Going back to Debbie's profile, I open up the photo of her and Luke and study it. The longer I do it, the stranger the photo appears to me. It seems the 'charming young man' has an absent-minded look and doesn't have much interest in being taken picture of. Yet, his girlfriend leans against him as if he is some sort of a marble column.

The photograph appears to have a 'glam' feel about it. Not quite the impression I have got of the 'charming young man' when I first saw him on the beach. But this doesn't bother me as much as this girlfriend of his, a model of dubious nature. I wonder what he has in common with her sort? Not that I can't see it happening between them at all, but my imagination runs dry picturing them together. Men like him should have far more intriguing girlfriends than Debbie Amore. She seems more of Mohammed's type of girl.

The phone rings.

I spring off the bed and, skipping over my shoes scattered on the floor, reach for the receiver.

'Yes?' I answer.

'Mademoiselle Du Monde, your taxi is waiting for you downstairs.'

'Merci!'

Racing to the bathroom, I glance in the mirror, then undo my hair and brush it quickly.

With no time left for make up, I dash back to the room, throw off my bathrobe and grab one of the four evening dresses from the bed. It happens to be an open back one, my 'Hollywood decadence of twenties' dress. I put it on. Picking up my silver stilettos from the floor, I drop my mobile and Mohammed's invitation into the clutch and sprint out of the room.

Episode 52 - Made It! (Luke)

Yacht 'Boreas', Saint Tropez, France, 31 December

I cross the boardwalk and come to the gangway. Joining a group of guests, I begin to ascend the black yacht. My heart thuds, but I do my best to stay composed.

My turn comes. Smiling, I pull the white envelope out of the pocket and hand it over to the guard. He takes it. But when he is about to open it, a tall Arab in sunglasses and a white shirt, unbuttoned on his chest, comes to him. The Arab leans over and whispers something to the guard. He nods, gives my envelope back to me and leaves his post.

Seizing the moment, I walk into the salon. The brightly lit room is filled with hum of voices. Dozens of guests, trying to outvoice each other and the deafening music, shout in an attempt to maintain a small talk.

I look around. Skipping from face to face, I search the gussied up, humming crowd but there is no sign of *her* amidst it.

What if all this business of *her* attending the New Year's Eve party has been just a figment of my feverish imagination? What makes me so sure I'll find *her* here?

Perhaps, I have misunderstood it all. Perhaps, when I saw *her* on the deck of the yacht, *she* was just smoking. Well, perhaps, not just, but still what does it matter? *She* has never told me *she* was going to this party, only asked how come I knew about it.

I pluck a glass from the waiter's tray and drink its contents up. It turns out to be an apple juice.

'What the heck?'

'Excuse me,' exasperated, I address the waiter, 'are you serving alcohol here at all?'

'*Mais oui, Monsieur*²⁴,' he replies, 'down at the bar.'

I give him an awkward nod and make my way through the crowd, looking for the stairs to the lower deck.

The yacht is packed. Every available space is filled with guests, even bedrooms. Their doors wide open, I see men and women, glasses in hands, lounging on beds, laughing and drinking.

²⁴ '*Mais oui, Monsieur*' (French) – 'Yes, of course, Monsieur'.

I finally reach the stairs and go down to the lower deck. There are more rooms there. I find a bar room and walk in. Behind the counter, a barman, a shiny cocktail-shaker in his hands, prepares a cocktail. I sit down and order myself a Daiquiri.

Episode 53 – Bedroom (Luke)

Yacht 'Boreas', Saint Tropez, France, 31 December

The cocktail is working - I feel in higher spirits now. Sipping my Daiquiri, I think of *her*. If *she* is to attend the party at all, *she* has arrived by now. And if I am to find *her* in this crowd, I have to really look for *her*.

I start my search from the lower deck and first head to the cinema room. Inside, I find some men in tuxedos sitting in plush armchairs. Unhurriedly drawing on their cigars, they talk some politics, glancing occasionally at a large TV screen transmitting an image of an almond-eyed girl. The hands wringed in a plea, she sings about love. In the next room, some long legged models, stooped over a mobile, giggle away at something.

I walk further along the corridor, trying the handles of bedroom doors. They all seem to be locked except the last one. I push it slightly open. A ray of light falls across the room. In it, I see the same Arab who, an hour ago, whispered something to the guard at the entrance. His shirt and sunglasses off, his head thrown onto the cushions, the Arab lies on the bed, uttering quiet punctuated groans. On top of him, her back to the door, a naked girl sits. Her elbows propped against the bed, her back arched, she moves slowly and rhythmically.

Stunned, I freeze.

Uttering a loud groan, the Arab smacks the girl across her buttock. She giggles then raising herself up a bit, turns her unseeing stare at me and begins to move in an increasing tempo. I suddenly recognise the model, which took the snapshot of me at *maman's* Christmas reception.

Shutting the door, I dash towards the staircase. Taking the stairs two at a time I run up and bump into a woman in a shimmering silvery dress.

'Monsieur Moreau!' she cries out, 'how very delightful to see you here!'

Right before me, a glass of champagne in hand, stands *she*.

'Likewise!' I respond, catching my breath.

'How kind of you to have accepted the invitation of Monsieur Al Murshidi!' she cries out.

'Yes, sure,' I nod trying to figure out what invitation *she* is talking about and why *she* is calling me Monsieur Moreau.

'Have you seen him?' she asks.

'Who?' I stare at *her*, bewildered.

'Monsieur Al Murshidi ... '

'Ah, no, I haven't ... ' I utter, trying to wipe off an image of the bedroom scene from my mind. 'I mean I haven't yet had an honour of being formally introduced to him.'

'Oh, I see,' she smiles.

'Would you like to go for walk?' I blurt out.

'For a walk?'

'Yes, I mean go out onto the deck.'

'I'd love to, but I'm afraid it is a bit chilly outside. My dress is rather open,' she replies, turning her bare back to me.

An image of the model's buttocks swims into my mind again.

'I'll give you my jacket,' I reply quickly.

Episode 54 - I Don't Smoke (Lina)

Yacht 'Boreas', Saint Tropez, France, 31 December

I take his jacket and throw it onto my shoulders. The atlas lining, bearing the warmth of his body, gives me a gentle caress, bringing to memory the time of my carefree school years and first adult like yet innocent dates.

We go out onto the deck. I draw in crisp salty air and look at the 'charming young man'. Despite the light chilly breeze coming from the sea, his cheeks flame radiantly, but it becomes him.

We come to a wide bench built into the crescent-shape side of the yacht and sit down on a large cushion, one of many conveniently left there for the guests to use. I take a cigarette pack out and hold it out to him. He hesitates for a second then shakes his head.

'I don't smoke,' he says and adds quickly: 'I don't smoke cigarettes.'

'And what do you smoke? Marihuana?' I ask with a smile.

He utters a laugh.

'Oh no, of course not ... I prefer cigars ... '

'Well, you don't give an impression of a cigar aficionado,' I reply, studying him curiously.

'Don't I?' he says, peering into the night, 'that's maybe because I'm more of an occasional smoker. You know, all depends on a company.'

'Are you implying that my company isn't good enough for you?' I ask, lighting up my cigarette.

'Not at all, I think it is perfect. It's just that I don't have my cigar case on me right now.'

I nod.

'Oh, pardon me. I haven't introduced myself to you yet. My name is Lina,' I say and reach my hand out to him.

He takes it, gives it a light squeeze and holds it in his for a bit, the palm of his hand hot and moist.

'And mine...' he starts.

I suddenly feel like telling him that I prefer his Facebook name, Luke Allen. But I say nothing of the sort, just smile and respond: 'I know.'

'How come?' he gives me a puzzled look.

'A little bird has told me,' I whisper into his ear.

'What bird?' he blinks.

'Just teasing. You know that very little bird happened to be Monsieur Al Murshidi.'

'But how come he knows my name? I don't think the two of us are acquainted.'

'Well, he didn't or rather hadn't until yesterday,' I say with a grin.

'I'm afraid, I'm not with you on that.'

I take the last draw on my cigarette then toss the butt over the board and say: 'You see, Monsieur Al Murshidi is one of those humans who are preoccupied entirely with themselves, and since I was keen on finding out your name I had to trick him a bit. Well, as a result now both of us know your name.'

Episode 55 – Exposed (Luke)

Yacht 'Boreas', Saint Tropez, France, 31 December

Now I see why Lina keeps on calling me Monsieur Moreau. That's because *she* saw me standing on the deck of the 'Rosalinda'. *She* must have assumed that it belongs to me. What on earth made *her* think that? My standing there could have been purely coincidental and not connected to the yacht at all. I could have been a guest there, or even a member of the yacht's crew.

I should explain *her* everything. I should say that my name is Luke Edward Allen and not Monsieur Moreau and that yesterday when *she* saw me I was visiting a friend on the yacht.

Only how should I do it without spoiling it all? Apart from the misunderstanding with my name, everything else seems to go perfectly well. Just a few days ago I couldn't even imagine being with *her* in an intimate setting like this one. And now, here I'm, sitting right beside *her*, side by side on the same cushion.

What if *she* takes me wrongly? What if *she* thinks I have plotted it all out just to set a 'trap' for *her*? Then, surely, *she* will regard me as a filthy liar.

Undecided, I sit and stare at Lina, admiring her face. The nakedness of it rather attracts me. The absence of any make up makes it 'exposed' and yet so open and real.

Her dress suits *her* too. It gives *her* that glamorous look of a Hollywood actress. You know, a kind of woman of decadent twenties with fine girlish features, wide-open lashed eyes, and the neat rouge lines of her lips.

'Aren't we going to miss the New Year?' she asks.

I glance at my watch: 11pm. The time seems to fly, when I am with *her*. I could sit here forever, admiring *her* features.

'No, we won't,' I reply, 'we still have an hour.'

'Aren't you cold, sitting here in just a shirt?' she asks.

'Not really, but I haven't thought about it at all,' I say and blush.

'And what have you been thinking about?' she asks with a smile.

'Well ... well, I've been thinking what a loud party Monsieur Al Murshidi has.'

'Really?'

'Really,' I nod, 'so many guests and none can hear each other properly.'

'Ah, that's an interesting thought ...' she replies, thoughtful.

An idea strikes me.

'I'd like to suggest you something!' I blurt out.

'Oh,' she responds.

'Would you fancy visiting my yacht?' I say and think, 'here we go. I've already assumed the ownership of the 'Rosalinda''.

'Yes, I'd very much fancy that!' Lina cries out, 'you know, I'm already in love with your yacht, it has such a beautiful name. Is it the name of your girlfriend?'

'It's the name of a woman close to my heart,' I reply.

'Is she as beautiful as her name?'

'Yes,' I nod, then get up and hold my hand out, 'come, I'll introduce you to 'her'.'

Episode 56 – Fiancé (Luke)

Yacht 'Boreas', Saint-Tropez, France, 31 December

Lina smiles and puts her hand in mine. Squeezing it lightly, I feel a pang of conscience. What on earth am I doing? There is still time to explain, to tell *her* everything. My acting won't make it any better. I can't possibly be two in one, assuming somebody's identity just like that.

'Do you have any food on the yacht?' she asks.

'Not really,' I reply, the bare shelves of the Monsieur Moreau's fridge looming before my eyes.

'Shall we raid Al Murshidi's festive tables, then?' she suggests with a smile.

'Excellent idea!' I reply.

'Great! Then you go after appetisers and I will deal with desserts. Hope you aren't short on alcohol.'

'No, I don't think I'm ...' I reply, mentally going through the contents of the yacht's minibar.

We go inside. The thunder of music instantaneously avalanches over us. The party is in full swing. Topsy guests, mostly of European origin, grouped in twos and threes are engrossed in what seems like rather intimate *tête-à-têtes*.

Lina heads to the deserts table. I approach the table with appetisers and throw a scrutinising look at its display. Most of the dishes are already empty, but some still have food on them.

Taking a plate, I begin to fill it with what looks appealing to me.

'Feeling peckish, Monsieur Luke?' I hear a familiar voice behind me.

I turn around. Before me, the 'bikini model' stands. She staggers slightly.

'What do you want?' I ask.

'Oh, Your Highness doesn't seem to be in the mood tonight?' she says with a smirk.

Putting her hand on my shoulder, she leans over and extends her lips to my cheek: 'Fancy a snapshot?'

I shake her off and turn away.

'If I were you, Monsieur Luke Edward Allen, I'd watch your manners. Rumours can spread faster than you think,' she hisses into my ear, her breath stinking of alcohol.

I suddenly feel like slapping her across her stupid face. But I contain myself. My posing as Monsieur Moreau abides me. I know if he were in my situation he wouldn't slide to such behaviour.

'Don't you dare threaten me!' I hiss back to her.

'Oh, why would I threaten my own fiancé?' she says, her fingers worming their way into my hair.

'I'm not your fiancé!'

'And whose, then?' she says, giggling.

Episode 57 - I Suppose So (Lina)

Yacht 'Boreas', Saint-Tropez, France, 31 December

Flicking my eyes from one dish to another, I stand with my plate before the table brimming with sweets.

Well, I shall take a bit of everything then, I decide. Soon, a multi-hued pyramid, made up of sweet pastries, candied nuts, cute little cubes of *pate de fruit*²⁵, and goblets filled with pinkish raspberries mousse, grows on my plate. Delighted with the result, I head to the appetisers table, our meeting point with the 'charming young man'.

Approaching, I notice that he isn't alone. Beside him a skinny girl stands. In her I recognise the very model, the photograph of which I have seen on the Facebook earlier today. Leaning towards 'the charming young man', she whispers something into his ear. Obviously, his girlfriend's been invited too, I think, annoyed. The Mohammed's invitation must have said: '*avec*'.

Not quite knowing what to do, I keep on watching them. Abruptly, the 'charming young man' turns to the girl and says something to her. She gives him a laugh, her hands flying up in the air. The gesture appears uncoordinated.

I make a move towards them. But at the same moment I see Mohammed coming up to the appetisers table. Putting his arm around the girl's waist, he pulls her in the direction of the exit. She goes limp in his embrace and lets Mohammed steer her away.

How very bizarre, I think, watching them, 'the 'charming young man' seems not to mind at all Mohammed's taking 'possession' of his girlfriend'. Perhaps Debbie Amore isn't the girlfriend of the 'charming young man' but why then she had posted that photograph of him and her together on her Facebook profile?

I come over.

'I see you've had a chance to acquaint yourself with the host of this festivity,' I say, nodding in the direction of the walking away 'couple'.

'Yes, I suppose so ... ' he replies, studying his plate.

²⁵ *Pâte de fruits* - a type of traditional French confectionery made of a set fruit paste. The flavour of the fruit is concentrated, similar to making a jam, with sugar and pectin, before setting and dusting with sugar. Often made with orchard fruits such as quinces, apples, apricots or plums.

'You don't seem to be delighted to have met him,' I note.

'And what emotions do you think people like him can evoke?' he asks.

'I think people like him aren't worth the time spent talking about them.'

'Well, then let us not waste it,' he says.

I nod.

Plates in hands, we hurry off to the exit. Walking down the gangway, we cross the boardwalk and stop at his yacht.

'Just wait a sec here,' he says, then passes his plate with appetisers to me and disappears in to the yacht.

Episode 58 - A La Russe (Lina)

Yacht 'Rosalinda', Saint-Tropez, France, 31 December

The interior of his yacht is as elegant as its exterior. Perhaps just a bit more conservative than I have expected. There are pieces of art, and books, and some sweet mementoes everywhere, which gives his floating home an inhabited look. It seems he frequents his yacht regularly.

I don't know why, but I have a feeling that the 'Rosalinda' is something of a 'retreat' for the 'charming young man', an oasis of peace and seclusion, where he escapes from the reality because it doesn't quite match his ideals or expectations.

I think of Debbie Amore. Well, if I had such a girlfriend, I would probably also want to 'retreat' from time to time.

We look around the yacht then go up to the cockpit salon.

With just fifteen minutes left till midnight the 'charming young man' rushes downstairs to fetch two flutes and a bottle of champagne for us. I slip off my shoes and sit down on the sofa, my legs drawn up.

Through the large windows of the salon I can see the Mohammed's yacht. Its decks are crowded with his guests who have flocked out there in anticipation of fireworks.

The 'charming young man' returns and sits down next to me on the sofa.

'You know,' I say, 'in Russia, we have a tradition of bidding farewell to the Old Year before the clock strikes midnight.'

'Are you Russian?' he asks.

'Yes, half Russian: my Mum is Russian and Dad is French.'

'How fascinating ...' he says.

'What about you?' I ask.

'Well, I guess, I can say that I'm half English ... '

'And the other half?'

'And the other one I'm not sure about ... '

'How so?' I ask.

'Simply so,' he replies. 'Let's bid farewell to the Old Year!'

'Yes, let's indeed! But what shall we drink? The champagne is for cheering the New Year, we mustn't use it now,' I say, pointing to the bottle in his hands.

'Well, then shall we have a shot of vodka? It'll be very *a la Russe*, what do you think?' he suggests.

'Great idea!' I respond.

He springs off the sofa, comes to the bar cabinet and gets out of it two small bottles of vodka. Flopping onto the sofa, he hands one to me.

'What's next?' he cries out. 'We've just five minutes left!'

Episode 59 - Happy New Year! (Lina)

Yacht 'Rosalinda', Saint-Tropez, France, 31 December

Quickly, we unscrew caps on our bottles. I raise mine and say: 'And now, recall the passing year and say thanks for all the good that it has brought you and let go of all the bad that might have occurred.'

For a moment he becomes thoughtful then brings his bottle to mine and whispers: 'I'm thankful for having met you and the bad, well, I have a very short memory for it.'

'I wholeheartedly agree! To us!' I cry out and pour the contents of the bottle into my mouth. The vodka turns out to be a soft one, but nonetheless a bit stinging. He follows me and at once begins to cough.

'Obviously, you aren't a great drinker,' I note with a smile.

'And you obviously drink every day,' he replies, uttering a laugh.

'I'm more of a smoker. But, to be honest, journalists do both, smoke and drink a lot.'

'What a fascinating job you have,' he says and, dropping his eyes, begins to fiddle with a loose thread of the sofa cover.

'Yes, I quite like it,' I say, glancing out the window.

The thudding of music has seized. The guests on the decks of Mohammed's yacht begin to recite the seconds left till midnight.

Grabbing the bottle of champagne, I push it into the hands of the 'charming young man'.

He tears the foil wrap off, untwists the metal cage and, holding the cork, turns the bottle. I hear a cracking pop and look up. Myriads of sparkling stars pour from the night sky down into the sea. Simultaneously, the babbling champagne flows from the bottle into our flutes.

'Happy New Year!' we cry out in unison and burst into laughing.

I take a sip of champagne. Bubbling down my throat, it spreads joyful sensation within me.

Bewitched, I watch the explosions of flicking 'flowers', one after the other opening up in the night sky. The 'charming young man' moves closer to me, leaning his elbows on the back of the sofa. His shoulder touches mine. I glance at his face illuminated by the lights and catch a reflection of fireworks in his eyes.

Episode 60 - The Cherry on The Cake (Luke)

Yacht 'Rosalinda', Saint-Tropez, France, 1 January

Pretending to be watching the fireworks, I steal admiring glances at Lina. The sleeve of her dress has slipped off *her* shoulder, baring it. But *she* stays unaware of it, enthralled by the festive display in the sky.

Our shoulders touching, I feel the warmth emanating from *her* and think of running my fingers over *her* shoulder, then pulling *her* sleeve down and kissing *her*. First on the shoulder, then on the neck and, finally, on the lips ... My mouth is dry, I have a sip of champagne.

Turning to me, *she* catches my glance. I freeze. *She* must have guessed what I'm thinking about. Moving my eyes away, I stare out the window.

The next moment I feel a touch of *her* fingers on my cheek. *She* brings *her* face close to mine. *Her* warm breath fanning my face, I feverishly try to recall some movie scene of the first kiss but nothing at all comes to mind.

In the night sky, illuminating our faces, the last flaming sphere bursts into millions of sparkles. *She* smiles, moves away from me and says: 'It seems we haven't tried any of the appetisers you picked for us yet.'

'Indeed,' I mumble and pluck the dish with appetisers. Placing it between us, I try to figure out its contents but can't see a thing. The appetisers seem to blur into one before my eyes.

'Would you tell me something about yourself?' she asks.

In the present situation there doesn't seem much to tell *her*. I don't think lying is a good option either.

'What would you like to know about me?' I ask cautiously.

'Well, for an instant, what hobbies you have.'

'I love music.'

'You mean to listen to?'

'Yes, but not only to listen ... I can play several musical instruments.'

'Have you studied music?'

'Yes, at the Berklee College of Music, in Boston.'

'How very interesting!' she cries out.

'Yes, quite,' I think and say: 'Well, yes, but ...'

'What?' she asks with a smile.

'But I'm not sure if I have a musical talent.' I reply.

'How come? You love music, studied it in the college and still not sure if you have the talent or not?'

'You see, the thing is it was my Mum who'd sent me to Berklee.'

'So, what?' she stares at me, 'but you still love music, don't you?'

'Yes, of course, I do.'

'Did you find studying in the college boring?'

'No, not at all, I rather liked it,' I say, 'only, you see, since graduating I haven't really pursued my calling.'

'Maybe, you lack self-confidence? You know, it happens, especially when parents insist on paving out the life path for their children.'

I fall silent. Maybe, she is right. Why hasn't it ever occurred to me before, I wonder.

Chapter Seven

'The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves.'

- William Shakespeare, Julius Caesar

Episode 61 - A Fragment (Lina)

Yacht 'Rosalinda', Saint-Tropez, France, 1 January

Pretending not to notice the curious glances he throws at me, I study discreetly his face.

Despite the air of shyness, which becomes him, his looks are flawless, perfect, even. He reminds me of a masterpiece, a look at which evokes aesthetic joy. Though, he somehow appears to be unaware of his own perfection. I wonder if no one has ever told him about it. I am sure he has tons of admirers and girlfriends too.

Him studying music also fits him. If you think, what else but music such a handsome beau could occupy himself with? Though, judging by his yacht, there is no need for him to be preoccupied with anything at all. And he worries about having the talent.

The only thing that doesn't suit him is his name.

I have a sudden itch to tell the 'charming young man' that I know his Facebook name. But If I do, it will look rather silly, for then, I will have to tell him that I know about his girlfriend and that I've seen their photo on her Facebook profile. And this will be way too much. He might imagine that I'm in love with him. Then, both of us will feel awkward. After all, he has got a girlfriend already.

Finished with the appetisers, we move to the desserts. Our forces united, soon there is nothing left on the plate but sugar crystals, golden crumbs and paths of snowy powder.

'I had no idea men love sweets so much,' I say, licking cream off my lips.

'I don't think there is much difference between women and men in this,' he responds, the last *éclair* disappearing in his mouth.

'Shall we say then that we're simply humans whose tastes sometimes differ and sometimes match?'

He nods, brushes crumbs off his trousers and, taking off his jacket, tosses it onto the back of the sofa.

'Would you like a cup of coffee?' he asks.

'Yes, I'd love to,' I reply.

He goes downstairs.

Picking up his jacket, I wrap myself in it, flop onto the cushions and close my eyes.

What if the 'charming young man' is indeed a materialised fragment of my subconscious? But then, I must be a fragment of his subconscious too, which means we exist in each other's subconscious. If so, then we must be connected in some way.

Who knows, perhaps my 'spontaneous' decision to come to Nice wasn't that spontaneous after all. Either way, it's great our paths have crossed.

'Lina, are you sleeping?' I hear him whisper and open my eyes.

'No, just reflecting on life,' I reply, raising myself from the cushions, but he stops me.

'Don't,' he says and slides down to the floor, propping his back against the sofa.

Taking the coffee pot from the tray, he pours coffee into our cups. An aroma of faraway exotic lands rises into the air.

Episode 62 – Hypocrisy (Lina)

Yacht 'Rosalinda', Saint-Tropez, France, 1 January

'Do you mind telling me more about yourself,' he says, handing me my coffee, 'it'll be far more interesting than listening to my Berklee stories.'

'Why do you think it'll be more interesting?' I ask, taking the cup.

'Oh, somehow it seems that your life is bound to be much more interesting than mine,' he replies, his cheeks blushing.

'Really?'

He nods.

'Is there anything in particular that you wish to know?' I ask.

His cheeks flame up again.

'Yes,' he mumbles, dropping his eyes.

'Like what?'

'Well, like where you live,' he replies, his eyes fixed on the floor.

'Right now, in London. I've got a contract with a certain publishing house there,' I say, taking a sip of my coffee.

'So, you're in London only because of your work?'

'Not only, we've a house there, well, my father has, but he's almost never there.'

'Why?'

'Because of his job, he's a diplomat. I spent my whole childhood travelling around, moving from one place to another, like a gypsy never staying anywhere for too long.'

'It must be fascinating!' he cries out.

'Yes, to some extent it is, but the thing is there comes a point in time when you realise that you don't really belong anywhere and that you've become a sort of international nomad.'

'A traveller, perhaps,' he says with a smile.

'Yes, a traveller,' I nod.

I finish my coffee and lean forward, placing my cup on the table. His jacket slips off my shoulders and lands onto his lap. He takes it and hands it to me. Our fingers collide. Blushing, I draw my hand away.

'And what about your Mum?' I hear him asking, his voice seems strangely distant.

'What about her?'

'I mean is your Mum a diplomat too?'

'Ah, no, she isn't,' I reply, suddenly feeling more embarrassed. 'She has a degree in Art, but she's never had much use for it, as with so much moving around it was hard for her to pursue a career. She's been a lady of leisure. You know, involved in social life, and done a bit of charity work too ... '

'Just like my Mum,' he says.

'Has she got a degree in Art too?' I ask.

'No, she's more of a specialist in Latin and other such useless subjects that she studied in Cambridge. I meant the charity work.'

'Oh, I see,' I nod, 'so, she is a Socialite, then?'

'Yes, unfortunately so...'

'Why unfortunately?'

'Because Society is saturated with superfluous etiquette and hypocrisy and I really hate it.'

'What? Superfluous etiquette or hypocrisy?' I ask.

'Both.'

'Shall I take it that you're always genuine and honest in expression of your thoughts and feelings?'

He drops his gaze.

'Not always ... '

Episode 63 - More Coffee? (Luke)

Yacht 'Rosalinda, Saint-Tropez, France, 1 January

Here it is, another chance to confide in *her*, I think, but say nothing. Ashamed of my faint-heartedness, I drop my eyes. I don't want Lina to read fear in them. The fear I'm unable to overcome.

What if I tell *her* the truth and *she* will misunderstand me, make a laughing stock of me, even worse, condemn me? Though, it isn't really my fault that *she* has called me Monsieur Moreau. I never intended to mislead *her* in this way. But why do I then feel so guilty? Because, perhaps, in actual fact, I'm scared to confess to *her* what happened some months ago ...

I raise my head and meet *her* eyes. What if *she* is already guessed it all?

She just stares at me. If *she* starts on hypocrisy again then I'll tell *her* everything and leave the rest to fate. But *she* doesn't say a word. The longer our silence stretches the more strained I become. Not being able to keep *her* stare, I move my eyes to *her* lips.

'You have a beautiful mouth,' she says, bringing her face close to mine.

'Really?'

She nods, running *her* fingers through my hair.

Motionless, I keep staring at *her* mouth, imagining covering *her* lips with mine, tasting *her* taste, breathing in *her* breath.

'You too,' I utter, 'you also have a very beautiful mouth ... and not only the mouth ... '

She smiles and runs *her* fingers across my lips. My heart skips a beat. I panic and, grabbing the coffee pot, blurt out: 'Would you like some more coffee?'

'More coffee?'

'Yes,' I say, feeling like a complete idiot.

She flops on the cushions and bursts into a ringing laughter. Catching *her* breath, *she* says: 'Well, can we have anything stronger, still?'

'Yes, sure.'

I jump to my feet and, coming to the bar cabinet, finger through its contents: mostly bottles of whisky, gin and vodka. Whisky I know nothing about, gin and vodka seem both like a real killer. Maybe, Cherry or Campari will do better ...

'You said something about being a cigar aficionado,' she says, interrupting my alcohol related musings.

'A cigar aficionado?' I repeat, freezing with horror.

'Yes, but you said you'd forgotten your cigar case on the yacht ... '

'Ah, yes, I suppose I did ... ' I mumble.

'Shall we smoke a cigar each?' she suggests.

I break out in a cold sweat. Having succumbed to an imposter role, now I am forced to assume cigar aficionado appearances as well. The turn of fate I haven't quite been prepared for.

'I was under the impression that you smoked cigarettes,' I venture out cautiously.

'Yes, but cigars too,' she replies, 'I used to work for a cigar magazine.'

Episode 64 - All at Once (Luke)

Yacht 'Rosalinda', Saint-Tropez, France, 1 January

Imagine, *she* is into cigars as well, I groan silently.

That will teach me a lesson. I shouldn't have lied about my smoking. Now, I have ruined everything. After all, I've smoked just one cigar before and even that one I couldn't finish. *She* will crack me in no time.

But not wishing to wrap our rendezvous so soon, I try to come up with a plan. The best option, it seems, would be to get myself drunk. Then there will not be any space or time left for smoking cigars.

I throw a look at the bar contents and fish out a bottle of gin. Trying my best to keep my cool, I move back to the sofa.

'How about gin?' I say, pointing at the bottle in my hand.

'Positive,' she replies.

I'm about to pour gin into our glasses, but Lina stops me.

'Wait, and cigars?'

'Oh, yes,' I utter and, doomed, stumble to the humidor. The lid open, I peer inside.

'Which ones do you prefer?' I say, trying to sound as natural I can.

'Dominican.'

'A wonderful choice,' I mumble.

Ignorant, I stare at the display of varying in size and shades cigars. Each has a ring with a name of a brand on it, but whether there are Dominican ones among them or not, I haven't a foggiest idea.

'I haven't got the Dominican,' I lie. Then remembering the brand of the one we smoked with Monsieur Moreau, I add: 'I can offer you a Cohiba.'

'That will do just fine,' she replies.

Taking two cigars out of the humidor, I go back to the sofa and hand Lina one.

'Thanks,' she says, 'but I'm afraid gin won't do. Do you have some cognac instead?'

I fetch it. *She* pours some cognac into our glasses. *Her* cigar lit, Lina pushes the box of matches to me.

The cognac gulped down with bravado, I take the matches from the table. My hands trembling, I desperately hope *she* won't take account of it. After all, it's the New Year's Eve and enough has been drunk already.

I strike a flame and, as Monsieur Moreau taught me, bring the cigar tip to it. The tobacco leaves catch up the flame, I find myself taking the first draw, cautiously and slowly, but awkwardly, as I feel extremely nervous.

Unlike me, leaning leisurely back on the sofa, Lina smokes unhurriedly. Inhaling deeply, rolling the smoke in *her* mouth, *she* savours it, then, throwing *her* head back, blows it out.

In need of extra courage, I pour another glass of cognac to myself. Smiling, *she* raises *her* glass and says: 'To your hospitality!'

She takes a sip of *her* drink and puts it on the table. I gulp mine in one go.

'You know, you remind me of Russian men, trying to have it all at once,' she says, her eyes studying me.

'Really? Always at your service ... ' I reply, feeling rather tipsy.

Episode 65 - Keep in Touch (Lina)

Yacht 'Rosalinda', Saint-Tropez, France, 1 January

I open my eyes and see the 'charming young man' lying next to me, his head resting on my arm. Fully dressed, we are sprawled on the sofa. Raising myself up, I look around the room. My eyes catch a sight of the coffee table, the empty bottles of gin and cognac on it, an unfinished cigar in the astray, the jacket of the 'charming young man' on the floor next to the sofa.

I flinch, remembering my unsuccessful attempts to turn the evening into a romantic soirée. What on earth possessed me?, I wonder, a sudden pang of shame overcoming me. Perhaps the champagne is to blame and the ambiance of the yacht, which seems rather conducive to romance, too.

My eyes still wandering around the room, I glance over the photographs, displayed on a shelf. An image of a smiling beauty with a large bouquet of white roses catches my eye. I think of that very 'close to his heart' woman, in whose honour he has called his yacht, and of the 'bikini' model. Oh, well ... The 'charming young man' and his colourful private life. I sigh. And what have I expected? I guess nothing. Though I must admit I quite like him, but again this doesn't mean at all he likes me back ...

I look at the 'charming young man'. Then, cautiously, so not to wake him up, remove my arm from under his head and get up, my bare feet meeting the cool boards of the floor. I look around in search of my shoes. Where have I tossed them? I kneel down and look under the sofa.

'Have you lost something?' I hear his voice above my arched back.

'No, I mean yes. I'm looking for my shoes,' I reply from under the sofa. 'Have you seen them, by any chance?'

'No, I don't think so ... ' he responds, his voice hoarse from sleep.

'What a shame, I can't possibly go back to the hotel bare foot, can I?' I mumble to myself and straighten up.

'Are you leaving already?' he asks, his eyes half closed.

'Yes, I need to freshen myself up,' I reply.

'You can freshen yourself up here ... '

'Thank you, that's very kind of you, but I don't wish to abuse your hospitality. Besides, I have all my things back at the hotel,' I say, finally spotting my shoes behind the bar cabinet.

'As you wish ... ' he says and closes his eyes.

'Oh yes, and I hope we'll keep in touch. I'll leave you my number.'

'Thank you,' he whispers.

My shoes on, I take my business card out of the clutch and leave it on the coffee table.

Episode 66 – Likewise (Lina)

‘Swiss Hotel’, Nice, France, 1 January

I hear my mobile ringing. I dart out of the bathroom, leaving a trail of foam behind me. Grabbing the phone, I look at the display – ‘Mohammed’. I toss the mobile on the bed and step back under the shower. The ringing starts again. The calls come insistently one after the other. Ready to give in, I am about to answer but the thought of standing naked and talking to Mohammed doesn't appeal to me. If it had been the ‘charming young man’, I think, it would have been a different matter.

The rest of the day spend in bed, texting to my parents and friends, wishing them a happy New Year. In the evening Mohammed calls again. This time, I answer.

'Happy New Year!' he shouts, enthused.

'Happy New Year to you too ... ' I reply.

'Did you like my party?' he asks, eager anticipation in his voice.

'Yes, it was ... '

'Delighted to hear. You were rather elusive, I didn't have a chance to talk to you at all.'

'Likewise,' I reply.

'I'm afraid, I was busy with my other guests ... '

'Indeed, festivities of such sort usually require quite an input of energy,' I say.

'What do you mean?'

'Nothing in particular, just that as the host of the festivity you had a lot to attend to before, during and after the party ... '

'Ah ... So, you liked it, then?'

'Yes, very much so,' I respond, thinking of the ‘charming young man’.

'Then, maybe, you can write an article about it?'

'An article?' I ask, surprised. 'I don't recall discussing my career with you. How do you know?'

He falls silent for a second.

'I don't really remember, someone must have mentioned it to me at the party,' he replies.

'Well, I can't promise anything right now. I'll have to talk to the editor first.'

I wave him good-bye and call the room service, ordering myself some French fries, then log in to my Facebook profile, hoping to chat with Nicolas. But he isn't online.

I update my status then go to Mohammed's profile and browse through snapshots taken at his party. There is a whole bunch depicting him and Debbie Amore. Looking at them, I note how at ease Debbie is, posing with Mohammed. If I hadn't seen the shot of her and the 'charming young man', I would have thought that she is Mohammed's girlfriend.

Episode 67 - Night-Night (Lina)

'Swiss Hotel', Nice, France, 2 January

My eyes wide open, I lie in bed and think of the 'charming young man'. Images of him, of the 'close to his heart' beauty, of Debbie Amore, and of his rocking on the waves yacht alternate before my eyes in a kaleidoscope like way. Every turn creates yet another improbable combination.

Why am I thinking of him so much?

I shut my eyes and turn to the other side. But images draw closer and become more vivid. Have I fallen in love with the 'charming young man'? How on earth did I manage to do that? I've seen him just twice ... Well, maybe thrice, if my taking a snapshot of him on the beach can pass as our first encounter. But what does it matter? He has never told me he liked me anyway.

A thought flashes across my mind: 'what if he never calls?'

The episode with cigars comes promptly into my mind. I shouldn't have smoked at all and drank, for that matter, either. Why on earth did I insist on smoking cigars? Wasn't it obvious that the 'charming young man' knew nothing about it? He just wanted to impress me but got drunk instead. And now what? And now he will surely avoid me.

Besides, he has already got a girlfriend and some 'close to his heart' woman. Sounds like some sort of harem. Do I want to be a third one in line there? Not really. Well, that's it then, time to sleep. But my eyes open, I stare at the ceiling.

And still, this 'bikini' girlfriend of his is totally out of place. Seriously, I can't perceive how someone like him can have a girlfriend like her, skinny, stupid, and vicious. Honestly, what is it that he sees in her? Maybe, she isn't his girlfriend at all? Incidentally, everything seems to point to that. At the party neither him, nor Debbie Amore sought each other's company. Well, almost. There are plenty of photos of Mohammed and Debbie Amore and none of her and the 'charming young man'. Though, this seems to be the case on Mohammed's profile but on hers, the case might be entirely different.

Either way, Mohammed seems to be oblivious of Debbie's 'significance' in the life of the 'charming young man' or else he wouldn't have stolen her away at the party. Or maybe he isn't and that's why he stole her away? Though, it seems quite unlikely for he hadn't even known the name of the 'charming young man' until two

days ago. Yet, that photograph on Mohammed's profile clearly shows he has been acquainted with Debbie Amore for some time already.

What if the 'charming young man' and Debbie Amore are just friends? Perhaps that can be the reason for him not minding Mohammed's taking her away. But why then didn't he introduce her to me as his friend? And yet, at the same time, Debbie has that dubious photograph of them hanging on her Facebook profile. And what does that have to do with it all?

Shame really, there is no way of checking out if the 'charming young man' has the same photograph on his profile as Debbie Amore does on hers. I utter a sigh and turn to the other side.

Episode 68 – Photoshop (Lina)

‘Swiss Hotel’, Nice, France, 2 January

Tired of tossing and turning, I get up and come to the window. The Angel's bay spreads out before me, the gleaming necklace of lights running along it. The sea seems as black as the night. I peer into the still darkness for a while, but soon feeling the chill, move away from the window.

Pulling the duvet off the bed, I wrap it around myself and sit down at the desk.

The thoughts of the ‘charming young man’ invade my mind again. I open my laptop and Google his Facebook name, ‘Luke Allen’, giving another go at finding some information about him. But nothing of relevance catches my eye. After a thought I decide to Google Debbie Amore as well. Perhaps, this way I can find something about him ...

There is no lack of ‘Debbies’, nonetheless, I easily single out the one I need. Most of the links point to the magazine sites where her photo shoots are published and to the sites of model agencies she works with. I also find some short interviews with her on various sites dedicated to models' life. But there isn't any information that would link her to ‘Luke Allen’.

Looking through her shots and reading about her only proves to me what a poor match she is to the ‘charming young man’. Yet, if to believe the photograph on her Facebook profile, this ‘bikini’ model has unsuitable, as it might seem, but nevertheless a ‘romance’ with the ‘charming young man’, whereas I have nothing but a few hours spent drinking champagne and smoking cigars with him.

I log in to the Facebook and go to her profile. Finding that photograph again, I zoom on it. The ambiguity of it is now looming apparently and clearly at me. The photo certainly looks like a magazine illustration and least because of the might be professionalism of a photographer, but much because of its ‘glam’ look. I've seen many a wonder-shots like this one. There is nothing wondrous about them except that they have been Photoshopped.

A thought flashes across my mind: what if Debbie Amore ... But that's unbelievable! What for? What would she gain by doing it?

I look at the photograph again, having an irresistible itch to dig deeper. Giving in to it, I copy and save the shot on my laptop then write an email to Patrick, attach the photograph and hit 'send'.

Episode 69 – 'Idiot' (Luke)

Yacht 'Rosalinda', Saint-Tropez, France, 2 January

I open my eyes and squint. The bright sunlight streaming in through the windows floods the salon of the yacht.

I look around. My eyes stop on the coffee table. An unfinished bottle of cognac stands on it, the light brownish liquid sparkling gold on the sun. Instantly remembering my New Year's Eve 'celebration', I utter a groan and sit up.

Why did I have to drink myself into such a stupor? I must have looked like an utter idiot ... Well, an idiot I am indeed, I think, dropping my head into my hands.

But I meant well, I did. Though 'well' what, I groan, for obviously a great kisser I'm not, and smoker or drinker neither. Only God knows what Lina thought of me. No wonder *she* was in such a hurry to leave. I would also hurry off and keep as far away as possible.

I raise my head. My eyes meet the surface of the coffee table again. Our glasses, an empty bottle of gin and my unfinished cigar in the ashtray stare at me in rebuke. I take my smartphone from the table. *Her* business card slips off onto the floor. Picking it up, I stare at it. What could I say or write to *her* now?

Dear Mademoiselle Brig,

This is your idiot from the yacht 'Rosalinda'. I'm delighted to inform you that my name isn't Monsieur Moreau and the yacht isn't mine.

Sincerely yours,

Your Stranger

I sigh, put the card back on the table and switch on my phone. As usual, a heap of missed calls from *maman*. Scrolling through messages, I reply to texts of my preppy 'friends' and social acquaintances. Finished, I get up and drag myself downstairs to take a shower.

With no food left for breakfast, I take the last bottle of water from the fridge, drink it up and start on tidying up in the salon.

My phone rings.

'Yes?' I answer.

'Darling,' *maman* breathes out into the phone. 'I've been trying to get through to you. Why don't you answer?'

'I was sleeping ... '

'Sleeping? Why? Something's happened?'

'Mum, nothing's happened. I've had a good time,' I say.

'Really? Why then you couldn't answer my call?'

'I've just told you. I was sleeping ... '

'Are you hiding something from me?'

'I'm not hiding anything from you,' I reply, annoyed.

'Why can't you just say that you've been with your girlfriend?' she cries out.

'Because, I haven't.'

'Then whom with?'

'Nobody ... I've told you, I was sleeping.'

'Well, if you don't wish to share it with me, then don't. Fine by me,' she says with an offended tone and adds: 'When shall we expect you?'

'I'll be back for dinner.'

'Good ... '

'Mum?'

'Yes?'

'Happy New Year.'

Episode 70 - Yes, I Mean No (Luke)

Monte Carlo, France, 2 January

After dinner, I wait for the moment when *maman* goes up to her bedroom and head to the library, the keys from the yacht in my pocket. I wish to return them to Monsieur Moreau and talk to him in private. Not knowing how to begin, I hand him the keys and say: 'Thank you very much for lending me your yacht.'

'I hope you've had a good time?' he says, taking the keys.

'Well, I'm not sure what to say ... ' I mutter.

'When in doubt, always say as it is. I believe that in many cases it is the only way to say it right,' he responds.

'The thing is I don't quite know what's right any more ... ' I say, downcast.

'Would you like to take a short walk, then?' he asks. 'It might cheer you up a bit.'

I nod.

Cigar in mouth, Monsieur Moreau puts his coat on. We walk out. The city still bears the signs of the recent festivities: the flickering Christmas lights, the pine festoons and wreaths on doors, the pots with small Christmas trees and scarlet cyclamens before entrances of cafes and restaurants.

We stroll on. Silent, Monsieur Moreau smokes his cigar. I begin to think he has forgotten about our conversation. But I don't mind really, as anyway I don't know what to begin my confession with.

Soon, I notice that walking shows some good effect on me. My thoughts now clearer, I suddenly realise that even if I don't find the courage to confess everything to Monsieur Moreau, I absolutely ought to mention the blunder with his name.

'Monsieur Moreau, I have something to confess ... ' I say.

'Monsieur Luke, you sound like you're about to confide in me some dreadful sins,' he replies with a smile, 'fear not, your secret will die with me.'

'You see ... I've ... Well, I've happened to be mistaken for you,' I blurt out.

'Oh, really?' he says with a laugh.

I nod.

'But, *mon ami*, how did you manage to introduce yourself in such a muddled-up manner?' he asks.

'Well, the thing is, I didn't. You see, the girl, well you know, the one in whose stimulating in all senses company I wished to spend the New Year's Eve, has called me your name.'

'How very fascinating,' Monsieur Moreau says, drawing on his cigar.

'I think she doesn't know you, but she was told that the owner of 'Rosalinda' is Monsieur Moreau, and when she saw me on the deck of your yacht she thought that I was you, or rather you were me ... '

'I see,' he responds, pondering over something. 'Are you wishing to say that you've met her for the first time on my yacht?'

'Yes, I mean, no.'

Chapter Eight

'I'm afraid I can't explain myself, sir. Because I am not myself, you see.'

- Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland

Episode 71 - I Dunno (Luke)

Monte Carlo, France, 2 January

Silent, Monsieur Moreau walks on, smoking. I glance at him, trying to figure out what he is thinking about but detect nothing except deep thoughtfulness. Have I lost his trust? Not sure how to take his silence, I begin to regret my confiding in him.

'Monsieur Luke, would you care for a cup of coffee? I know a cosy place just around the corner,' he says.

I nod, baffled.

We walk into a small cafe. A few clients stand by the bar, chatting, having their aperitifs. I take the menu and throw an unseeing glance at it. Unable to focus on the list, I go for a safe option, a cup of my favourite Americano. Monsieur Moreau orders an espresso for himself.

We choose the table and sit down.

'Monsieur Luke,' he says, emptying the contents of a sugar packet into his espresso, 'could you, please, start on your story again? I hope you forgive my being a bit slow-witted, but I'm afraid I've lost the thread of your amorous escapade.'

It's easier said than done, I think, wishing I knew where that very 'start' was.

'Monsieur Moreau, I'm not sure where to start,' I finally reply.

'Well, you could start from telling me how you met that girl who has mistaken you for me.'

That's easy, I think and say: 'Do you remember that day we were on your yacht?'

He nods.

'Well, you'd gone food shopping and I rested a bit, and then went out onto the deck and ... saw her. She was smoking on the deck of the yacht opposite yours.'

'I see,' Monsieur Moreau says with a smile, 'you're drawn to girls smoking on yacht decks.'

'Not really ... It's just that I like this particular girl. '

'All-right,' he nods, 'so, you see a girl smoking on the deck of the neighbouring yacht, realise that she is the one and decide to celebrate the New Year's Eve with her, right?'

'Not quite ... ' I mumble. 'You see, I just wanted to find a way of joining your neighbour's party and meet the girl there.'

'What made you think she was going to be there? Did she say she'd be there?'

'No, she didn't ... I just assumed she might be connected to the owner of the yacht.'

'I see,' he says, drawing on his cigar, 'and what would you do if your assumption turned out to be wrong?'

'I didn't really think about it. I was just following my intuition,' I reply.

'All-right, and what did your intuition tell you to do next?'

'Well, it told me to crash the party ... '

'And why didn't it tell you to simply introduce yourself to the girl you like and tell her that you want to join the party?'

I drop my eyes. Monsieur Moreau is right. If I had done it this way, everything would have been a lot easier now. But the thing is, I couldn't because some months ago I did it all wrong.

'I dunno,' I finally respond.

Episode 72 - The Other (Luke)

Monte Carlo, France, 2 January

I feel the scrutinising look of Monsieur Moreau, but keep staring into my coffee cup. I don't want to lie or keep anything secret from him, yet still feel unable to completely open myself up to him.

'It seems your intuition has chosen a rather long-winded path for you, otherwise, we wouldn't be sitting here now,' he says.

'Well, it's just happened, I didn't mean it ... ' I mumble.

A waiter comes up. Monsieur Moreau orders another espresso.

Putting aside his cigar, he takes out a small notebook and writes something down in it. I relax a bit and decide that from now on I will tell him nothing but the truth, if, of course, he still wants to know it.

'*Bon, mon ami*²⁶,' Monsieur Moreau says, raising his eyes to me, 'shall we leave the question of why and how you met the girl and focus on the confusion with our names?'

'Yes,' I nod.

'If I understood you correctly, you didn't introduce yourself to the girl because she had done it for you, right?'

'Yes, you see, everything happened so fast, almost by itself.'

'What do you mean by 'by itself'?''

'Well ... To be honest, at that moment I was thinking of something else ... ' I mutter.

'Pardon me, Monsieur Luke, but I don't get it. You meet the girl whom you like and at 'that moment' you happen to think of entirely something else. What else is there to think of but the girl?'

'Another girl,' I blurt out.

'Another girl?' he cries out. 'But, Monsieur Luke, I don't understand. You've just told me that the girl from the yacht is the one!'

'Yes, she is, but what I mean is that I was preoccupied with something else at that moment,' I try to explain.

²⁶ Bon, mon ami (Fr.) – Well, my friend.

'Are you saying that because you were preoccupied with another girl, you didn't quite remember to introduce yourself to the girl you like and that's why she did it for you?'

'Yes, I mean, no. It isn't because I was thinking of that another girl as of 'girl', you know, that I couldn't introduce myself properly to the girl I like. It's because I was still under the impression of what I'd accidentally seen in one of the rooms of the yacht.'

'I see,' Monsieur Moreau says, picking up his cigar, 'and what exactly did you happen to see there?'

'I saw the owner of the yacht lying on his bed ... '

'The owner of the yacht lying on his bed?' Monsieur Moreau stares at me, bewildered.

'Yes. He ... you know ... well, he was in the middle of making love,' I blurt out and blush.

Episode 73 - A Sham (Lina)

'Swiss Hotel', Nice, France, 2 January

The phone rings, waking me up. I grab it from the night table and press 'answer'.

'Yes?' I say, my voice hoarse from sleep.

'Hey, lovely, what's up?' I hear Patrick's cheer.

'Lovely yourself! How many times I have to tell you not to call me 'lovely'?'

'Yeah-yeah, what, the princess isn't in the mood today?' he carries on.

'Stop it!'

'Relax, lovely. I think working together bonds us in a rather intimate way, don't you find?' he lowers his voice to a whisper.

'Whatever. Have you received my email?'

'Yes,' he sighs.

'And?'

'Nothing. Who's sent you this crap?'

'None of your business. Can you speak like a normal person?'

Throwing the duvet off, I get up and come to the window, swinging it wide open.

'I do, lovely, I do,' he says, 'it's a juxtaposition, two shots, quite lousy ... '

'What's lousy? The juxtaposition or the shots?'

'The juxtaposition ... Rather inept.'

'Anything but yours is inept. And the shots ... taken with the same camera?' I ask, looking down at strollers walking on the beach.

'What camera? Are you joking? A smartphone!'

Suppose the photograph is a sham. Does it mean that the 'girlfriend' is fictitious too? But what is the point of this photograph then? If indeed Debbie Amore isn't his girlfriend, then why she has even bothered posting that photograph on her profile for everyone to see and think otherwise? Judging by her Facebook profile and 'rock-n-roll' life style, there shouldn't be any problems of that sort in her private life. Or maybe there are?

Either way, I don't really like the sound of it all.

Should I just leave it? If I do, the 'charming young man' will forever stay in my memory as a divinely handsome Frenchman whom I had happened to celebrate the New Year's Eve with on the beautiful yacht of a flower. Otherwise, I risk being left disenchanted, disappointed even.

Here we go. I am already thinking of him as if I don't hope to ever see him again.

'Lovely, something's the matter? You've gone quiet all of a sudden,' Patrick interrupts my train of thought.

'Nothing is the matter. I've been checking my inbox,' I reply quietly.

'Ah, well, I see ... Then speak to you later,' he says and disconnects.

Episode 74 - Who? (Lina)

Nice, France, 2 January

On the one hand, it is great that my guess has been proved right. But on the other..., well, on the other, the fact that the photograph is fictitious doesn't yet mean that Debbie Amore isn't his girlfriend. After all, she is a model and might simply like that a photograph can be manipulated and Photoshopped into something different. Maybe, she couldn't be with him that day and by manipulating the photograph expressed her love to him: 'apart for a moment but together forever': *'Ensemble à jamais'*²⁷!

Not wishing to sit alone in my hotel room, pondering over whether Debbie Amore is or isn't the girlfriend of the 'charming young man', I get out and go for a walk. But the architectural marvels of Mediterranean Nice fail to divert my attention. Constantly glancing at the screen of my mobile, I think of the 'charming young man'.

Strolling, I find myself in front of a pet shop with a small basket displayed in its window. There, in heaps of golden wood shavings, a black and white cocker spaniel puppy lies. He sees me, sits up and, placing his paws on the edge of the basket, leans forward, his tail wiggling. I smile and touch the glass where his nose pressing against it. The puppy bursting into cheerful barking, I suddenly realise that I absolutely ought to find out whether Debbie Amore is the girlfriend of the 'charming young man' or not. Sending a kiss to the puppy, I start walking back to the hotel.

Back in my room, I open the laptop and Google out the model agency that represents Debbie Amore. After a short chat with them I get her telephone number and write it down.

Gathering up my thoughts, I pause for a moment. My smartphone rings. Full of hope, I stare at the screen. It is Mum ...

'Hello,' I answer, deflated.

'Lina, sweetheart, Happy New Year!'

'Happy New Year, Mum!'

'Did you enjoy the Christmas reception in Monte Carlo?'

²⁷ *'Ensemble à jamais* (Fr.) - Together forever.

'What Christmas reception?' I ask, fiddling with a piece of paper with Debbie's number on it.

'The reception at Mrs Allen's! Haven't you got an invitation?' she asks.

'No, I haven't. I've spent Christmas at home in London, and the New Year's Eve in Nice.'

'What a shame! The invitation must have been lost in the post. I couldn't make it, I had to be with your father in New York, attending a reception at the French Embassy ... ' she rattles on.

'Mum, what exactly do I have to do with it all?' I say, the least interested in the details of her social life and some Mrs Allen and her reception in Monte Carlo.

'Everything! Mrs Allen has sent you an invitation too. I've given her our address in London, and it turns out you've received nothing and spent Christmas all alone.'

'I wasn't alone.'

'Really?' she cries out. 'Who's he?'

'Who?' I ask.

'Your lover ... '

'He isn't my lover, just a friend.'

'Ah, I see, that's how you call it nowadays,' she intones, undeterred.

'Mum, I have to go. I have got an important call coming.'

'Of course, darling, off you go then. Oh, yes, and Dad sends you his love.'

Episode 75 – Organic (Lina)

'Swiss Hotel', Nice, France, 2 January

Gathering up my thoughts again, I dial Debbie's number and listen to the long rings at the other end.

'Yeah?' I hear a voice.

'Good evening,' I say.

'Good evening,' The voice intones.

'Can I speak to Debbie Amore, please?'

'And who's asking?' she says after a pause.

'I'm calling from the Mod-Elle magazine,' I reply.

'Ah,' she says, crunching on an apple, 'Well, it's me.'

'Nice to meet you.'

'Yeah,' she replies, munching.

'I'm a journalist. I write about models. I'd be delighted if you agree to be interviewed for our next issue,' I say.

Her munching stops.

'Really?' she squeals, then adds: 'Why me?'

'I like your photo shoots. There is something mysterious about them,' I reply.

'Yes, I think so too. You know, I love posing. You see, photographers are so easily excitable, don't you think? Just a smile here, a bit of arching or bending there ... You know what I mean?'

'Yes, certainly.'

'You know, I always think that there isn't just one person but many people behind that camera, thousands of them, no, millions! It turns me on, you know!' she shrieks.

'Absolutely. Can you meet up with me tomorrow?'

'Yes,' she responds, enthused.

'Excellent. I'll be waiting for you at noon in the bar of *'Le Negresco Hotel'.*'

'Okey-doke,' she throws and disconnects.

If she is indeed the girlfriend of the 'charming young man', what on earth can he converse with her about? Or maybe he doesn't. Perhaps the conversing comes down to just bending and arching.

I feel a need to wash down the invigorating liaison with Debbie Amore with something of an intoxicating nature. I go to the mini bar, open it and peer inside.

Some fizzy drinks, Cola cans, miniature bottles of gin, vodka and some mysterious liquor line up its shelves.

My smartphone rings. Slamming the mini bar door shut, I race to the desk and look at the display. Mohammed ...

'Yes?' I answer.

'Any news on my article?'

'Not yet, but I think the most my editor will agree to is to include some photographs of your party in a section covering social events ... ' I reply, coming back to the mini bar and getting a bottle of the mysterious liquor out of it.

'Excellent! I was thinking of suggesting the same.'

'I see ... ' I mutter. 'You know, I've seen some photos with models on your Facebook ... '

'Glad, you've cast your appreciative eye on them,' he cuts in, 'those photographs came out the best. I think the models fit in perfectly with the interior of my yacht.'

'Yes, quite an organic match ... ' I reply.

'Organic match?' he asks with a laugh, 'what's this, the latest term of some sort?'

'Yes, very,' I say, studying the label on the liquor bottle.

'Perfect, shall we book a meeting to look through the photographs, then?'

Episode 76 – ‘A Calling’ (Lina)

‘Le Negresco Hotel’, Nice, France, 3 January

Still no call from the ‘charming young man’, but I keep on harbouring a faint hope. Who knows, he might be busy attending to some urgent matters. Though, I can't imagine what kind of matters can possibly captivate a handsome French aristocrat during the two days of New Year holidays. But again, life can be full of surprises, I think, sitting in the bar of ‘*Le Negresco Hotel*’, tapping my pencil on my notebook.

Leaving the ‘charming young man’ and his urgent aristocratic matters unattended for a second, I glance at my watch. It has been twenty minutes since my arrival, but no sign of Debbie Amore yet. Is she coming at all? She seems to be one of those people who don't quite know their own mind. Yesterday, she was in the mood for an interview and, today, she might not ...

A thought flashes across my mind: what if she has told the ‘charming young man’ about the interview? Even worse, what if she will bring him to the meeting? Then, obviously, everything will be clear and there will be no need in asking anything really.

I open my notebook and run through questions I have prepared. Then, taking my mobile, I'm about to dial Debbie's number, when she appears at the entrance. The black jeans she is wearing make her look starved.

I raise and wave at her. Noticing me, she makes her way towards my table, her hips swaying in a bizarre way. Through the gap between her legs the interior of the bar is clearly visible.

Debbie Amore comes up, flops onto the chair and begins to rummage in her handbag.

'I thought you weren't coming,' I say.

'I've been at a casting,' she responds, not lifting her eyes from her handbag.

‘Can I get you anything?’ I ask, pushing the menu towards her.

Debbie Amore stops her rummaging and throws a hungry glance at the menu.

'Nope, I'm on a diet, but thanks,' she says then gets a red apple out of her handbag and sinks her teeth into it.

Trying not to pay attention to the loud crunching she produces, I start on the interview.

'Debbie, in our recent telephone conversation you mentioned that you love posing. What helped you discover your purpose?'

She stops munching and falls silent for a second, her eyes blank.

'Nothing really, I guess I just like to be admired ... ' she replies.

'Do you mean admired by men?'

'And women too,' she says with a giggle. 'I love dressing up and then pose all dolled-up for photographers. I get high doing it. You can call it a purpose or whatever, if you wish.'

'All-right,' I say, making a note of her answer in my notebook. 'And what does your boyfriend think of you getting high on posing? I guess you have to pose naked too.'

'Luckily, I have no such problem,' she replies with a laugh, 'right now, I'm not in a relationship, but if I get into one I'll make sure my boyfriend isn't one of those prudes who gets all worked up just because his girl is admired by other men.'

'Pardon me, Debbie, but I was under the impression that you were in a relationship.'

'Why so?' she asks, tossing the apple core into an astray.

'Preparing for today's interview, I looked through some material available on you and found this photo on your Facebook profile,' I say, producing a printout and placing it before her on the table.

Episode 77 - Half-Truth (Luke)

Monte Carlo, France, 3 January

In the end, I have confessed everything to Monsieur Moreau. Almost everything. The only thing I haven't told him about is that photograph on the Facebook. I just don't think it is relevant.

Being a true gentleman, Monsieur Moreau has regarded my dilemma with much tact, for which I'm grateful. I have never confided in anyone before, at least not the matters concerning my private life, or rather absence of such.

He has urged me to clarify the misunderstanding as soon as possible. In his opinion, Lina will eventually find out the truth and then it will be more difficult to explain why I had kept quiet about it and kept on pretending.

To be honest, I have nothing against the truth. On the contrary. But, you see, there is this one thing: as it happens, my 'rendezvous' on the yacht of Monsieur Moreau isn't my first encounter with Lina. Only *she* is unaware of it, as *she* is convinced that I'm Monsieur Moreau. If I tell *her* about the blunder then I'll have to come clean about the identity of online L.E.A. And that is what I feel I don't have the guts to do. Well, not at the moment, at least ...

I spend the night turning and tossing, worrying about whether or not I shall tell *her* the truth. At dawn, I finally fall asleep, but at noon, as soon as I open my eyes, I start worrying about it all again.

After much deliberation I arrive to a conclusion that the best way out is half-truth. No, I'm not going to lie, not at all. I'll just keep quiet about some ambiguous details.

I will tell Lina that I didn't clarify the misunderstanding with the name because I found it convenient, as my intention was to invite *her* to the yacht of my friend and when *she* mistook me for him I thought it amusing and decided not to dissuade *her* in *her* belief. I will also reveal to *her* my name - Luke Edward Allen - but if *she's* going to draw any parallels between the online L.E.A. and me, then I shall say that it is a rather intriguing coincidence.

Cheered up by my finally taking the decision, I spring off the bed, grab my travel bag and shake its contents out onto the floor. Picking up my tux trousers, I search its pockets, looking for Lina's business card, but instead find the name card of Mademoiselle Du Monde, the mysterious stranger who had seemed so familiar to me. Putting the name card aside, I look through my things once again. I shake them, check

all the pockets, thoroughly examine the insides of the bag, hoping that Lina's business card might have just slipped into a crease in the lining, but all in vain. *Her* business card seems to have vanished into thin air.

Episode 78 - Just Between You and Me (Lina)

'Le Negresco Hotel', Nice, France, 3 January

Debbie Amore takes the printout.

'Ah, this,' she smirks, 'came out pretty well. What do you think?'

'I'm sorry but I don't get you,' I reply.

'Well, you may say I don't have a boyfriend,' she announces, putting the printout down on the table.

'Unfortunately, we can't say you don't have a boyfriend when there is evidence to the contrary, namely this photograph on your Facebook profile with the comment under it clearly showing that you are in a relationship with this young man. I hope you understand that what you suggest can be regarded as deliberate misrepresentation of facts. Our magazine isn't yellow press. We stick to truthful and well-researched information. We aren't going to make an exception for you.'

I stare at her, daring. I have no intention of getting her off the hook, but I'm not sure if she is really got no boyfriend or just covers up for something.

Debbie Amore bites her lip and, lowering her eyes, begins to rummage purposefully in her handbag. I wait. Finally, producing a pack of cigarettes, she lights up a cigarette and, giving me a sheepish glance, says: 'This photo has nothing to do with my private life. I've been asked to post it.'

'Who asked you? The guy?'

'Nope, not him ... Mrs Allen did,' she says, drawing nervously on her cigarette.

'Who's this Mrs Allen?' I ask.

'Luke's Mum.'

'Mum?' I say, baffled.

'Yes. You see, she's paid me to do it ... '

'What do you mean?'

Debbie Amore falls silent for a moment then, leaning over the table, whispers: 'Just between you and me, OK?'

I nod.

'Luke hasn't got a girlfriend ... '

'So, what? You aren't in a relationship either ... '

'I don't mean that,' she says impatiently, 'he has never had one. Do you understand?'

The meaning of what she is trying to convey finally reaches me. Silent, we stare at each other. Then, taking a long draw on her cigarette, Debbie Amore leans back in her chair and blows a cloud of smoke out.

'Are you saying that he is ... ' I begin.

'Yes, exactly that! A virgin!'

Episode 79 - What Does It Matter? (Lina)

'Le Negresco Hotel', Nice, France, 3 January

Looking at the apple's core lying in the ashtray, I am pondering over the information Debbie Amore has just shared 'in secret' with me.

On the one hand, I'm happy that, after all, the 'charming young man' is called Luke Allen and not Monsieur Moreau. Yet, on the other hand, I don't quite get why Luke Allen showed no objection when I called him Monsieur Moreau. Even more perplexing seems the fact that he didn't attempt even once to disillusion me in my mistaken belief.

Perhaps it is 'Monsieur Moreau', not 'Luke Allen', that is the assumed name of his. If so, then no wonder I couldn't find any information on Monsieur Moreau in Google. That person simply doesn't exist! But how did Gaspard know about it then?

I do remember how quickly Mohammed got the answer to his question, instantly finding out from Gaspard who the owner of 'Rosalinda' was. Maybe, Luke assumes the identity of 'Monsieur Moreau' when he speaks to strangers and people he isn't very well acquainted with? Gaspard is just one of such people, a mere stranger in his life. And I? Am I any different? Not really.

It all makes sense now.

Tossing my smartphone in the handbag, I order a glass of wine. Alone at my table, I doodle in my notebook, trying to push the thoughts of Luke out of my head.

I order another glass of wine.

The bar fills up quickly. I hear bursts of laughter and excited exclamations in the growing hum of chattering voices.

Sipping my wine, I wonder how many more people Debbie Amore has shared the 'secret' with. Personally, I don't find the fact of the 'charming young man' being a virgin embarrassing but rather intriguing. I somehow imagined that such a handsome young man is bound to have tons of experience in this matter. But it turns out not ... to be honest, I quite even like it. I think, it adds a certain romantic flair to his character. Especially, that there is no lack of 'masculinity' around. But what does it matter? He isn't going to call me anyway.

What for Debbie Amore ... Well, I've no intention of publishing the interview. I have told her that as long as that photograph is hanging on her Facebook profile there is no way the interview can be published. She pretended my words didn't affect her,

but said that she would try to talk to Mrs Allen and see what can be done. But I don't believe she will. Apparently, the remuneration received from Mrs Allen outweighs Debbie's vanity.

I pay the bill and walk out of the bar.

Episode 80 - The Number (Luke)

Monte Carlo, France, 3 January

Staring at my clothes, scattered on the floor, I try to figure out where else, if not in the pocket of my tux trousers, I could have put Lina's business card. Have I really lost it? I break out in a cold sweat. Losing Lina's business card, in this case, means really losing *her*. Besides, I can't possibly go back to using the online 'L.E.A', especially now when I have made such a breakthrough.

I sit down on the bed and think. But the more I think, the less confident I get, as I suddenly see myself through Lina's eyes: a stranger with fine looks but lack of confidence and direction in life invites *her* to celebrate the New Year's Eve on his yacht. So, what? And, so did the son of the Ambassador, and many other men perhaps too.

Yes, but *she* has accepted my invitation and even seemed to enjoy being in my company. Evidently, *she* must have liked me. Yet, I think, there is a chance of *her* accepting my invitation for some other reason ... I suddenly see *her* face and a flicker of disappointment in *her* eyes when I failed to kiss *her*. Well, here we go, I sigh, doomed.

And what if I go and look out for *her* by the entrance to the 'Swiss Hotel'? But it's silly really. *She* would imagine I am stalking *her*. Besides, how am I to explain to *her* that I know where *she* is staying? Apparently, *she* is unaware of me having followed *her* to the hotel that day.

The door to my room opens and in walks *maman*.

'Mum, I've asked you to knock before you enter!' I cry out, leaping off the bed.

'*Chéri*, what's the matter?' she asks, looking at my things, scattered on the floor.

'Nothing's the matter, nothing at all, except that I've lost the telephone number of my girlfriend!' I blurt out, unable to contain myself.

'*Chéri*, why are you shouting?' she says with an offended voice. 'I've got her number, I can give it to you, if you wish.'

'Whose number?' I say, baffled.

'The number of your girlfriend ... I have it written down somewhere,' she replies, picking up my clothes from the floor.

'Mum, pardon me, but how come you have the number of my girlfriend?'

'Why, don't you remember?' Her face assumes a surprised look. 'She was present at our Christmas reception. Such a nice girl she seemed, I took her number, just in case.'

'Mum! The girl whom I like was not present at your reception and you couldn't have possibly met her! What girl are you talking about?'

'About Debbie Amore,' she replies, leaving my clothes alone and looking up at me.

Chapter Nine

'If I'm really part of your dream, you'll come back one day.'

- Paulo Coelho, The Alchemist

Episode 81 - And Anyway (Luke)

Monte Carlo, France, 3 January

A silence falls between us. Fuming, I stare at *maman*, waiting for her to explain what is going on. Her face assumes a look of an offended innocence. I see tears welling up in her eyes.

Here we go again, I think. As soon as it comes to telling the truth she bursts into tears. As if it isn't her but me who is guilty. I decide to pay no attention to this pantomime of hers. I turn away, grab my jeans and pull them on.

'*Chéri* ... ' I hear her pleading voice.

'Yes?' I say but don't turn.

'I wanted to help you, I wanted to fix it ... '

'Really?' I cry out. 'And did you ask me if I want it to be fixed or not?'

I hear her sobbing and turn to her. Her face exhibits a sorrowful look, the sparkling in the sun droplets of tears rolling down her cheeks.

'Mum, please, don't put on a tragic act,' I say.

'But, *chéri*, I don't put any tragic acts, I just want to help..., ' she responds, her sobs seize.

'But don't you see that you only make it worse!'

'Why worse?'

'Because you can't push the first girl you happen to come across into my arms!' I cry out.

'*Chéri*, it's not what you think at all. I just hoped you and that girl might like each other enough to perhaps start a romantic fling of some sort ... '

'Mum, I don't like your Debbie Amore, and there could have never been any 'romantic fling of any sort' between us, not in a million of years!'

She just stares at me.

'I'm ... I ... ' I utter convulsively. 'Well, I just like another girl, that's it!'

'What another girl?'

'The most wonderful, lovely, and beautiful, the journalist from London!' I blurt out.

'*Mais chéri*, why haven't you told me anything about her before?'

'Because there hasn't been much to tell, and you wouldn't believe me anyway,' I reply.

'What makes you think I wouldn't?' she asks, surprised.

'Because you never really listen to what I say, you only hear yourself and only care how and what will look in the eyes of the Society. And I don't pay a damn! I don't care for your fashionable receptions or your posh friends, who aren't friends at all, and ... and ... anyway,' I say, turn away, and grab my t-shirt.

'Anyway what?' she turns me to face her.

'And anyway, I don't even know who my father is,' I reply, meeting her eyes.

Episode 82 - Real Love (Lina)

Nice, France, 3 January

Not in the mood to go back to the hotel, I head to the beach. A gust of cold wind throws salty sea spray into my face. Wrapping my coat tighter about me, I think if it would be better to leave, but instead stand hesitantly on the deserted beach.

More gusts follow, disheveling my hair into a mess. I think of the ‘charming young man’ and his wavy locks, ruffled by the gentle sea breeze ... A pang of sadness hits me.

Glancing at the scarlet disk of the sun melting into the horizon, I begin to walk along the beach, slowly approaching the place where I first spotted the ‘charming young man’ with his dog.

It's been three days since I first met him but it seems like an eternity, in the course of which so much has changed. Back then I couldn't have imagined falling for a stranger who had accidentally got into the snapshot of my smartphone. Or perhaps not so quite accidentally after all ...

I remember Nicolas saying there are no coincidences, just signs. But if that was a sign indeed, then what's it for? What is the meaning of it?

Suppose, Nicolas is right and the ‘charming young man’ exists in my subconscious mind as some sort of ‘fragment’ that happened to materialise on the beach and made me fall for him. Though, why do I think the ‘charming young man’ has made me fall for him? After all, he is just a ‘fragment’ of my subconscious. Yes, but it was this very ‘fragment’ that invited me to his yacht. I didn't ask for it ...

Suddenly, it dawns on me. It is simple, really. And it is nothing to do with ‘fragments’ and signs at all.

Yes, I fell for the ‘charming young man’ and yes, I arranged for Mohammed to invite him to his party. Perhaps, not having any other plans for the New Year's Eve the ‘charming young man’ accepted the invitation. But once at the party he got bored. Luckily for him, he bumped into me and decided to have a bit of fun and, at the same time, who knows, get rid of his virginity too. The moment and the ambiance seemed right, and even the girl too, a stranger on a holiday in Nice.

How silly of me to have thought anything more of it. I have even given him my business card, hoping for our encounter to grow into something more. But how can there ever be more, if there was nothing to start with?

I don't know what kind of signs Nicolas talks about but in my case, it is just a sign of my having let my guard down and slipped into romantic naivety. After all, it's the Cote d'Azur, the sea, the sun, the romance of it all ...

What for Debbie Amore whom I have spent so much time thinking about, well, she is but an insignificant detail in the private life of a young modern aristocrat.

But Rosalinda ... Rosalinda is an entirely different matter. He said she was a 'close to his heart woman'. Since he is a virgin, then surely, he didn't mean it in a sexual way. Can Rosalinda be his real love, then?

Episode 83 – ‘Romance’ (Lina)

Nice, France, 3 January

I walk into my hotel room, my face is flaming from the wind, my hair is a tangle of confused wet mess. The lights off, I come up to my bed and sit down.

How come I haven't guessed it before? The answer has been staring right at me all this time. Well, perhaps not all ‘this time’, perhaps since that yacht ‘rendezvous’ of ours or rather since the very moment of my failed attempt to kiss the ‘charming young man’.

How could I have missed it?

It isn't the matter of him being a virgin, nor it is the matter of my hastily expressed eagerness. You see, it is just that a kiss is much more than pressing one's lips against the lips of the other. It is an expression of love, desire, and affection ...

The truth is the ‘charming young man’ isn't in love with me. He is in love with his Rosalinda. I do remember him saying: ‘come, I'll introduce you to her’. How much should a man be in love with a woman to refer to his yacht, called in her honour, as a living being?

The photograph I saw on his yacht swims into my mind, the dashing smile of the beauty pictured on it looming before my eyes. ‘That's it’, it dawns on me, ‘the woman from the photograph must be that very Rosalinda.’

Really, how naive of me to have even imagined a romance springing between the ‘charming young man’ and me. Evidently, the ‘fragments’ of our subconscious don't overlap. For him, I was an aspect of his unexpressed physical love to Rosalinda. If he had lost his virginity with me, he could have offered pleasures of a different kind to his Rosalinda now. Only, if he loves her so much why doesn't he try his luck and lose his virginity with her?

What does it matter anyway? Virgin or not, but his heart isn't free. His wonderful Rosalinda blossoms in there, making it unattainable for anyone else.

He is just too polite. So, naturally, he isn't going to say to a woman that he isn't quite into her. Instead, he would keep quiet. Actually, that's exactly what he's doing right now.

I feel a sudden shame for all my stupid fantasies. How could I have slipped into a delusion of thinking something might spring up out of our chance encounter, even worse managing to fall in love with the charming stranger? How? Giving out a loud

groan, I drop my head into my hands. Tears well up in my eyes, gush out and stream down my cheeks. Sobbing, I flop onto the bed.

As I cry, I hear my smartphone ringing but ignore it. What does it matter now? Anyway, the ‘charming young man’ is never going to call me.

I lie on the bed for a while then get up, open my suitcase and start packing.

Episode 84 - A Wide Choice (Luke)

Monte Carlo, France, 3 January

Shying my stare, *maman* turns away. We have never spoken about my father before – she has never raised the subject and I haven't asked. Even when I was a kid, still I didn't ask. But I believed that he was with us, present in some other dimension yet busy and that is why we didn't see him. Now, I know that it was just a trick of my mind, trying to protect me from the truth.

Silent, *maman* comes up to the window. I sit down on the bed and stare into space. I don't know why I have blurted out to her that I've never seen my father. I guess I was furious and wanted to hurt her. But I know that if she had something worth telling me about him she would have done it already.

'I don't know who your father is ... ' she says.

Baffled, I stare at her back.

'What do you mean?'

'I mean I don't remember,' she replies.

'You don't remember?' I repeat, her words refusing to sink in.

How come she doesn't remember my father? Even I, however little experience I might have in this matter, understand that it's highly unlikely. Suppose, it happened to be a complete stranger but even then, she should have had some recollection of him: his face, his voice, his looks, something at least ...

'It isn't true,' I cry out.

'Yes, it is.'

'No, but you at least must have ... you two must have had ... ' I stop short, unable to finish the sentence.

'Yes, of course, we did, otherwise you wouldn't have been sitting here now.'

'But then when you were ... well, in this case, you must have seen his face!'

'Yes, perhaps I did, but next morning he wasn't around to remind me of himself, and I myself had a very vague recollection of it all.'

'But Mum!' I cry out.

She turns to me, her face bearing pensive expression.

'Back in Cambridge I had plenty of admirers... '

'What in heaven's name, does that mean? That you managed to sleep with several of them at once? '

'It means that I had a wide range of choices ... '

'Yes, sure, and that's exactly why you chose the guy you have no recollection of.'

'Despite having so many admirers, I was in love with a young man, who paid no attention to me, perhaps regarding me as a beautiful spoilt girl.'

I say nothing.

'I so much wished to attract his attention somehow ... anyhow ... ' she continues.

'And?'

'Well, at one of our student parties where he was present too, I flirted with every man I could, except him, of course. One of those males happened to be more succumbing than others ... By then, I was already rather drunk. And the rest happened quickly, leaving little trace in my memory. '

She pauses for a second then adds: 'I know, it was very stupid of me ... '

Uttering a moan, I drop my head into my hands.

Episode 85 – Mademoiselle Du Monde (Luke)

Monte Carlo, France, 3 January

Why I have even asked for this stupid truth? Somehow, I've managed to live without it for the past twenty-three years. At least before I could take refuge in my childish fantasies. And now? And now, I've discovered that my father is just some Cambridge student of an unknown identity who happened to fall prey to calculative flirting of *maman*.

A lump in my throat, I swallow convulsively. *Maman* comes up to me and sits down on the bed beside me. Pulling me close, her lips pressing lightly on my forehead, she says softly: '*Chéri*, I'm really sorry that I'm unable to tell you more about your father, but I have got no regrets about you coming to this world as the result of my rash actions.'

I put my arms around *maman* and press my cheek against hers. My eyes closed tightly, I try to contain tears, uncontrollably welling up in my eyes.

'The hell with my father', I think. I'll never know who he is and for that reason will never see him either. So, what does he matter to me? But *maman* ... she's right here, beside me. And in spite of her faults, theatrical gestures and her inclination to the Society, she is still the closest person to my heart in the whole of the world. To others, she might appear as a beautiful, bright, elegant socialite, but, to me, she is my Mum whom, I've just realised, I love so dearly.

'And what about Monsieur Moreau?' I ask, letting *maman* out of my embrace.

'What about him?' she smiles, pushing hair locks away from my forehead.

'Isn't he one of your many admirers too?'

She gives out a perky laugh.

'Monsieur Moreau is an old friend of my father, he is a real gentleman. He was the only one who didn't rebuke me for my rash behaviour. All these years, he's offered me his support. It would have been much tougher for me without his care and kindness. '

'So, he's just a friend then?'

She nods.

'But why then ... ' I begin, but, remembering *maman* isn't aware of my visit to the yacht of Monsieur Moreau, fall silent.

'But why what?' she asks.

'Nothing.' I reply.

'*Chéri*, you haven't told me yet the name of that most beautiful and wonderful London journalist of yours.'

'Lina Brig ... '

'Do you mean Lina Du Monde?' *maman* asks, her eyebrow arching in surprise.

'No, Lina Brig.'

'What an interesting coincidence ... I'm acquainted with her mother, Lidia Du Monde. I invited Lidia to our Christmas reception, but, unfortunately, she couldn't attend and ...'

'Mum! My girl's name is Lina Brig, what has she got to do with some Lidia Du Monde?'

'*Chéri*, Lina is her daughter, Lidia's maiden name was Brig. In fact, Lina Brig is Lina Du Monde.'

Episode 86 - R-O-S-A-L-I-N-D-A (Lina)

London, UK, 4 January

I open the door and pause for a second at the doorway, breathing in the aroma of pine tree and oranges, still wafting in the house. The floor of the hall is littered with envelopes and advertising leaflets. I wheel in my suitcase, gather up the post and, walking into the living room, toss the pile onto the table.

My Christmas tree, its faded paws drooped sadly, is still standing by the fireplace. Some baubles have slipped off the branches and are now lying on the carpet, reflecting its fanciful patterns.

I come up to the window. Peering out, I search in the windows of the Edwardian house across the street for the Christmas tree that used to twinkle at me. But it's gone.

The Christmas's over and with it my holiday 'fling' too. All that is left of it is the snapshot, stored in my mobile. 'I'd better delete it', I think, taking my smartphone out. Or perhaps not. Perhaps I should keep it to remind me of my subconscious and its pixelated fragments.

I move away from the window. My eyes fall onto the book, *'The History of Metaphysics and The Life's Great Mysteries'*, forgotten on the sofa in a haste of packing. I sit down and take the book in my hands. I should have been educating myself instead of making up some holiday flings, I think, flipping the book's pages.

My smartphone rings. Mohammed and his models again... I look at the display – 'Mum'.

'Yes?' I answer.

'Are you still in Nice?'

'No, I've come back to London, just walked in. Why?'

'Sweetheart, I'm rather upset that you haven't received the invitation to the Christmas reception in Monaco. I couldn't attend and you weren't even aware that you should be there ... '

'Mum! What this 'should' is about? I don't think I owe anything to that posh acquaintance of yours. '

'Lina, sweetheart, calm down please. I only want you to check the post for me. '

'All-right, all-right,' I say, get up and walk to the table. 'Who from?'

'From Rosalinda Allen.'

'Who?'

'From R-O-S-A-L-I-N-D-A ... ' Mum begins to spell the name.

'Mrs Allen's first name is Rosalinda?' I ask, baffled.

'Yes. Isn't it beautiful?'

Episode 87 - The Hell With It! (Lina)

London, UK, 4 January

Rosalinda Allen. Is the 'close to his heart beauty' from the photograph and Mrs Allen one and the same woman? But how ...? But why ...?

It can be just a pure coincidence, I grasp at an explanation. 'There are no coincidences' the words of Nicolas flash in my mind. Aren't there? Rosalinda's Christmas reception was held in Monaco, her surname 'Allen' matches the one of the 'charming young man', and her first name is the name he had chosen for his yacht. Evidently, there are too many coincidences for it all to be coincidental.

Why on earth, while talking to Debbie Amore, haven't I asked the full name of Mrs Allen? Bewildered, I stand and stare at the pile of letters on the table.

'Lina, what's wrong?' I hear the worried voice of my Mum.

'Everything's fine,' I mumble, digging into the pile, looking for the letter from Rosalinda.

I find it, a snowy envelope stamped with golden monogram and addressed to Mademoiselle Du Monde. I turn the envelope and look at the sender's name. '*Mrs Rosalinda Allen*' it says. I rip the envelope open. An invitation to the Christmas reception at Mrs Allen's residence falls out.

I utter a loud groan.

'Lina, what's the matter? Are you all-right?'

'I'm fine. It's nothing, just a headache. I'll call you later, all-right?' I reply and disconnect.

I feel awfully ashamed for creating a story of non-existent love of Luke and Rosalinda. What kind of journalist I am, if I failed to assume that Rosalinda might be Luke's Mum? He did say, 'a woman close to my heart', didn't he? And what other woman can be dearer to a man than his mother?

Now I know that Mrs Rosalinda Allen is Luke's Mum, that Luke is a virgin, and that his Mum had hired the model, Debbie Amore, to play out his girlfriend. And so, what?

Evidently, Luke isn't in love with Rosalinda. But he isn't in love with me either. The fact of him not having contacted me remains unchanged.

Pondering over Luke's amorous life gives me a headache. I go and lie down on the sofa. I should stop thinking about him. But instead I'm drawn to check out Debbie's Facebook profile, to see if that bogus photo is still hanging there.

I take my iPad, log in the Facebook, and go to her profile. But to my surprise, I find that the photo is gone. Has Debbie Amore really spoken with Mrs Allen?

A wave of tiredness overcomes me. The hell with it all, I think and log out of the Facebook.

Episode 88 – ‘Sent!’ (Luke)

Monte Carlo, France, 4 January

Maman leaves the room. I sit motionless on the sofa.

Lina Brig and Mademoiselle Du Monde is one and the same person? But it's impossible! Perhaps, *maman* has got it all mixed up.

I grab the name card, found in the pocket of my tux trousers this morning, and stare at it in bewilderment, the name of Mademoiselle Du Monde glittering at me from its black velvety surface. Was the mysterious stranger who seemed so familiar to me indeed Lina? But that is incredible! How could I know that I knew her? After all, I had no idea that *her* name was Mademoiselle Du Monde.

As it turns out, *maman* had invited two new girls to dinner and seated one of them right next to me. Perhaps she had plans of acquainting me with both of them. Rather unlikely ... I don't think she could plan out my 'romance' with Lina too, as she couldn't possibly foresee if Lina was going to make it to the reception or not.

Still in doubt, I Google out the 'Swiss Hotel', call them and enquire about Lina Du Monde. The receptionist informs me that Mademoiselle Du Monde has already checked out.

Checked out? How come? Perhaps she has been called back to London due to some urgent assignment. What am I to do now?

The first thing that comes to mind is to ask *maman* to get in touch with Lidia Du Monde. But after a thought, I drop the idea. The involvement of our Mums will only create a situation fraught with more complications. Besides, Lina doesn't know that I know her real name. Neither does she know that I'm not Monsieur Moreau ...

It seems the only thing is left to do is to use the online L.E.A again. But what can I tell Lina as 'L.E.A.'? For he has never been to Mohammed's party, and has never spoken to Lina off line, and has never been mistaken for Monsieur Moreau. It seems I've come to a dead end. Perhaps I should just tell Lina the truth. But if I do it, I won't be able to undo it. And if I don't, I might never ever see her again.

Finally, I make up my mind and begin to compose a letter to her but get carried away and produce a lengthy 'creation' of several pages. As I read it, I realise what a complete and utter nonsense it is. If Lina receives such a thing in her inbox she will surely think of me as some sort of creep.

I delete the text. Staring at the screen of my laptop, I try to come up with a more comprehensible message. Suddenly, an idea crosses my mind. I quickly write an email and, not giving myself any time to change my mind, hit 'send'.

Episode 89 - Too Good to Be True (Lina)

London, UK, 6 January

I seem to be unable not to think of Luke. Though, there isn't even much left to think about, he hasn't called me and that is as much to it as it is. But I still keep thinking of him. I think of how different things could have been had Rosalinda's invitation reached me in time. To start with, I wouldn't have spent so much time pondering over Luke and Rosalinda's non-existent romance. And then, it could have been me pictured with Luke on that photograph and not Debbie Amore, pasted to him in Photoshop. And everything would have been simpler - I would have met the 'charming young man' for the first time at the Christmas reception in Monaco, not on the beach in Nice, playing with his dog ...

But then I remember that Luke isn't in love with me. Well, it doesn't matter what could have been. He still wouldn't have been in love with me. Or perhaps he could have been? Fuelled up, my thoughts spiral to another level.

I check my inbox for new messages. Not finding any, I occupy myself with deleting spam, changing filtering settings and sorting out my mail. Finished, I check the inbox once again and see a new message.

The message is short, just a couple of lines: a suggestion to meet on the 6th of January at six o'clock in Notting Hill. I accept.

With no assignments from my editor and not much else to do, I can't bear sitting alone and pondering over the 'charming young man' any longer. Or so I try to reason my decision. I realise there is a chance of my online admirer standing me up again. But I brush this thought off and try not to think about it.

Sitting on the tube I think how wonderful it would be if it was the 'charming young man' waiting for me at the Notting Hill cafe right now. But it would be too good to be true.

To come across coincidences and signs is one thing, and to dream out fanciful images is entirely another. Though, what else a fantasy is, if not a fragment of my subconscious materialising into being? Well, never mind whether it is a fragment or not. Picturing my fancies makes me feel so much better.

'Next stop - Notting Hill.' I hear the automated announcement.

Episode 90 – ‘All You Need Is Love’ (Luke)

Notting Hill, London, UK, 6 January

I book myself a flight to London. I am meeting Lina in that same cafe where some months ago our ‘rendezvous’ should have taken place.

I will never forget that day. It was going to be our first date and Lina knew nothing about me, except that I’m a fan of hers. But I thought I knew a lot about her as I had read every article, post and note written by her or about her.

I arrived early, well before the agreed time. Strolling up and down the street, I got cold and entered a small shop, the windows of which looked out onto the cafe that I had chosen for our rendezvous. Warming up, I spent time looking at various knick-knacks displayed in the shop. When I checked the time, I realised that it was six already. I was about to leave the shop when I saw Lina. She approached the café and walked in.

And then, I got scared. My dream finally had come true and I found myself not being ready to face it.

I stood and stared at Lina through the shop window. I watched her take off her raincoat and sit down. She waited, glancing at her smartphone from time to time. I watched her but couldn't make myself move.

Then she called me but I quickly switched off my phone. I was ashamed. Later, I emailed Lina and I came up with an excuse - ‘*The Number of The Beast*’. I don’t think she understood but I had noticed earlier that the date, month and time of hour rendezvous corresponded with the digit six: the 6th of the 6th month at 6 o'clock.

That was then. And now, I'm not scared - I crossed that line. I did it when I struck up the conversation with Lina back at the deck of the ‘Rosalinda’.

This time, I also arrive early, but not too early, just a few minutes before the time, and head straight to the cafe. I choose the table, which Lina was then sitting at, order myself an Americano and wait, hoping she won't change her mind at the last minute.

When Lina sees me, she will guess most of the things. And the rest I will explain myself. I'm ready. I can do it.

A waiter in faded blue jeans appears. Winking at me, he goes behind the bar and soon the room is filled with the tunes of the eternal ‘*All You Need Is Love*’, a masterpiece of the Beatles ...

The minute hand of the clock jumps off the digit six. I fix my eyes on the door. Five minutes pass. Has she changed her mind?

The door of the café opens and in walks Lina. She sees me. I stand up, make several steps towards her and pause. But Lina just stands by the door, staring at me. Then, I make a few more steps. Now we stand face to face, just a step between us. She doesn't move. My heart throbs. Unable to bear it any longer I'm about to draw her to me, but Lina smiles, makes the last step, and embraces me.

THE END

About the Author

Seraphina Bogomolova was born in Paris, France, and grew up in Saint-Petersburg, Russia. Her birth was a result of the Cold War clandestine love affair of her parents across borders and ideological divides.

Seraphina's parents met in France. He was a Soviet operative undercover in diplomatic services in Paris, called Mikhail, and she— a 19 y.o. girl of the Russian aristocratic émigré circles, Sophie de Prittwitz (married name Druon) An unlikely, yet striking pair. At the moment of their encounter, none of them could have even envisaged the implications of their romantic affair.

The implications were severe, at least for Seraphina,— according to the protocol of the Soviet intelligence services the couple had to give up their children after their birth. However, prior to the actual birth giving, the number of children to be given birth to was not known. Having found out that she gave birth to twins, Seraphina's mother faced an unwinnable situation in which she took a bold yet cruel decision— to give up just one child. The choice of being 'sacrificed' to the Soviet system fell on Seraphina. As a result, she was taken to Leningrad, USSR, and her twin brother stayed with their mother in Paris, France. The decision separated the twins, creating cultural, political, territorial, and emotional distance between them.

On the arrival to Leningrad, Seraphina was brought to the Institute Otta – an elite medical institution located in the centre of the city. The Institute Otta was responsible for providing medical care for Seraphina and for creating “official” documentation for her subsequent registration in the Soviet Union.

As soon as the needed “official” documents were arranged, Seraphina was placed into a foster family of Russian-Ukrainian descent. The family resided in Leningrad, and, by the time she was given to them, already had a newly born boy of the same age as herself. The boy automatically became a substitute for Seraphina's biological twin brother. Neither Seraphina, nor the substitute, and, most likely, nor her biological twin knew of this elaborate arrangement of the Soviet secret services.

At the same time, Seraphina's biological twin started his life journey in Paris with their mother and her relatives, not knowing anything about his twin sister. He was growing in the Russian aristocratic émigré circles of Paris, as his and Seraphina's family on their mother's side comes from a mix of such aristocratic lineages as the Bobrinsky, Trubetskoy, Shuvalov, Dolgorukov, Potocki, Karnovich, von Prittwitz,

with their roots going as deep in time as Rurik and Yaroslav Court and Grand Princes of Kiev period.

As Seraphina was being ‘protected’ and ‘cared for’ by the Soviet secret services system, her twin brother was surrounded by his mother’s care and the environment of the Russian aristocratic émigré circles, facing a very different reality from the one of Seraphina. The reality that shaped him and his outlook on life. Similarly, Seraphina was affected by the state system she had been placed into, and the immediate environment she experienced as a child.

Regardless of her mother’s calculated decision that affected Seraphina’s early life, she grew up into an independent, strong, and brilliant individual who is not afraid of challenges, seeing them as an opportunity for development and improvement. Seraphina has also successfully incorporated both worlds of her parents– Russia, the country where she grew up and spent the first 23 years of her life, and the Western world where she has spent several decades travelling, living and working in London, New York, Dubai, Geneva, Berlin.

Her book ‘Puzzled’– Головоломка in Russian version– is the first book of the trilogy dedicated to Seraphina and her twin brother. Luke Edward Allen depicted in the ‘Puzzled’ is drawn from Seraphina’s subconscious images of her twin brother. At the moment of writing the book Seraphina was not aware that Luke is a reflection of her brother, begging to be heard and written about. Seraphina’s then unawareness makes the final story even more charming, mysterious, and romantic.

To learn more, visit the website:

www.seraphimabogomolova.com

About the Book

In December 2013, Seraphina moved to Geneva, Switzerland, hoping to make it her home. Being a special place from energy and vibes point of view, Geneva inspired her to write a romantic mystery, taking selected themes from her previous two books. ‘Puzzled’ was Seraphina’s third book. She started it while temporary living in an attic flat on the Rue Francois Bellot street, just couple of minutes’ walk from the Geneva Old Town.

‘Puzzled’ was initially written in Russian under the title Головоломка. The characters of the book appeared in front of Seraphina’s eyes as if by magic, each having their own story to tell. Like in the case with her first book, ‘My Trickster’, she was drawn to write from the perspective of the two narrators— a woman and a man. The writing process was a spontaneous one, since she worked with her subconscious, not having a particular plan or goal. However, despite not having a plan, Seraphina clearly saw the beginning and the end of the book.

While writing ‘Puzzled’ in Russian, Seraphina was releasing finished episodes of the book on the platform Wattpad, quickly gaining appreciative audience, and tweaking the book based on the Wattpad readers’ feedback.

The book focuses on such themes as love and romance, identity and self-discovery, truths and deception, coincidences and fate, family and relations, misunderstandings and mistaken identity. The very themes that have been present in Seraphina’s own life.

Seraphina finished Головоломка (Puzzled) in just three months – she started it in December 2013 and finished it in March 2014.

In 2015, Seraphina translated her book into English and called it ‘Puzzled’, and four years later, in 2019, she turned the story into a screenplay format.

To learn more, visit the website:

www.seraphimabogomolova.com