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The Other Side

-

Noémi's Story

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Foreword

Hi there! I'm so glad that my first book has made its way into your hands (or onto your screen)! This story follows the life of a young woman named Noémi. The narrative unfolds from Noémi's point of view, so you'll be guided entirely by her thoughts, feelings, and decisions throughout the events.

To enhance your experience, I've included a special touch: at the beginning of each chapter, you'll find a link to a Google Drive folder containing a song that complements the theme of the chapter. I hope this music will help you connect even more deeply with Noémi's journey.

To help you navigate the story more easily, I've prepared a brief reading guide:

- **Monologues:** These are Noémi's inner thoughts, reflecting her emotional state and current situation. They are marked like this:

[Inner thoughts]

Text...

- **Dialogues:** Since Noémi is the narrator, her spoken words are marked with **[Me]**, while other characters are identified by their name or a descriptive tag (e.g., [Male voice]).

They appear like this:

[Me] “...”

[Man’s voice] “...”

- **Cinematic elements:** To help you fully experience the atmosphere and events of the story, I’ve included sounds, actions, and sensory effects. For example:

/ Door opens /

or

/ She opened the door /

- **Time jumps:** The story contains several (mostly brief) time skips, marked like this:

...

I would like to give special thanks for the support and help in the development of this book to:

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Thank you all for your support and encouragement — this book couldn’t have come to life without it!

Before you begin, it's important to note that some chapters can be emotionally intense or heavy. If at any point you feel the need to take a break, feel free to put the book down and continue later — it'll be here waiting for you. 😊

I truly hope you enjoy the story, and that Noémi's journey will stay with you for a long time.
Happy reading!

Prologue

The Picture He Promised



Twelve years ago:

[Me] “Dad, Dad!” – I have to show him my new camera, I just got it for my birthday!

[Dad] “I’m coming, Noémi!” – Is it in the living room? I thought you were still in the room with mom.

[Me] “Dad, look! I got a camera from mom!”

/ Dad laughs /

[Dad] “Wow, I’m glad you’re so happy with it! Should we take a picture? I can print it out at work!” – Wow, that would be awesome, a printed picture with Dad.

[Me] “YES, YES!”

[Dad] “Alright, come here! When we count down from three, press the photo button, okay?”

[Me] “OKAY!”

[Dad] “Alright, three, two... ONE!”

[Inner thoughts]

Wow, this picture turned out really well, but how is he going to take it and print it?

[Me] “Dad, how are you going to print it?”

[Dad] “I’ll connect the camera to my laptop, download the picture to it, and print it out while I’m at work!” – That sounds perfect!

[Dad] “Can you give it to me while I download the picture to my computer?”

[Me] “YES!”

Twelve years later:

[Mom] “Noémi?!” – Ugh, it’s mom, what does she want?

[Me] “Yes, mom?”

[Mom] “There’s a pile of old stuff here, I’d appreciate it if you could go through it and see what you want to keep and what you don’t. Leave what you don’t want, and keep what you do...” – She’s always so focused on these old bags, she never had a problem with them before.

[Me] “Alright...”

[Inner thoughts]

It's better if I start now, the sooner I finish, the more time I'll have for my own things.

...

[Inner thoughts]

Let's see... wow, there's so much here that I completely forgot I had. My old music player, I wonder if it still works... My old camera, wow. I still remember... I got it from Dad. Wow, there are so many pictures here that I took, with mom in the park, with mom at the zoo, there's one with my grandma too. She passed away about nine years ago... I didn't really know her that well, I randomly got a shot of her for a wildlife photo...

...

[Inner thoughts]

No, this can't be, this picture... Dad...

Chapter One

So sudden...



[Inner thoughts]

This photo—every time I look at it, a knot forms in my stomach. I was only seven when Mom collapsed at the kitchen table after answering a phone call. It was Dad's boss. A workplace accident.

Mom tried to stay strong, but she couldn't hide what had happened from me.

[Me] "Mom...?" – I asked, my face full of fear.

[Mom] "Noémi..." – she answered through sobs.

[Mom] "Daddy... he's not coming home anymore." – she said, tears in her eyes.

[Me] "Does he have that much work?" – I asked her, clueless, not understanding what was going on.

[Inner thoughts]

For a brief moment, a faint smile crossed her tearful face—she knew I didn't grasp it yet.

[Mom] "Oh, Noémi, come here..." – she said, pulling me into a hug. That's when I started to understand what she meant.

[Me] "Daddy... did he die?" – I asked, surprised, eyes welling up. That's when it hit me—I'd seen him for the last time that morning.

[Inner thoughts]

That evening, we both cried in each other's arms like two little children.

That's when she promised me that no matter what happens to us, she would always be there for me.

"Noémi, whatever happens to us, I'll never leave you. I promise."

I was desperate, scared for what would become of us—but those words calmed me in that moment.

A few days later, we buried Dad. I haven't been to his grave since. I still haven't processed it, even though it's been eleven years. I miss him so much...

I'd better put this picture back in the box. Just thinking about it brings me to the verge of tears...

/ My room door opens /

[Mom] "Noémi!" – I already know what's coming...

[Mom] "I'm sorry, I can't drive you to work this afternoon either. You'll have to take the bus."

[Me] "It's okay, I'm used to it..." – She always makes promises, but lately work keeps her from keeping them more and more.

[Mom] "Please don't do this now. I have so much work. I have to leave early and won't be back until nine tonight." – I know she's had enough of this too.

[Me] "It's fine, Mom. As long as we have each other, everything's okay." – At least she acts like a real mom, trying to improve our lives.

[Inner thoughts]

Soon—hopefully by the end of summer—we'll have enough saved for a house with a yard in the countryside. Finally, we'll leave this city life behind and slow down. I'll continue high school there. Mom might even start her own business.

[Mom] "Since your father passed..." – Ugh, not this again...

[Me] "Mom, please not now. I'm not in the mood to think about this stuff." – I can't. It just hurts too much. Still, I appreciate her loyalty to Dad. Even after eleven years, she never sought out another man.

[Mom] "I'm sorry, sweetheart. I know it's hard." – Yeah, it is...

/ Mom walks toward me with open arms /

[Mom] "Come here, Noémi." – Her hugs are the best. They always calm me down.

/ I look at the clock /

[Me] "Mom, you're going to be late. Traffic's getting worse. You shouldn't speed like last time." – That fine was no joke.

[Mom] "You're right." – she says, a bit sarcastically. I don't get what's so fun about speeding.

[Mom] "I'm going now. I'll call you during my break." – I hope she actually gets a break this time...

[Me] "Okay, Mom. But seriously, drive safely." – My stomach's in knots, probably still because of Dad.

[Inner thoughts]

Now that she's gone, I need to get ready too. My bus leaves soon—I shouldn't miss it.

Ugh, this fast-food uniform makes my whole body itch. I don't know how I wear this for 8 hours.

At least I have a summer job, so I can earn a little to help Mom.

The bus leaves in 10 minutes. I better hurry.

...

[Inner thoughts]

Ugh, I almost missed it. Again. The bus was packed.

[Alan] "Oh, good morning, Noémi!" – Ah, Alan. My manager.

[Me] "Good morning!" – He replaced the old manager, Liz.

[Inner thoughts]

That woman was unbearable. Treated us like robots.

[Alan] "You don't have to stay the full 8 hours today. I have to leave early—you're only working 5." – What? That's nice. I just hope the pay stays the same...

[Me] "Okay, should I tell the others or will you?" – Just in case he forgets to mention it.

[Alan] "I'll handle it. But please jump into work. We've already had a few orders. You're on barista duty today." – What?! I'm not certified...

[Me] "Alan, I don't have a barista license." – How can he even think that?

[Alan] "You're right, Noémi, I mixed you up with someone else..." – Ugh. He's only been here a few days.

[Alan] "Okay then, please take the register." – Slightly better...

[Inner thoughts]

I got used to working the register after a few weeks. I kind of like it now, but I'm not great at talking to people. At first, I froze up a lot. But I found that one deep breath helps a lot.

/ My phone rings /

[Inner thoughts]

Huh? A call during work? Official number—I have to answer this.

[Me] "H-Hello?" – I'm such an idiot, I don't even know what to say.

[Woman's voice] "Good afternoon. I'm calling from the district police headquarters. My name is Emma. Am I speaking with Noémi Koltz?" – What happened?

[Me] "Yes, this is me. Why are you calling?" – I hope I'm not involved in something without knowing.

[Emma] "I'm afraid I have a terrible task... to inform you..." – Ugh, what kind of terrible news? An arrest warrant? Haha—no way they'd call for that.

[Emma] "Your mother was in an accident this morning... and passed away." – WHAT?

/ I drop to the floor behind the register /

[Me] "Uh, excuse me, what?" – This must be a prank. They got my name and—

[Emma] "I know it's not easy to hear this way. I'm terribly sorry. Please come to the station by 5 p.m. to collect her belongings." – No, this can't be true. It's a lie. I don't get it.

[Emma] "I have to hang up. Please accept my condolences. Come as soon as you can." – And she really hung up. What is going on?

[Inner thoughts]

No, I can't. I'm falling apart. My chest hurts. My stomach... what's happening? This isn't real. I... I...

/ Alan sees me on the floor /

[Alan] "Noémi! Are you okay?" – No, Alan, I'm not.

[Me] "My mom died. I have to go, sorry." – I don't even know where the station is...

[Alan] "But... Okay. Go. I'll cover for you." – Minimum he could do.

/ I stand up, dizzy /

[Me] "Thank you. That's kind of you. I'll come back. Or... I don't know." – WHAT IS HAPPENING?

[Inner thoughts]

Ah, phone... maps... 3KM away? Seriously? No buses? I have to walk...

This can't be true. I don't believe it. I bet it was a prank call or a mistake.

Stupid me—I'll call Mom. Just to be sure.

/ I call her /

[Inner thoughts]

Ugh, she's not picking up. No. You promised. You said... AAAAAH.

/ My head is spinning. Legs going numb /

[Man's voice] "Ma'am, is something wrong?" – AH, a police officer. Yes. Yes, something's wrong.

[Me] "YES. PLEASE TAKE ME TO THE STATION." – I can't take this stress.

[Me] "Hey, HEY!" – I can't feel my legs...

...

/ Blinding lights /

[Woman's voice] "She's awake. You can give her mother's belongings to the hospital. I'll talk to her when she's ready." – Ugh. My whole head is spinning.

[Me] "W-Where am I?" – Everything's spinning.

[Woman's voice] "Hi, Noémi. I'm Zoé. You collapsed pretty badly. Slept for a few hours." – I can tell. Not the refreshing kind of sleep.

[Inner thoughts]

Wait a second...

[Me] "MOM. WHAT HAPPENED TO MOM?" – No. No way.

[Zoé] "Noémi, please calm down. Your pulse is spiking. Try to rest." – She doesn't get it.

[Me] "Where. Is. My. Mom?" – Just say it already, you—

[Zoé] "Your mother, Anna Koltz, passed away in a car accident today." – Not true.

[Me] "Ha, ha, ha. Very funny. Don't you understand? Without her I'm nothing. I..." – If I keep going, I'll break down sobbing like a toddler. I need to calm down.

[Zoé] "I'm so sorry, Noémi. The news is true. I know it'll take time to process, but your health is most

important now." – If she's really gone, then I'm done too...

[Me] "But she promised... aaah." – I sound like a preschooler now, I'm sure. But after Dad, she meant everything.

[Zoé] "Get some rest. I'll be nearby. Press the button if you need anything, okay?" – I won't press anything unless I'm dying.

[Me] "Okay... thanks. Huh." – Feeling a bit lighter. Must be the sedative.

[Inner thoughts]

I have to sleep. I really do. I feel like nothing. I want to die.

...

/ I hear voices /

[Mom] "Noémi, wake up..." – Mom?

[Mom] "You're going to be late for school." – Huh?

[Me] "But Mom, I..."

/ I jolt awake /

[Me] "AAAH..." – Ugh. Just a dream.

[Zoé] "NOÉMI?!" – They really are watching me.

[Zoé] "Are you okay?" – I don't know. Physically? Maybe. Mentally? I have no clue.

[Me] "Better... I dreamed of Mom." – It felt so real.

[Zoé] "You can go home tomorrow morning. Please try to rest until then." – She's right. My head's spinning again...

...

[Me] "Ugh, feeling a bit better, but still..." – I can't believe this is real.

[Zoé] "Are you ready to go home, Noémi?" – I don't even know.

[Me] "Yeah... I think so." – Hopefully I don't collapse again.

[Zoé] "Okay. Please get dressed. I need to give you a few things..." – Just not Mom's things...

...

[Me] "I'm ready, Zoé." – Finally on my feet.

[Zoé] "80€ in cash, a phone, apartment keys, a photo, and her personal ID with her wallet." – A photo... huh.

[Me] "Thank you..." – I can barely look at any of it.

[Zoé] "Your mother's body can stay here a few more days..." – Wow. Smooth transition. You really know how to talk to people.

[Me] "I don't know how funerals work. Just... bury her next to Dad. That's what she'd want..."

[Zoé] "Someone will call you, I'm sure. Here's my number—call me if anything comes up." – Was she serious?

[Me] "Okay. Thanks, Zoé..." – Everything's happening so fast. Ugh...

...

[Inner thoughts]

Her stuff is in this bag. I don't dare look at the picture. What if it's a family photo? I can't take it. My chest aches, my stomach's twisted. I just want to go home...

...

[Inner thoughts]

Finally home... ah...

[Me] "Oh, Mom, I don't even know where or how it happened... I still can't believe this..." – It hurts so much...

...

[Me] "I didn't even get to say goodbye. And you lied. YOU'RE NOT GOING TO BE HERE ALWAYS..." – And now I'm crying again, just like when Dad died—except now, there's no one here with me.

Chapter Two

Now What?



[Inner thoughts]

It's been three days since Mom died. I can't sleep. I can't eat properly either, and I got fired from work for not showing up for my shifts. At least I still have access to the bank savings—for now, it might be enough to get by. But first, I have to bury Mom.

The hospital called—the one where they took her. They said they'd prepare her body for me free of charge, I just have to pay for the coffin and the transport. I managed to buy a spot next to Dad. It's insane how much has happened in just three days.

I could lose this apartment at any moment. I have no idea how I'll pay the bills or the rent. Ugh, I've already spent almost a quarter of our savings.

I still can't process what happened—just like I never processed Dad. Ugh.

Why is this happening to me? Why can't I have something good in my life for once?

I've been suffering since Mom died. She was the only one who could take my mind off Dad. And now she's gone too.

I want to die too...

I don't even know who to invite to the funeral. Her boss, maybe—Mom always said they kept in touch. But he might be the only one.

Ah, screw it. I won't invite anyone. I'll leave it in fate's hands—whatever happens, happens. They'll dig the graves tomorrow, and once it's over, they'll bury her.

I can't stop crying.

Mom, why did you do this to me? I told you not to rush. I bet you were in a hurry. I'm mad at you.

[Me] “WHY DID YOU DO THIS TO ME?” – Great, now I'm crying like a little kid again.

[Me] “YOU LEFT ME IN PIECES, YOU DIDN'T EVEN KEEP YOUR PROMISE!” – ...

[Me] “AAAHH!” – How long am I going to be like this?

[Inner thoughts]

Maybe a walk would help... but going outside, among people—I don't know.

I'd rather stay here... if I can even call this place a home anymore.

Huh? Someone's knocking. I hope it's not the neighbors. Actually, I hope it's someone—or something—that ends my suffering.

[Alan] “Noémi, it's me, Alan...” – Huh? What is he doing here?

[Alan] “Look, Noémi, I hope you can hear me. I... I know what happened to your mom. I thought you were bluffing when you ran out of the restaurant...” – Seriously? He thinks I'd fake something like that? Idiot.

[Me] “Still, no one's heard from you—not even your classmates...” – How does he know them?

[Alan] “How do I know them?” – Did I say that out loud?

[Alan] “I'm graduating with you next year. We moved here recently. My dad owns the restaurant, that's why I could be the manager. I studied while working too. They keep saying I should take over one day. But... I don't know.” – Great. Another idiot for the last school year.

At least he came and checked on me... but why? I don't even know him. I don't really know anyone.

[Me] “Alan, thanks for checking on me, but this is really bad timing. Please leave. I don’t want to talk.” – Was that too harsh?

[Alan] “Okay, Noémi... at least we know you’re alive.” – He’s right...

[Alan] “Then I’ll go. My sincere condolences. And... sorry for talking too much.” – Finally...

[Inner thoughts]

Why do I always assume the worst? I still have to bury Mom.

Even if there’s nothing else, at least that’s a goal.

I’ll just lie down... maybe I can sleep through the day and mentally prepare for tomorrow...

...

[Inner thoughts]

I didn’t get much rest. My thoughts won’t leave me alone.

Existing hurts.

It’s almost midnight. I’ll rest a bit more, then get ready.

...

[Inner thoughts]

It's 7 AM. The funeral's at eleven. I better get going.

I'll wash up, put on something black, and... see what happens next.

[Me] "Ugh..." – Mom put away all the brushes recently... said she'd clean them. Now I can't find any.

[Inner thoughts]

Where did you put them, Mom...

...

[Inner thoughts]

Alright, I'm ready.

I can't believe where I'm going.

This is a nightmare—I just want to wake up...

The bus should get me there on time...

...

[Man's voice] "Uh, dear passengers, sorry, but this bus is about to break down. Old warrior, hehe. Don't worry, another bus will be here in 30 minutes." –
You've got to be kidding me.

Honestly, I hate everything.

Of course this happens.

Good thing the cemetery's only ten minutes away.

...

[Inner thoughts]

Finally. She's here.

At least... I hope she is.

I'm not looking at her body. It already hurts too much.

And... it was an accident. I don't even want to think about what happened.

[Man's voice] "Is it just you, miss?" – Not surprising.

[Me] "Yes, just me. She was my mother. If I have to bury her, I'll at least be here..." – No matter how much it hurts.

[Man's voice] "And the others?" – He doesn't know...

[Me] "Just me..." – Please don't start crying, Noémi...

[Man's voice] "Alright then, I won't bother you. But I'll need to close the grave at noon. You can stay as long as you want." – At least he's kind.

[Me] "Thank you, uuhm..." – I don't know his name.

[Man's voice] "Just call me Uncle Róbert." – How old is he that I'm calling him uncle...

[Me] “Thank you, Uncle Róbert. My name’s Noémi.” – Fair enough. Now he knows my name too.

[Uncle Róbert] “I hope you’ll be able to move on someday, Noémi.” – Oh, if only you knew.

[Uncle Róbert] “Well, I’ll go now. I’ll be back shortly, okay?” – I hope so—I paid for you.

[Me] “Alright...” – ...

[Inner thoughts]

God, Mom... what am I supposed to do without you?

I’m almost twenty, and I still don’t know anything about the real world...

I’ll sit down. Maybe someone else will come.

...

[Woman’s voice] “You’re Noémi, right?” – Huh? Who’s this?

[Me] “Uhm, yes. And who are you?” – Probably someone familiar.

[Woman’s voice] “Jessica—but just call me Jess. I was friends with your mom. Don’t know if she ever mentioned me.” – Rings a bell... but not sure.

[Me] “Honestly, I don’t know you.” – Better to be honest.

[Jess] “That’s alright. If you’d like, I can give you a hug. I can see you’re going through a lot.” – And there goes my trust in you.

[Me] “Thanks, but no. I’m fine being alone here. Thank you for coming, but there’s no one else. I’ll stay until she’s buried, then... I don’t know.” – I’m hopeless.

/ Jess leans in toward me /

[Jess] “Alright, whatever you say, sweetheart.” – !!!

[Me] “Please don’t call me sweetheart...” – I’m about to break. My voice is trembling.

[Jess] “Oh, I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to...” – Just be quiet.

[Me] “Please. Just be quiet. Show some respect for my mother—at least that much.” – I hope I never see you again.

[Jess] “Alright...” – Finally.

[Inner thoughts]

I don’t get people. Why do they always have to talk?

Why isn’t silence and peace ever enough?

I never understood people. I never will.

[Jess] “I’m going now, Noémi... Please accept my condolences, and I’m sorry if I upset you.” – Already? Couldn’t even last thirty minutes.

[Me] “...” – I’ve got nothing to say.

[Inner thoughts]

Now that she’s gone, it all just hurts more.

Let’s just pretend today never happened...

[Uncle Róbert] “I’m here, Noémi.” – Finally. He’s a few minutes late.

[Me] “Good. You can go ahead with the burial... I—I can’t stay any longer.” – Great. Crying again.

[Uncle Róbert] “Alright, Noémi. Uncle Róbert will take care of what needs to be done.” – I can’t take this anymore. It’s too much again.

/ I stand up from the chair /

[Me] “Th-thank you...” – I can’t even speak...

[Inner thoughts]

I need to leave.

I can’t stay here.

Not just because of Mom...

But because she's now lying next to Dad—and realizing that just tears me apart even more...

I need to go home. Take a shower. Then I need to shut the world out somehow...

Chapter Three

A New Hope?



[Inner thoughts]

I buried Mom a few days ago. It's unbelievable—only one person came. Jess. I don't even know her; she could've been Mom's boss or just anyone else. I might've been able to talk to her. I have no choice but to get through this week... There's still almost a month left of summer. I don't know how, but I need to finish school, and I have to work too, because the savings won't be enough. Luckily, the landlord waived the rent for the next two months, which helps a lot, but I still have to cover the utility bills. I need to go for a walk. My legs want to move, and my head wants to forget. I need to clear my mind.

...

[Inner thoughts]

I have no idea where to go. I'll walk around the apartment block first, then figure out where next. I've walked here so many times before, often with Mom. I remember once a bird flew into the window right in front of us—we tried to help it, but it didn't last long. Maybe it was a woodpecker? Huh, I can't even remember for sure anymore.

...

[Inner thoughts]

Finished the loop. I'm back in front of the steps leading to our door. I can't stop thinking about how many times Mom and I walked up these together. Now I have no idea where to go. Maybe I'll head toward the mall nearby—it's about a ten or fifteen-minute walk. It's afternoon, almost six. If I remember right, they're open till nine. I'll check when I get there.

...

/ An older man is walking toward me /

[Man's voice] "Noémi!" – Huh? The voice isn't familiar... neither is the face.

[Me] "Do I know you?" – Strange that he just calls out to me on the street, a complete stranger.

[Man's voice] "I used to be your father's boss, many years ago..." – Huh? How did he recognize me? I've never seen this man in my life, and I don't even remember what Dad used to do.

[Me] “Really? How did you recognize me?” – I ask. I’ve never seen this man before, and I’m a little freaked out.

[Man’s voice] “That’s not important right now, but I want to help you.” – Why is it not important? And how exactly does he want to help me?

[Me] “Thanks, but I don’t need your help. Please leave me alone.” – I’m starting to get scared.

[Man’s voice] “If it bothers you that I didn’t say how I recognized you, then I can explain, but I’m in a hurry.” – If you’re in a hurry, why stop me?

[Me] “Yes, that does bother me. Please explain.” – Idiot.

[Man’s voice] “I’m Alan’s father. I own the fast-food place where you used to work. I went through your file when I had to let you go. Your name sounded familiar. I made a couple of calls and confirmed that you were the one whose father saved me.” – Huh? Alan’s dad? How does he know I know his son? And what does he mean my dad saved him?

[Me] “This all sounds unclear. Okay, so you saw my name on the papers. But who did you call? And how exactly did my dad save you?” – I shouldn’t have gone out for a walk...

[Alan's dad] "I run a private investigation office alongside the restaurant. Been doing it for over 25 years. Your dad used to work for me. But sorry, I really have to go now. I'll call you soon." – My dad was a private investigator? And how does he have my phone number? Why is he so eager to help me?

[Me] "How do you have my number? And why do you want to help me?" – This is getting uncomfortable.

[Alan's dad] "From the file I mentioned earlier. I want to offer you a job—one you can do while finishing school. Fixed salary plus bonuses. But seriously, I have to run. I'll be in touch." – A job? What kind of job?

[Me] "I'm not sure about any of this, maybe..." – ...

[Alan's dad] "I'll call you. Bye!" – Ugh, he brushed me off. Guess he really was in a hurry.

...

[Inner thoughts]

I didn't like any of that. Alan's dad... I don't even know his name. Looked about fifty. Fast food joint and a PI office? How does that combo even work? I'll be at the mall soon. I'll eat something, then head home.

...

[Inner thoughts]

Last time I was here was with Mom, looking at pets. We wanted a cat, but the landlord didn't allow it. So we gave up on the idea. Maybe we would've had a cat in the house we were going to buy in the countryside... I'd better just eat something...

...

[Inner thoughts]

These mall meals... I used to eat here with Dad whenever Mom got home late. Time to head back. I still need to pack up Mom's room. I don't want the stuff of a dead person around me. Gives me the chills.

...

[Inner thoughts]

These trees... It'd be so nice if the city would put a few benches underneath them. I could rest here, especially since it's a park.

[Woman's voice] "DON'T HURT ME, GERGŐ..." –
Huh?

[Gergő] "SIX YEARS! SIX YEARS DOWN THE DRAIN, YOU WHORE!" – Gergő's not doing well. Ugh, this is why I won't be in a relationship for a long time.

[Woman's voice] "I DIDN'T MEAN IT, PLEASE..."

[Gergő] "I'LL KILL YOU, AND YOUR DAUGHTER TOO!"
– What is he doing? Bluffing for sure.

[Woman's voice] "SHE'S YOUR DAUGHTER TOO, NOT JUST—"

[Gergő] "SHUT UP! DON'T YOU DARE COME HOME!"

[Little girl's voice] "Daddy, please don't hurt us..." –
Poor girl. She's probably not even ten. Making a kid cry like this, especially in public—there are crazy people in the world.

[Inner thoughts]

Better leave before they notice me. I don't want to get involved in someone else's private mess. I've got enough of my own.

...

[Inner thoughts]

Ah, home. I really need to start cleaning. Bag up Mom's stuff. I hope I don't find anything related to me—like gifts, letters, whatever. That would mess me up. I'll start with her shelf. I'll bag all her paperwork and job-related things.

/ I start clearing out Mom's belongings /

[Inner thoughts]

What's this? A journal. Should I open it? I don't know... Not right now. I'll set it aside.

/ My phone rings /

[Inner thoughts]

Ugh, someone's calling. Probably Alan's dad... Should I answer? After all, he's offering me a job, and I do need the money. I'll pick up.

[Me] "Uh, hello?" – Sounded like an idiot.

[Alan's dad] "Hi, Noémi!" – Called it.

[Alan's dad] "So, there's a job opportunity for you—doesn't require papers." – I don't want to go back to fast food. I'd better tell him.

[Me] "Umm, sorry, but I'm not looking to go back into fast food. And even if I did, I'd only be fit for cleaning or running the register, so..."

[Alan's dad] "No, Noémi, you misunderstood. I need you for my PI office—to input data, type, share documents with me, stuff like that." – Whoa, didn't expect that kind of role.

[Me] "I really appreciate the offer. But how could I manage that while still in school?" – What he described sounds like a full-time job. In summer, maybe, but later? Seems unrealistic...

[Alan's dad] “Just Tuesdays and Thursdays, three hours a day, from 5 to 8 p.m. On weekends, you can do full days for bonus pay, if you're free and not studying.” – Would I be enough on my own to handle all that input?

[Me] “Wow, that's unexpected, and thank you so much for the offer. But can I ask—wouldn't I be too little for all that on my own?” – Sounds like I wouldn't be the only one...

[Alan's dad] “You won't be working alone, relax. I've got three full-time employees. They'll train you on the basics, check your input later, and tell you what you could improve.” – This actually sounds really good. I'm interested, and the extra cash wouldn't hurt. But how much cash...

[Me] “I don't want to be rude or anything, but can I ask about the salary?”

“The pay is a fixed monthly amount—1200€ to start. If you stay for half a year, I'll raise it. As for bonuses, on any full workday, you'll get 86€ in hand.”

/ I sit down on the floor /

[Inner thoughts]

Wow... he's actually serious?

[Me] “Thank you so much for the details. I really like this offer, umm... but I still don’t know your name.” – Time to ask.

[Alan’s dad] “I’m Amadeus. And please, just call me that—I should’ve said earlier.” – Amadeus. Interesting name...

[Me] “Alright, Amadeus. Honestly, I really like the sound of this job. Data entry seems doable, and I’m open to it.” – This could actually work well. Doesn’t eat up my time, I can rest between days, and weekends are optional.

/ Amadeus laughs /

[Amadeus] “So are you one hundred percent in?” – That old-man laugh... I like it.

[Me] “Yes!”

[Amadeus] “Then tomorrow—Monday—please come to my office. We’ll handle a bit of paperwork, and you can start whenever you want.” – I can’t believe how smoothly this went.

[Me] “Sounds good. Any specific time I should come?” – Best to ask.

[Amadeus] “I’ll be in all day. Just tell them you’re here for me and who you are.” – Does he have that much going on?

[Me] “Alright!” – Finally something positive this week. Maybe things are turning around.

[Amadeus] “Noémi... your mother... I’m sorry. My condolences. I’m trying to help you make the beginning easier. Believe me, I know how hard it is now. I lost both my parents early too—I was twelve. The roof collapsed while we were sleeping. They shielded me with their bodies... Please, value my help. And if you ever need an old guy to talk to, I’m here, willingly.” – That hit me a bit, but I appreciate his kindness. I’ll try to treat him with respect.

[Me] “Thank you... yes, it’s really hard right now. But thank you for helping. I’ll do my best. Thank you...” – Finally, some comfort...

[Amadeus] “I’ve got to go now. Call me anytime, okay? See you tomorrow, Noémi!” – Still working this late?

[Me] “Alright, see you tomorrow. Bye!”

[Inner thoughts]

That conversation felt good. And it looks like I’m finally going to have a fairly easy job. I can finally see a way out of where I am now... I forgot to ask how my dad saved him. I’ll ask tomorrow. For now, I’ll just finish clearing the desk. Then I’ll rest.

[Inner thoughts]

So many papers on her desk. I'm amazed she could find anything. I'll keep the bag for now—maybe her workplace needs some of these. She worked in marketing, probably just photocopied everything, and kept the real stuff at her desk. But where do I even put all this now? Just leave it here? For now, I'm done. I'm tired. I'm going to bed. Tomorrow I'll head to the address Amadeus gave me.

...

/ I enter the office building /

[Inner thoughts]

This building is huge. I hope there's a receptionist—and that they're actually at their desk...

Huh? Jess? What is she doing here? Is she the receptionist?

/ I walk up to the reception desk /

[Me] “Jess?” – I ask, just to be sure.

[Jess] “Noémi? What are you doing here?” – It's her.

[Me] “Amadeus offered me a job. Told me to come in for the paperwork.”

[Jess] “I’m glad he could offer you something. Come, I’ll show you where his office is.” – I like how she gets straight to the point.

...

[Jess] “Keep going down this hall, it’s the last door. You can’t miss it. But if you do, I’ll be at the desk.”

[Me] “Alright, thanks, Jess!” – Now I just need to get there.

[Inner thoughts]

Here’s his office. I’ll knock.

/ I knock on the door /

[Amadeus] “Come in!” – I think he knows it’s me...

/ I enter the office /

[Amadeus] “Ah, Noémi!” – Guess not. Maybe he greets everyone like that.

[Me] “Hi, Amadeus!”

[Amadeus] “Come in, have a seat. I’ve got the papers ready for you.” – Nice vibe in here. The wall plants, all the sunlight, everything neat and tidy.

/ I sit down /

[Me] "Thanks, I like your office!"

[Amadeus] "Thanks a lot. My wife decorated it... Said if I'm going to be here every day, it should feel like home. Here are the papers—just need to fill out your basic info. Didn't mention it before, but I'll need your details and all that." – His wife sounds understanding.

[Me] "I've got my ID with me, I always carry it."

/ Amadeus stands up and walks to the back /

[Amadeus] "Great, would you like some coffee, or maybe a pastry?" – It's nice of him to ask.

[Me] "I'd like a regular coffee, not too strong, if possible."

[Amadeus] "How much sugar would you like?"

[Me] "I don't want any, thank you." – I don't like it sweet, it takes away from the taste.

/ Amadeus laughs /

[Amadeus] "Then you drink it just like I do, just the coffee beans and water."

[Me] "Yes..." – I'm almost done with the sheet, it didn't take long.

...

[Me] "Amadeus, I think I'm done, could you take a look?"

/ Amadeus starts walking back to his desk /

[Amadeus] "Sure, slide it over here... I'll take your coffee as well."

[Amadeus] "Here you go, I hope you'll like it." – The smell is nutty, what kind of coffee is this?

[Me] "What kind of coffee beans did you use for this coffee?"

[Amadeus] "So you noticed, this is a special kind of coffee, 'Jamaica Blue Mountain', from Jamaica." – Wow, it's sweet by nature.

...

[Amadeus] "Your papers are good, Noémi. Now, you just have to decide when you'd like to start." – I think it would be good to start this week, I don't have much to do anyway, and I could really use the money.

[Me] "If possible, I'd like to start this week, on Tuesday." – If I remember correctly, Tuesday is the first day I need to work this week.

[Amadeus] "I'm glad you're not dragging it out. So on Tuesday, please come in from 5 PM to 8 PM. I'll send Alan to pick you up at your place, he'll show you what

you need to do." – I really don't want to go with Alan, but I don't want to be rude either.

[Me] "Okay, then I'll be downstairs at 4:30 PM, we'll be there in about half an hour, I think."

[Amadeus] "Alright, Noémi. Come on, I'll walk you out."

...

[Amadeus] "So, tomorrow, Noémi, take care! If you have any questions or anything, feel free to call me."

[Me] "Okay, see you tomorrow!"

/ I start walking towards the bus /

[Inner thoughts]

That went pretty smoothly, he was kind, and I liked the atmosphere. I hope I'll be able to fit into the working conditions. Amadeus really wants to help me. This job, three hours a week twice, plus a full day on Saturdays if I want to take it, I don't know how long I'll be able to handle not going in every day, but at least it'll give me some use. My bus is just about to arrive, better hurry so I get a seat.

...

[Inner thoughts]

I'm home again. Since mom passed away, I haven't cleaned a bit, I think I'll tidy up the apartment this afternoon.

Chapter Four

What Have I Gotten Myself Into...



[Inner thoughts]

Finally, I'm done. The cleaning didn't take as long as I thought it would. Without Mom, it was completely different. It will be evening soon; maybe I should rest earlier considering tomorrow. I'm not sure when Alan will pick me up, and Amadeus asked me to be at the office by 5 PM. I'll leave at 4:30, and then we'll see what happens.

/ The phone rings /

Huh? Someone's calling, and the number isn't familiar. Maybe it's from the office, I'll pick up.

[Me] "Yes?" – I still can't properly answer a damn phone.

[Alan] "Hi, Noémi" – It's Alan, what does he want?

[Me] "Hi, Alan! Why are you calling?" – I was just about to sleep, great timing, as always.

[Alan] "So, tomorrow, I'm supposed to pick you up around 4:30 PM. The thing is, would you be interested in going out a few hours earlier? Ever since your mom passed away, I haven't heard much from you."

[Inner thoughts]

Huh... I don't know how to respond. I really haven't been going anywhere, my social life has totally changed. He's right, though, a couple of hours outside wouldn't hurt, but it still feels weird, with him.

His father, Amadeus, is helping me with this new job. He wouldn't want to do anything bad, would he?

[Me] "You're right, Alan. I haven't been socializing much. But when were you thinking? Where would we go? I'm free after 1 PM, I'll be getting ready for the office until then."

[Alan] "1 PM works for me. There's a small market-like event in the park near you. If you want, we could head there." – The program sounds a bit weak, but I can't think of anything else, maybe there'll be something good.

[Me] "Okay, I'll be downstairs at 1 PM then. What car will you be driving?" – I shouldn't get into a stranger's car.

[Alan] "A black Volvo. So, I'll see you at 1 PM. I'm off now to help my dad with some things. Have a good rest! Bye!" – Black car, got it.

[Me] "Bye!"

[Inner thoughts]

Finally, I can rest. I'll get ready in the afternoon for 1 PM.

...

[Inner thoughts]

I could barely get up. The weather is warm, the sun is shining brightly. I'm curious how much shade there'll be in the afternoon, I don't want to be out in the sun for too long. It wouldn't be great working with a headache and sweaty. It's almost 1 PM, I think I'll bring some water and sunglasses. I'll take a shower first, then get ready.

...

[Inner thoughts]

It's almost 1 PM. I'm heading down, maybe he'll arrive early.

/ I check the time on my phone /

[Inner thoughts]

It's 1:10 PM, he should be here by now. Maybe this is him, black car, am I sure it's black? I think I remember correctly. He stops; it must be him.

[Alan] "Hey, Noémi!" – Yep, that's him.

[Me] "Hi! You're late..."

[Alan] "Yeah, sorry, some football player was doing a signing event. The traffic was really bad, and there were road closures too, but I only stopped for a few minutes. I left at 12:15 PM." – I don't know who could have been so important, but closing off the main roads is a bit much.

[Alan] "Is the air conditioning okay?" – Good thing he asked. Because I'm freezing in the car.

[Me] "Could it be a little less cold? Haha"

[Alan] "Sure, I'll adjust it. I was starting to get cold too."

[Inner thoughts]

This feels weird to me, with my former manager in the car, going out to relax for a couple of hours, and he's also taking me to work. Why isn't he working at the restaurant today? I'll ask him.

[Me] “Alan, by the way, how’s your managerial position going?”

[Alan] “My dad’s not an easy man, at least not with me. After what happened with you, he immediately assigned me to be your partner at work. I’ll be training you and all that. On one level, I understand, but still, he didn’t have to pull me out of the familiar environment I had.”

[Inner thoughts]

Huh? Assigned me as his partner, interesting setup. I don’t know how to feel about this information. I don’t like it, but it’s not bad either. At least someone’s helping, showing me the ropes, but does he have enough experience for this?

[Me] “Do you have experience in the role I’ll be in?”

[Alan] “Yeah, before the restaurant, I was helping my dad. We just moved here, and the office was already here. I used to do data entry at home. It’s not difficult, you’ll get the hang of it in a few days.” – Hmm, so he has experience. Doesn’t he miss working at the restaurant?

[Me] “Haven’t you tried going back to the restaurant? Doesn’t the managerial position miss you?”

[Alan] “I miss it, it would be nice if I could convince my dad. But he said I’m needed here, so that’s what I’m doing.” – I’m glad he has such a good relationship with his dad; I haven’t had that for long... I still don’t know what that accident was that happened with him. Amadeus said he saved him, I’m curious how...

...

[Alan] “We’ll get there slowly, the traffic is heavy, even though it’s so hot...” – Finally...

[Inner thoughts]

It feels weird to be going out with someone else, I’ve never done this before. I was always with Mom. Now that I think about it, I never had any friends. Am I really this reclusive?

I don’t have any relatives, if Amadeus didn’t help, I wouldn’t have anyone to rely on.

...

/ We get out of the car after Alan parks /

[Alan] “Look, Noémi!” – Huh?

[Inner thoughts]

There’s so much here, but even more food trucks.
Langos, gyros, ice cream trucks.

There’s even a cocktail truck, I’ve never seen one of those before.

[Alan] “Where do you want to start, Noémi?” – I think I’d like to start with food.

[Me] “I think we could eat something, I haven’t eaten anything today.”

[Alan] “Okay, what do you want?” – This is what I was afraid of, him asking.

[Me] “You choose, Alan!”

[Alan] “I think I’ll have a gyro.”

[Me] “That works for me too.” – I haven’t had gyros in a while.

/ We sit down at the gyro stand /

[Inner thoughts]

There are a lot of kids here, but I don’t see any parents, is this a kindergarten group?

/ Alan reaches his hand out to me /

[Alan] “Watch out!” – Huh?

/ Something hits me in the head /

[Me] “Ouch!” – I got hit in the head with a beach ball...

[Alan] “Are you okay?” – Well, what does he think, it’s just a beach ball.

[Me] “Yeah, it’s not that hard of a ball.” – Lucky it wasn’t a football.

[Little girl’s voice] “Sorry!” – This little girl’s voice sounds so familiar. Maybe it’s the one I saw in the park. Luckily, she’s fine, no one touched her. I just hope her parents have made up.

[Me] “It’s okay...”

...

[Inner thoughts]

We’ve gotten our food, and we haven’t spoken for a good five minutes. I’ll ask if he has any hobbies.

[Me] “Alan, do you have any hobbies? Something you do regularly?”

[Alan] “Yeah, I surf in the summer, in France.” – I never would’ve guessed that he had that kind of hobby.

[Alan] “What about you?” – I didn’t expect him to ask back. I don’t have anything, really.

[Me] “Not really, I never had the chance to find out what I’d be good at...”

[Alan] “If you had the chance in the future, would you make time to figure out what you’re good at?” – Interesting question...

[Me] “Honestly, right now, I don’t know when I’ll have the chance, or if I’ll even have the money to try things out.”

[Alan] “Well, if you get the chance after high school, what would you want to pursue?”

[Me] “Alan, right now I don’t even know what’s happening tomorrow or after, please spare me from these questions...”

[Alan] “Sorry, Noémi, I didn’t mean to.”

[Inner thoughts]

So far, nature hasn’t really helped me forget the things at home. This market isn’t much either, the food’s good, but it doesn’t have that fair vibe. At least I’m

slowly going to work; Alan's going to train me, and then I'll rest for a bit.

...

/ Alan stands up /

[Alan] “Noémi, it's almost 4:30. I think we should leave earlier. I'm not sure how the roads are closed, they shouldn't be anymore, but you can never be sure.” – Finally, I was starting to get bored.

[Me] “Okay...”

...

[Alan] “Huh, the roads aren't closed, we'll be there soon. I'm going to step out for a few minutes. You can head into the office, you'll be alone. Check the computer, create your own profile, and if you can't figure it out, wait for me.” – He wants to leave me alone, and I have no idea what's going on.

[Me] “I'll wait for you to show me everything. I won't touch anything work-related until you come in and show me how it works. I don't want to mess anything

up since I don't know anything about this." – At least he assumed I'm not an idiot.

[Alan] "Okay..."

...

[Alan] "Huh, the roads aren't closed, we'll be there soon. I'll go away for a few minutes, meanwhile you can go into the office, you'll be alone, check the computer, create your own profile, if it doesn't work out, just wait." – He wants to leave me alone, and I don't even know what's going on.

[Me] "I'll wait for you with everything, I won't touch anything work-related until you come in and show me how things work. I don't want to mess anything up because I don't understand any of this." – At least he assumed I'm not a complete idiot about this.

[Alan] "Okay..."

...

[Inner thoughts]

We'll arrive in a few minutes, but I feel some kind of anger inside me, I don't know who or what it's directed at, I'm just irritated and tense. I'll have to calm down because if people see me like this, I won't last long at this job.

[Alan] "Here we are, I'll park, then go in. From the reception, go right, then take the first left on the next hallway. Then look for door 214, our names will be on it. My dad arranged for us to have a separate office." – A separate office... I don't want to work with him after training. For now, I'll let it go, maybe later...

[Me] "Okay, so right, left, door 214, right?"

[Alan] "Yep, I'll join you in about ten minutes!"

/ I get out of the car /

[Inner thoughts]

He drove off quickly, must be in a hurry, but then why didn't he say where? Whatever, I'll just go into the office and wait for him to come back.

...

[Jess] "Hi, Noémi!" – Huh? Jess...

[Me] "Hi, Jess!" – I should've guessed she'd be here. She is the receptionist, after all...

[Jess] "First day?"

[Me] "Yes, the first." – I doubt she didn't know.

[Jess] "Need help finding your office? By the way, where's Alan?" – Alan, oh, you know, somewhere around.

[Me] "He said he'll be here in 10 minutes, he has some business. At least I hope he'll be here in 10 minutes..."

[Jess] "Ah, okay, so do you know where the office is?"

[Me] "Yeah, I'll go, I'll unpack."

[Jess] "See you later then!"

[Me] "Yeah!"

[Inner thoughts]

I kinda get Jess' approach, we work together, but I'm too tense, I don't want her to take the brunt of it, so I need to calm down. I don't even have a real reason to be so guarded and snappy with her. Honestly, this just isn't my day...

So, which way was it again? Here's a left... Okay, now a right. Is this the way? No, I'm an idiot, I went left first instead of right...

...

[Inner thoughts]

Finally, here it is, Koltz Noémi and Alan. Interesting, why isn't Alan's last name on the door? Whatever, I'll go in, unpack, and whatever happens, happens.

/ I open the office door /

[Inner thoughts]

Wow, a glass wall overlooking the street and the nearby playground. I hope only we can see out, and no one can see in. On the left, there are two desks facing each other. Looking around, the place is pretty big. First, I'll unpack at the more appealing desk, this one right by the wall. Nothing can sneak up on me from behind, hehe. There's also a small kitchen with a microwave and fridge, a separate bathroom, and another room off the kitchen—a small lounge, I think. With a TV, couch, and a small table. I'll go back to my desk...

/ I sit at the chair by my desk /

[Inner thoughts]

The monitor is pretty big for just handling data, at least I think that's all I'll be doing. The desk has plenty of space, the monitor, mouse, and keyboard barely take up any room. There's also an extension cord I can put on the desk so I can use my phone while it

charges. I like the office, now I just have to wait for Alan.

...

[Inner thoughts]

I've been here for twenty minutes already, it took me five minutes just to find the office. He should be here by now. I'll turn on the computer, at least it'll be booted up by the time he comes in. Do I press this button? Whatever, worst case, I break it...

/ I turn on the computer /

Okay, that was it, it's on. I'll leave it like this.

...

[Inner thoughts]

He's an hour late, I haven't done anything yet, and it's almost 6:30.

I'll call him... It rings, but he doesn't pick up.

/ Alan answers /

[Alan] "Noémi, I'll be there in a few minutes, sorry, this took longer than I expected..." – He answered, his voice is shaky, and he's whispering...

[Me] "What happened? Your voice is trembling, and you're whispering..."

[Alan] "I can't explain, I'll be there soon..." – What the hell could be so important?

[Me] "Alan, please hurry..."

/ Alan hangs up /

[Inner thoughts]

He hung up. Great, I'm here doing nothing. My workday is almost over. I'll plug in my phone, in case something happens and I need to answer.

...

[Inner thoughts]

It's 7:30, no calls, Alan is still nowhere to be seen.

/ Someone knocks on the door /

[Me] "Come in!" – I guess that's how I should respond.

/ Jess enters /

[Jess] "Noémi, Amadeus sent word for you to go home. Tomorrow morning, they'll pick you up early by car. You'll come back here, there's an important meeting. You're one of the main participants." – Why did he send word? Why didn't he call?

[Me] "Alright, I'll go, but what's all this about?"

[Jess] "Amadeus and Alan are involved in a case. Amadeus said the person they were investigating was

killed, but that's all I know—why or how, I don't. We'll find out tomorrow." – What? So that's why Alan didn't come in, but then why didn't he say he'd be gone for hours? And someone was killed? I'm curious about the whole thing.

[Me] "Okay, then tomorrow. Do you know around what time they'll come?"

[Jess] "Unfortunately no, but I know the meeting starts at 11."

[Me] "Alright, bye!"

...

[Inner thoughts]

The bus left ten minutes ago, the next one comes in an hour. I could walk home in that time. Walking home in the dark, from here... Ugh. I don't feel safe. Maybe I should wait, or go back to the office and wait there.

I'll go back to the office until a bus comes.

...

/ I try to open the office building door /

[Inner thoughts]

Great, the door's locked... Now what? Fine, I'll start walking. I'm so done. It's gotten a lot colder compared to this morning when I was practically baking...

I hope I don't run into any idiots on the way.

...

[Inner thoughts]

Finally, home. I'm completely frozen by the time I got here. A warm shower is what I need now. And I need to lie down, I'm exhausted, though I don't know why. I hope I'll be awake by the time Amadeus and the others come...

...

/ My phone rings /

[Me] "Ugh..."

[Inner thoughts]

It's 4 in the morning... It's Alan, I'll answer. I barely slept three hours...

[Me] "Yes?"

[Alan] "Noémi, we're here." – No kidding...

[Me] "Okay, I'll need ten minutes to get ready."

[Alan] "Alright, we'll be waiting in the car. There's a little guest here too..." – A little guest? A dog or something?

[Me] "Okay, I'll be down in ten. Same car?"

[Alan] "Yes, see you then."

[Inner thoughts]

He sounded relieved when he hung up. Huh?

/ I hear a phone ringing, but it's not mine /

[Inner thoughts]

Mom's old phone is ringing—a button Nokia. I thought it was dead. I don't recognize the number, I'll answer...

[Me] "Hello, you've reached my mother.
Unfortunately, she passed away a few weeks ago. I don't—"

[Man's voice] "Don't care, I need to speak to her husband. Who are you?" – What?

[Me] "I'm her daughter, but my father has been dead for years." – I don't get it...

[Man's voice] "I see, then sorry for waking you. Have a good rest."

[Inner thoughts]

He hung up fast. He was looking for my dad, but I don't get why, or how he didn't know he was dead—it's been years. Whatever, I'll go down. I've already run out of my ten minutes.

...

/ I go down to the front of the house and look into the car /

[Inner thoughts]

Here's the car, I'll get in. There are three people inside...

/ I get in the car, looking directly at the stranger /

[Me] "Hi, sorry I'm late—ooh" – Why is the little girl from the park here...

[Amadeus] "What's wrong, Noémi?"

[Me] "Amadeus, I know this girl..." – She's asleep, but her face shows she's been crying a lot. Her whole face is red. She's twitching, poor thing...

[Amadeus] "Seriously? From where? Does she know you?" – Why is this so important right now?

[Me] "Yeah, I saw her once in the park after a walk. Her parents were arguing badly. And once I saw her at the fair when I went with Alan—she accidentally hit me in the head with a beach ball. But I don't know if she remembers me."

[Amadeus] "Okay, good-good-good. Let's go, stay quiet, don't wake her unless we have to."

[Me] "Alright."

[Inner thoughts]

This is really unexpected. I don't get why she's here. Maybe something happened with her parents, maybe the constant fights ended badly.

...

/ Amadeus parks /

[Amadeus] "Noémi, Alan, take the girl to your office. Lay her on the couch, then send Jess in to watch her."

[Alan] "Got it, Dad. Noémi, please carry her in." – I've never held a kid in my life...

[Me] "Okay." – I'll figure it out, worst case, she wakes up.

/ I pick up the girl /

[Inner thoughts]

I didn't think it'd be this easy. Shouldn't it be harder? I don't know how old she is, just guessing—maybe ten?

/ We're in the hallway /

[Alan] "Noémi, take her into the room, I'll get Jess."

[Me] "Okay."

/ I look at the girl /

[Inner thoughts]

She's so calm in my arms, not twitching anymore. Her neck looks like she was choked... Poor kid. We're almost there, then I'll put her on the couch.

Finally, I manage to open the door... I lay her down gently, no need to cover her—it's warm enough here.

[Jess] "Hi, Noémi..." – Jess is here.

[Me] "Hi, can you watch her?"

[Jess] "Yeah, you go to Amadeus' office, they're waiting."

[Me] "Okay, if anything happens, let us know. I don't know what to say to her when she wakes up."

[Jess] "Alan said to come get you guys when she wakes up. Do you know her name?" – I don't even know her name, poor thing.

[Me] "No, sorry, but I'll go. See you later."

[Inner thoughts]

Considering how little I slept, I woke up pretty well. I'll go into Amadeus' office. I don't understand anything, I hope they explain. And why did I have to be part of this?

/ Hesitantly, I knock on the door /

[Amadeus] "Come in, Noémi, no need to knock..."

[Me] "Can you explain what's going on? I'm a little tense because I don't get any of this. Like why Alan was gone for hours yesterday instead of ten minutes, so I couldn't learn what I was supposed to. I get it was an investigation, but why couldn't you say? Then I wouldn't have waited for hours, doing nothing." – Maybe I should've phrased that nicer, surprising what came out of me...

[Amadeus] "You're right to be upset, but we've seemingly closed a key point in the case. Want some coffee?" – Coffee would be nice...

[Me] "Yes, same as the day before yesterday."

/ Amadeus walks back, starts the coffee, then returns
/

[Amadeus] "Alright, so while that's brewing... I asked Alan to come help me quickly with a case. Didn't tell him what, just said it'd take ten minutes max. What happened, in short: the guy we were investigating—the girl's father—pulled a gun on us in the street. I had to shoot him. Then when we went into the apartment where the investigation started, we tried to inform the mother, but she was choking her daughter on the floor. We tried to pull her off, but she pulled a knife from her pocket, almost cut me. Alan shot her in the hand. I rushed to the girl—she wasn't breathing. We performed CPR, she started breathing again. Backup arrived, arrested the woman. The paramedics said we should take the girl with us for now, her condition is stable thanks to us. Now we're here. The girl hasn't spoken to us, she fell asleep in the car. She'll stay with us until the police contact us. Probably just a day at most." – Huh, interesting. Why would her own mother choke her? I don't get it. My mom never laid a hand on me, even when she yelled, she'd apologize. I don't know what could drive someone to do that... But it still doesn't explain why I'm here.

[Me] "That's... intense. Her own mother attacked her. The father tried to shoot you. But I still don't get why I'm here."

/ Amadeus stands and goes to get my coffee /

[Amadeus] "Here's your coffee."

[Me] "Thanks."

[Amadeus] "Alan, why is Noémi here again?" – So it's because of him?

[Alan] "Noémi, I knew you recognized the girl when you looked at her at the fair, when she apologized. I thought maybe you were related, but as we found out in the car, you'd just seen her once in the park." – That's a wild assumption. If she were family, I'd have talked to her. Dumb move.

[Me] "That was a dumb decision. I don't know her well enough to have ever spoken to her."

[Alan] "You're completely right..." – At least he admits it.

[Amadeus] "Noémi can still try talking to her, Alan. So it's good she's here." – That's true, I guess.

[Me] "So we wait until she wakes up?"

[Amadeus] "Yes, Noémi."

...

/ Jess and the girl enter the office /

[Jess] "Hi, everyone!"

[Amadeus] "Hi, Jess!" – Amadeus sounds so cheerful, I never noticed before, haha.

[Inner thoughts]

Should I ask her name? I'll ask.

/ I kneel down to the girl /

[Me] "Hi, we've met before, remember? At the fair."

[Girl] "Yeah..." – Her voice is so thin, like she's about to cry.

[Me] "I'm Noémi, what's your name?"

[Girl] "Zora..." – Cute name.

[Me] "Zora, that's a pretty name!" – Didn't think it'd be this easy.

/ Amadeus comes over and kneels beside me /

[Amadeus] "Hi, Zora, I'm Amadeus. Sorry I didn't introduce myself earlier. Are you feeling okay? Do you need anything?"

[Zora] "I'm hungry... and my throat hurts..." – Probably from the choking.

/ Amadeus stands /

[Amadeus] "Jess, can you grab something from the lounge? I don't have anything here." – There's a lounge?

[Jess] "Sure, I'll find something for her. The store will open in a few hours, then I can get you anything, Zora, just say the word!" – Sweet of Jess to offer.

[Amadeus] "Alan, take her to your office. Noémi and I will stay to talk. Jess, you go with them!" – Wonder what he wants...

...

/ Amadeus sits back down, gestures for me to sit /

[Amadeus] "So, Noémi. The girl recognizes you, which is good—she might trust you more. She might know some info her parents didn't share, stuff our hidden cameras and mics couldn't pick up. We need to know exactly what caused the conflict between her parents. There's a video and audio recording that hasn't come in yet or been processed. When it does, I need you to watch it, sort it into the 'Important' folder with the date, time, and an exclamation mark. Then later, you'll talk to her, if Zora shares anything." – I don't get why I have to watch the video. Just sending it should be enough... And why do I have to interrogate this poor girl about fresh trauma?

[Me] "Amadeus, I don't want to grill her about what just happened..."

[Amadeus] "Not now, in a few days or weeks. Take her somewhere, like for ice cream, just as an example.

Ask a few questions then, or she might open up on her own." – I doubt she'll talk to me at all. She has no reason to trust me. But Amadeus will see that. I don't care.

[Me] "Fine, Amadeus. When the audio and video come in, I'll check them and send them to you. But I still don't know how to use the computer."

[Amadeus] "Right, forgot. I'll let you know when they're ready. Alan will help at first, but you'll have to handle sending them—it's simple." – Ugh, whatever, not arguing.

[Me] "Then I'll head back home. I'll be here Thursday, same time—5 PM." – Thank goodness I'm only here Tuesdays and Thursdays, three hours each. This whole place is a circus.

[Amadeus] "Okay, I'll ask Alan to drive you home." – Oh great, just who I need. My bus is leaving now.

[Me] "The bus is here, thanks, but I'll manage on my own."

[Amadeus] "Alright, see you tomorrow. Bye!"

[Me] "Bye!"

...

[Inner thoughts]

This is a joke. I don't get any of it. I feel bad for the girl, but what am I supposed to do with her? Mom never put me in situations like this. I miss her. The bus is here, I'll go home and sleep. I'm exhausted.

Chapter Five

Now I Understand



[Inner thoughts]

I finally managed to rest a bit by the afternoon. The barrage of stimuli I faced wasn't pleasant—I was thrown into situations I'd never experienced before. Zora... poor thing, they only brought her in because of the investigation's progress, and at least they're treating her kindly. I'll go talk to her today. Maybe she'll open up a little, if she feels like it. After all, I'm the one from the office she knows best. I don't feel like waiting around with her—I don't know how long I'll stay at this job, with all the nonsense happening. I get that Amadeus wants to help, but by now, I feel like just a puppet to him. Sure, the light workload is nice, but... eh, I don't even know. I should call Amadeus and let him know I'm leaving with Zora. But where should we go? The park? Maybe it's best to just do something at my place. I'll figure it out. Alright, calling now.

/ I call Amadeus /

[Me] "Hi, Amadeus. I want to talk to Zora today. We won't go anywhere. We'll do something at my place—I'll see what later."

[Amadeus] "Hey, Noémi. Slow down, you're rushing your words. So you want to be alone with Zora, to talk. At your apartment?" —I don't think I was rushing at all...

[Me] "Yes."

[Amadeus] "Then Alan will bring her within about thirty minutes. Try to gently get information out of her later, about her parents." —I'll try, but ah, I don't know why this is so important.

[Me] "Alright, I'll try, but no promises..."

[Amadeus] "Fine, they'll be there in about half an hour." —I'll prep the place until then—put Mom's things away, my private stuff. She shouldn't see pictures of my mother; I don't feel like talking about that.

[Me] "Okay, bye then!"

[Amadeus] "Bye."

/ Amadeus very noticeably brushed me off /

[Inner thoughts]

He practically slammed the phone down. He said goodbye, but it felt like he was mad at me. Maybe I'm overthinking things.

...

/ Knocking at the front door. Alan shouts inside /

[Alan] "Noémi, we're here..." —You didn't have to yell...

[Me] "Coming, coming..."

/ I open the door. Alan seems tense /

[Me] "Hi!"

[Alan] "Hey, I'll leave Zora here. Let me know when to pick her up." —What's his problem?

[Me] "Okay, come in, Zora."

[Alan] "Yeah, hi." —Alan's being really rude right now...

[Me] "Hi..."

/ Alan slams the door shut /

[Inner thoughts]

He slammed my door. Hah, I want to be annoyed, but somehow I can't. Maybe it's because of Zora...

/ I take Zora's bag from her /

[Me] "Hi, Zora!"

[Zora] "Hi..."

[Me] "You remember me, right? I'm Noémi."

[Zora] "Yeah... You're not mad at me?" —What did they do to her at the office?!

[Me] "No, why would I be? Who's mad at you?"

[Zora] "The man who brought me... he was really angry. I think it was at me..." —I'll deal with Alan later.

[Me] "Alan was probably mad at me, or someone else. Not you." —I really hope so.

[Zora] "Everyone's been weird with me today. I don't know where Mom and Dad are. I haven't seen Dad since last night when he went out with his friends. And Mom got really angry for some reason, started speaking another language—Russian—and smashing things. She pulled out a knife, and then I woke up on the floor with paramedics around me. Do you think Mom's in the hospital?"

[Inner thoughts]

Poor kid... She doesn't know what happened to her. I don't want to tell her, but maybe I should. Someone needs to handle this realistically, and she seems smart—I hope she'll understand. The knife thing... I'm surprised she doesn't remember being strangled. And

her mom was Russian? I don't get that either. I'll try to figure it out later...

[Me] "I know what happened, but I'll tell you later. For now, let's do something. Is there anything you like doing indoors?"

[Zora] "Umm... I like drawing." —I don't have anything for that here...

[Me] "Sorry, I don't have stuff for that. Something else?"

[Zora] "I like watching TV." —At least my TV still works.

[Me] "Okay, what do you want to watch? Any ideas?"

[Zora] "You pick. I always watched whatever Mom put on." —That's what I was afraid of...

[Me] "Let's watch a cartoon. I'll put on a kids' channel. Sit down, I'll get popcorn. Do you like it?"

[Zora] "Yeah." —At least I have that. Haven't been to the store in over a week.

/ I turn on the TV, find a kids' channel, and head to the kitchen to make popcorn /

[Inner thoughts]

Interesting kid. Doesn't ask many questions, gets straight to the point. Adapts to situations—didn't throw a fit about not drawing, just picked something else. I'll give her the popcorn, then talk to her. Maybe I can get closer while she's watching TV and eating. She seems honest, doesn't overthink what she says. I just need to understand her. With Mom, I could always talk through my problems. Hope it'll be the same with her.

/ I bring Zora the popcorn /

[Me] "Here you go, Zora!"

[Zora] "It's hot..." —Is she cold? It's almost the end of summer—nights are getting chilly.

[Me] "Are you cold?"

[Zora] "A little."

/ I go look for a blanket /

[Me] "I'll get blankets!"

[Inner thoughts]

Where did I put my old blankets? Maybe in Mom's room, in her closet. I don't want to dig through her things...

But the thinner ones should be there. Come on, Noémi, you've got this. Just open it, peek at the bottom—aha! Here they are. Whew.

/ I bring out the blankets /

[Me] "Which one do you want, Zora? Pink or black?"
—Her choice might say a lot.

[Zora] "The pink one." —Thank goodness.

/ I drape the pink blanket over her /

[Me] "There, better?"

[Zora] "Yeah." —Glad to hear it.

[Me] "Are you liking the show so far?"

[Zora] "Yeah. And I can actually hear the TV properly."

/ I sit on the chair next to the couch /

[Me] "What do you mean?"

[Zora] "At home, I could never hear the TV when Mom turned it on because they were always fighting." —I'll ask what about.

[Me] "Can you tell me what they fought about?"

[Zora] "Dad always said Mom cheated and I wasn't his daughter. Mom would bring up stuff Dad did in the past—how he wasn't there when I was born, never helped her. I've memorized it all by now. I don't really

want to talk about it, if that's okay. It just makes me upset..." —Poor kid... Hearing that all the time, never stepping aside to talk privately. Instead, they traumatized their own daughter. Disgusting.

[Me] "Of course, no problem!"

[Inner thoughts]

She's enjoying the TV—finally smiling, even giggling sometimes.

[Zora] "Noémi, can you come sit with me? I'm alone on the couch, and you're over there thinking really hard..." —Huh? Should I go?

/ I stand and sit next to her /

[Me] "Sure..."

[Zora] "Want to share my blanket?" —Why's she suddenly so empathetic?

[Me] "Sure!"

/ Zora covers me with her blanket /

[Zora] "There!"

[Inner thoughts]

I remember doing this with Mom—bundled up, watching TV. Before they called to say Dad had died...

Ugh, this hurts. I don't want to start shaking and freak her out.

/ Zora looks at me /

[Zora] "Are you okay?" —Did she notice?

[Me] "Yeah, it's just... this feels a little weird for me."

[Zora] "What's wrong? Don't you want to be next to me?"

/ I try to pull myself together /

[Me] "No, no, it's nice. It's just... I used to do this with my mom. She... died a few weeks ago. This just reminds me of her, really strongly. If that makes sense, Zora." —If she understands this, I swear she's smarter than I was at her age.

[Zora] "Yeah, I get it..." —I hope she's not just saying that.

...

[Zora] "Noémi, we've been here watching TV for a while. Will you tell me what happened to Mom and

Dad?" —I almost dozed off, haha. She's right—I did promise.

[Me] "Well, I don't know everything. But I'll tell you what I do know. You're smart—I think you'll understand."

[Zora] "If you say so..."

[Me] "So... your dad. The private investigators were after him. He tried to kill them, and they had to... neutralize him. I don't know where he is, but chances are he's... not alive." —I didn't mean to phrase it so harshly. I can't believe I'm saying this to a kid.

[Zora] "Hm." —That's her reaction?

[Me] "And your mom... she tried to strangle you. She succeeded, which is why you don't remember much. Paramedics helped you. The police took her away—I don't know where she is now. But she's definitely alive." —Again, too blunt.

[Zora] "Thanks for telling me. I don't miss them. They were too much. I'm... relieved." —I believe her, but her calmness is unsettling.

[Me] "No problem. You don't miss them?"

[Zora] "I do, but... all the stupid fights, the nonsense—it's over now." —How old is this girl?

[Me] "How old are you, if you don't mind me asking?"

[Zora] "Twelve. My birthday was two days ago. Didn't get anything..." —Wow, she seemed younger.

[Me] "You're mature for your age. Do you go to school?"

[Zora] "No. Mom took me out because Dad spread rumors that she was a... streetwalker. I don't know exactly what that means, but I can guess. Couldn't go to another school—this was the only free one around." —Hm. If Mom felt humiliated by the rumors, there might be some truth to them.

[Zora] "I like being with you, Noémi..." —She said it so sweetly, heh.

[Me] "I like being with you too, Zora."

...

/ My phone rings. I fell asleep with Zora /

[Inner thoughts]

Ugh, phone's ringing. Morning already. It's Amadeus...

[Me] "Yeah?"

[Amadeus] "Noémi, is Zora still with you?"

[Me] "Yeah, she's here, sleeping. Why? Something wrong?"

[Amadeus] "No, just checking. The police said they can't place her in an orphanage yet, and no families are taking her. Her relatives are either in prison or dead. She can't stay at the office. Any ideas where we could put her? Legally, I mean." —Legally? What's that supposed to mean?

[Me] „What do you mean by legal?"

[Amadeus] „The person taking care of them must be over 18, there needs to be at least one person in the household, at least one of the caregivers must be employed, and they cannot have a criminal record." – These are the requirements I meet, by the way. I think he's hinting at something, just wants me to say it out loud.

[Me] „Amadeus, if you're referring to me, the answer is yes, you can trust me with it."

[Amadeus] „Great, then I'll let you know. We're talking a few weeks, maybe a few months, then they'll be placed with a family."

[Me] „Alright, I'll bring them in to work with me today."

[Amadeus] „Okay, we’ll be waiting! Jess will take over Zora once she’s done talking with Alan.”

[Me] „Alright, I’m off to make us some breakfast, bye!” – I hope she likes toast, I’ve been eating that for almost two weeks now.

[Amadeus] „Bye!”

[Inner thoughts]

I’ll let Zora sleep a little longer. I’m making some toast and tea. I hope she likes this kind of tea, the funny thing is, I don’t even know what kind it is. I’m trying it for the first time.

/ Heading to the kitchen /

...

/ Going back to the living room with Zora /

[Me] „Good morning, Zora!”

/ Zora stretches /

[Zora] „Noémi... Good morning.”

[Me] „I made some toast and tea, eat. Afterward, we’re going to the office. Even though I’m supposed to go by 5 p.m., I need to go through a lot of things. Also, I need to talk to Alan.”

[Zora] „Thank you so much...”

[Me] „Let me know if you need anything else.”

[Zora] „Do you have any medicine?” – What kind of medicine is she talking about?

[Me] „What does this medicine do?”

[Zora] „It calms me down...” – I need to find out what she means.

[Me] „Do you remember the name, or what was written on the box? Or what does the box look like?”

[Zora] „It was blue and white. I took one every morning, Mom said that if I don’t take it every day, I’ll end up killing myself.” – I have no idea what she’s referring to.

[Me] „I don’t think we have any of that kind of medicine here, but we’ll figure it out at the office. Okay?”

[Zora] „Okay...” – I can see she’s scared...

[Me] „Don’t worry, Zora, you’re not going to hurt yourself, there’s no reason to. And I’m here with you.”

[Zora] „Okay...” – Poor thing.

„Come here, Zora” – She really needs a hug right now... That medicine must be really important to her.

/ I hug Zora, she starts to smile /

...

[Zora] „Thanks so much for breakfast, Noémi.”

[Me] „You’re welcome. I’m going to start getting ready, since you only have one outfit right now, how about we stop by the mall after the office?” – It just hit me that she doesn’t have any clothes or belongings of her own, and her birthday was recently too.

[Zora] „Sounds good!”

[Me] „After I shower, you can go to the bathroom, wash up, and we’ll tidy your hair a little!”

[Zora] „Okay!”

...

[Inner thoughts]

We’re ready, I can’t believe it, now I understand what Mom meant when she said, “It takes forever to get ready with you.” ” I’ll brush her hair a few more times, and then we’ll head out.”

/ I start brushing Zora’s hair /

[Zora] „Noémi...” – Am I pulling too hard?

[Me] „What’s wrong, too hard?”

[Zora] „Uh-huh...”

[Me] „Sorry, Zora.”

[Zora] „No problem, haha.”

...

/ We get on the bus /

[Me] „Zora, how often do you take the bus?”

[Zora] „Almost never, Mom wouldn’t let me show it to anyone, at least, when they argued, I heard Mom say it to Dad.” – Her parents were jerks...

[Me] „I see, but I don’t get why your mom hid it. I don’t think there was any reason for that.”

[Zora] „I don’t get it either, I never had any friends...” – Poor thing...

[Me] „If you want, Zora, I’ll be your friend!”

[Zora] „Really?” – Haha, her eyes lit up.

[Me] „Yes, Zora, I will be.”

/ Zora starts smiling /

[Inner thoughts]

It’s nice to see her smile. This means a lot to her.

...

[Me] „Looks like you enjoyed the bus ride, Zora.”

[Zora] „Yes!” – If I had a car, getting around would be so much easier...

[Inner thoughts]

Once I get to the office, I need to find Alan, I don't know what's going on with him. He was acting so distant yesterday. Before that, I'll pass Zora to Jess.

...

/ We enter the office building, heading to the reception /

[Me] „Hi, Jess! I need to talk to Alan in the office.”

[Jess] „Hi! Sure, Noémi. Zora, do you want something to eat? I'm ordering breakfast now!”

[Zora] „I already had breakfast, but I like eating!” – I was hoping she'd mention the breakfast I made for her.

[Jess] „Haha, alright, come and see what we have.”

[Inner thoughts]

Okay, the 214 office, almost went the wrong way again like last time, hope Alan's here. I'll knock, but it's my

office too, so I don't really need to. Oh, here he is. I can see his stuff laid out.

[Me] „Alan, I'm here.”

[Alan] „Ah, Noémi, hi... I guess you heard the phone call.” – Oh no, I blocked my ears haha.

[Me] „Yes, why can't you work with me?”

[Alan] „I wasn't thinking about you.”

[Me] „Then who?”

[Alan] „Never mind, let's drop it, come on, I'll show you how to do it.”

[Inner thoughts]

If he wasn't thinking about me, who was he thinking about? I think he's just lying to avoid conflict. At least they're finally telling me what I need to do.

/ He sits in my chair while I stand, waiting for what he says /

[Alan] „So, Noémi, here's the machine. It's on, so just press the power button here. Then log in with your account, your username and password should have been sent to you via email, check that. After you log

in, open the app called 'AMNYI', look into the camera and it will log you into the system. Once you're in, click on this folder, check what's inside, take notes in the 'Notes' window next to it, then press 'ctrl + a' on the keyboard, and drag everything into here. Once you're done, just click the big green upload button and you're done, once you've confirmed it. Clear?"

[Inner thoughts]

Wow, he explained it really quickly and clearly. I got it, and it helps that he showed me while talking, I'll remember it visually.

[Me] „Yes, I got it! Thanks, Alan.”

/ Alan's phone starts ringing /

[Alan] „I'll step out, I need to take this. In the meantime, log in and open the app.”

[Me] „Okay!”

[Inner thoughts]

I log in, check my email for the password. Huh, my name is different, KtzN is my name, password KtzPswd\$123, very unique... Okay, it worked, here's 'AMNYI', let's log in here too.

/ Alan opens the door, leaning back into the office /

[Alan] „Noémi, I have to go, if you have any questions, call me.” – Again, what could be so important?

[Me] „Okay, I'll manage, thanks!”

[Inner thoughts]

Now, I'll log in here too, where's the camera on this thing? Oh, okay, found it, it's well hidden, a pull-out. There's a folder called 'Zora Kovacs', I didn't even ask her last name... I'll quickly check what's in it, take some notes, and move it to the 'Important' folder, renamed with an exclamation mark like Amadeus asked. Hope there's nothing too tough in here. I'll start the recording...

/ I started the recording /

[Zora] "Mom, I'm hungry, is there any food at home?"

[Woman's voice] "No, Zora, I'll order something soon."

[Zora] "Okay... is dad on the phone?"

[Woman's voice] "Yes, I hope he's not doing something stupid."

[Zora] "You always treat dad like this..."

[Woman's voice] "Shut up, Zora, you don't understand this."

[Zora] "But I..."

[Woman's voice] "Zora, go to your room. I'll come in a bit and tell you why you need to keep your mouth shut. Go, I'm going to talk to your dad." – This microphone is in Zora's room.

/ I hear Zora sighing as she lays down on her bed /

[Woman's voice] "Gergő, where the hell are you going with that damn gun on your side again?" – Can I hear what they're saying in Zora's room so clearly?

[Gergő] "Shut up, Amanda. Don't talk to me with your whore mouth, I'm not interested in you."

[Amanda] "Your whore mouth... You know what, Gergő, rot in hell with all your mafia crap, get lost and die in the street with your minions."

[Amanda] "I'm leaving, I'm never coming back again."
– She slammed the door shut.

"Я во всем виноват, ты не знаешь, через что мне придется пройти, пока ты топчешь мое сердце, ты последний никто!" – What?

/ Someone runs past the door, probably her mother /

[Amanda] "ZORA, YOU'RE THE REASON FOR EVERYTHING, IF YOU HADN'T..." – She stormed into the room.

/ I hear her pick Zora up /

[Zora] "MOM, NO, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?"

[Amanda] "I'LL KILL YOU, I'LL DESTROY YOU,
BECAUSE OF YOU I COULDN'T BE WHAT I WAS
SUPPOSED TO BE!" – What is she talking about?

/ Zora is choking /

[Zora] "Mom..." – Did she suffocate her here?

/ Suddenly, the front door opens /

[Amadeus] "Alan, did you hear that?" – Alan and the
others just came into the house.

[Alan] "They're here, Dad."

[Amadeus] "GET OFF THE GIRL, DROP THE KNIFE,
DROP IT, ALAN!"

/ I hear a gunshot /

[Amadeus] "Alright Alan, thanks, check on the little
girl, I'll call for backup. When you're done, turn off the
microphones, they can't store more than an hour."

[Alan] "She's not breathing, I'm going to revive her..."

[Inner thoughts]

This is where the recording ends.

Well, this really shouldn't have happened right now.
I'll write something, process what happened, and
then send it to Amadeus.

...

[Inner thoughts]

Okay, that's done.

/ The door to my office opens /

[Jess] "Noémi!" – It's Jess, she just walked in.

[Me] "Yes, Jess?"

[Jess] "I should head out, can I bring Zora with me now?" – I'm going shopping with her soon anyway, time flew by while I was taking notes.

[Me] "Yes, she can come!"

[Zora] "Hi, Jess! Thanks for the food!" – I'm glad Jess is so kind to Zora.

[Me] "Thanks, Jess... So, Zora. I'll be done soon, I just need to turn off the computer and pack up, then we'll head to the mall. How does that sound?"

[Zora] "Okay, I like that!"

...

[Zora] "Um, Noémi."

[Me] "Yes, Zora?"

[Zora] "The medicine I told you about, do you know which one it could have been?" – I totally forgot about it.

[Me] "Sorry, Zora, I forgot. We'll go to the pharmacy in the mall and ask about it, okay?"

[Zora] "Okay!"

[Inner thoughts]

That medicine completely slipped my mind. I hope it's available without a prescription, because if not, I'll be in trouble. I'm curious about what medicine it was.

...

[Me] "Okay, Zora. I'm ready, let's go. The mall is just a few minutes' walk from here."

[Zora] "I'm coming!"

/ We enter the mall together /

[Inner thoughts]

I'm not sure where to start with her. Maybe we'll look for clothes, I'll get a suitcase too, a bag. And whatever else she wants. Afterward, we'll eat and check out the medicine she mentioned.

[Me] "Zora, I think we should start by looking for clothes for you, what kind do you like?" – Well, if I can go by color or style.

[Zora] "I don't know, but I like black things." – Simple clothes then, got it.

[Me] "Alright, let's look for something you'll like. We're almost there."

...

[Inner thoughts]

It was farther than I thought, it took about 15 minutes to get here. There are a few clothing stores on the first floor, we'll check them out first.

[Zora] "Noémi!" – Huh?

[Me] "Yes, Zora?"

/ Zora points to two people /

[Zora] "Those are dad's friends..." – What?

[Me] "Are you sure?"

[Zora] "Yes!"

[Inner thoughts]

I have no idea what to do now, do they know Zora?

[Me] "Do they know you?"

[Zora] "I don't know." – Great.

[Inner thoughts]

Then we'll go up to the second floor and look around there, hopefully, they'll leave by then.

[Me] "Okay Zora, let's start upstairs."

[Zora] "Okay..." – She's a bit scared, I hope those people didn't see us.

[Inner thoughts]

There are several smaller shops here too, let's start with the left side.

[Me] "Zora, come on, let's look around here."

[Zora] "I'm coming!"

...

[Me] "Do you like anything from here, Zora?"

/ Zora walks over to a rack of clothes /

[Zora] "Yeah, these here..."

[Me] "Nice summer clothes, black and white combo. Want to try them on?"

[Zora] "Yeah..." – She seems so down right now... Maybe it's because of her dad's "friends"?

[Me] "Zora, are you feeling bad because of your dad's friends?"

[Zora] "Yeah..." – I could tell.

[Me] "If you want, we can leave, we can come back another time."

[Zora] "I'll look at these first, haha, then we can go?"

[Me] "Sure! Try them on, if they're good, we'll take them!"

...

[Me] "Do they look good on you, Zora?"

[Zora] "Yeah, they're all good!" – I'm glad.

[Me] "Haha, alright, go change back and we can go."

[Zora] "Before we leave, can we check the medicine?" – I completely forgot about it again...

[Me] "Yes, let's check it!"

[Inner thoughts]

I'm happy I could help Zora, she's got clothes now, a place to be until they find her a new family... Since she's been here, I think less about her mother. I needed her now to help me get through not having her here. Now I understand why, it's not really me helping her, it's her helping me.

Chapter Six

What's All This?



[Inner thoughts]

I've already forgotten exactly which part of the mall the pharmacy is in. Maybe on the first floor, directly across from the other entrance? We'll check, worst case we'll walk around a bit. Hopefully, the people who made Zora uncomfortable are gone by now.

...

[Inner thoughts]

Hah, it was right where I thought.

[Me] "Zora, look. Here's the pharmacy. Could you tell me again what color the box of her medicine was?" — I've already forgotten.

[Zora] "Bluish-white..." —I hope it's available without a prescription or doctor's note. Though I could mention that I've recently become her guardian.

[Me] "Okay, if we can't get it for some reason, what should we do?"

/ Zora lets out a big sigh /

[Zora] "I don't know..." —That sad childlike expression again... This medicine is really important to her.

[Zora] "Come on, let's see what we can do."

[Inner thoughts]

So far, I don't see those figures Zora was afraid of.
Hopefully, they've left the area entirely.

...

[Inner thoughts]

Finally, it's our turn—we've been standing here for 15 minutes already.

[Woman's voice] "Good evening, my name is Laura!
How can I help you?"

[Me] "Good evening! This girl here is Zora. She was placed in my care just a day ago because her mother and father can't look after her right now. She mentioned a medicine she takes every morning—a bluish-white box, has a calming effect on her."

[Laura] "I see... Just a moment, I'd like to check with my supervisor. She might know exactly what it is!" —I think she knows but just wants to pass it off to her supervisor.

...

[Woman's voice] "Good evening, I'm Georgina. I heard you're looking for a bluish-white box of

medicine for the girl. Does that medicine help calm you, Zora?"

[Zora] "Yes..." —She answered so quietly, her tone distrustful.

[Georgina] "Alright, so the medicine is either Xanax or Sertraline Sandoz. Unfortunately, neither is available without a prescription. Did Zora happen to get a doctor's prescription before she was transferred to you?" —Prescription-only. I don't know if she has one right now.

[Me] "I haven't received any of Zora's paperwork yet. Her personal documents are here, but I think they're just photocopies for now."

[Georgina] "That's actually enough! We can check the system. Just give me her health insurance number."

[Me] "That's great, here it is... 282 345 679."

[Georgina] "Alright, found it... She does have an active prescription for Sertraline Sandoz in the system. It was issued two months ago, renewable for a year, with one refill per month. This is the third yearly prescription..." —She's been on a yearly-renewable prescription for three years? What has this poor girl been through?

/ Georgina takes the medicine from the drawer /

[Georgina] "No need to wait, here you go!"

[Me] "Thank you so much! So, one pill every day?"

[Georgina] "It varies. If she's been taking one a day, stick with that until a doctor says otherwise. I'd recommend seeing a doctor soon—it'd be good to know how long she should keep taking it."

[Me] "Got it, we'll get her checked out... Thank you again! Goodbye!"

[Georgina] "My pleasure! Take care!"

[Me] "Come on, Zora, let's go!"

...

[Inner thoughts]

I'm glad we got the medicine. Zora seems relieved too. We should eat something before heading home.

/ Alan calls, I pick up /

[Me] "Yes, Alan?"

[Alan] "Hey, Noémi! Where are you and Zora right now? You weren't at your place."

[Me] "We're at the mall, about to grab something to eat."

[Alan] "Head out to the parking lot in about five minutes. I'm on my way—we'll go to a restaurant. I also need to talk to you about something." —Where did this come from? I wonder what he wants to say.

[Me] "Alright, we'll be there. I'll let Zora know too!"

[Alan] "Okay, see you."

[Me] "Bye..."

[Inner thoughts]

Zora will probably be happy about this. I don't know if her parents ever took her to restaurants...

[Me] "Zora, good news. Alan's taking us to a restaurant for dinner. What do you think?"

[Zora] "A restaurant? I'd love that! When are we leaving? Where is it, which restaurant?" —Haha, her eyes lit up.

[Me] "Yeah, but I don't know exactly which one. Alan's coming to pick us up soon."

[Zora] "Okay!"

...

[Inner thoughts]

Alan's here—took a little longer than five minutes.
Luckily, it's not as cold as usual.

[Alan] "Sorry, there was a big crowd at the crosswalk I had to wait for."

[Me] "No problem. So, where are we going? Which restaurant?"

[Alan] "There's a new one called The Gathering Spot. Thought we could check it out. Zora, what do you think?" —He's speaking calmly and finally including Zora in the conversation...

[Zora] "I like it!" —Haha, she's so excited. She probably doesn't go to places like this often.

[Alan] "Haha, then let's go. It's not far."

...

[Inner thoughts]

I'm glad Alan's taking us here. This is my first time going to a restaurant since Dad died. Mom and I never managed to—she never had time... I hope it's actually a good place with a full menu. I don't know what Zora likes yet—I haven't known her long enough to figure

out what she eats. Speaking of Zora, I don't know how to categorize her. I mean, I've only known her for a day. And yet, she's already grown so close to me—I don't know how to process this feeling. As for Alan, he's suddenly become so helpful and direct. He wants to say something—I hope it's not related to their investigation...

...

[Alan] "Here we are. Looking for a parking spot—they don't have a big lot."

[Me] "Alright, Zora and I'll head in and ask for a table."

[Alan] "Sounds good!"

...

[Woman's voice] "Good evening, my name is Patricia. Welcome to The Gathering Spot—how can I assist you?" —Whoa, she startled me... We barely stepped inside, but they already knew we were coming.

[Me] "Good evening! A table for three, please. Our friend is still looking for parking."

[Patricia] "Of course, right this way."

[Inner thoughts]

This place is huge—three floors, open kitchen, aquarium, projector screens, everything well-lit...

/ Zora looks all the way up to the ceiling—the interior is very tall /

[Zora] "Whoaaa." —Seems like Zora noticed too, haha.

[Me] "Do you like it here?"

[Zora] "Yes, a lot!"

[Patricia] "Glad you like it! I'll bring your friend over when he arrives. What's his name?"

[Me] "Alan. His name's Alan."

[Patricia] "Got it! I'll bring him over as soon as he arrives!"

[Me] "Thank you so much!"

[Inner thoughts]

She was nice. Hope the rest of the staff is too... Alan's been trying to park for five minutes now—hope he didn't ditch us...

...

/ Alan enters, Patricia waves him over /

[Patricia] "Enjoy your meal, you three!"

[Alan] "Thank you! Sorry, guys, parking was a nightmare. Tried to hurry." —It's true, the place is packed, but there's still no dedicated parking.

[Me] "No worries... I was wondering why the building doesn't have its own lot. Look how many people are here."

[Alan] "Supposedly, it's still under construction. They're building a separate side road just for the parking lot—it's gonna be huge."

[Me] "Ah, got it. Zora and I really like the place. What about you?"

[Alan] "A lot. Fits tons of people while still feeling spacious."

[Man's voice] "Good evening, I'm David. I'll be your waiter tonight. Here are the menus. Can I get you something to drink while you decide?"

[Alan] "Uh, yeah. I'll have sparkling mineral water. Noémi?"

[Me] "Zora, what do you want to drink?"

[Zora] "Uhhmm..."

[David] "We have sodas: Coke, Sprite. Also, lemonades: regular, elderflower..."

[Zora] "I'll have elderflower lemonade!"

[David] "Got it. And for the lady?"

[Me] "A Sprite would be perfect."

[David] "Alright, I'll be back with your drinks shortly."

[Inner thoughts]

They have a huge selection. Zora's struggling to decide... She looks like she can't process it.

[Me] "Zora, need help?"

/ We lean our heads together /

[Zora] "Yeah..." —She sounds frustrated...

[Me] "How about this?" —Huh, why's she leaning in?

[Zora] "Noémi... I can't read..." —Oh. Oh no. Poor thing... Why didn't I think of that?

[Me] "Oh, no problem! I'll help... They have artisanal burgers with beef and veggies, right? Also pizza—you can customize toppings. There's a ton more. Any ideas?"

[Zora] "Uhhh... Do they have sweet potato fries?" —
Oh yeah, it's been ages since I had those.

/ I scan the rest of the menu /

[Me] "Uh, yeah. What do you want with it? They have schnitzel, cheese, fish..."

[Zora] "With cheese, I think!"

[Me] "Got it!"

[Inner thoughts]

I don't know what to get—maybe just a simple pizza.
I'll order a Margherita.

[Alan] "Noémi, figured out what you want?"

[Me] "Yeah, I think I'll go with pizza. What about you?"

[Alan] "I'll try their veal with sweet potato fries and a small salad." —Huh, Alan's got taste.

...

[David] "Here are your drinks: sparkling water, elderflower lemonade, and Sprite. Decided on your orders yet?"

[Alan] "Yes, I'll have the veal with sweet potato fries and a small salad—tomatoes, cucumbers, etc."

[David] "Got it. And for the young lady?"

/ Zora looks at David, freezing a little /

[Zora] "....." —She tried to speak but couldn't. I'll help.

[Me] "She's a little shy. She'd like the schnitzel with sweet potato fries—"

[Zora] "No, with cheese!"

[Me] "Haha, sorry, with cheese!"

[David] "Understood. And for you?"

[Me] "Margherita pizza, extra cheese, if possible."

[David] "Got it! Your food will be ready within 30 minutes. If it takes longer, you'll get a 25% discount coupon valid for a month. If you need anything before your food arrives, just press this button—I'll be here in under a minute!"

[Alan] "Sounds good, thanks!"

...

[Inner thoughts]

Alan said he wanted to talk about something. I'll ask.

[Me] "So, Alan. You said on the phone you wanted to talk about something—that's why we're here."

[Alan] "Yeah, my dad asked me to tell you to hurry up with, you know, that thing. The investigation isn't moving forward..." —What's he talking about? Interrogating Zora? Poor girl, I've only known her for a day. Her wounds are fresh, and she barely opens up. So far, all I know is her dad thought her mom cheated, and that's what started their constant fights.

[Me] "Listen, Alan, if that's why you brought us here, I'll gladly get up and walk out with Zora... Now's not the time or place."

[Alan] "You're right. I just wanted to mention it, not—"

/ Zora slams the table /

[Zora] "Would you two stop it, please?! Mom and Dad always did this—I hate it!" —Poor thing... She's completely right.

[Me] "Sorry, Zora. We'll stop. It's just... Some things don't go as planned, that's all."

[Alan] "Sorry, Zora..." —I expected a bit more from him...

...

[David] "Here's the veal with sides, sweet potato fries with cheese, and the Margherita pizza with extra cheese. Enjoy!"

[Me] "Thank you!"

...

[Inner thoughts]

The pizza's really good. Zora's eating happily too. Alan seems a little down—maybe because of Zora. She had every right to snap. She saw the same thing from people she shouldn't have in such a short time... I'm almost done, and so is everyone else...

...

/ David returns about 30 minutes later /

[David] "Need anything else?"

[Alan] "Want anything more?"

[Me] "I'm good. Zora?"

[Zora] "Me neither."

[David] "How about dessert for the young lady?"

[Zora] "No, thank you."

[David] "Alright."

[Alan] "Could we get the check, please?"

[David] "Of course, one moment!"

...

[David] "Here you go."

[Alan] "I'll pay by card."

[David] "Perfect! Thank you very much! Come again!"

[Zora] "Noémi, I need to pee..."

[Me] "Okay, let's go. Alan, we're running to the restroom."

[Alan] "Got it, I'll head out too."

...

[Inner thoughts]

The restrooms were spotless too—this place must've cost a fortune.

[Alan] "Come on, I'll drive you home."

...

[Inner thoughts]

He had to park pretty far—no wonder it took so long.

...

/ We get into Alan's car /

[Zora] "Noémi, when we get home, can we watch something on TV?" —Not a bad idea...

[Me] "Sure, we can watch something."

[Zora] "Is Alan coming too?" —Huh, seems like she's starting to like him, haha.

/ I turn to Alan /

[Me] "You coming, Alan?"

[Alan] "Uh, sure. What are we watching?" —He agreed pretty easily, huh.

[Zora] "I think a cartoon—I like those!"

[Alan] "Haha, alright, Noémi. We'll find one!"

...

/ Alan taps my shoulder—I almost fell asleep /

[Alan] "We're here. Go on up—I'll find parking."

[Me] "Okay, come on, Zora."

[Inner thoughts]

I'm glad Zora brought it up—seems she wants to spend more time with us. I don't get how we got here in just a day... As for the investigation, Amadeus and the others haven't made much progress. I hope he listened to the recordings I sent and read my notes.

/ We enter my apartment /

[Zora] "Do we have popcorn at home, Noémi?" —
Huh, home? Haha, she already feels at home... It's weird—she acts like she's lived here for years.

[Me] "Uh, yeah. I'll make some. Wait for Alan on the couch."

...

/ My front door opens /

[Alan] "I'm here, where are you?"

[Zora] "I'm here, come!"

[Alan] "I'm coming!"

[Inner thoughts]

Alan's here too, I'm making popcorn.

[Me] "I'll be there in a second, just making the popcorn!"

/ The Nokia starts ringing again /

[Inner thoughts]

Ugh, mom's old phone is ringing again... Should I pick it up? It's showing a number—Erik? Dad had a friend

by that name, I remember, but why would he call after being at the funeral? They weren't even that close...

[Me] "Yes, Erik?"

[Erik] "Hi, Noémi." – He remembers me?

[Me] "Dad's been dead for years, why are you calling?"

[Erik] "Oh, nothing, nothing. It's just... you have my niece, and I'm really not okay with that..." – Zora is his niece?

[Me] "Zora, she's your niece?"

[Erik] "Yes, yes. You have thirty minutes from the end of this call to return Zora to the address you'll find on your mother's bed. Hurry, tick-tock." – HE WAS INSIDE THE HOUSE?

[Me] "WHAT? WHERE... why would I return her, what if I don't?"

[Erik] "Let's just say you won't need air anymore. Move, tick-tock."

/ Erik hung up /

[Inner thoughts]

He hung up, what the hell is going on? Think, Noémi...

/ I run to the living room /

[Me] “ALAN, ALAN!”

[Alan] “Whoa, what’s going on, Noémi, slow down, breathe, what is it?”

[Me] “Erik, he called me, he said we have to take Zora to some address—THE ADDRESS, ON MOM’S BED...”

/ I run into mom’s room /

[Alan] “Noémi?”

[Inner thoughts]

They were inside the house... In mom’s room... Here’s the note—this is the address of the cemetery where I buried mom...

[Alan] “Noémi, what is it?”

[Me] “They want us to take Zora to Erik, to the cemetery where I buried mom.”

[Alan] “Why would you take her back? And who even is Erik?”

[Me] “A friend of dad’s from long ago, Zora’s his niece. If I don’t take her, he says they’ll kill me—I have half an hour, and now only 17 minutes left. WHAT DO WE DO?”

[Inner thoughts]

I can't take this anymore...

[Alan] "Calm down, we're not taking her back. There are probably more people at the cemetery—it's not safe. And don't put Zora through this. I'll call my dad. We'll go to our place."

/ I start crying from the stress /

[Zora] "Noémi, why are you crying?"

/ I hug Zora /

[Me] "Zora, come here..." – I'll ask if she knows Erik...

[Me] "Do you know Erik? He's supposedly your uncle?"

[Zora] "What does Erik want? I hate him, he always hurt mom even though they were siblings. Also, he used to hang out with dad all the time—I don't know what they did." – She knows him, okay. Hates him, good. But then...

/ Alan comes back into the room /

[Alan] "Okay, Noémi, it's alright. I spoke to my dad, he's expecting us. We'll run out, get in the car, and head over there. He's waiting."

[Me] “Alright. Zora, quickly grab what you need. We’ve got 5 minutes—I’ll pack too.”

[Inner thoughts]

I hope this has nothing to do with Amadeus’s investigation. Also, if Erik is alive, why didn’t Zora go to him? He’s the closest relative...

[Zora] “I’m ready!”

[Alan] “Noémi, are you ready?”

[Me] “Yeah, just, huh... let’s go...”

...

[Inner thoughts]

That black car in front of the building... I bet it’s Erik!

/ I turn back to Alan /

[Me] “ALAN, HURRY!” – I can’t believe he parked that far.

[Zora] “Noémi...” – I stressed her out too much...

/ Zora starts crying /

[Me] “Zora, it’s okay. We’ll figure this out, somehow.”

...

[Alan] “Here’s the car, come on, get in!”

[Me] “Come on Zora!”

[Alan] “I’m gonna drive fast, really.”

[Me] “Okay, just go! There was a black car out front—I think they were waiting for us.”

[Alan] “Alright, I’ll be quick. Call my dad, he’ll tell us what to do.”

[Me] “Okay, calling, just... let me breathe a second...”

[Inner thoughts]

Everything is happening so fast... it’s just too much...

...

/ I call Amadeus /

[Me] “Amadeus, we’re coming. Alan’s driving fast, he wants to know what to do.”

[Amadeus] “Alright, Noémi. Just pull into the driveway—it’s open. Then run inside through the back entrance. I’ll be there. We’ll talk more inside. Who called you?”

[Me] “Erik. Erik called. Dad’s old friend.”

[Amadeus] “Ah, I see... Hurry up. I’m getting ready.” –
Does he know him?

/ Amadeus hangs up /

[Me] “Amadeus said to pull into the driveway. Then go in through the back door.”

[Alan] “Alright, I’m hurrying.”

...

/ We arrive at Amadeus’s driveway /

[Inner thoughts]

Huh, it’s not that big of a house—I thought it’d be bigger. At least we’re on the edge of town. If they didn’t follow us, hopefully they won’t find us.

[Alan] “Get out, I’ll park. Run in through the back door, it’s right next to the garage.”

[Me] “Okay. Come on, Zora. Zora?”

[Zora] “I’m coming...” – She didn’t say a word the whole ride, poor thing’s shaking...

[Inner thoughts]

The back entrance, here it is.

/ Amadeus opens the door /

[Me] “AMADEUS?”

[Amadeus] “Come in, don’t shout.” – Is that a gun in his hand?

[Amadeus] “Go down to the basement, after the first door straight ahead run through the house, you’ll find a more rundown-looking door—go down, and lock it behind you.

[Inner thoughts]

I’ll have a second key with me—if everything’s clear, I’ll unlock it. Got everything? Basement, lock the door, I’ll be there with Zora, good.

[Me] “Yes, got it. Come on Zora...”

[Inner thoughts]

I don’t get Amadeus’s reaction. Hiding us and calling the cops would’ve been just as effective, I think. He’s acting like Erik is actually coming here.

[Me] “Come on Zora, here’s the door—let’s go down.”

[Inner thoughts]

It’s a bit cold down here. How did I end up here? One moment I’m talking with mom, the next I’m hiding in a basement with Zora from Erik, who I haven’t heard from in ten years. And my current boss is waiting at his house with a gun, telling us to go to the basement. I don’t know...

[Zora] “Noémi, I’m scared...” – Ugh, Zora’s about to cry. She’s shaking and sobbing.

[Me] “Try to calm down, Zora. Hopefully this will all be over soon.”

/ Gunshots /

Huh? Damn it...

/ A loud, ear-ringing explosion sound /

[Man’s voice] “Paul, we got them!” – Uh, huh, I... I can’t see right, I’m dizzy. And I can’t hear well...

[Paul] “Finally. Grab the girl.”

/ Two gunshots /

[Amadeus] “Bastards... Noémi! Are you okay? Come quickly.”

[Me] “I can’t see well—ZORA?! WHERE ARE YOU?”

[Amadeus] “She’s here. Calm down, Noémi. I’ll get you out of here, com—”

/ Gunshot /

[Inner thoughts]

Huh? What happened, Amadeus?

[Erik] “Finally got you, it was a pleasure knowing you...” – He shot him...

Zora! She started crying loudly...

[Zora] “LEAVE ME ALONE!”

[Erik] “Shut up! Your mother asked for this. Now be quiet and come!”

[Me] “LEAVE HER ALONE!” – Amadeus’s gun is here, next to me, I have to grab it!

/ I fire the gun /

[Erik] “AGH, GRAB THE GIRL, I’LL HANDLE THIS BITCH.” – I shot him?

[Alan] “Leave her alone. Why don’t you just finish what you started...”

[Erik] “I will—but first I’m gonna take care of your girlfriend.”

/ Gunshot /

[Erik] “Agh, LET’S GET OUT OF HERE, EVERYONE OUT, WE GOT ZORA!”

[Man’s voice] “Alright, come on, I’ll help!”

[Man’s voice] “GASSING, EVERYONE OUT!” – Gassing?

/ I cough up blood /

What the hell is this, it’s burning my throat and whole face, I can’t see...

[Alan] “NOÉMI!”

...

Chapter Seven

What happend?



[Inner thoughts]

Ugh, my whole throat is burning. I have no idea where I am. My head hurts, I can't see properly. My ears are still ringing from that blinding flash of nonsense.

/ Door opens /

[Zoé] "What the hell happened to you, Noémi..." — Huh, Zoé, the one who helped me last time. After I collapsed following Mom's death, I must be in the hospital now.

[Inner thoughts]

I can barely speak, but I have to try...

[Me] "Hey, Zoé..."

[Zoé] "Oh, don't talk. Your throat looks like it's been stabbed by a thousand needles." —Good to know they're aware...

[Zoé] "Just rest. You'll be able to talk in a few days."

[Inner thoughts]

A few days? I can't wait that long. I don't know what happened to Zora, or Alan... Is he here in the hospital too? Ugh, my head is killing me. I should try to rest, at least until my vision fully recovers.

...

[Inner thoughts]

Ugh, the ringing in my ears has stopped. My vision's mostly back. My throat still hurts, but it's getting better. I think I can talk now. Looks like I'm in a private hospital room, hooked up to all kinds of machines. I can sit up, but I can barely move.

/ Door opens /

[Zoé] "Ah, so you're doing better, I see. Can you see properly now?"

[Me] "Yeah, starting to... My ears aren't ringing anymore, but my throat still hurts. How did I end up here?"

[Zoé] "Your throat might never be the same—chemical burns. You inhaled mustard gas. I don't know what you got mixed up in, and maybe it's better if I don't. A man named Alan brought you in. He had entry and exit wounds on his left arm. Do you know him?" —So he was shot...

[Me] "Yeah, I know him... Is there a little girl here? Her name's Zora, Zora Kovács..."

[Zoé] "No, not that I know of, but I'll ask around. Let me check your throat again." —Did they really take her? Nobody knows anything...

[Zoé] "One more thing before I go—the police were here. They'll want to talk to you before you're discharged." —Great...

[Me] "Wait, what about Alan? Is he okay?"

[Zoé] "He's fine. They already spoke to him, discharged him a few hours ago."

[Me] "Alright, thanks for telling me."

...

[Inner thoughts]

I've been feeling better for two days now. They should really let me out... Alan hasn't called since he was discharged.

/ Door opens, two police officers enter /

[Male Officer] "Good afternoon, Noémi Koltz. My name is Viktor Lukács. My colleague here is—"

[Female Officer] "Good afternoon, I'm Patrícia Lakatos. We'd like to talk to you about what happened, just the basics. So we can clarify things during the official interrogation later." —Interrogation? Well, a girl entrusted to me went missing, I fired a gun,

Amadeus died in front of me, and oh yeah, I got mustard gas in my face.

[Me] "Alright, what do you want to know?"

[Patrícia] "A little girl, Zora Kovács, was in your care. She went missing three days ago. Do you know anything about that?" —So they really did take her...

[Me] "Yes, a man named Erik kidnapped her from me..."

[Patrícia] "Alright, do you know his last name?"

[Me] "No, unfortunately."

[Patrícia] "Alright. We found fresh fingerprints on a revolver and its trigger. Did you fire the gun?"

[Me] "Yes, I fired it."

[Viktor] "Are you okay? How are you feeling?"

[Me] "Like I've been beaten to a pulp. Zoé was taken, Alan was shot, and I couldn't do anything."

[Viktor] "You did a lot, actually. Let me tell you—you shot someone pretty badly from the basement. The fresh blood results aren't back yet, but it's probably the guy who took Zora."

[Patrícia whispering] "You weren't supposed to tell her that..."

[Patrícia] "Alright, that's all we wanted to ask. The interrogation will likely happen tomorrow, since the case ties into multiple investigations. You'll be discharged soon." —Hm, I wonder what Erik's involved in...

[Viktor] "Get well soon. See you around!"

[Inner thoughts]

Huh, so I shot Erik. That bastard... Now that I think about it, where do I go once I'm out? I can't go home—Erik's people know where I live. Mine and Zora's stuff is still in Alan's car, so maybe that'll be enough until I find a place. For now, I'll probably stay at the office for a while... Alan won't mind, right? Amadeus... He's dead. Poor Alan. I hope he can process this.

/ Door opens /

[Zoé] "Alright, Noémi. You're free to go. I'll unhook you from the machines, then try walking a bit."

[Me] "Okay, thanks, Zoé."

...

[Inner thoughts]

Finally, I'm out of the hospital. I should call Alan, see how he's doing... If he even picks up...

/ Phone rings, Alan answers /

[Alan] "Noémi! Hey, sorry I didn't call. Been swamped with work, and Dad's funeral is tonight. Can you come?" —Tonight? Interesting timing. I don't even know where to go...

[Me] "I'd love to, but I can't go back to my place. Erik knows I live there. What if I run into him?"

[Alan] "You're right. Come to my apartment. I just finalized the lease yesterday—got the keys already. Any news on Zora?" —He already got a new place, huh. Nice of him to offer.

[Me] "About Zora? Nothing besides her being taken. And that I shot Erik. My interrogation's tomorrow. Where's your apartment? Can you send me the address?"

[Alan] "Yeah, I'll text it once I hang up..." —I'm such an ass, I didn't even ask how he's doing.

[Me] "How are you holding up? You know what I mean..."

[Alan] "Pretty damn bad, but what can I do? My arm hurts, and Dad... I can't do anything about it, EXCEPT— Sorry, just... I requested the case files from the police, but I can't take it on alone as a private investigator. I need a partner. Since I'm not with the agency anymore, I shut it all down—sent everyone home. I'll find that bastard and gut him myself." —He's

pissed, but I get it. His dad was killed. And Erik took Zora from me... Poor kid...

[Me] "When I get to your place, let me know so you can come down. We'll talk more then..."

[Alan] "Alright, sending the address now. Ring me when you're here."

[Me] "Okay, bye!"

[Inner thoughts]

From what I can tell, Alan's processed Amadeus' death but wants revenge on Erik. That's why he's taking on the investigation. He didn't spare a second thought for Zora beyond asking if I knew anything... I hope she's okay.

...

[Inner thoughts]

I'm here. I'll ring the bell... Oh, he's already downstairs, sitting on the steps.

[Me] "Hey, Alan..."

[Alan] "Ah, hey..."

[Me] "How long have you been sitting out here?"

[Alan] "Since you called. Come on, I'll show you the place. I already brought your stuff up from the car. If

you need anything, just say so. I'll run to the store while you settle in."

[Me] "Okay. Thanks..."

[Inner thoughts]

This is a big apartment building, way on the edge of town. Must be expensive... I didn't pack much. My black clothes aren't even here.

[Alan] "So, here we are—ground floor, unit 02. Come on in."

[Me] "Coming!"

[Alan] "Three bedrooms, a kitchen, a bathroom. And a living room connecting everything—no separate dining area. But it's cozy. Stay as long as you want."

[Inner thoughts]

Cozy?! This place is bigger than mine... Speaking of which, I need to call my landlord. I have to move everything out and bring it here. Gotta break the lease.

[Me] "This is huge, Alan. Bigger than my place, haha. But I need to talk to my landlord, and I'll need help moving my stuff."

[Alan] "I'll hire movers. No way you're going back there. Just cancel the lease. Need anything quick from the store?" —So nice of him to offer.

[Me] "Thanks, Alan. From the store... I don't have any clothes for the funeral. Just something frozen—I haven't eaten properly in the hospital. And Zora... I hope she's okay. I miss her. Damn Erik..." —I'm about to cry...

[Alan] "Don't worry, we'll find her one way or another. And Erik? I'll tear him apart... I'll grab some frozen food. Don't stress about clothes—you can wear what's here." —He really wants this case, but he can't do it alone. Shutting down the whole agency was stupid, but I won't bring it up...

[Me] "Okay, I'll look for something. Let me know when you're back."

[Alan] "Got it. Be back in an hour. Funeral's at 9 PM. We'll make it."

[Inner thoughts]

I'm glad Alan offered to let me stay. I jumped at it pretty fast... But I really have nowhere else to go. I'll start getting ready. Need to find the least casual outfit here.

...

[Inner thoughts]

Maybe this white sweater with black jeans... God, this is embarrassing. None of my clothes are here. The

only shoes I have are the white Adidas sneakers I'm wearing. Whatever, it'll have to do. I'll shower and start getting ready.

...

[Alan] "I'm back! Got frozen pizza and instant soup. Should last for tomorrow and tonight. Once things settle, I'll start cooking. Where are you?" —At least he can cook too.

[Me] "Bathroom, just showered. Be out in a sec."

[Alan] "Got it! Find any clothes?"

[Me] "Kinda... Let's just say it's almost a tracksuit, haha."

[Alan] "No problem. The funeral starts at 9. Two hours from now, but I need to be there in an hour to greet people. A lot are coming. You'll be ready by then?" — Great, no proper clothes, and my eyes are starting to hurt again.

[Me] "I think so. How many people?"

[Alan] "Up to a hundred, but probably less." —What?

[Me] "A hundred? Your dad must've known a lot of people."

/ Alan laughs /

[Alan] "Haha, more like opportunists and ass-kissers, but there are a few good ones." —Interesting. Hope that's not entirely true.

[Me] "Okay, I'll come out. Couldn't do much with my hair or makeup. Didn't bring my stuff. Just brushed my hair, that's it."

[Alan] "No problem. We leave in half an hour—the cemetery's far. I'm not burying him in the local one. Too many enemies. They'd vandalize the grave."

[Me] "Okay, I'll wait till you're ready..."

[Inner thoughts]

His mom... What's up with her? They don't talk? As far as I know, she's still alive...

[Me] "Alan, if it's okay to ask... How's your mom?" — Didn't see her at the house when we stopped by.

[Alan] "She hasn't cared about me in five years. Stayed in touch with Dad, though. When I told her he died... No reaction. Just said, 'Oh.' Then hung up. I hate her." —Damn... I don't get how a mother could be like that.

[Me] "I'm sorry, I didn't know your relationship was like that."

[Alan] "It's fine. She's not coming to the funeral either. Just texted: 'No thx.' I'll go get ready. Gotta move."

...

[Inner thoughts]

Had no idea Alan's mom was this bad... There'll be a lot of people, huh. Poor Amadeus. He saved me. And Zora...

Ugh, Zora, where the hell are you?

...

/ Alan steps out of his room /

[Alan] "Ready to go?" —Wow, he's dressed up properly... I feel like a hobo. Gotta call my landlord.

[Me] "Yeah, let's go. I'll call my landlord tomorrow—forgot while getting ready. Hope it's really okay that I didn't dress up."

[Alan] "No big deal. Come on, just realized I need to get gas."

[Me] "Okay, I'm coming."

...

[Alan] "Alright, quick gas stop, then we're off. My car might be recognized by Erik's people, so if you see anything suspicious, stay calm. Don't overreact. The

whole thing's bulletproof—unless they shoot a rocket at us, HAHA." —That's reassuring...

[Me] "Okay, thanks for the heads-up..."

[Alan] "Be right back."

[Inner thoughts]

I figured they'd know his car. Didn't get why he didn't replace it if he could afford a whole new apartment, but now I see. The entire car's basically a tank.

[Alan] "Back. Anything weird happen?"

[Me] "No, not a soul at this gas station."

[Alan] "I'm surprised too. Alright, let's go."

...

[Alan] "We're here. Once I park, let's hurry in. Some people are already here."

[Me] "Got it."

[Inner thoughts]

Big cemetery, but well-kept.

...

[Jess] "Noémi!" —Jess!

/ Jess hugs me, crying /

[Jess] "Are you okay? What happened? I—"

[Me] "It's okay, Jess. I'm fine. My eyes hurt, and my throat's messed up, but I'm alive."

[Jess] "I'm glad you're okay..."

[Man's voice] "Noémi Koltz!" —Huh?

[Me] "Yes?"

[Inner thoughts]

Well-dressed man, here for the funeral. How does he know my name?

[Man's voice] "You're Sándor Koltz's daughter?" —
How does he know my dad?

[Me] "Yes, how do you know him?"

[Man's voice] "Me, Amadeus, and your dad were detectives together years ago. He talked about you a lot—showed us photos you took with the camera he got you for your birthday. I'm sorry I'm the only one left..."

[Alan] "Levente! Found Noémi, I see!" —So this is Levente...

[Levente] "Yeah, memory's still sharp. How are you holding up? Your arm okay?"

[Alan] "Getting by. Arm could be better. Thanks for coming. Means a lot."

/ Levente steps closer, hugs Alan /

[Levente] "Thank you for inviting me. If you ever need help, just say the word. I'm not as strong as your dad, but I'll do what I can." —Alan's fighting tears...

[Alan] "Thanks, Levi... Gotta go prep my speech. People are starting to gather."

...

[Inner thoughts]

Not a traditional funeral, I guess. When Mom died, I just buried her without a priest... Starts in 10 minutes. Alan's mom really didn't come. I'll find a seat...

[Alan] "Noémi..."

/ Takes my hand /

[Me] "Yeah, Alan?"

[Alan] "Thanks for being here..." —He's about to cry...

[Me] "Of course, Alan..."

[Alan] "I'd like you to sit in the front row. Next to me and Levente."

[Me] "Okay, I'll go there..."

[Inner thoughts]

That was... unexpected. Poor guy's not okay. Angry and hurt...

[Alan] "Well, thank you all for coming to say goodbye to my father, Amadeus." —Here we go.

[Alan] "If anyone would like to say a few words, please come up by the casket..." —His voice cracked.

[Alan] "Sorry... So, yeah. If anyone wants to speak, please..."

/ Levente stands, walks to the casket /

[Levente] "Well... Where do I start? Amadeus and I knew each other since we were kids. He was always kind and forward-thinking. When we were detectives—Amadeus, Sándor, and me—he saved my life three times. I'm sorry I wasn't there to help him when he needed me. Thank you, Amadeus..."

[Alan] "Thank you, Levente."

[Man's voice] "I'd like to pass along a message from János Nagy to Amadeus and Alan. It reads: 'Amadeus, old friend... Sorry I can't be there. The situation here is too dangerous. Alan, thank you for the invitation. My farewell gift—please accept it. —NJ'" —Huh, he sent a messenger..."

/ The man walks up, hands Alan a briefcase /

[Alan] "Thank you for delivering this. Please tell János: 'Thank you for the message. I accept your gift. Hope the situation improves soon.'"

/ No one else seems to want to speak /

[Alan] "Well, if no one else wants to speak, let me say my piece... Dad, I learned everything from you. You were there when I took my first steps, started school, and began working. You taught me fairness and honor, how to think ahead and admit my mistakes. You helped your family and others with integrity. The most

important lesson you taught me was justice. I promise you—I will deliver justice for your death. The man who pulled the trigger will pay... Thank you for being there for me. Rest in peace..." —Seems like he feels better after saying his piece.

/ A woman stands in the back, starts walking forward.
Her face is hidden /

[Woman's voice] "Amadeus... I always knew this is how it would end for you. The strength in your eyes burned like fire on a cold night. I'm sorry I wasn't there for you while I still had the chance."

/ The woman touches the coffin, Alan looks nervous,
crying /

[Woman's voice] "But the recklessness... I'm disappointed in you. And yet, you were right when you said: work would be the death of me. I feel like it's time I joined you..."

/ The woman pulls out a gun, trying to kill herself /

[Me] "OH MY GOD"

[Alan] "MOM! DON'T DO IT!"

/ Alan knocks the gun out of her hand /

[Levente] "AURÓRA, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?"

/ Auróra, Alan's mother, starts crying hysterically as she is escorted out /

[Alan] "I apologize, everyone... we'll continue in a few minutes..."

/ Alan leans in toward me /

[Alan] "If you can, maybe you could say a few words while I handle this..." – Me, speak? After that?

[Me] "I'll try... But I'm not even dressed properly, and..."

[Alan] "Please, if you can, just go. Don't worry about how you look... I have to go now."

/ I step up next to the coffin /

[Me] "Hi everyone, I'm Noémi... Amadeus took me in during the hardest time of my life, after I lost my mother. He offered me a job, and I accepted. I never got to fully know him, but I do know he was an incredibly honest and helpful man. He saved me... and Zora. I'm sorry..." – I'm about to cry, my eyes are stinging badly...

[Me] "Sorry, just..."

[Levente] "It's okay, Noémi... Come sit, let's quietly remember Amadeus together..."

...

[Inner thoughts]

Alan's been gone for five minutes already...

[Alan] "Apologies, everyone. My mother has completely lost what remained of her sanity... The ambulance took her away... Thank you all for your patience. If everyone agrees, let's go and lay the coffin to rest..."

...

[Inner thoughts]

Beautiful coffin—similar to the one my dad was buried in.

[Alan] "Alright, thank you all for being here. You can place memorial gifts on the table near the exit! You're welcome to stay and talk, but I unfortunately have to go. Thank you again!" – Where is he rushing off to?

/ Alan walks over to me /

[Alan] "Let's go, Noémi. I can't stay here any longer..."

[Me] "Alright, let's go."

...

Chapter Eight

What now?



/ Sitting at the kitchen table with coffee in hand /

[Inner thoughts]

A few days have passed since Amadeus' funeral. I testified against Erik at the interrogation—turns out the police are after him for multiple kidnappings. Looks like Alan will take the case as a private investigator. He's at the station now, consulting on how much freedom he'll have. If he likes the terms, he'll take it... He also wants me to fast-track a private investigator's license so I can work with him. Zora's still missing, but Alan has a lead. Poor kid... I miss her. This helplessness is killing me. I hope Alan knows what he's doing. Aurora, Alan's mom, was admitted to a psychiatric ward—no surprise after her scene at the funeral. Finally got hold of my landlord too. Even though he didn't pick up at first, he let me off the lease, knowing what happened. He even had my remaining belongings shipped over, including Mom's old phone. It's dead. I won't charge it. That's for sure.

Alan and I get along well—practically living together now. We've talked a lot about our pasts, swapping stories about Amadeus and my dad's antics. Turns out, Dad once saved Amadeus from a gunshot wound—shoved him out of the way. Yesterday, we

cooked together. Thought I'd have to teach him, but turns out, it was the other way around. Never thought I'd end up here with him. Only Zora's missing...

The police confirmed she's still alive. Since I was her legal guardian, they had to disclose everything about her status. At least I know she's okay. That's some relief.

/ Alan walks in through the front door /

[Alan] "Got the case! I can assist—almost full autonomy. But if we find Erik, we call the cops immediately. My job's just to hold him."

[Me] "Glad to hear it. They must trust you."

[Alan] "Dad's name carries weight."

[Inner thoughts]

True. Amadeus was well-known in law enforcement.

[Alan] "I also set up the private investigator training I mentioned. Since we don't have an office yet, I listed this address as the training site. Got my credentials sorted after securing the case. Could fast-track yours in a couple of days—just some basic material to study. Since I'm certified for armed operations, you'll need to do some live-fire practice at Levente's range. Then he'll administer the exam. Not exactly by the book, but legally doable."

[Inner thoughts]

Listing this address as a "business location" was reckless. What if Erik tracks it down? The whole thing feels rushed. But Zora needs me. And having an actual profession wouldn't hurt—especially if I can skip most of the hard parts.

[Me] "Zora needs me. That's why I'll do it."

[Alan] "Glad you feel that way. We can start today. I'll coordinate with Levente tomorrow. If all goes well, you'll be certified in two days. Paperwork arrives next week, but once you pass, you can join me. We'll hit the suspected location after dark."

[Me] "Alright, that's fast. Where is Zora?"

[Alan] "An old cargo ship. All the uncleared traces lead there—could be a decoy, but it's the only lead."

[Me] "Hope she's really there and we're not too late. Wait—Alan, couldn't you check it out alone first? If it's not urgent, why make Zora wait?"

[Alan] "Can't. If she's there, I'm not the emotional anchor she needs. You are. You matter to her. And to me."

[Me] "I get it. I matter to Zora. That's why I'll do the training. But why do I matter to you?"

[Alan] "Well... We're basically living together. You were there when Dad died, got me to the hospital, came to the funeral. For a fast-food employee and manager, we've had... a lot of unplanned things happen."

[Inner thoughts]

He's right. Life just unfolded this way. Without Alan and Amadeus, I'd have no place to stay, no stability. And if I hadn't taken Amadeus' job offer, everything would've been different. Probably wouldn't even be with Alan now.

[Me] "You're right... When do we start training?"

[Alan] "Just need you to sign some papers, fill in details. Then we begin."

/ Alan pulls out the paperwork. I start filling it out. /

[Inner thoughts]

Huh, all these forms look official—not something he or the police printed. He must've been sure I'd agree.

[Alan] "Done. Toss something frozen in the microwave while I prep the key material. We're cramming this in one day."

[Me] "Got it. Be right back."

[Inner thoughts]

It's 11:30 AM. If this takes all day, there's a lot to cover. Better make soup—lasts longer, and we've got leftovers from yesterday. And coffee. Lots of coffee.

...

/ Alan leans back, yawning /

[Inner thoughts]

It's 8 PM now. We got through most of it. "A few pages of material," he said. Took all damn day.

[Alan] "Took longer than I thought, but this covers the written exam. You'll take it tomorrow morning, then live-fire practice with Levente. After that, we plan the raid and coordinate with the cops. We'll extract Zora, contain Erik if he's there..."

[Me] "Alright..."

[Alan] "You're exhausted, aren't you?" —Not even a question.

[Me] "Mhm..."

[Alan] "Find something to watch. I'll grab a few things from the store." —Could really use a break.

[Me] "Okay, when will you be back?"

[Alan] "Twenty minutes. Heading out now."

/ Alan leaves /

[Inner thoughts]

Ugh, I'm wiped. My brain's numb. Maybe some music, then crash... If Alan wakes me, so be it.

...

/ Alan whispers /

[Alan] "Noémi..." —Was almost asleep...

[Me] "Hm? Yeah? Almost dozed off, haha."

[Alan] "Sorry for waking you. Just... Never mind. Tomorrow." —Tomorrow what?

[Me] "What are you talking about?"

[Alan] "Went to the old office... Was going through Dad's files. Found letters between him and your dad. From when they were just friends. They talked a lot about us—mostly you. In one envelope... Dad's farewell letter to yours. Never got to deliver it. Thought you should read it. There's something inside for you too."

[Inner thoughts]

Alan's on the verge of tears... Wonder what he read. What's in the envelope?

[Me] "Okay, Alan. I'll read it."

[Inner thoughts]

[Amadeus' letter]

"Deeply regret not being at your funeral... Aurora's unwell, couldn't leave Alan. Still, I thank you for everything—your brotherhood, the support you gave me and Levente on cases. The gifts for Alan, the financial help when we struggled. Most of all, for saving my life.

I should be in that damned casket, not you. No matter how much I begged you not to risk yourself, you never listened. Always there to help. I'll look after Noémi and Anna as best I can. Giving Noémi your old necklace—the one shot off during our first case together. Had it repaired. Hope she treasures it.

I'm no good at goodbyes, but I know clinging would consume me. I have to let go. Trust you're in a better place now.

—Amadeus"

The necklace... I'm about to cry.

/ I hug Alan, then I start crying /

[Me] "Thank you, Alan. For showing me."

[Alan] "You're welcome."

/ I put on the necklace /

[Me] "I remember this. Dad said it was ruined beyond repair."

[Alan] "I remember him holding it at his desk, just staring."

[Me] "Thank you... This means so much."

[Alan] "I'm grateful too. That you're here. After Dad... Mom's a wreck. No one else to lean on. Just you. I..."

/ I hug him tighter /

[Me] "It's okay. Just stay like this a while. It'll get better."

/ Alan sobs, then cries. I do too. /

[Me] "If Amadeus hadn't helped me... Things would've been so different. I barely knew him, but he knew me... Wish we'd met sooner, Alan."

...

[Inner thoughts]

This feels... good. Like a void inside me is filling. My soul's unraveling.

/ Alan pulls back, wiping his eyes, smiling /

[Alan] "Thanks, Noémi... Needed that."

[Me] "Me too."

[Alan] "I'll turn in. Call if you can't sleep."

[Inner thoughts]

Can't even think straight. Need more time. Interesting that he offered. Hope I can sleep. Or... not.

[Me] "Okay. Thanks, Alan."

...

[Inner thoughts]

Tossing and turning for 20 minutes now. Maybe I should go to him... Come on, Noémi. Pull yourself together. You're strong. No—just can't shut my brain off. Zora, Amadeus, Dad, Mom, Aurora, Alan... I'm going.

/ Knock on Alan's door /

[Alan] "Come in."

[Me] "Sorry, just... Can't sleep."

[Alan] "S'okay. Sit. What's on your mind?"

/ I sit beside him on the bed /

[Me] "Just... Zora. Not knowing where she is. Dad never talked much about your dad. Never even met him."

[Alan] "Mine talked about you all the time. Never crossed paths, though. We'll find Zora. Trust me."

[Me] "I do. But I can't let it go."

/ Alan takes my hand /

[Alan] "Noémi, neither can I. But to move forward, some things stay in the past. For me—Dad's death, Mom's scene, Zora's kidnapping. Not saying emotions are bad, but facts are clearer without them. Plan based on reality, not fear."

[Inner thoughts]

Interesting mindset. Not bad, but not something I can switch to overnight.

[Me] "How do I just let go? I can't shut it out."

[Alan] "I'll help."

/ Stands, paces /

[Alan] "Zora was taken by a syndicate. Fact. Emotions? Anger, despair, helplessness. Set those aside. Realistically? Erik's her uncle. Not selling her. She's probably safe, just unhappy. Cops are looking. If we hit the lead in two days, we'll get her out. That's logic over emotion. Get it?"

[Me] "Yeah. Still hard."

/ Sits back down /

[Alan] "Understandable. Almost midnight. You can stay, but I'm turning in."

[Me] "Okay, won't keep you."

[Alan] "Not keeping me. Just tired. A lot on my mind."

[Me] "Goodnight, Alan."

[Alan] "Night."

[Inner thoughts]

Don't want to overstay... Ugh, just gonna collapse into bed and try to sleep.

...

/ Alan whispers /

[Alan] "Morning..." —Ugh, must've slept.

[Me] "Morning."

[Alan] "Talked to Levente. We're on for noon. It's 9 AM."

[Me] "I'll get ready."

[Alan] "I'll whip up breakfast."

[Inner thoughts]

Still no updates on Zora beyond Alan's lead. Only ever fired a gun once—when I shot Erik. No idea how I managed it. Shower first, comfy clothes, then see what Alan's making.

...

[Inner thoughts]

Smells like Dad's grilled cheese.

[Alan] "You're up. Eat. Made breakfast sandwiches. I'll get ready, then we head out."

[Me] "Thanks, Alan."

/ Sit to eat /

[Inner thoughts]

Even tastes similar. Gotta ask how he makes these.

...

[Alan] "Ready? Oh—before we go."

/ Pulls out a gun case /

[Alan] "Open it."

/ I do /

[Alan] "Your dad's sidearm. Glock 17. He and mine always argued—1911 or Glock?"

/ Laughs /

[Alan] "Hope you like it."

[Inner thoughts]

Weird... Holding it, I feel... connected. Dad's gun. Like he's watching.

[Me] "Thank you... Means a lot."

[Alan] "Our dads were there when we needed them. Now their guns are too. Stow it, let's go. Levente's waiting."

[Me] "Got it."

...

[Alan] "Parking here. Levente's inside. Hand me the gun cases from the back."

[Me] "Okay."

[Inner thoughts]

This area's familiar. Mom and I walked here after Dad died. Never knew there was a range nearby.

...

/ We enter /

[Levente] "Hey!"

[Alan] "Levente!"

[Me] "Hi!"

[Levente] "How's the theory going, Noémi?"

[Me] "Pretty well. Studied all yesterday. Wore Alan out."

[Levente] "If a suspect uses multiple aliases online, how'd you link them?"

[Me] "Writing style, activity timestamps, IP cross-referencing if possible."

[Levente] "Sharp. Most blank on that. You're first."

[Alan] "Even I didn't know during my exam."

[Levente] "What was your question again? Never mind. Bring the guns. Let's start."

/ Alan laughs /

[Alan] "Okay."

...

[Levente] "So, Noémi. You've fired a gun before, but not yours. What's Alan's gift?"

[Me] "Dad's sidearm. Glock, I think?"

[Levente] "Sanyi's gun? Can I see?"

/ Open the case. Levente smiles. /

[Levente] "Glad it's with his daughter. In good hands."

[Alan] "Found it in Dad's safe at the old office."

[Levente] "He kept it there... Anyway. Safety first. Unload, no round chambered." —Wait, what?

[Me] "Understood 'take it out.'"

[Levente] "No worries. Magazine's empty. Insert it."

/ I do /

[Levente] "Good. Finger off the trigger until ready to fire. Show you how to load."

/ Hand him the mag /

[Levente] "Glock 17 takes 9mm. Like this."

/ Inserts three rounds /

[Levente] "Your turn."

/ I load five /

[Levente] "Good. Before live fire, basics. Glocks lack external safeties—just the trigger safety. Slide's the metal top part. Slide lock holds it open if empty. Slide feeds rounds. Sights aligned? Accurate shot. Grip? Dominant hand firm, support hand..."

/ Demonstrates /

[Levente] "Like this. Got it?"

/ I mimic /

[Levente] "Perfect. Ready to fire. Load fully—standard mag holds 17."

/ I load, chamber a round /

[Levente] "Aim at the silhouette target. Eight meters. Fire when ready."

/ Breathe. Squeeze. /

[Levente] "Natural talent, Alan. You lucked out."

/ Alan grins /

[Alan] "No wonder she hit Erik."

[Levente] "More practice, then paperwork. Exam's waived."

[Alan] "No test?"

[Levente] "Her live-fire is the test. Theory's solid. Just needs field experience."

[Me] "Is that... legal?"

[Levente] "Yep. You aced my random question. That's enough."

[Me] "Thanks, Levente."

[Levente] "Anytime. Let's drill."

...

[Inner thoughts]

Three hours of nonstop shooting. Alan's dozing off—used to gunfire. Still startles me if I'm not the one firing.

[Levente] "Wore you out, sorry. Good seeing you handle your dad's gun. Paperwork time, then you're free."

[Me] "Thanks. Yeah, I'm beat."

[Alan] "Done?" /Wakes up/

[Me] "Good morning. Yeah, just finishing."

[Levente] "Twenty minutes tops."

/Fill out forms/

[Levente] "Noémi—be careful. You're a natural, but still green. Hesitated on malfunctions. Learn field-stripping with Alan. Rely on him for tactical calls. You're his backup now—for Zora and his mental state. Your dad's Glock's reliable but old. Needs maintenance before ops. First-aid training's lacking—get that later. Here's your license. Stay safe."

[Inner thoughts]

Levente is right—I'm still unsure about a lot of things when it comes to the gun. The first aid stuff would definitely come in handy later... He was very helpful. I'm glad I got through this. Zora, we're coming tomorrow.

[Me] "Thank you, Levente. I'll try to do everything you told me. I'll leave everything to Alan..."

[Levente] "I'm glad we agree. I'll check in later—try not to kill yourselves..."

/ I laugh awkwardly /

[Me] "We'll do our best."

...

[Alan] "So, where's your certificate?"

/ I smile and show it /

[Alan] “Nice job! Come on, let’s go. I already put our pistols in the trunk. I tried shooting too, but I was just too tired... Maybe next time.”

[Me] “Will you show me how to disassemble my pistol? And we should clean it before we go pick up Zora...”

/ Alan starts the car /

[Alan] “Sure, but right now... Let’s go home, I want to get some rest.”

[Me] “Alright. Are you feeling okay?”

[Alan] “My throat and head hurt a little, but I’ll be fine by tomorrow. You’ll see.”

[Me] “I’ll make some tea and give you medicine...”

[Inner thoughts]

Poor Zora, I still haven’t been able to give her the medicine... I hope she can hold on a little longer... Tomorrow will make a week since they took her. This whole thing is taking so long, but it’s okay. If I look at it the way Alan said last night, maybe she really is holding on. If she endured the family situation she was living in, then she can handle this too. She’s a strong little girl, thankfully. We’ll be there soon, Zora...

Chapter Nine

Cavalcade



[Alan] "Good morning, Noémi."

[Me] "Ah, good morning..."

[Inner thoughts]

After yesterday, my whole arm is sore, but at least I managed to fall asleep as soon as I got to my room. And now, I'm nervous about today...

[Me] "Alan, when and how are we leaving?"

[Alan] "I submitted your papers and the request to start the investigation to the police about 20 minutes ago. So, if everything goes well, I'll get the data and a map of the ship we're going to in a few hours. Until then, we'll visit a friend of mine and get you some new clothes. Then tonight, we'll go in, look around, and hopefully find Zora and get her out."

[Me] "What kind of clothes are we getting? And what do you mean by hopefully get her out?"

[Alan] "Everything's tied to regulations since we're just private investigators, but later, we can cite some complete nonsense as a reason for taking her out—don't worry about that. As for the clothes... you'll see."

/ Alan smiles and walks out the door /

[Alan] "I made breakfast. Once you've eaten and are ready, we can go."

[Me] "Okay, thanks."

[Inner thoughts]

I'm already nervous about the whole thing—I don't even have an appetite. And the clothes... I bet they're some paramilitary stuff. I've never worn anything like that before. What if Zora isn't even there anymore? Or if they gave us bad intel? Or what if I'm just too clumsy for this? What if I slow Alan down and we can't finish in time? What if we get caught? Ugh...

/ I sit down to eat /

[Inner thoughts]

Dad's warm sandwich again... I still haven't asked how he makes it. Though it can't be that hard.

...

[Inner thoughts]

I can't eat anymore... My stomach's cramping from the nerves.

[Alan] "You okay, Noémi?" —Is it that obvious?

[Me] "No, I'm just nervous..."

[Alan] "I'm guessing because of tonight."

[Me] "Mhm..."

[Alan] "Come here..."

/ Alan hugs me /

[Alan] "I know exactly how this feels. The first time I went with my dad to handle a small case, I was only 12. It wasn't even official—our neighbor's cat went missing, and we went to look for it. I was so nervous I was shaking the whole time. All these worst-case scenarios ran through my head—what if it got hit by a car, eaten by a dog, or we just couldn't find it? We found the cat within an hour—she'd had kittens. That's why she didn't come home when the neighbor called. Don't overthink things... Just let go and let what needs to happen, happen. Nothing bad will happen. Trust me. We'll go in, get Zora out, and then we'll be gone. I'll hand over the info to the police, and that'll be it. Hopefully, Erik and his lackeys will get locked up. And being nervous? That's natural. I get nervous too, but I don't overthink it."

[Inner thoughts]

I don't know how to just let things happen, but I can try...

/ I step back from Alan /

[Me] "I can try to let things happen, but I don't know how... Thanks, Alan, for trying. But there are some things even I can't change... Still, I'll try."

[Alan] "I'm glad you'll try. Let me know when you're ready—I'll be in my room packing what we'll need for tonight."

[Inner thoughts]

I'll go take a shower, drink some coffee, and give him time to pack.

...

[Inner thoughts]

I'm done. I'll check on Alan—hope that was enough time for him. I'll ask if he wants coffee too.

/ I open the door—Alan is packing carefully and methodically /

[Me] "Wow, you've got a lot of stuff here."

[Alan] "Heh, yeah. Sometimes I feel like I'm preparing for the apocalypse. But really... never mind. Are you ready?"

[Me] "Yeah, I was just wondering if you wanted coffee."

/ I lean against the doorframe /

[Alan] "No, thanks. I already had some this morning before I came to your room. Just give me a few more minutes, then we'll leave to get the clothes."

[Me] "Alright."

[Inner thoughts]

He seemed a little frustrated—maybe something's missing? Or maybe he's just hyper-focused on making sure everything's there.

...

[Alan] "I'm done. I'll take the gear down to the car now so we can leave quickly if needed."

/ He's carrying four bags—what's in them? /

[Me] "Need help?"

[Alan] "Nah."

[Me] "What did you pack?"

/ We step out into the stairwell /

[Alan] "Ammo, first aid, radios, holsters. And snacks, as always."

[Me] "Haha, what kind of snacks do you usually bring?"

[Alan] "Get in." —What's his problem?

/ I walk to the door and get in /

[Me] "Okay..."

/ Alan loads the trunk, then gets in the car /

[Alan] "Sooo, I always bring chips or chocolate. Sometimes I have to wait in one spot for a long time, doing nothing, so I just munch on them."

[Me] "Our pistols are in there too, right?" —I didn't see him pack them.

[Alan] "Yeah, they're here. I put them in the bag."

[Me] "Then we're good."

...

[Alan] "We'll be there in a few minutes. We'll pick out the stuff, then go over the plan. They already sent the map and the permit. We can be on-site after 7 PM."

[Me] "Alright, glad to hear it."

...

/ Alan parks in front of the store /

[Alan] "Come on, let's go in. Trust me, you'll love the style!"

[Me] "Paramilitary style?"

/ We get out of the car and head to the door /

[Alan] "Yeah, or something similar."

/ We enter the store—it's filled with everything from hunting gear to fishing clothes /

[Alan] "Mia! Hey!" —Mia?

[Mia] "Alan, long time no see! What's up? And who's this?"

[Me] "Hi, Mia! I'm Noémi!"

[Mia] "Nice to meet you! How can I help you two?"

[Alan] "We're working a case together—need some tactical gear that's good for night ops." —He's not giving any info about me, who I am, or anything. Straight to business...

[Mia] "Hmm, something similar to what you have?"

[Alan] "We can check!"

[Mia] "Alright, come on, Noémi! Let's see what we have in your size. We'll go to the back—these aren't displayed up front."

[Me] "Sure."

...

/ Mia points to a shelf, then to a few pictures /

[Mia] "These are the sets in your size. Try them on—they're good quality, comfortable, and you'll have full

mobility. Plus, all the belts work with the pants—we can check those too. What kind of weapon do you have, if any?"

[Me] "Just a pistol for now, with three mags."

[Mia] "You've got a holster for it, I assume."

[Me] "Yep."

[Mia] "What model?"

[Me] "Glock. Glock 17."

[Mia] "Light and sexy, got it. I'll grab the belts. In the meantime, pick out the clothes and see which one works best for you."

/ Mia heads to the back storage /

[Me] "Alright."

/ Alan points toward the fitting rooms /

[Alan] "Once you've picked what you want to try on, the fitting rooms are over there."

[Inner thoughts]

These clothes are so different from what I'm used to. They look durable, with lots of pockets. And this one has this weird carabiner thing on the thigh—I'll ask Alan what it is.

[Me] "Alan, what's this thing on the thigh?"

[Alan] "Tourniquet. If someone gets shot in the leg, you can tighten it to slow the bleeding. Same thing on the arms."

[Me] "Got it..."

[Inner thoughts]

I think I'll go with the one that has the tourniquets.
Practical and safer.

/ I take the set off the shelf /

[Me] "I'll try this one."

[Alan] "Alright."

...

[Inner thoughts]

Fits well. I like it. Comfortable and snug, though a belt wouldn't hurt. Is Mia having trouble finding one?

/ Alan knocks on the fitting room door /

[Alan] "Well? Good?"

[Me] "Yeah, but a belt would help..."

/ Alan holds a belt over the door /

[Alan] "Here's the one Mia brought. Put this on with it."

[Me] "Okay, thanks."

...

[Inner thoughts]

With the belt, it's much better. Looks good.

...

[Mia] "Well, good to go? You like it, Noémi?"

[Me] "Yeah, it's comfortable and practical."

[Alan] "Thanks a lot, Mia."

[Mia] "No problem, I'll add it to your tab, Alan. Go ahead—I'm guessing you're in a hurry."

[Alan] "Yeah, gotta scout the location. Thanks again, Mia!"

[Mia] "Anytime, see ya!"

[Me] "Bye!"

/ We exit the store and get in the car—I put the clothes on the back seat. /

[Alan] "It's... 11 AM now. I was thinking..."

/ Alan's phone buzzes /

[Alan] "They approved your papers! And here's the map—this ship is huge..."

[Me] "So Zora could be anywhere inside?"

[Alan] "Yeah, and Erik could be anywhere too."

[Inner thoughts]

Looking at this map, our chances of finding Zora seem slim. A three-deck monstrosity with hundreds of rooms... I thought it'd be smaller.

/ Alan puts a hand on my shoulder /

[Alan] "I know it seems impossible, but if we don't try, our chances of finding and getting her out are even smaller."

[Me] "You're right, but a place this big for just two people..."

[Alan] "We'll figure something out..."

/ Alan takes his right hand off me and puts it on his left arm /

[Me] "Your arm okay? At Levente's, you said it could be better."

[Alan] "It's fine, just... a painkiller wouldn't hurt. Let's head back to the apartment—no point in staying out when everything's already in the car. Tonight's still far off. Just... the nerves got to me already."

[Me] "Got it, no need to explain. Let's go back."

...

[Inner thoughts]

The size of the map really brought Alan down. But for Zora, it's worth it.

...

/ We enter the house with the gear /

[Alan] "Put down your pistol and clothes, then come to the kitchen—I've got an idea."

[Me] "Okay!"

...

[Alan] "So, sit down. I'll show you the map."

/ I sit at the table—Alan puts his laptop down and opens the map /

[Alan] "There are three entrances. Two of them have surveillance—each guarded by two men. The third one has no footage, but we know it's a maintenance vent. If we go in there, chances are no one will be around. Then we'll sweep the decks one by one. Any questions?"

[Me] "Uh, yeah, a ton. First, are you sure no one's at the maintenance entrance? Second, how do you plan to sweep the place? It's huge—we could get spotted anywhere, and I bet there are cameras. Third, if we do find Zora, how do you plan to get her out with a place this big?"

/ Alan angrily stands up from the table /

[Alan] "I don't know, Noémi."

/ Alan's phone rings—he answers /

[Alan] "Yeah, Levente? Yeah, the place is bigger than I thought... No, only Noémi and I have permits to be there, and even those are strict about what we can do. No, I didn't know... What? Seriously? That's great news. Where do we meet? Half an hour? Okay, we'll be there!"

/ Alan looks at me with childlike excitement in his eyes /

[Alan] "Good news—the police and the special unit got a tip about a major organ trafficking operation. Guess where... The container ship."

[Inner thoughts]

Not the kind of good news I expected. Pretty morbid...

[Alan] "And Levente's leading the special unit. We'll meet them near the site in half an hour—two kilometers away."

[Me] "That... that is good news. So we'll go with the special unit, or separately? The material they drilled into me says if we're working with official agencies, we have to follow their lead."

[Alan] "Yeah, that's how it is. But Levente will let us look for Zora while they extract the suspects."

[Me] "Okay, okay, that sounds good."

/ Alan stands and packs up /

[Alan] "Come on, hurry—we need to be at the rally point soon."

/ I stand and gather my things /

[Me] "Give me two minutes—I need to change."

/ I take the new clothes to the bathroom, change, then holster my pistol /

[Me] "Ready, let's go!"

...

/ Alan parks—around us are three armored vehicles and four police cars /

[Alan] "This'll work... I can feel it."

[Me] "There are so many of them..."

[Alan] "You'll get used to it. It's good there's this many—we can watch each other's backs."

/ I nod as I get out of the car—Levente spots us and walks over /

[Levente] "Alan! Noémi! Good to see you! I see you got suited up."

[Alan] "Yeah, we did. No bulletproof vests, though—think you can spare some?"

[Levente] "I'll check—probably. Come on."

/ We walk toward one of the armored vehicles /

[Levente] "I'm guessing you don't know the plan yet..."

[Alan] "Nope."

[Levente] "In about an hour, a buyer's arriving to pick up organs from Erik's crew. We'll surround the area 20 minutes before—so in 40 minutes. You two will be with me and two of my guys. Once we move in, you can go after the girl you're extracting. I'll assign someone to help you. You'll have 30 minutes to search all three decks—that's all I could arrange."

[Alan] "Thanks a lot, Levente. We'll stick with you until you handle your part."

[Inner thoughts]

I like this plan—it's safer than what Alan had in mind...

/ Levente pulls two bulletproof vests from the armored vehicle /

[Levente] "Hope these fit. Can't spare helmets, so watch your heads."

[Alan] "This is already enough. Thanks."

/ Alan and I put on the vests /

[Levente] "Noémi, how are you holding up? Haven't heard much from you."

[Me] "I like the plan. Sounds safe, and if Zora's really here, thirty minutes should be enough to find her. And thanks for the vest—fits well."

[Levente] "Glad I could help."

...

/ Levente points to one of the armored vehicles /

[Levente] "It's 21:23 now. In 11 minutes, head to that vehicle—we're moving out in it."

[Alan] "Got it."

[Me] "Okay."

...

[Inner thoughts]

It's reassuring to have this many people here, all coordinated. But I'm still scared. Will Zora even be there? And if she is, where exactly?

[Alan] "You okay, Noémi?"

[Me] "No... Do you think Zora's still here?"

[Alan] "Can't say for sure, but the odds are good. She's related to Erik, and they didn't take her far. Her mom's in prison right now."

[Me] "Yeah, the odds are good..."

...

[Levente] "Let's go! Move out!"

[Alan] "We're coming!"

/ Alan and I run to the armored vehicle and get in /

[Levente] "Alright, quick intro. Alan, Noémi—this is Félix and Andor. We'll be working together tonight. For

that thirty-minute window, Félix will go with you to find the girl."

[Félix] "Ahoy, welcome aboard."

[Andor] "Ciao, amici miei. If anything—or anyone—doesn't move when it should, just say the word. I'll clear it in half a second."

[Alan] "Hey!"

[Me] "Hi..."

[Inner thoughts]

This'll work. Andor's a damn mountain, literally. And Félix? Good vibe—confident.

...

/ The vehicle stops /

[Levente] "Alright, set your radios. Frequency name: *ThisIsTheDay-02*, wavelength 165.2MHz. Coded names only. Entry passphrase: I fell off a damn mountain. That's our channel. But also set up a second one—this is the shared comms. Put it on channel two: *ThisIsTheDay-01*, wavelength 165.1MHz. Coded names there too. Passphrase: No way, seriously?"

[Inner thoughts]

What the hell?

[Alan] "Got it... Noémi, need help?"

[Me] "Yeah. No idea what they're talking about."

[Levente] "Once you're set, I need your call signs."

[Félix] "Same as always—Marko."

[Andor] "Then I'll be Polo."

/ Félix and Andor laugh. Alan looks at me /

[Alan] "Here, radio's set. You should be able to use it now. What's your call sign?"

[Inner thoughts]

Call sign... No clue. Maybe Nova...

[Me] "How about Nova?"

[Levente] "Perfect."

[Alan] "I'll be Rook."

/ Levente taps on his laptop /

[Levente] "Alright. We move in thirty seconds. Alan, Noémi—get your pistols out. Stay between Félix and

Andor. Use call signs—radio and face-to-face. Only fire if fired upon or if I give the order."

/ Levente hands us two face masks /

[Levente] "Put these on. Plug in your radio earpieces—we're doing a comms check."

/ I put on the mask, plug in the earpiece, and quickly tie up my hair /

[Levente over radio] "Check check, Hawk on channel two."

[Félix over radio] "Marko, present."

[Andor over radio] "Polo, present."

[Alan over radio] "Rook, present."

[Me over radio] "Nova, present."

[Levente] "Okay, now switch to channel two—shared comms."

[Levente over radio] " Hawk on shared."

[Me over radio] "Nova on shared."

[Male voice over radio] "NightRider on shared."

[Another male voice over radio] "Crossjaw on shared."

[Another male voice over radio] "Ashmark on shared."

[Alan over radio] "Rook on shared."

[Female voice over radio] "Ironveil on shared."

[Félix over radio] "Marko, present."

[Andor over radio] "Polo, present."

[Another male voice over radio] "I'm Lajos on shared."

[Another male voice over radio] "SwornBlue on shared."

[Crossjaw over radio] "Then let's roll. Move, move!"

/ Levente, Félix, and Andor jump out of the vehicle.
Alan glances at me, then follows. After a brief
hesitation, I do too. /

[Levente] "Nova, fall in behind Rook. Polo, cover her six."

/ I nod and take my position. We advance toward the
ship, slow but steady. /

[Levente over radio] "Crossjaw, plant the C4. We're in position."

[Crossjaw over radio] "Already down..."

/ A blast echoes. We breach the ship. /

[Man's voice] "OH SHIT, COPS! RUN!"

[Andor] "HANDS WHERE I CAN SEE 'EM, YOU RATS!"

/ Gunfire erupts toward us /

[Levente] "Take cover!"

/ I duck behind a wall. Félix covers me. Alan takes someone down. /

[Alan] "This sector's clear."

[Andor] "Nice shot, Rook."

[LajosVagyok over radio] "HANDS UP OR I DROP YOU!"

[Levente] "Relax, funny-name guy—it's us. This sector's clear."

[Crossjaw over radio] "Alright, we're good. Deal went down where we expected. Got what we came for. We're clear to leave."

[Inner thoughts]

What?

[Me] "No! We haven't found Zora yet!"

[Levente] "Nova's right. Let's wrap up the trafficking op. You three—Rook, Nova, Polo—find the girl. Careful, other decks aren't clear yet. We'll hold this sector. Need backup? Call it in."

[Me] "Yeah, copy!"

/ Polo cuts in front, gesturing for me to follow. Alan stays behind me. We reach a staircase and climb. The deck we emerge onto seems empty—until a child's cry echoes in the distance. It sounds like Zora. /

[Me] "Polo, this way—come on..."

/ Polo follows. Alan covers our rear. We enter a dark room. In the corner, I spot a small figure... /

[Zora] "LEAVE ME ALONE!"

/ I pull off my mask, holster my pistol, and slowly approach her. /

[Me] "Shh, Zora... it's me. Noémi..."

/ Zora lowers her hands from her face. Her eyes widen—teary, shocked. /

[Me] "Oh, Zora... come here..."

/ I kneel and pull her into a hug. /

[Zora] "Noémi..."

/ She keeps crying. /

[Me] "It's okay... We're here. We're getting you out."

[Zora] "Hurry, before he comes back!"

/ Her voice shakes with panic. /

[Zora] "If he comes back, he'll kill—"

[Félix] "Not happening. Let's move."

/ Alan enters the room. /

[Alan] "Our exit's clear. Zora..."

/ He crouches and hugs us both. /

[Félix] "Rook, Nova—touching moment, but we gotta go."

[Me] "Right. Right."

/ I scoop Zora into my arms, shielding her head as Félix and Alan cover us. /

[Erik] "WHERE DO YOU THINK YOU'RE TAKING HER?"

/ A gunshot rings out. /

[Me] "AGHH—MY LEG!"

[Félix] "NOVA!"

/ Félix takes Zora from me as Alan returns fire. /

[Inner thoughts]

Ugh... My whole leg's numb. The tourniquet—gotta tighten it.

/ Alan hoists me over his shoulder. /

[Alan] "Come on..."

[Me] "Alan... I don't feel good..."

[Alan] "Losing this much blood in minutes? Arterial hit, DAMN IT!"

[Alan over radio] "Nova's hit! Need extraction—arterial bleed!"

[Levente over radio] "On my way..."

/ Alan carries me into a storage room, trying to stem the bleeding. He tightens the thigh tourniquet. /

[Me] "Agh..."

[Inner thoughts]

It hurts so much... I can't breathe right. My head's pounding...

[Alan] "Shh, stay with me. Okay?"

[Me] "Alan..."

/ Sound fades. My vision narrows. Alan shakes me. Then—everything goes black. /

Chapter Ten

The Other Side



[Inner thoughts]

Huh? Where am I? Everything feels so light... It's dark,
I can't see anything...

/ I stand up, in the darkness I see a white door /

[Inner thoughts]

This door... It looks like the one from our old house.
But what is it doing here, in the middle of nowhere?
And what am I doing here? Where am I?

/ Hesitantly, I step toward the door. Familiar scents hit
me from behind it. I pace around a few times, thinking
/

[Inner thoughts]

Should I dare to open it?

/ I hesitantly place my hand on the doorknob /

[Inner thoughts]

I must be dreaming. What happened before I got
here?

...

/ Some time passes. I'm lying on nothingness,
everything is black. I try to remember how I got here.
The door calls to me more and more... /

[Inner thoughts]

What could be behind the door? What happened to Zora? To Alan?

/ As I think, I stand up and place my hand on the doorknob /

[Inner thoughts]

Well, I have nothing to lose...

/ I press down on the handle. The inside of the door glows white. I step through... /

[Inner thoughts]

Where... where am I?

/ I step into an endless expanse of white. Countless people stand around me, keeping their distance /

[Me] "Where am I? Hello?!"

...

/ A few minutes pass. They still stand there silently. Suddenly, a familiar figure appears out of nowhere /

[Mom] "I'm so sorry..."

[Me] "Mom?!"

/ I run to hug her.../

[Mom] "Wait!"

[Me] "Why?"

[Mom] "It's not time yet..."

[Me] "What do you mean?"

[Mom] "You'll see. Follow me."

/Mom leads me into a room/

[Mom] "Sit down..."

/I sit in a chair. Mom kneels in front of me/

[Mom] "I'm so sorry... I wasn't paying attention, I was going too fast, and then..."

/I lean toward her. Mom starts crying/

[Me] "Mom, it's okay..."

[Mom] "I was irresponsible, and I left you all alone. How are you? What have you been doing?"

/I sit up in the chair/

[Me] "I don't really know. Everything went dark, and then I ended up here... But I live with Alan now. I became a private investigator because Zora was

kidnapped, and Alan and I were trying to get her back.
Huh... I got shot... That's how I got here."

/Mom stands up and grips my shoulders/

[Mom] "How long has it been since I died?"

[Me] "I don't know, about a month."

[Mom] "I thought I'd never see you again..."

[Me] "I never thought we'd meet again either... But where are we? Am I dead?"

[Mom] "No, not yet. You're in a coma. But you're close to death. Right now, doctors are monitoring you. The blood loss caused brain damage. Even if you wake up within a few months, you'll have memory problems. As for where we are... Between life and death."

[Me] "How is it possible that I'm talking to you?"

[Mom] "I don't know. When you opened the door, I was already here."

/I hear a strange noise and turn around.../

[Dad] "Excuse the interruption—am I in the right place?"

[Me] "DAD!"

/I sprint toward him, but he stops me/

[Dad] "Wait, Noémi! Not yet..."

[Me] "Dad..."

/I start crying/

[Dad] "How's my big girl doing? Hmm?"

[Me] "As good as possible... Now, at least..."

[?] "Anna, Sándor. Time is almost up."

[Mom] "Alright..."

[Me] "Who was that?"

[Dad] "We don't know, but they told us we could talk to you one last time. Before we're taken away..."

/I stand up from the chair/

[Me] "Taken where?"

[Mom] "To the other side..."

/I grab Mom and Dad's hands/

[Me] "Let me stay with you. Just the three of us, together..."

[?] "That's not for you to decide, Noémi... Please, say your goodbyes."

[Dad] "Come here, hug us..."

/I tightly embrace Mom and Dad, sobbing/

[Mom] "Stay strong, my little one. Life is cruel, but you've always been a fighter. Don't let pain control you. I love you..."

[Dad] "Hold on, Noémi. Life is wild and unpredictable, but if you're brave enough, you can take control. Never forget how proud we are of you..."

/Mom and Dad's bodies begin to fade like sand in the wind. The less of them remains, the tighter I cling, crying like a child/

[Me] "No, DON'T GO YET... DAD, MOM—"

Chapter Eleven

Returning



[Me] "Ughh..."

[Alan] "She's awake! She's awake! Someone help!"

...

[Inner thoughts]

Where am I? What happened?

/ I look around—I'm lying in a hospital bed. Alan stands by the door, then a doctor rushes in. I sit up on the bed. The doctor steps closer. /

[Man's voice] "Good morning, Noémi. I'm János. You've been in a coma for two months."

[Inner thoughts]

Mom, Dad... They're really gone... I miss them so much. I have to pull myself together. It felt so real... Ugh, my head hurts.

[Me] "How... how did I end up in a coma?"

[János] "Blood loss, at least that's what the special unit said when they brought you in."

[Me] "My head hurts, and I feel nauseous..."

[János] "I'll get you some medication. And a doctor will run some routine tests."

/János leaves. Alan sits on the edge of my bed./

[Alan] "I thought you'd never wake up... I missed you."

[Me] "What happened? And what about Zora?"

[Alan] "We took down the mafia—completely. But we had to move. We live in the countryside now. Zora started elementary school, and I opened a restaurant two weeks ago."

[Inner thoughts]

Huh, how did they manage all that in two months?

[Me] "Alan, all that in two months? A new house, a restaurant... How? Where did you get the money?"

[Alan] "There were still savings left in my dad's account. After you went into a coma, I got access to it. It was enough to take care of everything."

[Me] "So Zora's in school... What day is it today?"

[Alan] "Sunday, 7 a.m. She was here yesterday. Today, Levente is watching her."

[Me] "Levente?"

[Alan] "Yeah, they get along pretty well. And he's the only one I trust to take care of her while I'm here."

/ Zoé walks in. /

[Zoé] "You always get yourself into trouble... This is the third time you've been under my care in half a year... How are you feeling?"

[Me] "My head hurts, and I'm nauseous."

/ Zoé places two pills on the table. /

[Zoé] "The right one is a painkiller, the left is B6. I'll get you water—take them!"

/ Zoé brings a glass of water. I swallow the pills. /

[Zoé] "Okay, your hand works fine... Let me check your eyes..."

...

[Zoé] "Alright, all done. You can go home in a few days, but until then, you'll be under observation."

[Me] "Okay."

[Alan] "Noémi, I have to go. I'll bring Zora tomorrow—she'll be so happy you woke up!"

/ Alan steps closer, hesitates, then... kisses my forehead. /

[Me] "Uh... what was that?"

[Alan] "I'm glad you're awake... I have to go now. See you tomorrow!"

[Me] "Alright, bye!"

/ Alan and Zoé leave. I lean back in bed ./

[Inner thoughts]

So, Zora's in good hands. And we don't have to worry about the mafia anymore. And Alan... interesting. I like him.

...

[Inner thoughts]

I still don't understand. I was between life and death... Why didn't I die? I could be with them now... But then Alan and Zora would've been left alone. I got to see Mom and Dad one last time... When my time comes, I'll join them on the other side... I need to talk to Alan about all this.

/Hours pass. It's evening. Zoé enters the room./

...

[Zoé] "How are you feeling? You've been staring at the ceiling all day—haven't even gone to the bathroom."

[Me] "I'm fine... Just thinking. That's all."

[Zoé] "I'm leaving soon. The night shift will check on you. If anything happens, press the call button—someone will come."

[Me] "Got it. Have a good rest."

[Zoé] "You too. See ya!"

[Inner thoughts]

That was sweet of Zoé to check on me... I should rest. I've been replaying that meeting in my head all day... I hope it wasn't just a coma dream.

...

/Next morning. The door opens, waking me./

[Zora] "NOÉMI!"

/Zora rushes over and hugs me while I'm still lying down./

[Me] "Zora... Are you okay? How are you?"

/Alan and Zoé enter./

[Zora] "Yes! Guess what? I'm in school now! And I live with Alan! His house is so nice!"

[Me] "That's great, Zora."

[Alan] "How are you, Noémi?"

[Me] "A little tired, but okay."

[Inner thoughts]

Well, apart from the fact that she pointed out the obvious about you... Not much.

[Me] "They're discharging me tomorrow."

[Zora] "YES!"

[Alan] "Finally! I'll show you our new place—and the restaurant!"

[Me] "I'd love that. But there's something else..."

[Alan] "Yeah?"

[Me] "The blood loss damaged my brain—not enough oxygen. So I might struggle with new memories... and even old ones."

[Inner thoughts]

I'll tell Alan about what happened in the coma later...

[Alan] "But the meds will help, right?"

[Me] "Yeah, they will. That's what Zoé said."

[Zora] "I hope you'll still remember who I am in a few years..."

[Me] "Zora, I could never forget you... We fought too hard to get you back."

[Zora] "Thank you... both of you."

/ Alan and Zora lean in, and we all hug. /

...

/ Next morning. Zoé enters. /

[Zoé] "Good morning, Noémi!"

[Me] "Morning..."

/ I sit up. /

[Zoé] "Let me check you..."

...

[Zoé] "Okay, everything looks good. Alan will be here soon. And... I have something for you."

[Me] "What is it?"

/Zoé hands me two pill bottles./

[Zoé] "The blue one helps with memory. If something's not coming back, take one. The red one helps you focus on new things. Only take them if absolutely necessary. These can damage your brain if overused, and you'll get dependent... They were discontinued two years ago, but I thought you might need them. My grandma doesn't use them anymore."

[Inner thoughts]

Why is she giving me these? Won't the meds be enough?

[Me] "That's... kind? But why give them to me if they're dangerous?"

[Zoé] "One or two a year won't hurt. Only use them if you're really struggling..."

[Me] "Thanks, Zoé. But I don't want them."

[Zoé] "Alright, your call... Here's what I do need to give you—this just boosts brain function. More blood flow to your head, so even damaged areas work better."

[Me] "Okay, thanks..."

/ Alan enters. /

[Alan] "So, Noémi? Finally taking you home—can't believe it."

[Me] "Me neither... Finally see what happened in two months."

/ I look around Alan. /

[Me] "Where's Zora?"

[Alan] "In school. Teacher wouldn't let her skip—they're at a crucial part."

[Me] "Ah, okay."

[Zoé] "I'll leave you to it. Glad you're okay, Noémi—try not to visit me again anytime soon."

[Me] "I'll do my best, don't worry."

/ Zoé and I laugh. Alan puts a bag in front of me. /

[Zoé] "See you later!"

/ Zoé leaves. /

[Me] "What's in the bag?"

[Alan] "Open it..."

/ I open it. /

[Inner thoughts]

What's this? New clothes... and pictures? Of me? Zora and Alan took photos every week...

/ I pull out nine photos. I look at Alan, then back at them. /

[Inner thoughts]

These are all of me... lying here.

The first one is just Alan... on the phone. It says: "First week..."

The second has Zora too: "Second week... Miss you so much."

The third is just Zora... sleeping in a chair, her head on my bed: "Third week... You can wake up now..."

The fourth is Alan holding my hand: "One month... Zoé says you'll wake up soon."

The fifth shows Zoé and Zora playing: "Month 1, Week 1... Waiting for you."

The sixth is Zora, presumably at school: "My first week! Month 1, Week 2."

The seventh is Alan taking a selfie with me: "Where are you, princess? Month 1, Week 3."

The eighth is just Zoé: "They couldn't come today... Month 1, Week 4."

The ninth is Alan and Zora: "You moved and talked today! Month 2, Week 1."

The last one is blank... just says: "YOU WOKE UP!"

/ I stare at the photos for a few seconds, speechless. /

[Me] "Alan... wow. I..."

[Alan] "We missed you so much... We thought if we took pictures with you every week... it'd help. I was here almost every day."

/ I stand and step closer to Alan. /

[Me] "Thank you... for everything."

/ I hug him. /

[Alan] "Now that you're here, everything's better."

/ Alan lifts his head, looking into my eyes. /

[Inner thoughts]

Ugh, those eyes... I can't resist.

/ My body takes over—my brain shuts off. I kiss him. /

...

[Alan] "Wow... That was... good."

[Me] "Felt right..."

/ I lean back to check the clothes, but Alan pulls me in again. /

[Alan] "One more?"

/ Before he finishes, I kiss him again. /

[Me] "There."

[Alan] "Thanks..."

[Me] "I'll change... into the clothes you brought."

[Alan] "Mia sent the new ones."

[Me] "That's sweet! I'll be right back."

/ I head to the bathroom. /

[Inner thoughts]

I like this outfit—comfy sweats and a new bra set.

/ I open the bathroom door. /

[Me] "Ready... Let's go."

[Alan] "Alright, come on!"

/ I grab the doorknob. /

[Inner thoughts]

Just like on the other side...

[Alan] "Everything okay?"

[Me] "Yeah, just thinking."

/ I open the door and step out of the hospital room.

Alan and I walk straight to the exit. On the way, János passes by. /

[János] "Glad you're better. Take care!"

[Me] "I will!"

/ We reach the exit and step outside. /

[Alan] "One more surprise..."

[Me] "What is it?"

[Alan] "Come on..."

/ We walk through the parking lot. /

[Inner thoughts]

I don't see his car anywhere...

[Alan] "Look."

/ Alan unlocks a sports car with the key. /

[Me] "Alan... wow. How? With what money?"

[Alan] "Always wanted a Nissan GTR R35. The money left in Dad's account covered most of it. It's used, but only 80,000 km."

[Me] "I'm happy for you!"

/ Alan opens the passenger door. /

[Alan] "Get in!"

/ I climb in. Alan gets in the driver's seat. I toss my bag in the back. /

[Me] "You kept the Volvo, right? This isn't exactly spacious."

/ Alan looks at me, and I burst out laughing. /

[Alan] "Of course! It's in the garage. Speaking of home... You'll love it."

[Me] "Can't wait."

/ Alan starts driving. The car is unbelievably smooth. /

...

/ Twenty minutes later, we reach a village. /

[Me] "Briarwood... Mom and I wanted to move here."

[Alan] "Really?"

[Me] "Yeah..."

[Alan] "Then you'll love the house. Big property, private area. Nearest neighbor is 40 meters away. Quiet. And the rooms? Amazing."

[Me] "How much was it?"

[Alan] "Around 120 million. A lot, but there's still money left. And the restaurant's doing well. I'll take you there tomorrow."

[Inner thoughts]

Holy... How much did Amadeus have?

[Me] "I'd love that dinner... So, should I take this as you finally asking me out after all this time?"

[Alan] "I wasn't prepared for that question, ma'am. But if you'd like, then yes."

/ We turn onto a quiet street. Then I see the house. /

[Me] "Wow... Alan, it's beautiful."

/ Alan opens the garage with a remote. He parks inside. /

[Alan] "Welcome home..."

Chapter Twelve

Peace



/ I sit down on the terrace to drink coffee /

[Inner thoughts]

A week has passed since I woke up from the coma... My meeting with Mom and Dad still lingers in my mind, especially before falling asleep... Zora is doing well in school, she's already learning to read. Dinner with Alan at his restaurant went damn well. Alan stops by the restaurant every other day to check on things—he's completely shut down his private detective office. His mother, Aurora, was recently released from the psychiatric hospital. Alan plans to visit her soon... He wants to talk to her... I still can't believe life can be this peaceful... I haven't told Alan yet about meeting Mom and Dad... while I was in the coma...

/ Alan steps out onto the terrace and sits beside me /

[Alan] "You're enjoying the peace, aren't you?"

[Me] "Me? I love it... This silence, the air—it's helping me recover. Speaking of which, I remembered I have a check-up next month. So, in two weeks."

[Alan] "Are you noticing your memory getting worse?"

[Me] "Yes, a little. I struggle more with passwords, where I put things, and yesterday I even had trouble with names..."

[Alan] "What do you mean?"

[Me] "I tried to recall the doctors' names—János and Zoé—but it was hard. Though I did remember eventually."

[Alan] "If you keep your mind active, trust me, you'll be fine."

[Me] "That's what I think too. We'll see how it goes."

[Alan] "I'm heading to the restaurant, then I'll pick up Zora. Would you like to go for a walk this afternoon? I think Zora would join us."

[Me] "Sure, I like the idea."

/ Alan stands up, smiles, and heads back inside /

[Inner thoughts]

Ah, Alan... Ever since Zoé opened my eyes, I can't help myself... Why haven't I admitted my feelings until now?

...

/ I stay on the terrace a few more minutes to finish my coffee, then go inside /

[Inner thoughts]

This house... It's beautiful and spacious. I love that the terrace is on the second floor, opening from the kitchen.

/ My phone rings—Alan is calling. I answer. /

[Me] "Yes, Alan?"

[Alan] *"Can you check the gun storage? Levente asked how many unopened 9mm ammo boxes we have. He mentioned the legal limit is 50 boxes—2,500 rounds. I think we only have 50-round boxes."*

[Inner thoughts]

Huh, I knew we had a lot, but why does he need so much?

[Me] "Alright, I'll check. Should I call you back or just call Levente?"

[Alan] "Call Levente. I'll be busy and might not notice."

[Me] "Got it!"

[Alan] "Thanks... And..."

[Me] "Yeah?"

[Alan] "Gotta go, bye!"

[Me] "Ugh... Bye!"

[Inner thoughts]

Wonder what he wanted to say...

/ I walk downstairs and head to the gun storage,
opening the door /

[Inner thoughts]

Alright, let's pull out the 9mm ammo crate...

/ I slide out the crate from under the table and remove
the lid /

[Me] * "These are 50-round boxes, just like Alan said.
There aren't too many—I'll start counting..."*

/ I place them one by one on the crate's lid /

[Me] "Huh..."

[Inner thoughts]

Only 21 boxes... So 21 times 50... That's 1,050 rounds.
Still well below the legal limit. I'll call Levente.

/ I dial Levente /

[Levente] "Hey, Noémi! Long time no talk—how are
you?"

[Me] "Hey! Better... Alan asked me to count our 9mm
ammo boxes. Then he told me to call you."

[Levente] "Yeah, how many are there?"

[Me] "21 boxes of 50, so 1,050 rounds total."

[Levente] "Good, that's well within legal limits. What's new with you? What've you been up to?"

[Me] "Well, Alan's at the restaurant, Zora's at school. Alan's picking her up today. I'm just resting. Might read something later..."

[Levente] "Zora and I got along great while you were in a coma. I'd like to take her to the mall tomorrow. It's Saturday, and a friend's opening his shop early—I'd love to spend time with her. You and Alan could have some time alone."

[Inner thoughts]

He misses her, huh. Can't blame him—I went through hell to get her back... And it'd be nice to finally have time alone with Alan.

[Me] "Sounds good. I've spent every weekday afternoon with her—playing, doing homework, even baking. On weekends, I've been reading her bedtime stories. She's a special kid. I get why you adore her."

[Levente] "Yeah... She makes all the suffering worth it, doesn't she?"

[Me] "Absolutely."

[Levente] "So, what time can I pick her up tomorrow?"

[Me] "How about 9 AM? She'll be up and ready by then—if she wants to go."

[Levente] "Right, right. Could you ask her if she's interested? Then call me tonight to confirm?"

[Me] "Sure, I'll call you."

[Levente] "Thanks so much, and for checking the ammo too. Call me later! Bye!"

[Me] "Will do, bye!"

/ Levente hangs up. I start repacking the boxes /

...

/ A few hours pass. It's afternoon—Alan and Zora enter through the front door /

[Zora] "Hi, Noémi!"

[Me] "Hi, Zora! How was school?"

[Zora] "Good! We did math all day—I'm tired."

[Alan] "Hey!"

[Me] "Hey!"

[Me] "Zora, would you like to go to the mall with Levente tomorrow?"

[Zora] "Yes! When's he coming?"

[Me] "He'll pick you up at 9 AM."

[Zora] "Okay! I like hanging out with him. He teaches me a lot."

[Me] "Glad you two get along. I'll let him know he can come!"

[Zora] "Okay!"

/ I call Levente—he answers /

[Me] "Hey! Zora said she'd love to go. So, 9 AM pickup. Around what time will you be back?"

[Levente] "Hmm, maybe around 6 PM? If that works for you."

[Alan] "Who are you talking to?"

[Me] "Levente—he's taking her to the mall tomorrow."

[Alan] "Ah, got it!"

[Me] "Alright, 9 AM then."

[Levente] "Cool, I'll be there. See ya!"

[Me] "Bye!"

/ I hang up /

[Alan] "They really get along... What about the ammo? Are we good?"

[Me] "Yeah, everything's fine. We have less than I thought—1,050 rounds."

[Alan] "Good. Still up for that walk?"

[Inner thoughts]

Ah, yes... The area's quiet, and there's a lake nearby...

[Me] "Sure, how about the lake? Last week we couldn't go because Zora needed to pee..."

[Alan] "Sounds good. Can you get Zora ready? I'll grab a box from the car—some of your old stuff and mine. Mom sent it... She called me on my way home. Didn't realize she'd deteriorated this much, but she seems better now."

[Inner thoughts]

Aurora's out? She was in for months... Hope she's improved...

[Me] "She's out? What did she say?"

[Alan] "I'll tell you later. Just help Zora get dressed—not like last time. I'll be right back."

/ Alan heads to the garage. I knock on Zora's door /

[Zora] "Come in!"

/ I open the door /

[Me] "We're going for a walk—straight to the lake today. Dress warm—it's colder than last time."

[Zora] "But last time's outfit was so uncomfortable!
Can't I stay home?"

[Me] "Zora, I'd really love it if you came. Maybe try
these..."

/ I walk to her closet and pull out comfy-looking pants
/

[Zora] "My butt hurts in these—I move a little and
then..."

[Me] "Fine, wear what you want. Just come with us—
but I'm warning you, it's cold and getting colder."

/ I leave the room /

[Inner thoughts]

Maybe if she gets cold, she'll learn... Worked for me
as a kid.

/ Alan brings a box from the garage and sets it on the
kitchen table /

[Alan] "Come look through it. Some of it's mine. My
old landlord dropped it at Dad's place, where Mom
went after her release. He noticed and figured he'd
bring it to the restaurant."

/ I rummage through it, pulling out old photos /

[Me] "Huh, look. Probably our first family photo..."

/ I keep digging, then freeze—pulling out /

[Me] "...My old camera. Dad gave it to me when I was seven... I took so many pictures with this... Can't believe it's still here."

[Alan] "Want to take it? We could snap some shots at the lake."

[Me] "Let's bring it!"

/ Zora steps out, properly dressed /

[Zora] "Ready! Let's go?"

[Me] "Sure, Zora. Let me change, then we'll head out."

/ Alan steps closer, whispering /

[Alan] "You dressed her well—warmly. Almost like you're her mom."

[Me] "Oh no, I left it to her... She dressed herself like this."

...

[Inner thoughts]

This path is surprisingly well-maintained for such a sparsely populated area. And now that I have my old camera... I need to tell Alan what happened while I was in the coma. Tomorrow, while Zora's with Levente.

/ We reach the lake /

[Zora] "Noémi, I'm hot..."

[Me] "Take off your jacket if you want. I'll loosen up too. The sun's out—it's warmer than expected for fall."

[Alan] "Got your camera, Noémi?"

[Me] "Mhm."

[Alan] "Mind if I take a shot of you by the lake?"

[Me] "Go ahead. You know how to use it, right?"

[Alan] "Yep!"

/ I pose by the water—Alan snaps the photo /

[Me] "How's it look?"

[Alan] "Think it's good..."

/ I check the photo /

[Me] "Wow, it's great!"

[Zora] "Let me see!"

/ We show her /

[Zora] "It is good! Can I get one too?"

[Me] "Of course. Come here!"

/ I take the camera from Alan and photograph Zora /

[Me] "Come see!"

[Zora] "It's nice!"

[Me] "Should we print these?"

[Zora] "Yes!"

[Alan] "My turn!"

/ Alan strikes a silly pose by the lake—I snap the shot /

[Me] "Aaand, got it!"

/ Alan checks the photo and laughs /

[Alan] "This is actually great..."

[Me] "Want one of all three of us?"

[Zora] "Yes!"

[Alan] "Sure, gather up!"

/ I set the camera on a timer, then join them by the lake—it snaps /

[Me] "Think it turned out well..."

/ Rain starts falling /

[Me] "Zora, put your jacket back on—let's go... Don't want to get soaked."

[Alan] "Quick—under that tree..."

...

/ I open the terrace door and sit at the table /

[Inner thoughts]

7 AM. Zora's still asleep... Should get things ready before Levente arrives. We got drenched yesterday. Surprised my nose isn't running this morning... I need to talk to Alan about what happened in the coma... But I'm scared of his reaction. What if he says I've lost it? Or claims I dreamed it? But I know it was real.

/ Alan steps onto the terrace with his coffee /

[Alan] "Morning... Mind if I join?"

[Me] "Not at all!"

/ He sits beside me /

[Me] "While I was in the coma... You know, something strange happened to me..."

[Alan] "What do you mean?"

/ Zora opens the terrace door /

[Zora] "Noémi, which outfit should I wear? Help?"

[Me] "Sure, Zora—coming. I'll tell you later, Alan."

[Alan] "Alright."

...

[Zora] "Levi's almost here—can you help with my hair?"

[Me] "Sure, come here."

/ I start brushing her hair /

[Me] "Levente lets you call him 'Levi'?"

[Zora] "Yeah, he said I can call him whatever. Sometimes I say 'Levente,' sometimes 'Levi.'"

[Me] "Haha, got it."

/ My phone rings—Levente. I answer /

[Levente] "Hey Noémi! I'm outside—just shout when she's coming out!"

[Me] "She'll be right there—one sec!"

[Levente] "Cool! See ya then!"

[Me] "Bye!"

/ He hangs up /

[Me] "Okay, Zora. Levi's here—put your shoes on!"

[Zora] "Okay..."

...

/ Levente rolls down his car window as we walk out /

[Levente] "Hey!"

[Zora] "Hi!"

[Me] "Hi!"

[Levente] "I'll bring her back by 6 PM."

[Me] "Sounds good. Zora, behave, please!"

/ Zora climbs into the passenger seat /

[Zora] "I will!"

[Levente] "Tell Alan I said hi..."

[Me] "I will!"

[Levente] "Bye!"

[Me] "Bye, guys!"

/ They drive off. I head back inside /

[Alan] "Watched from the window—you seeing Zora off like that... You could be her mom."

[Me] "Well, her actual mom's some shady Russian woman. Thank God I'm nothing like her."

[Alan] "Didn't mean it like that. You care for her, pay attention, love her. I think she sees you as more than a big sister."

[Me] "I love Zora. Honestly, I wouldn't have let her go anywhere for a while if I didn't trust Levente or know most of the mafia's in jail now. We fought so hard to get her back. Her spirit's still broken—I see it every morning... But I also see her doing much better than when we first met."

[Alan] "Yeah, we fought hard... But remember, everything's okay now. We watch out for each other. Our past's... messy. Wouldn't wish it on anyone."

/ Alan steps closer and hugs me /

[Inner thoughts]

Never thought I'd get this far with Alan. Or that I'd finally find peace in a place like this...

[Alan] "Want to grab lunch at the restaurant later? Need to check on the staff anyway."

[Me] "Sure—what time?"

[Alan] "Around 1 PM? Even if it runs long, we'll be back by 6."

[Me] "Okay, I'll start getting ready soon. Gonna read a bit..."

[Alan] "Cool... What are you reading?"

[Me] "About a boy and girl fleeing their country... No spoilers—read it yourself! I'll lend it when I'm done."

[Alan] "Deal. Let me know when you finish! I'll go wash the Nissan—back in an hour."

[Me] "Okay..."

/ Alan heads to the garage. I sit down to read... /

...

[Inner thoughts]

Time to start getting ready—Alan should be back soon.

/ I stand and head to the shower /

...

/ I step out, dry off, and dress /

[Inner thoughts]

Weird he's not back yet. I'll get dressed and fix my hair.

/ I head to my room—Alan pulls into the garage /

...

/ Alan enters /

[Alan] "Back! Car wash was packed—give me 20 minutes to get ready."

[Me] "Okay, I just need to do my makeup."

/ Alan showers while I apply makeup /

...

[Inner thoughts]

Mom taught me how to do this... I need to talk to Alan at the restaurant about the coma...

...

/ Alan, now dressed, approaches /

[Alan] "Done. How much longer for you?"

[Me] "I'm ready too—let's go!"

[Alan] "Great, let's roll."

/ We head to the garage and get in the car /

...

/ Alan parks at the restaurant /

[Alan] "Busier than usual—good for business. But we've got extra staff today. If it gets too loud or overwhelming, just say so—we'll handle it."

[Me] "Okay, thanks. Hope it won't be necessary..."

[Inner thoughts]

Since waking from the coma, I've been sensitive to loud noises, sudden flashes, touch... Only from strangers, though. Weird, but it is what it is.

/ We enter the restaurant /

[Inner thoughts]

It is crowded. Good to see Alan's place thriving...

[Leonárd] "Alan! Noémi! Hey! Your table's ready—let me grab your drinks, then I'll check other tables. We're swamped—had to send Dorina and Zelda home early. They were mixing up orders and feeling awful. Rest'll do them good."

[Alan] "No problem. I actually want to talk with Noémi anyway."

[Leonárd] "Thanks, boss!"

[Inner thoughts]

So I'm not the only one wanting a conversation...

/ Leonárd leads us to our table /

[Leonárd] "Drinks in a minute, food in about 30."

[Alan] "Thanks!"

/ Leonárd leaves /

[Me] "What did you want to talk about... Alan?"

[Alan] "Well, I wanted to sit on this a bit longer, but... Here goes."

[Me] "Okay..."

/ Alan takes my hand across the table /

[Alan] "While you were in a coma, I couldn't stop thinking: Why you? I mean, start with the fast-food job. I was your manager, briefly. Then you worked for my dad. After he died, you helped me through all that chaos—while we fought to get Zora back... And now here we are, peaceful, like a family. Zora's in school, I'm finally doing what I love, and you... You're resting, at peace. Why you and me? How'd we get this close?"

[Inner thoughts]

Fate really seems to have orchestrated this... How do I even respond?

[Me] "Fate brings things we'd never expect."

[Alan] "Can I ask you something?"

[Me] "Sure..."

[Alan] "Why did you stay with me?"

[Inner thoughts]

...

[Me] "I don't know... Something always told me I was safest with you."

/ Leonárd arrives with drinks /

[Leonárd] "Food's almost ready!"

[Alan] "Thanks!"

/ Leonárd leaves /

[Alan] "I... I've grown really attached to you. Didn't plan to, but after everything... I can't imagine my life without you. That's all I wanted to say. Maybe too blunt, but... yeah."

/ Alan leans back, meeting my gaze /

[Inner thoughts]

Funny how this unfolded... I feel the same, just...

[Me] "I feel the same, Alan. I just... Never wanted to admit it. I'm scared of all this."

[Alan] "Why are you scared?"

[Me] "I don't know. Rationally, there's no reason. My soul just reacts this way."

[Alan] "I get that."

[Inner thoughts]

Ugh, why am I lying? I know I love him. He's done so much for me, for Zora...

[Me] "You know... If you're up for it... We could try being... more than roommates."

[Alan] "Really? You'd want that?"

[Me] "Yes!"

/ Alan stands, grinning /

[Alan] "Then I'm in!"

...

/ After returning home, Alan stays in the garage. I head inside /

[Inner thoughts]

Today was... interesting. Alan and I are officially together. Never thought I'd get here... Though not much changes—we've just admitted we need each other.

/ My phone rings—Levente. I answer /

[Me] "Hey, Levente! Everything okay?"

[Levente] "Yeah! Just checking—can Zora and I stay out another 2 hours and 15 minutes? Want to catch a movie."

[Zora] "Please, Noémi! Let us!"

[Me] "Uh... Fine! Go ahead, enjoy the movie. Just call before heading back."

[Zora] "YES!"

[Levente] "Great! Thanks, Noémi!"

/ They hang up. Alan comes inside, and we sit on the couch /

[Alan] "Who called?"

[Me] "Levente. He and Zora are staying out for a movie."

[Alan] "So we've got more time alone..."

/ Alan scoots closer... /

[Me] "What are you doing...?"

[Alan] "What I've wanted to for a long time."

/ His fingers trace my skin, pulling me closer /

[Inner thoughts]

What's he—

...

[Inner thoughts]

That was... Amazing. Never imagined...

/ My phone rings—Levente. I reach down from the couch /

[Inner thoughts]

They must be close. I'll wake Alan.

/ I nudge Alan /

[Me] "Alan, they're almost back. Go to your room. I'll get dressed..."

[Alan] "Got it..."

/ I answer /

[Me] "Hey, Levente..."

[Levente] "Hey! We're 5 minutes away. Zora's asleep—I'll carry her in. Just have her bed ready."

[Me] "Okay, thanks..."

/ He hangs up /

[Inner thoughts]

That long already? They were out forever... Maybe they ate too.

/ I dress and tidy Zora's room /

...

/ Levente knocks /

[Levente] "We're here!"

/ I open the door—Zora's asleep in his arms /

[Levente] "She's heavy for not even 15..."

[Me] "Tell me about it... Come on, I'll show you her room."

/ He tucks her in /

[Levente] "I'll head out. Loved spending time with her."

[Me] "I'm grateful... While you were gone, Alan and I got... a lot closer."

[Levente] "Happy for you... Really gotta go—goodnight!"

/ He leaves. I watch Zora sleep a while longer /

Chapter Thirteen

Why me?



/ I step out onto the terrace to drink coffee. /

[Inner thoughts]

Last night was really interesting... Alan and I are the closest we've ever been now. As for Levente, it's like he's Zora's grandfather... I still haven't told Alan what happened to me in the coma... I never get the chance. And even when I do, for some reason, I can't get the words out.

/ Alan comes out onto the terrace and sits next to me.
/

[Alan] "Good morning!"

[Me] "Good morning."

[Alan] "Got any plans for today?"

[Me] "Not really, but... Listen..."

[Alan] "Yeah?"

[Me] "While I was in the coma, something... strange happened to me."

[Alan] "Like what?"

[Me] "I met Mom and Dad... But not as memories. It felt... real."

[Alan] "What do you mean? You dreamed about them?"

[Me] "I don't know... It was so vivid... Wait, let me explain everything."

[Alan] "Alright..."

[Me] "I was in full gear the whole time. It started with me standing in an empty black space, with a white door that looked like the one from our old house. I debated for a while whether to go through it. Eventually, I did. The room I stepped into was a vast white space. At first, no one spoke to me. Then I heard Mom's voice... We talked, and then Dad appeared too... We said our final goodbyes and... hugged one last time as a family. Then I woke up."

[Alan] "That's... intense. Why didn't you stay with them?"

[Me] "A voice told them their time was almost up... I said I'd gladly stay with them, that we could be together again... But the voice wouldn't let me. So I woke up in the hospital bed, with you sitting beside me."

[Alan] "What did this voice sound like?"

[Me] "I don't even know how to describe it..."

[Alan] "Thank God it didn't let you stay. What would Zora and I do without you?"

[Me] "I don't know what I was thinking... It just felt so good to see them, to touch them..."

[Alan] "So in your coma, you... really said goodbye to them for good?"

[Me] "Yeah, you could say that... Since then, I've felt lighter. But I know when everything's over, they'll be waiting for me on the other side."

[Alan] "Just like I will be, if I go before you..."

[Me] "Let's hope that's a long, long time from now..."

...

/ Alan and I head back inside. Zora opens her bedroom door. /

[Zora] "Uh... Good morning..."

[Me] "Good morning, Zora. How was yesterday?"

[Zora] "It was fun. Levi got me some new stuff, we ate, went to the movies."

[Alan] "I'm gonna go tidy up the garage for a bit. After that, wanna go for another walk?"

[Me] "Sounds good. Zora?"

[Zora] "Me too!"

[Alan] "I'll hurry then!"

...

[Inner thoughts]

While Alan's in the garage, I'll organize the armory...
And clean my Glock, too. It's on the nightstand.

/ I head to the armory. /

[Inner thoughts]

Starting with the ammo. I'll sort it by caliber, then
arrange the guns top to bottom.

...

[Inner thoughts]

Done with that...

[Zora] "You finished, Noémi? I'm hungry..."

[Me] "Yeah, Zora. Sorry, I lost track of time. Go sit in
the kitchen, I'll make you something. What do you
want?"

[Zora] "Dunno... A grilled cheese would be fine."

[Me] "Got it. Be there in a few. Can you set out what
we need?"

[Zora] "Okay!"

...

/ I go to the kitchen. /

[Me] "Coming! Sorry, here now!"

[Zora] "I put everything out. How long 'til it's ready?"

[Me] "Five, ten minutes!"

[Zora] "Okay!"

/ I make the grilled cheese. /

[Zora] "Thanks!"

[Me] "No problem. And again, sorry—totally lost track of time..."

...

[Inner thoughts]

Almost done cleaning my Glock... Glad Dad's gun is mine now. He used it a lot—who knows how many lives it's ended.

/ Alan comes back inside from the garage. /

[Alan] "Garage is done. Ready for that walk? Near the lake where we went last time, there's a bridge. We couldn't reach it because of the rain."

[Me] "Sure, I'll tell Zora to get ready!"

/ I go to Zora's room. /

[Me] "Zora, we're going for that walk now. Get ready, we'll wait outside."

[Zora] "Okay..."

...

/ Zora comes out the front door. /

[Zora] "So, we going?"

[Alan] "Yep, let's move!"

...

[Inner thoughts]

This area's so beautiful... I don't get why more people don't live nearby. Sure, it's far from the city, but still.

[Alan] "We're almost at the bridge. If you follow it far enough, you'll reach the edge of the city. If cars could drive on it, the trip downtown would take ten minutes, not an hour."

[Zora] "Wow, can you bike on it?"

[Alan] "Yeah!"

[Me] "How long is that bridge?"

[Alan] "You'll see!"

/ We reach the bridge. /

[Me] "It's freaking huge..."

[Alan] "Hah, knew you'd like it."

[Me] "And high up—must be 10 meters at least."

[Alan] "The water level makes it seem that way. In a few months, it'll be closer than you think."

[Zora] "Did you bring your camera, Noémi?"

[Me] "No, sadly..."

[Zora] "We could've taken such cool pictures here!"

[Alan] "She's right... But we can use my phone if you want!"

[Zora] "That works!"

[Me] "I'm in!"

/ We group up for the photo. /

...

/ Evening. We get home. Zora opens the front door. /

[Zora] "My ass is freezing."

[Me] "Mine too, haha."

[Alan] "I was starting to get cold. At least it didn't rain this time."

[Me] "True..."

[Zora] "Today was fun, guys."

[Me] "We had fun too, Zora."

[Alan] "C'mon, Zora. I'll make you hot chocolate—warm up a bit."

[Me] "I'll join soon, just gonna change first..."

/ Something crashes through our window. /

[Alan] "GET DOWN!"

/ A blinding flashbang detonates. /

[Inner thoughts]

WHAT'S HAPPENING? NOT THIS AGAIN—

[Man's voice] "НА ЗЕМЛЮ!" ("ON THE GROUND!")

[Alan] "I'LL KILL YOU, YOU—"

/ A small-caliber gunshot. Alan's body collapses like a ragdoll. /

[Zora] "HELP!"

[Man's voice] "GOT THE GIRL..."

/ I scramble up, sprint to my room for my gun—Dad's pistol—then rush back to the kitchen and fire. A man's body drops lifelessly. /

[Me] "ZORA, COME HERE!"

/ Zora runs toward me—then a sharp pain tears through my right shoulder. Against my will, my gun fires—aimed at Zora. Her body hits the floor. /

[Me] "ZORA!"

/ My legs give out. The adrenaline fades, reality crashes in. /

[Amanda] "Well, well..."

[Me] "WHAT DO YOU WANT?"

[Amanda] "Came for my daughter. But looks like I'm too late..."

[Me] "YOU PSYCHO BITCH!"

/ I fire at Amanda—then press the gun to my throat. /

[Me] "DROWN IN YOUR OWN BLOOD, YOU—"

[Man's voice] "AMANDA'S DOWN! MOVE OUT!"

/ My body shuts down from blood loss and shock. Only one thing matters now: breathing. /

[Inner thoughts]

Breathe, Noémi... Just breathe...

/ I turn my head. Zora's body lies still, eyes open—staring blankly. /

[Me] "Zora..."

/ Alan's body is nearby. Half his skull is gone. His remaining eye is fixed on Zora. /

[Me] "WHY ME? WHY ALWAYS ME?"

/ Darkness takes me. /

...

/ I wake up in a hospital bed—again. /

[Inner thoughts]

Ugh... where...? AGH—

[Me] "ALAN! ZORA!"

/ I thrash, hysterical sobs tearing from my throat. /

[Me] "IT CAN'T BE REAL—I'M A CURSE, A GODDAMN CURSE—"

[Zoé] "Noémi! Calm down!"

[Me] "THEY'RE DEAD, THEY'RE—"

[Zoé] "IF WE LOSE YOU TOO FROM THAT GUNSHOT, WHAT THEN? STOP FIGHTING—LET US HELP YOU!"

/ They inject a sedative into my IV. My vision blurs. /

...

/ I wake again. Zoé talks to someone outside the door—in audible. /

[Inner thoughts]

Why? Why? I killed them... It was me... Alan... ALAN!

[Zoé] "Noémi? You've been staring at the wall for hours. You talk out loud sometimes, but when I answer, you don't hear me."

[Me] "Zoé... They're gone."

[Zoé] "But you're alive. That's what matters now."

[Me] "Amanda... I killed her."

[Zoé] "A lot of people died. They hauled away four bodies. You were the only one found with a gunshot wound."

[Me] "When I... When I got shot... I accidentally—I SHOT ZORA."

/ Hysteria surges again. /

[Zoé] "Noémi. Listen. You're still here. That's all that matters."

[Me] "WHY SHOULD I LIVE? EVERYONE I LOVE IS DEAD! IT'S MY FAULT—I'M A CURSE!"

Chapter Fourteen

It's pointless now



/ Sitting outside on the terrace, staring into the distance /

[Inner thoughts]

A few weeks have passed since... No, I've had enough... I can't take it anymore... I need to go for a walk...

...

[Inner thoughts]

None of this makes sense... I walk the same path, over and over again, the one I used to take with Alan and Zora...

/ I reach the bridge /

[Inner thoughts]

If I jump now... and die... They'll be waiting on the other side... Just like Mom and Dad...

/ I step onto the railing to jump /

[Man's voice] "What are you doing, miss?"

[Inner thoughts]

This old man again...

[Me] "Just looking at the depth. It feels good."

[Man's voice] "Just don't fall, have a nice day..."

/ I step down from the railing and start walking toward
the city /

[Inner thoughts]

I didn't even go to their funerals... It's just pointless. I
failed... I failed as a partner, a friend, a child...

/ As I walk, I cross the bridge and enter the city /

...

/ Walking through the city, I arrive at the park /

[Inner thoughts]

This is where I first saw Zora, and where Amanda and
Gergő were arguing.

/ I sit on a bench /

...

/ A few hours later, I reach the stairwell of my old
apartment /

[Inner thoughts]

After Dad died, Mom and I moved here... We wanted
to start a new life... It didn't work.

...

/ Now I arrive at the fast-food place that used to belong to Amadeus—now it's closed /

[Inner thoughts]

Huh, no one's taken over since then... It was good working here, especially after Alan became my manager. I should leave...

...

/ As I walk, I reach the former private detective's office—it's being demolished /

[Inner thoughts]

Alan must have sold the property... That's where he got the extra money from...

...

/ It's getting dark—I reach the now-closed container ship area, with a few patrol officers monitoring the perimeter /

[Inner thoughts]

I can still feel the tension from when we broke in...

/ An officer approaches me /

[Man's voice] "Excuse me, ma'am. This area is closed. Do you need any help?"

[Inner thoughts]

If you killed me, I'd thank you...

[Man's voice] "Pardon?"

[Inner thoughts]

Maybe I was thinking out loud...

[Me] "Nothing... I was just leaving."

[Man's voice] "Where do you live? I'll take you. You shouldn't walk around here this late."

[Inner thoughts]

Maybe that's a better idea... I wouldn't make it home in the dark anyway...

[Me] "I live pretty far from here."

[Man's voice] "No problem, come on."

/ I follow the officer and get into the patrol car /

[Man's voice] "My name's Alistair. And yours?"

[Me] "Noémi."

[Alistair] "What's your address, Noémi?"

[Me] "Briarwood, 2 Blackthorn Lane."

[Alistair] "That's really far from here... Did you drive?"

[Me] "No, I walked."

[Alistair] "What brought you all the way out here from Briarwood?"

[Me] "..."

[Alistair] "Were you threatened?"

[Me] "No."

[Alistair] "Alright, if you don't want to talk about it, I won't push. Hope you're okay."

...

/ Half an hour later, we stop in front of the house /

[Alistair] "I left my district about 15 minutes ago—I should hurry back. And don't do anything stupid, alright? I don't know what you've been through, but I can see it on your face."

[Me] "Thanks for the ride."

/ I get out of the patrol car and enter through the front door. As I head toward the room, I stop in the kitchen /

[Inner thoughts]

This is where it all happened... I can still see it...
Zora... just staring... and Alan...

/ I run into the room, crying... /

...

/ In the morning, I wake up to the doorbell /

[Inner thoughts]

Didn't sleep much... Tossed and turned all night...

/ The doorbell rings again /

[Inner thoughts]

Who the hell is visiting this early?

/ I go downstairs and open the door /

[Zoé] "Good morning, Noémi. Sorry to bother you so early, but we wanted to check on you."

[Me] "We? Where's the other person?"

/ Levente steps out of Zoé's car /

[Levente] "Good morning, Noémi."

[Me] "Good morning."

[Zoé] "We just wanted to talk to you... Maybe—"

[Me] "Get lost... I'm not in the mood."

[Levente] "Please, Noémi, just a few minutes."

[Me] "No, I'm sick of everyone and everything... And you two just remind me even more of Alan and Zora—screw off!"

/ I slam the door and wait to see if they say anything /

[Zoé] "Well, this isn't good... Not good at all."

[Levente] "You did everything you could."

[Zoé] "If her mind keeps deteriorating like this, she'll reach a stage where she relives the same days over and over... The meds she's taking are too weak, and she refused the ones I wanted to give her."

[Levente] "Reliving the same days with the same emotions... It happened to her at the worst time. It's been almost a year since Alan, Zora and the others died, and we've been coming here every day since... She rarely lets us in. We'll try again tomorrow."

[Inner thoughts]

What? Almost a... year? No... I'd remember that, it can't be...

/ Zoé and Levente get back in the car and drive off /

[Inner thoughts]

If it's been a year, why do my feelings feel so fresh? Or is my mind just tricking me into thinking... Ugh, I'm done with this...

...

/ I sit on the terrace with my father's Glock in my hand, watching the sunset /

[Inner thoughts]

This is what I killed Zora with... And what made me fail... But on the other side, they're waiting... for me... Everyone I ever loved... There's just no point in staying here, on this side of life, when I can't even remember what I did yesterday... Alan promised he'd wait for me on the other side if he ever left me too soon...

/ I raise the gun to my head /

[Me] "Alan, Mom, Dad... Zora... I'm coming..."

/ I pull the trigger... /

Epilogue

Walker's Speech



/ Walker steps up to the coffin, places a hand on it,
then looks at the crowd. /

[Walker] "I don't usually speak publicly... But this
occasion is different."

/ Walker takes a step forward. /

[Walker] "They say time heals all wounds. But some
wounds never close. Noémi became that kind of
wound for us."

/ Walker looks up at the sky. /

[Walker] "She fought as long as there was meaning in
it. Then... she fell silent. Don't look for someone to
blame—not in yourselves, not in each other. What she
did wasn't against us. It was against her own pain."

/ Walker looks back at the crowd. /

[Walker] "Many have said, 'She never let anyone
close.' It's true. But not because she didn't want to—
because she was afraid."

...

Epilogue

[Walker] "I couldn't save her either. None of us could. But there were moments... a smile, half a sentence... when I could see what she might have been like if she'd found peace."

...

[Walker] "Now it's over. She's there, on the other side..."

Noémi's Letter



To Whoever Finds This,

I'm sorry. Not for what I'm about to do—I've earned this ending—but for the mess left behind. If you're reading this, it means I finally had the courage to finish what I should've done the moment I pulled the trigger on Zora.

Alan, Zora, Mom, Dad... they've been waiting for me. Every night, I see them—just out of reach, just beyond the bridge, the park, the old apartment, the places where I lost them. I've been walking in circles, reliving the same days, the same guilt. Zoé and Levente tried to help, but they don't understand. No one does.

I was supposed to protect them. Instead, I destroyed everything.

- Alan, you were the only one who ever saw me as more than a broken thing. I should've died in your place.*
- Zora, I still hear your voice when I close my eyes. I'm sorry I wasn't stronger.*
- Mom and Dad, I failed you both. You died thinking I'd move on. I didn't.*

The pills don't work. The days blur. The memories loop. I'm stuck in a world where they're dead but

*never gone, where every street, every room, is just
another grave I can't leave.*

So I'm leaving now.

*Don't blame Zoé. Don't blame Levente. They tried.
This was always going to be the end.*

Tell them—if they ask—that I'm not afraid anymore.

*Because when this gun fires, I won't see darkness.
I'll see the bridge again—but this time, they'll be
standing on the other side.*

Alan will smile that stupid, reckless smile.

Zora will roll her eyes like I'm late.

Mom will scold me for my messy hair.

Dad will say, "Took you long enough."

And for the first time in forever...

I'll be home.

~ Noémi

**Thank you for
taking the time
to read it!**