

PUZZLED

by

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Prologue

*You know, 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

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 at the front of 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 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

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 pine tree and oranges wafting 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. I think of my friends scattered around the world. 'What are they up to right now?' I think 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 ... '

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

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.

Episode 3 - What Girl?

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. Maman is throwing a big reception tonight: her annual Christmas dinner. If it were for me I wouldn't attend it. I hate 'talking' to 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 it 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.

'Chéri³, 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.

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

³ Chéri (French) - dear, darling.

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

Episode 4 - The Number of The Beast

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.' he 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!

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, 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 a direction of one of the Baron's daughter.

‘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 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

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

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. Thanks 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'll 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 ami⁶. 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 excited 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

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 mess 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

Monte Carlo, France, 24 December

The dinner is in full swing now, 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 brulée⁷ 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 mysterious guest... In fact, I’d find everything possible and even the impossible about her.’

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.

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

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 ...'

'Ah, 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.

You have read an excerpt from the book ‘Puzzled’. The full version of the book can be purchased on the following site: [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com), [Kobo.com](https://www.kobo.com), [Litres.ru](https://www.litres.ru), [Ozon.ru](https://www.ozon.ru)