ELIAS & LOVISA

When Two Hearts Speak Different Languages



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PREFACE

This book is about a young man with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), the term this story uses throughout. His way of perceiving the world and relating to others often complicates romantic relationships, despite a strong longing for intimacy and love. Some situations are deliberately amplified for the sake of the narrative but are based on real experiences and recognisable patterns. Other details are factually possible, even if they sometimes appear improbable. The aim is not to reproduce reality exactly, but to portray an inner and outer reality that many will recognise.

I have encountered many of these challenges myself, as I am also on the autism spectrum. But, like many autistic people, I personally prefer the term autism spectrum condition.

The images in this book were generated using artificial intelligence. The quality varies, the style may shift from image to image, and a character's appearance may vary slightly between different images of them. Should any image happen to resemble a real person, it is not intentional, but a coincidence or a result of the algorithms' own expression.

This narrative is written in British English and is set in the United Kingdom. References to schools, social services, and other institutions broadly reflect the British context.

The Author

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Elias walked into the supermarket with four children. He was more or less herding them ahead of him. The little ones, aged three to five, reached for yellow bananas and bright oranges, turning to him with small laughs and eager questions. He tugged his t-shirt over his shoulders, pushed his glasses up his nose, and tried to keep them all moving at the same pace. He wasn't yet thirty, with medium-blond hair that sat a little too neatly, as though it were trying not to draw attention, much like himself. The smell of freshly washed fruit and damp greenery filled the air, every step sounded too loud against the shiny floor, every glance from

other customers was a silent test. Elias was here, surrounded by the colours and smells that pulled at his senses, yet like a shadow in the background, always on guard, with the children ahead of him like small beacons he needed to steer.

Suddenly, he froze, rooted to the spot, when he spotted a woman at the produce section choosing apples. He felt his heart pick up without her having the slightest idea he existed. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Fair skin with small pale freckles across her cheeks, and the subtle patches of psoriasis on her arms and neck made her somehow more present, more human. Her long red hair fell in soft, fluffy waves over her shoulders and caught the light as though it glowed. She stood there, touching an apple. Her movements were quick but purposeful. Every gesture felt effortless, full of life. The simple outfit, a white top and loose rust-coloured trousers, only emphasised how natural and alive she was. *Oh God, she's beautiful*, he thought. *What wonderful, long, fluffy hair… and what a fantastic bum… and wonderful breasts… Help! Did I really just think that? I didn't say any of that out loud, did I?*

He stood still, almost transfixed. Then, as if she could feel his gaze, she turned towards him. He couldn't hold her eyes and took a step back, alarmed that she had caught him. *Oh no! She's looking at me! Panic! She's going to be absolutely furious!* he thought. *Oh God, she's frowning, she looks so angry… I need to look somewhere else. ASAP.*

Elias looked away and discovered with a start that all four children had more or less dissolved into the shop and out of

sight. He hurried off to find them. Fortunately, they hadn't gone far and were busy examining the fruit themselves. One of them had peeled a banana and started eating it. Elias corrected him calmly, without raising his voice.

– My angel, you know you have to pay before you eat, don't you? Come on, let's get a banana from that basket over there, the one that's meant for eating in the shop. Just for little angels like you.

– But I got it from there!

– Blimey, aren't you clever. I'm sorry for having a go at you.

– You never have a go! You so kind!

Elias smiled at him and gave him a gentle pat on the head, then focused on gathering all four children and made his way round the produce section, filling the trolley with what he needed. He was careful to keep his back to the beautiful woman, yet couldn't help stealing glances in her direction when he thought she wasn't looking. It still felt as though she was staring at him, most likely because she was annoyed at being ogled earlier.

Before long, he was done with the fruit and veg and moved on, still keeping a close eye on the children. They were a lively lot, but Elias made sure they didn't cause any trouble, not once raising his voice. When he turned into the bread aisle, the beautiful woman was already there and seemed to be watching him. He nervously picked out bread he knew the children liked, something nutritious as well. *Don't look at her. Don't look at her. Just bread, just the*

children, nothing else. He hurried on to get away from her gaze.

He reached the cheese section, and she disappeared from view, so he asked the children which cheese they liked. When he turned into the next aisle, he caught a glimpse of her red hair further along and followed, just to get another look. When she began to turn her head, he immediately looked away and spoke to the children.

– What do you all fancy on your sandwiches, my little angels?

– I want cheese! the eldest boy shouted.

– Cheese and ham, that's just…

– But I said cheese first…

– Jam! I want jam, not cheese! the youngest girl said, while the others carried on.

– Hang on, I haven't even had a chance to say mine! another one burst out.

– Jam's better!

Elias listened patiently and, once they had settled down a little, said:

– We've already got jam at home. Let's find some ham here, shall we?

He felt the woman's eyes on the back of his neck and glanced discreetly over his shoulder. She was watching him intently, so he quickly grabbed the sandwich ham one of the children was pointing at and hurried on to the next section to get away from her gaze.

When he turned into the cereal aisle, she was already there, searching through the muesli. He looked at that wonderful wave of red hair and felt a warmth spread through him. *No, she's looking again. Quick, quick, what cereal do the children want?*

– What would you like for breakfast, my little angels? he asked, turning to the children.

He stole a glance at the woman and noticed she still seemed to be watching him intently. *She must be furious with me for staring*, he thought. He continued round the shop, but it felt as though she was following him. She seemed to be everywhere. Or was it him following her? He had to admit to himself that he thought she looked absolutely stunning, and his eyes kept being pulled in her direction.

When he finally reached the till to pay, she had thankfully disappeared. He checked out at the self-service and guided the children through the barrier and out through the front door into the car park. To his horror, the woman was standing outside and met his eyes directly. The discomfort hit him at once, and he dropped his gaze. *Fantastic breasts*, he had time to think. *No, no, don't look there.* He quickly let his eyes slide away to the children instead.

– Hi there! Wait a moment, I need to talk to you!

Elias was practically shaking. *Oh God, she's going to tear strips off me. Hurry, hurry, get out of here*, he thought.

– Forget it. This is a car park, and I've got four children to keep an eye on.

He put his arms round the children and steered them past the woman towards his car. As he passed her, he focused hard on the children and was careful not to glance in her direction at all.

– McDonald's, twelve o'clock tomorrow! she called after him. I know you heard me!

– Fine, fine, he managed, for lack of anything better.

He got in behind the wheel, his heart still pounding and his hands refusing to quite stop shaking. In the rear-view mirror, he could see the children already chattering about something else entirely, as if nothing had happened. He wished he could do the same. He started the car and drove off. *Focus on the road. Focus on the children. Focus on anything else.*

When he finally got home, he made dinner for them from the ingredients he'd just bought. It was hard work managing four children at the table, but at the same time, he loved it. After the meal, he asked them to put their plates and cutlery in the dishwasher, and after some gentle persuasion, they did.

Then he followed them into the children's room. He lived in a house with four rooms and a kitchen. It looked old but had been completely modernised and was in excellent condition. In the children's room, he sat with them and played, enjoying every moment of it. He was completely focused on them as though nothing else existed. The woman from the shop had been pushed entirely from his mind.

The children wanted to go out, so he helped them with their coats and shoes. Then he took them to the play park where they could really burn off some energy. There were several other children there. Unlike the other parents, who sat round with their phones in hand, he hadn't brought his out at all. He was completely focused on what the children were doing, stepping in whenever one of them needed him.

After several hours, he headed home again with the children. They were practically steaming with warmth from all the running about. He, on the other hand, was properly cold by this point. He kept it to himself and showed nothing, just happy to be with them. Once home, he made their evening meal and then began the bedtime routine. Eventually, everyone was in pyjamas or a nightgown, teeth brushed, and faces washed. He read them a bedtime story and kissed each of them goodnight on the forehead, one by one.

Finally, he sank onto the sofa in the living room and had a moment to himself at last. Now the beautiful woman from the shop came back to him, and he couldn't stop thinking about her. *Oh God, she was stunning. An incredible figure. And that wonderful hair!* he thought. Her image was etched deep in his memory. But as for going to McDonald's, not a chance. The last thing he wanted was to meet that sharp-tongued woman again and get an earful.

After drifting through a few episodes of a series on the telly, he went to bed. The woman followed him into his dreams, and he slept restlessly through the night.

The following day was Sunday, so he wasn't working then either. He did work at an IT company, ten per cent of full time, but never at weekends. Well, except during the weeks he was on call, of course. The children had breakfast and then played reasonably well in the children's room with him. As lunchtime approached, they began to chant:

– Maccies! Maccies! We're going to Maccies!

– Now, my angels, I never promised I'd take you to McDonald's.

– But you said "fine" to that red-haired lady. The one with really long hair! Red hair, like fire!

Elias hesitated. He hadn't meant to agree at all, but the children had clearly taken it that way. They looked up at him with wide, pleading eyes. He caved immediately. *Damn it, I can never resist pleading little eyes!* He looked at the time. Nearly twelve.

– All right then, we'll go to McDonald's.

– Yay!

– Hooray!

– Yes yes yes yes yes!

– Happy Meal! I want a Happy Meal!

– It's a bit early yet, but we'll head off soon.

Time moved painfully slowly, and the children grew more and more excitable. Just before one o'clock, he couldn't hold out any longer. He bundled all the children into the car and drove to McDonald's.

He dreaded the thought of the beautiful woman being there, waiting to give him a dressing-down.

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Elias walked into McDonald's with all four children gathered round him. The first thing he spotted was a wave of red hair that seemed to light up the whole restaurant. A pang hit his stomach before the thought had even fully formed. *Oh God, she's still here! It's gone one o'clock. Why hasn't she left?* He shepherded the children towards the counter to order. It turned into a proper circus at the till. All the children started shouting at once, eager and bouncy as though their lives depended on getting exactly the right thing from the menu:

– Nuggets, I want nuggets!

– Burger and chips!

– I want **cheese** on my burger!

– Nuggets, I said **nuggets**!

– Hang on, I haven't even had a chance to say mine!

– **No** cheese on mine, but loads of chips!

– Hang on, burger **and** nuggets for me!

– They don't do that!

– Then I want **cheese**, but no burger!

– You're not having **my** cheese anyway!

Elias had to work hard to get some order into the chaos, but he didn't lose his temper for a single second. Instead, he listened patiently to each child in turn and managed to relay everyone's order correctly to the cashier. Then he ordered a burger for himself as well and gently tried to ease one of the children aside so he could pay. Suddenly, a lightly red-mottled arm reached in from behind and tapped a card on the reader. Elias flinched and stepped back as the red-haired woman almost touched him in her eagerness to pay.

He put his arms round the children and drew them to one side, avoiding looking at the woman by dropping to his knees and speaking to the children quietly.

– We'll wait over here while the server sorts out your food. Other people want to order.

– Yes, like that lady with the fire hair!

– That's not a very kind thing to say, Elias said, embarrassed.

The woman heard the remark and smiled warmly at the children and at Elias. He could feel her gaze boring into him. She ordered her food and then stood a little way off,

watching him and the children the whole time. He shifted uncomfortably and stole a glance at her. *Oh God, if only she weren't so beautiful*, he thought. *Then maybe I'd be able to stop staring like an twit.*

Before long, he had all the orders stacked on a number of trays and carried them to a table with enough seats for everyone. He sat down at the end, and the children sat down round him. Then he handed out the boxes, four identical boxes, four different orders, but he got the right box to the right child without a moment's hesitation. They eagerly tore open their Happy Meals, and there was a happy chaos of wrapping paper and toys for a while before everyone was satisfied.

Once the children started eating, Elias noticed that the woman had sat down in the last chair to his left, with only one child between them. His stomach tightened with nerves, and he focused entirely on the children.

The woman said nothing yet, but he noticed her restlessly playing with the straw in her drink. Her gaze lingered on him and the children, on how he helped them fit their toys together, wiped away ketchup without seeming to think about it. There was organised chaos at the table, and she seemed unable to look away from how he handled it.

Eventually, the children finished eating and wanted to play in the play area, so he let them run in. Since he had his back to it, he moved to the other side of the table so he could keep an eye on them. In doing so, he ended up diagonally opposite the woman, who was sitting at the far end of the

table, with empty chairs between them on either side. He kept his gaze fixed straight ahead, but out of the corner of his eye, he saw her lean forward and say, quite openly:

– Hi! Hi there! We haven't even introduced ourselves! My name's Lovisa, and I just have to say it straight out. I want to marry you and start a family, and I mean right now, immediately, practically yesterday!

– What?!

The words poured out of her so fast that he could barely catch the meaning before the next sentence was already on its way. Elias turned his head towards Lovisa, his face full of disbelief and a touch of alarm, overwhelmed by the flood of sound. She looked him straight in the eyes, stirring that same unease in him again. Out of habit, he dropped his gaze by the best part of a foot. *No, stop staring at her breasts, you idiot!* he thought. The fear of conflict inside him surged like a storm, and his eyes began to dart about again.

– What did you say?!

– I said I'm interested in you and I want to marry you. I mean it, genuinely! You seem absolutely wonderful!

Elias was almost seized by panic. He fixed his gaze on the play area and counted the children again, even though he had only just done so. His chest tightened, and he couldn't quite get the air down properly.

– But… right… I mean… I don't think… Hang on, wow…

– I mean it. You are attracted to me, aren't you? The way you were looking at me in the shop. Admit it. You want this too!

– Well… like… sorry for staring, but I don't really want… I mean, I'm not sure I'm actually interested.

– Well, I am! Trust me on that. I think you are, too. What's your name, by the way?

– I'd rather not… it doesn't… matter…

– Oh, go on, just tell me your name? I only want to get to know my future husband and the father of my future children a little better.

– Honestly, I… I'm not… a person… that… for a girl or woman… is suited for.

Elias felt mortified that he couldn't even string a sentence together, his own brain had turned traitor. *Oh God, "is suited for", what on earth is that supposed to mean?* he thought. But Lovisa simply carried on, completely undeterred.

– You're clearly a man who'd be perfectly suited for any woman. Are they yours? The children, I mean. The way you handle them is just incredible!

– What? No! Well, I mean…

– No, of course they can't all be. They look to be roughly the same age, but they're not twins. Are you looking after them for someone?

– Ah, what… no…

– So they're not yours, and you're not minding them for anyone. Do you run a childminding service from home?

– No… they're… social… social services…

– You work for social services. That explains everything. Have the children been taken into care?

She leaned in even closer, excited, without noticing him inching back a few centimetres with every sentence.

– Er, confidentiality…

– Of course, I understand. I work as a nursery teacher myself at Willow Tree Nursery, so I know a fair bit about social services. Foster care, maybe? It would be wonderful if that's what you do!

– No… emergency… care… sort of.

– Wow, so you're an emergency foster carer, looking after children who've been forcibly removed from their parents. That's amazing, even better.

– Well, not always… forcibly…

– No, of course, sometimes it's voluntary, when parents are ill or something like that. You're incredible! she said, smiling warmly at him.

Elias desperately tried to think of something that would put her off, because now he was genuinely frightened of her. He bit his lip and jerked his head towards her. With some effort he got out:

– I'm not… boyfriend material… people have said so, so…

– I couldn't disagree more. The way you manage four completely wild children like that makes you every woman's dream. My dream man, above all! Trust me on that!

At that moment, he hit on a new way to put her off: by making her understand that he was deranged.

– Right, well… I've also got a diagnosis… and all that…

Elias's eyes darted more and more between Lovisa and the children. He had almost never mentioned his NDD

diagnosis. He was so incredibly ashamed of having a neurodevelopmental disorder and felt like a psycho because of it. As if he were worth less.

– It must be a kindness diagnosis you have, she chirped with a broad smile.

– No, not at all. It's ASD, so you see… I'm just not suited to…

Lovisa fell silent for the first time, her brow slightly furrowed as though she were searching her memory. After a few seconds, her face brightened again.

– Autism spectrum disorder, isn't it? That's interesting, especially given how incredible you are with children. Not exactly typical for someone on the autism spectrum, is it? I love that you're willing to share that with me.

– I don't… want to… talk about it, Elias mumbled, staring down at the table.

– All right, she said straightaway. But how does it affect you day to day? Honestly, I mean. The children must usually be traumatised when they arrive, doesn't that make things difficult for you?

He tensed. His gaze drifted instinctively towards the play area again. He counted them with his eyes. Four. All still there.

– I… it's nothing… nothing important…

– No, no, but it is something! You brought it up, so… you can't just say it and leave it at that! I need to know! Tell me! Please, I really want to know, because otherwise I won't be able to let it go, and then it'll be… well, completely

impossible, and I don't want that… so why did you want to tell me?

– It was… so you'd know…

– Right! But when exactly? I mean, when did you get the diagnosis? Was it when you were little and perhaps didn't even understand what it meant, or was it later, when you started noticing… things… things that were different? I mean, it must feel so strange! Mustn't it? I'm only wondering… and it's all right that I'm wondering, isn't it?

He didn't answer.

– Is it difficult that I'm asking?

He gave the tiniest nod.

She pressed on, gently but persistently.

– All right, all right… but I can't help it! I just have to… understand! What is it that's difficult, exactly? Is it the noise in here, or… all the people, or the fact that I'm staring at you now and probably over-analysing everything, or that I'm too close, or… or something else I can't even put into words? Because I really do want to know, I promise, I only want to understand and… yes, help… if I can…

He swallowed.

– I… I don't want to…

The sentence trailed off. One of the children took a tumble on the slide and began to cry. Elias was on his feet and at their side before the sound had even had time to fade, comforting them at once.

– See that! You're absolutely wonderful with children, she said when he came back.

Her words washed over him like a small hurricane.

– It's completely obvious! I mean... really, completely, completely obvious! You're going to be absolutely wonderful... as my husband! Surely you can see that?! I mean, look at you! Look at the way you touch them, the way you talk to them, the way... the way everything just... just flows! I can't think about anything else! I mean, how can someone like you not already be with me? Get that through your head, get it through your head RIGHT NOW!

Elias grew more and more desperate. *The woman seems unhinged. Completely unhinged. Doesn't she see that I just want to be left in peace? Doesn't she have any boundaries?* He glanced round the room, looking for someone who could help him, anyone at all. *What am I thinking? There's never anyone who helps me!* he thought. Lovisa kept pushing, every word and movement like a hook pulling him closer, and he resisted with everything he had. The harder he struggled, the stronger she seemed to become, as though his resistance only made her more animated, more predatory, more... on top of him. He felt like a fish on a line, caught and without the strength to thrash properly, without air, without anyone to call out to.

To his relief, the children came charging back after what had felt like far too long. They said they were tired and wanted to go home. Elias exhaled and felt the tension slowly release. He began helping them with their things, and when some confusion broke out as they tried to find their own coats and shoes, he calmly took his time to sort out the

muddle and make sure everything ended up with the right person.

Suddenly, his text message tone went off, and he took out his phone to check who it was. When he looked at it, Face ID unlocked it automatically, but it was just some sort of advert. He set the phone down on the table to carry on helping the children. Quick as a flash, Lovisa snatched it up. Elias froze, shocked, and reached for it, but she was faster. Her fingers flew across the screen. A moment later, a ringtone sounded from her bag.

– There! she said cheerfully, handing the phone back with an enormous smile that seemed to take up most of her face. Now you've got my number! Yes, **exactly**, so you can ring whenever you like! I mean, any time at all! Or no, you don't have to ring right now… but soon… or later… you know what I mean! It's just… just that simple!

– I won't ring, Elias said quietly. Never. Forget it.

– All right, all right, she smiled. But then I can ring you? I mean, I can call you! Maybe now, soon, or when I feel like it! I promise I won't ring all the time, just a little… so we don't lose touch!

– No… I won't answer… Ever…

The words came out short, almost mechanical.

He said nothing more. With shaky movements, he gathered up the children's things and their toys and hurried out in a panic, while she stayed sitting, giggling and bright-eyed, as though she had barely noticed him leave. He tried to work out what to do now. *This madwoman has got hold of*

my phone number! I need to rip out the SIM card and bin it. Wait! That won't help.

He drove a few hundred metres away and then pulled over and sat there, breathing hard. *Oh God, she works at Willow Tree Nursery,* he thought. *And one of his children had attended her nursery just a few months back. They'd have his details on file from that placement. She could find him.*

Elias drove home with the children and tried to focus on them. *I really hope this madwoman doesn't turn up again to lay into me.*

But the days passed, and Lovisa didn't get in touch. A week went by, and two of the children were placed with a foster carer. Then another week passed before the remaining two children were finally handed over to relatives of their parents. On the Saturday, he sat in the sitting room, unwinding, without children for once.

Then a text arrived from Lovisa, and all his dread came flooding back.

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It was Saturday afternoon, a fortnight after the meeting at McDonald's, and his phone lay on the table in front of him. A ping. A new message.

"Hi, Elias, it's Lovisa! ❤️ We met at McDonald's a fortnight ago 🍟😊 I've been thinking about you ever since 💭💕 I'd really really love to see you again!! 🥰✨ Could I pop round? 🙏💛"

He shuddered. *Do I really want to meet this mad woman again? Not a chance. She's beautiful, granted, but completely off her head, and I'm frightened of her.* He started typing back: "You can forget that", but his thumb slipped, and it came out as just "You can". *Hang on, wait, I*

need to write the rest, he thought, in a panic, but his fingers wouldn't quite cooperate. Then the doorbell rang.

He checked the camera and sure enough, there she was outside, just as beautiful as he remembered. She must have been sitting in her car out on the street when she'd texted. But now that he'd replied and she'd rung the bell, he felt as though he had no choice but to open the door.

– Hi Elias. Please don't slam the door in my face. I know I came on too strong at McDonald's, but please, can I come in so we can talk for a bit? I promise I'll stay calm. And if you say I should go, I'll go. Straight away. Please please please?

Elias hesitated and couldn't help looking at her where she stood. She looked him straight in the eyes, which made him uncomfortable, so he dropped his gaze as he usually did. *Nice breasts. Oh God! Don't stare at her breasts, what am I thinking? Don't just stand there like an idiot. Invite her in instead. And stop staring, for heaven's sake.*

Elias stammered something and stepped aside so that Lovisa could come in. He was careful not to look at her and at the same time to keep his distance so as not to risk any accidental contact. He didn't take her outstretched hand, but realised she wanted to greet him, so he placed his own hand against his chest over his heart. He had read that Muslims often greet one another that way, but it felt completely wrong all the same.

Lovisa walked past him in the hallway and made a point of keeping her distance, too, which was a relief. He showed her into the living room, where he took the sofa while she

settled into an armchair instead. Elias sat hunched on the edge of the sofa, his eyes fixed on the carpet, his hands clenched tightly in his lap. Lovisa watched him quietly for a moment without saying anything, before gently breaking the silence.

– Right then, Elias. Thank you for letting me in. I want to apologise for being so pushy before. Let me explain what I **actually** meant. The thing is, I'm interested in getting to know you. But not just as a friend. Not someone I can discuss child-rearing with, or want as a babysitter. Not someone to just have sex with and then dump, either.

Elias flinched at that last part.

– No, what I'm interested in is getting to know you properly. If things work out between us, I'd actually like to marry you someday. I genuinely do want children of my own, so it matters to me that you'd want that too. But I'm not suggesting we jump into bed here and now. I'm ready to take it slowly, one step at a time. What I meant was, what I still mean, is that my goal is for us to become life partners and build a family together. Does that make more sense?

Elias gave a nervous nod.

– I just have one question. I promise. I'll leave without argument, and never come back, if your answer isn't what I'm hoping for.

Elias perked up. A way to get rid of her!

– Right, Elias. I understand you have reservations about me at the moment. But what do you think about the idea itself, of finding a woman somewhere in the future, marrying

her, and having children? Is that completely out of the question, or is it something you could imagine for yourself? Please be honest.

Elias hesitated. He couldn't lie. It made him feel awful when he did. At last, he stammered out:

– Well… yes… it's… that's… if I couldn't imagine that concept at all… I would never have let you in.

Lovisa laughed at that. He thought her laugh sounded wonderful.

– That's brilliant. I love you for saying that. Speaking of children, where are the ones you had last time we met?

– Well, that's confidential. They've… sort of… moved on to better places. *No, that's not right.* To other places and people. Not that… you know…

– Of course, you're an emergency foster carer. Speaking of last time, Elias… it's been a fortnight since we spoke! I've really longed for you, but I wanted to try first to get my head round… what autism spectrum disorder actually means. I was so glad you told me. It… well, it means a lot.

She smiled warmly at him, and he felt a warmth inside that was equally matched by discomfort.

– So I've been reading everything I could get hold of these past two weeks. I started with Wikipedia and some NHS pages, but then I thought, no, that's not enough, so I read some medical articles as well and got a few books out of the library. Then I went to see a counsellor, who explained things a bit better, and she pointed me towards a seminar and some sessions with parents of autistic children. And

then… I actually paid quite a bit, as it happens, for a couple of hours with a psychologist as well, just to try to really understand. All of this… I did it to understand you. Genuinely.

– So… you mean you… actually… understand me now, after all that?

– Ah, an interrogation and a trick question. What I've understood is that your ASD doesn't define you. It's simply something you have. But you also have a personality, and that's what comes first. Then there's the fact that it's called the autism **spectrum**, meaning there's a range and a depth. I can't know where on the spectrum you fall, or which autistic traits are stronger or weaker in you. So in reality, I know nothing about you. The only thing I've learnt is that there may be moments when you react differently, and in those moments I can think: "right, he's doing that because he's autistic, not because he's being unkind or stupid". And accept it for what it is.

Elias looked toward her with a blank expression.

– Well then, Professor. Did I pass?

– Yes… that's… fairly accurate…

– Wonderful, Elias. Then I went through every autistic trait you might possibly have, one by one, and thought about whether it was something I could live with if I had to. And honestly, I couldn't come up with a single one that I **couldn't** live with. Some might be tricky at times, but it doesn't matter, because you're so wonderful with children. How does that work, actually? Children are fairly complex.

Surely it must be difficult for someone on the autism spectrum?

– Well, I don't know... I can be cross with a child for doing something daft without looking cross. Patience is a bit of an autistic trait too, at least when it comes to a special interest.

– Wow, whole sentences. I love it!

Elias flushed slightly but carried on anyway.

– And I don't have a problem with routines or repetition, which children love.

– Repetition?

– "Once upon a time there was a teeny-tiny woman who lived in a teeny-tiny house in a teeny-tiny village. Now, one day this teeny-tiny woman put on her teeny-tiny bonnet, and went out of her teeny-tiny house to take a teeny-tiny walk."

– Yes, of course. And then the same story every single night. But don't autistic people have difficulty reading emotions?

– Yes, but a child is an open book. If they're crying, they're sad. If they're laughing, they're happy. If they're screaming, they're angry.

– True, I hadn't thought of that. Do you have any family of your own? Siblings, cousins?

– Hm... brother... well, half...

Elias fell silent.

– Now I'm being silly, only asking about you. Me, I grew up in a small village nearly three hours away from here by car. My parents still live there. I've got a younger brother and a few cousins. What about you, Elias?

– Born here…

Elias went quiet again.

– Right, born here in the city. You don't like talking much, do you? I'd love to sit here with you for a few hours, but you look fairly uncomfortable. What could we talk about or do to lighten things up a bit?

– Well… you're the sociable one. You'd be better at… you know…

– Right, right. Let me read the room. A sofa facing a large telly. I take it you watch a lot of telly. Regular TV or streaming?

– Streaming, I suppose…

– What do you say to watching something together, and we can chat about whatever's on?

– All right…

– Is there a series you're watching at the moment?

– Yes, a few…

– Pick one for us!

– Well… "The Good Doctor" maybe…

– A medical drama, not bad at all! Let's give it a go.

Elias switched on the telly and opened Netflix. Lovisa noticed he was already on the fourth episode of the first series.

– Give me a quick summary of how it starts, and we'll carry on from where you left off.

– Well… we could watch from the beginning… better that way…

Elias put on the first episode, and after a while Lovisa began watching him thoughtfully. The series follows Shaun Murphy, a newly qualified doctor with ASD, and much of it centres on Shaun's difficulties with his autism. Elias commented regularly on Shaun's behaviour.

– That's not really how you'd act.

Lovisa nodded without saying anything.

– Now that's a genuine problem.

She just smiled, and let him carry on.

– Did you see what he did there?

Lovisa gave an amused shrug and said nothing.

– That's a bit exaggerated, but essentially true.

Lovisa simply sat and enjoyed listening to Elias talk about the series. The hours slipped by, and one episode followed another. Eventually, she reached for the remote and paused it between two episodes.

– This has been really lovely, Elias, but it's getting late.

Elias gave a start, almost surprised. He'd completely lost track of time.

– … well, yes, I suppose that's right, he said, glancing at the clock, a bit anxiously. I hadn't even noticed that… no, forget it.

– I suppose I ought to head home, but could you answer one thing first? This series about Shaun: did you choose it to explain how **you** work? It feels as though you're talking about yourself when you talk about him.

– Er, yes… Is it that transparent?

– I'm good at reading people, so don't take it personally. Anyway, I'm heading off now, but would it be all right if I came back tomorrow?

– If I say "no", does that mean you won't come tomorrow?

– I'll probably come anyway, she laughed.

– So why are you asking?

Lovisa's laugh sounded like music as he walked with her to the door.

– Goodbye, Elias darling. See you tomorrow.

– I suppose so, Lovisa, er…

She left with a happy smile. He closed the door and leaned his back against it from the inside. He let out a long, relieved breath now that she had gone. And yet there was something he couldn't quite put his finger on. This hadn't been particularly unpleasant at all.

He was pensive as he went to bed. He lay awake in the dark for a long time afterwards, and realised with some surprise that he actually longed for tomorrow, despite everything.

✯ ✯ ✯

4



Lovisa arrived earlier the following day. Elias was still very uncomfortable with her presence, but he didn't protest that she was there. They carried on watching the series, and Lovisa felt a certain quiet pleasure in sitting near Elias, even if not on the same sofa. At the same time, she sensed that he didn't seem to dare speak freely, but was always thinking carefully before he said anything. Eventually, she couldn't help herself.

– I just want to say one thing. I'm pretty straight-talking, you know. I say what I think. And it's completely fine if you do the same with me. Just say whatever's in your head. If

things get weird, we'll talk about it, Elias darling, without getting angry. Does that work for you?

– That's the only way I can communicate. Er… you've seen Shaun, haven't you? He, kind of, doesn't filter, so…

– No, I've noticed that. And you can do the same. Just go for it, stop thinking so much before you speak.

Elias stared straight ahead without saying a word.

– But there's one more thing. When you talk to me, your eyes dart about, and it actually makes me a little uncomfortable. I'd be glad if you could try to focus on me when we're talking.

A flicker of irritation crossed Elias's face, quickly hidden, and he looked away. He sat completely still without turning the programme back on.

– I get the feeling you've heard this before. You're talking to a girl, but you're not looking her in the eyes. You're looking a bit further down. And she goes: "Hey, I'm up here, not down there", and points at her breasts. Am I right?

– Yes, maybe…

– I'm used to men looking in the wrong place, let's put it that way. So don't worry, you're not unique on that front, Elias darling. But I'm not that fussy. Focus on whatever works for you. My eyes, my forehead, my nose, my neck… or my hands, my feet, my stomach, my breasts. Whatever feels comfortable for you.

Elias flinched when she said "breasts" and looked surprised.

– Yes, you heard right. If you want to focus on my breasts, that's fine by me. They're part of me too, aren't they? Just find a point and focus. Can you do that for me?

Elias mumbled something inaudible, clearly feeling uncomfortable with the subject. He reached for the remote and put "The Good Doctor" back on. Lovisa smiled slightly and studied Elias. Now and then, he continued to comment on what Shaun was doing, turning his head to look at her as he did. She noticed his eyes had stopped darting about and had settled, quite steadily, somewhere below her face.

When it had gone twelve, Elias suddenly paused the programme and asked:

– Lunchtime… hungry?

– Yes, I could eat something. Shall we order in?

– Nah… feels unnecessary…

Elias went into the kitchen and began moving things about. Lovisa followed and asked if she could help with anything, but he just shook his head. Before long, he was done and set out two plates, glasses, and cutlery on the kitchen table. Lovisa sat down to have a proper taste. And it really was good.

– Wow, this is delicious, Elias darling. I never imagined you'd be such a good cook as well.

He looked at her but couldn't think of anything to say and just carried on eating. When they had finished, Elias cleared the table and loaded everything into the dishwasher. Lovisa was fascinated watching him do all the work without a

moment's hesitation. She had also noticed something else during the meal that she couldn't help mentioning.

– This has been lovely, Elias darling, just sitting and eating together like this. But do you know what I've noticed?

– What?

– You've stopped letting your eyes dart about. Instead, you're extremely focused on my breasts. Don't get me wrong, I don't mind… it just feels a little unusual. It's almost as though you're testing me. As if you didn't quite believe me when I said it was fine.

– Yes, a bit… is it that transparent?

– Haha, yes, a little. But what fascinates me most is that you changed how you behave just because I said to.

– Well… when you have ASD, social interaction isn't something that comes naturally. It's… kind of, learned.

– I've come to understand that too. The psychologist I spoke to explained it.

– So… if you teach me, maybe… I could learn to behave, right?

Lovisa was taken aback by that. *Were there really men who could become better socially through a woman's love? Apparently so.*

The rest of the day went far too quickly, and soon she had to head home again.

– Elias darling, I hope I can come back tomorrow.

– Didn't we discuss this yesterday?

– Yeah, we did. I can't get back until later tomorrow though, I'm working.

– Right… of course.

Lovisa left feeling slightly uncertain whether Elias really wanted her to come. But she was too stubborn to give up now.

Meanwhile, Elias's head was full of conflicting thoughts. Did he really want Lovisa coming round every day? She was attractive and all that, but even so. And this business of her saying "Elias darling" all the time was bothering him. It was as though she had already decided they were going to be together, regardless of what he wanted. At the same time, he did actually want a girlfriend. *If only it weren't so difficult!*

✯

The following day, she came round after work. He opened the door and said straight away:

– I… well, I've got a little angel, called Ebba, to look after today. Sorry, but I need to… go to her… so…

He went into the children's room and sat down on the floor in the middle of the room. Lovisa came to the doorway and saw a small girl of about three lying in the bed, crying.

– Why do Mummy and Daddy always argue?

– The thing is, my angel, sometimes people argue even when they don't want to.

– Don't they love each other any more?

– In some way, I'm sure they still do. But I know for certain they love you, because it's completely impossible not to love such a wonderful angel as you.

Lovisa stood for a long time, marvelling at how much patience Elias had. He repeated the words without tiring, showing no irritation whatsoever, even though Ebba didn't seem to be listening. Lovisa went and sat in the living room with her phone instead. It felt hurtful, admittedly, that Elias was entirely focused on the child and paying no attention to her. At the same time, she thought it was wonderful that he put a child before everything else.

After a couple of hours, she heard him moving about in the kitchen, so she went in and helped set the table despite his protests. Then he fetched Ebba, who absolutely insisted on sitting in his lap, so he let her. His focus remained entirely on the child as he helped her eat. After the meal, he carried her on one arm while clearing up with the other. Then he took her to the bathroom and helped her brush her teeth and wash her face before reading her a story.

Lovisa was deeply impressed by the way Elias had not only managed to comfort Ebba but had also got her to trust him completely. Before long, the story was over, Elias said goodnight, and then came back out to the living room.

– Ebba is falling asleep now. Sorry for ignoring you.

– No, Elias darling, please don't apologise. Genuinely. It's been wonderful watching you with her. How naturally you put her first and comfort her.

– Well, it's not the little one's fault she's sad.

They watched another episode of their series before Lovisa realised it had got quite late, and Elias was struggling

to keep his eyes open. No surprise there. It had been a tiring day for him.

– I think it's time I headed home before you fall asleep. But I've noticed something about you today, Elias darling.

– What's that?

– You've been extremely uncomfortable being around me the whole time. Tense, awkward in conversation, sitting stiffly. But today, here and now, you don't seem at all uncomfortable any more. You're sitting back, relaxed, just talking.

Elias glanced her way and was quiet for a long time.

– You know you can speak freely, without filtering?

– Yes, but I just need to think for a moment.

He sat in silence for a full minute that felt like an hour before he finally answered.

– The thing is, women always make me uncomfortable. It doesn't matter what the situation is: dates, caseworkers, colleagues, doctors, counsellors, shop assistants, all of them make me uncomfortable. Every woman has made me uncomfortable my whole life.

– Except your mum, of course.

Elias flinched, and a strange, unreadable expression crossed his face before he refocused.

– Especially my mother. No, every woman, without exception. Until today. Because you're right, I feel comfortable with you. It's completely overwhelming, and I can't understand what's happened. What have you done to me?

– That sounds like love, I think, Elias darling.

– I don't understand that word. But if this is love, it's rather nice, all the same.

– Wow, it's wonderful to hear you say that, Elias darling. What you feel for the children you look after must be love, too. Which makes me wonder what your actual background is. A childcare worker, perhaps?

– I'm actually a systems programmer, but I'm only on a 10% contract at an IT company.

– Wow, that's unexpected. Though actually not, because someone with autism might be a fantastic programmer. But how did you become an emergency foster carer for social services?

– I can barely keep my eyes open. Can we talk about that tomorrow?

– Of course, Elias darling. Can I come round then?

– You know what would happen if I said no, don't you?

Lovisa laughed and left. Tomorrow, she would finally find out how Elias had come to look after children.

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5



Lovisa kept coming round over the following days but found, to her frustration, that she got very little time with Elias, as he was completely absorbed in Ebba. At the same time, she thought it was extraordinary to watch him so utterly consumed by his care for her.

On Friday, arrangements had been made for Ebba to return to her mother while the parents worked out the arrangements for contact. Lovisa was there when the mother came to Elias's house on the Saturday, just after lunch, to collect her daughter. The mother was struck by how settled Ebba had become under Elias's care. She barely seemed sad that her mother had come alone.

– Mummy… are we going to live without Daddy now?

– Yes, it looks that way, my poppet. But don't be sad about it.

– Nuh-uh, Mummy… Unca Eli said it's better you live apart. So you don't fight.

The mother looked at Elias in surprise and thanked him deeply for looking after Ebba so well during this crisis in their lives. He just smiled and said:

– It's been a true pleasure spending time with Ebba. My angel, it's time for us to say "goodbye" now.

The little girl threw herself into his arms and held on for a long hug. Lovisa felt a pang of envy watching the child cling to him.

– Bye-bye, Unca Eli… I love you… but Mummy… most! the little girl said.

– That's exactly how it should be, my little angel.

The mother left with her daughter, and Elias simply closed the door and walked back into the living room with a blank expression.

– You'll miss her, won't you?

– Yes, of course. I love children.

– When did you realise you love children, Elias darling?

– Well, I suppose I always have. After I'd finished school, got a job, and done up the whole house, I noticed something was missing.

– Done up the whole house?

– Yes, it was necessary.

– But what was missing, then? I think the house looks lovely as it is.

– What was missing was the sound of small feet on the floor. So I realised I didn't want to be the last of my family, that I genuinely wanted children of my own to love and look after.

– Wow, and then I turned up, Elias darling!

– No, this was several years ago, before the pandemic. I realised I couldn't walk into a bar, clock a woman, and drop some charming line to catch her interest. So what do you think a person with ASD does?

– A dating app, maybe?

– Yep. Downloaded an app, created a profile, and started swiping left and right to find someone. Got a match with one who was fairly attractive, exchanged a few messages, and eventually asked her out to a café. We ordered coffee and a cake… but before we'd even tasted them, it happened. Bang, just like that.

– Oh no, what happened?

– I got a slap across the face and some obscenity, and she stormed out of the café while I sat there with a stinging cheek, wondering what had happened. So I went home, googled how to date women, and started swiping again. Found another one who seemed nice and asked her to the same café.

– Did that go better?

– Well, before I knew what had happened, she threw her coffee in my face, snarled something, and left. There I sat,

drenched in coffee. Fortunately, it had cooled down a bit. So I hurried out, went home, got changed, googled some more, watched a few YouTube videos, and carried on swiping. The third one went really well, I thought. We had quite a pleasant conversation, and when the coffee and cake were done, I was wondering whether to ask if she wanted to meet again. Then she stood up and said:

"Thanks for the coffee, it's been all right. But I assume you realise I could never put up with being with someone like you. Good luck with love anyway."

– What did she mean by "someone like you"? What right did she have to say something like that?

– Well… I actually understand it. Then I went home, googled, and started swiping again.

– Gosh… the fact that you didn't just give up after a knock like that!

– Well, things had been getting progressively better. The first date lasted a few minutes, the next a quarter of an hour, and the last one nearly an hour. So I was heading in the right direction. This time, I chose a woman who wasn't particularly attractive, not done up and all that, because maybe a less self-absorbed girl would be better. Looks are secondary anyway. This time I took her to a restaurant instead, because I'd read that it was better. In the middle of the meal, she stood up, shouted something about me being a "bloody idiot", and stormed off.

– Good grief… the nerve of some women.

– Well… I went home, googled, and started swiping.

– Wow, I love you so much right now. The fact that you didn't just give up after all those knock-backs.

– I need a woman to have children. So I felt I was still heading in the right direction. Found one with an ordinary sort of look and took her to the same restaurant. She was really pleasant, and I was hopeful again. When I asked if she wanted a pudding, she stood up and said:

Elias took a breath, as if trying to remember the exact words.

– Right: "I've been trying to figure out how you thought this evening would go. And I can't. I really can't. Because this, this is you at your best, isn't it? And it's just… not enough. I don't think you get that. I don't think you ever will. No woman is going to be able to deal with this long term. You're just… unreachable. And honestly, I think you're going to end up completely alone, and you won't even know why."

A tear came to Elias's eye, and Lovisa was completely shocked.

– What did you do then?

– I stayed, ordered a pudding, and got my phone out.

– No. No, no, no. You swiped? After that? The same evening?

– No, I went in, deleted my profile, and then the app. That was when I realised I'm completely impossible as a boyfriend. Honestly, I don't understand what you're doing. This between us can't last. I have 5 women who have explained that to me with remarkable clarity. But I enjoy

being with you, so I'm making the most of it while I can, even though I know you'll leave me in the end.

Lovisa was completely stunned by what he had said and could barely find the words:

– Good grief, Elias darling. Don't think like that! You're wonderful, and I'm completely in. Don't you want this too?

– Yes, I **want** this with all my heart, but I don't **believe** in it. 5 to 1: those aren't particularly good odds.

Lovisa tried to get over the shock. At the same time, she now understood why he was so guarded. She realised she would need to be patient with him and show him clearly that she wasn't going anywhere.

– Elias darling, I promise you this between us can work. Just give me a little time to show you.

– Good luck proving me wrong. I genuinely hope you're right. It would be wonderful to be wrong this time.

– But after all that, Elias darling, what happened next? I still haven't heard how you started looking after children for social services.

– Well, I was working 100% at the same IT company as today, but all the programmers have to sit in open-plan offices, and I hated it. You were crammed in together, constantly hearing other people talking, and everyone came to me for help. I was quite popular to go to, because they thought I was better than them.

– I can believe that.

– But then the Covid-19 pandemic came, and I loved it. Not that people were getting ill and dying, of course, but I

liked that the management decided that everyone who could should work from home. So I set up the office in the room over there and stayed home the whole time. I could still help others, sometimes three or four people at once, over chat. I really enjoyed working alone. Then the pandemic wound down, and everyone was supposed to go back to the office.

– And you weren't keen on that, Elias darling.

– Nope, but the boss decides, so… well, he rang on Teams and explained that everyone had lost a lot of productivity, so I thought that was that. But then he explained that I specifically had become over 50% more productive during the pandemic. I don't know how he measured it, but I was genuinely happy when he suggested I stay working from home. He asked if I was all right with that, and you can probably guess what I said.

Lovisa laughed and replied:

– You told him to get lost, obviously.

– Of course, Elias laughed. Not.

Lovisa laughed again, happy to hear him laugh for the first time.

– Well, I did feel a bit cooped up all the same. I hadn't been outside the house in over a year. Well, except to sort out the garden occasionally. So I started going for walks in a woodland area not far from here. It was wonderful to hear birdsong, the rustle of leaves in the trees, and the scurrying of small creatures in the undergrowth. And to breathe fresh air, smell flowers, soil, moss, and sweaty joggers.

– Sweaty joggers?! That doesn't sound very pleasant.

– Nope, so I started taking some smaller animal tracks instead. I came to a clearing and saw two small children playing, maybe 3–4 years old. I thought it looked so sweet, so I called out "Hello!" to them. They jumped and ran off. "Good children", I thought, "stranger danger". So I just walked on. But I saw them again the next day, with the same reaction. And I couldn't see any adults anywhere. So one day I crept closer and had a proper look. They were incredibly dirty and were wearing torn clothes. Very pale and thin as well. Practically skin and bone.

– Maybe they'd run away from home?

– That's what I suspected, so I decided to win their trust. The next day, I bought four hot dogs from a kiosk and took them along. When I spotted them, I called out loudly, "Do you want hot dogs?" They ran off, but the girl stopped and licked her lips. I put the hot dogs on a tree stump in the middle of the clearing, then backed away and sat down at the edge. Before long, the children came back and took them. I've never seen four hot dogs disappear so fast. Kind of funny that the boy let the girl eat three of them and only had one himself.

– They must have been starving! I imagine they hadn't had proper food in a long time.

– Almost certainly. So I came back every day with hot dogs, burgers, and sometimes pizza. And fizzy drinks. Lots of sugar and lots of fat, because they needed it. After about a week, they started waiting for me when I arrived. But it was

the same routine every time: I put the food in the middle of the clearing and backed away.

– Did they say anything?

– They were still frightened of me. But eventually, they started responding a little when I spoke to them, and yes, they had run away, but from foster families. Their parents were dead.

Sorrow crossed Elias's face before he went on.

– Days turned into weeks, and I kept working on getting them to come home with me, but they wouldn't. Though they were less frightened of me now, at least.

– You were so patient with them. Weeks of work to earn their trust. Good grief, Elias darling, I love you so much now!

– Well, I just couldn't leave them there. It was getting colder, with autumn coming on. I bought them a blanket each to keep them a little warmer.

– What are the children called, actually?

– Carl and Sonja. Just think, big brother Carl was only five years old and was trying to look after his little sister, who was three. Those two small lives changed my whole life.

– But wow, I can't believe you found them! How did they affect you? Please, tell me everything. I want to hear every single detail, Elias darling!

Elias took a deep breath and carried on with his story. Lovisa was swept back in time as she listened intently.

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6



Elias sat in the clearing as the rain poured down, protected by a rain poncho that kept the worst of it off, but not the cold. He had bought a pizza for Carl and Sonja, which he had placed on the tree stump in the clearing as usual. Eventually, the children came trudging along, clearly out of sorts. They had their blankets wrapped round them, but they were soaked through and shaking with cold. When they tried to lift slices from the pizza, it fell apart, having been soaked through the cardboard box. When they began despondently scraping up the filling with their hands to eat it, Elias said:

– I'm sorry for not protecting the pizza from the rain. This is my fault. Can I make it up to you by cooking spaghetti bolognese?

Sonja looked at him eagerly, with a longing expression.

– You would have to come home with me, though. You can come back here afterwards, if you want. It's warm and dry at my place, of course.

Sonja looked at Carl beseechingly.

– Carl… I'm cold… I'm wet… and hungry. I want spag bol. Can we go with the man? He seems nice.

Carl thought hard. He was cold and wet too, and on top of that he had his little sister to look after. So he nodded.

– All right, then. But only so we can eat and get dry!

Elias nodded and began walking home. The children followed, though keeping quite a distance behind. It was a fairly long walk before they reached the house. He opened the front door, stepped into the hall, and opened the door to a room, gesturing towards it for the children, who hadn't yet dared come inside. He had got in a couple of beds and made them up with Winnie-the-Pooh bed linen, and set a toy farm on the floor.

– Come and have a look, he said.

Elias stepped back, and the children ventured into the hall. Carl looked suspiciously at Elias and at the room, so Elias fetched a key and put it in the lock from the inside. He said:

– See here. Now you can lock yourselves in.

– You've probably got more keys.

– I have, yes. But look at this.

He fetched another key and showed them that it was impossible to get a key in from the outside if there was already one in the lock on the inside. Eventually, they went into the room. Elias fetched two large bath towels and some of his old clothes he'd found in the attic, and tossed them into the room before Carl locked the door from the inside.

Elias was a little worried about what they might get up to in there, but then again, he had cameras throughout the house, so if anything serious happened, he wouldn't be in the dark. He also knew how to knock out the hinge pins and lift the whole door off, if it came to that. He heard them getting changed and starting to play with the toy.

Meanwhile, Elias started making the bolognese sauce and boiling the spaghetti. When it was ready, he knocked on the door and told them they could come and eat. He stepped back, and they came out shyly and made their way to the kitchen. Elias followed them into the kitchen and served them their food, still being careful not to get too close. Then he went back to the room and gathered up the towels and clothes they had thrown all around the room, and hung them up to dry.

He had probably never seen anyone eat so much spaghetti, before or since. After the meal, they went back to the room to keep playing with the farm. Elias talked them into staying the night there by tempting them with warm, soft beds.

He could hear them carrying on playing quite calmly until it was time for bed. Elias wondered how on earth he'd get them to settle down, but eventually they went and got into bed on their own. All without asking for help, or even unlocking the door.

At breakfast the following morning, he broached the sensitive subject with some hesitation.

– Here's the thing, my little angels. I need to take you to social services.

– Have you rung them? You've rung them! We're off!

Carl stood up and looked towards the door.

– No, I haven't rung. I won't ring until you agree to it. But I have to do it, otherwise I could go to prison. It's called kidnapping.

– No! Never, Carl said. They're horrible there!

Elias spent several days patiently talking to them, calmly and with care, listening to their worries without giving up. He explained things, waited for them, and gave them time to feel safe. At last, on the Friday, they agreed to it.

Eventually, he forced himself to ring social services, even though he found it so hard to talk on the phone, but he had to, for the children's sake.

– Erm, yes, Elias here…

– Yes, hello?

Elias shook, unable to get a single word out.

– Hello, are you still there?

– Yes… sorry… it's two children… erm…

– Two children, right. What are their names?

– Carl… and Sonja.

– I see, and what's going on with them?

– I… well… I think they've run away…

– Right, where did you find them?

– Outside…

– Hold on a moment. I can book you an appointment with a social worker called Clara on Monday, and you can tell her what you know. Can you do two o'clock?

– Yes… 2 o'clock. Monday. Yes.

Elias hung up, breaking out in a cold sweat. Gosh, that had been hard going. But it felt like he had got permission to have the children with him. They had also started to trust him a little more, and dared to leave the room, when he suggested they go out and play at a playground. The weather had improved that weekend, so he took them there.

On Monday, he told the children they needed to have a bath first. Carl said angrily:

– You… you'd enjoy that, wouldn't you?! Forget it! You're not bathing us!

– I wasn't going to. You can manage that yourselves, can't you?

So he ran the bath, set out towels and soap, and told Carl to make sure they both soaped themselves from head to toe and washed their hair. Then Carl locked the door from the inside. There were no cameras in the bathroom, but Elias

could hear them splashing and laughing, and thought that if they were laughing, things must be all right.

After a while, it went quiet, and suddenly Carl opened the door a crack and called through it for him to come in. So he went into the bathroom and looked around. The entire bathroom was drenched in water. The floor, the walls, even the ceiling, everything was wet. Elias was quite annoyed, but of course showed none of it, as usual. Carl still looked guilty and apologised.

– It doesn't matter. It's only water, and a bathroom should be able to cope with water. And your clothes are still dry, after all.

– Can you help me… with Sonja's hair? It's so tangled… I can't manage it myself.

Elias went over to the bath and saw, to his surprise, that they had wrapped the towels around their hips under the water. He then washed Sonja's hair first, then Carl's. He had to wash them three times each before it came clean. Then he had them let the water out and switched on the shower. Finally, he fetched fresh towels, and asked them to rinse off, dry themselves, and get dressed again. After a while, they came out of the bathroom, clothed and dry.

Elias put them in his car and drove first to a toy shop where they could each pick a toy. Carl chose a big Brio train set, and Sonja a big doll. Not cheap things, exactly, but he wanted to make them happy. Then they went on to a clothes shop, where he asked the staff for help to choose clothes that would fit them.

It had gone twelve by then, so Elias took them to McDonald's, where they each chose a Happy Meal, which they ate in good spirits. After the meal, he took them to a hairdresser's he had booked to sort out their hair. The hairdresser simply tidied up Sonja's hair and put it into several very pretty plaits. The other hairdresser cut Carl's hair quite short and styled a cool quiff with a little hairspray. They were both pleased with how they looked. Only then did he drive them to the meeting with social services.

They were sitting waiting in the waiting room when the social worker, Clara, arrived. Even though Elias was hopeless at reading faces, he could see at once that she had not expected to see the children, especially not freshly bathed, newly trimmed, and dressed in clean, smart clothes. She grabbed a doorframe to stop herself from falling over. Then she made to run towards them, but Elias blocked her way.

– Hold on. They might not want to be hugged.

He looked at Carl, who seemed satisfied. Elias told Clara to lead the way, and after a brief hesitation, she went ahead down the corridor. Elias followed and gestured for the children to come along, which they did, to Clara's obvious surprise.

Once inside the room, Elias explained first how he had found them, but said nothing about how long they had been in the woods before coming with him.

Clara looked at Carl and Sonja, who were sitting close together on the sofa. Sonja pressed herself against the back of the sofa, eyes wide with fear, not daring to meet Clara's

gaze. Carl sat watchful beside her, his eyes fixed on Clara and his hands poised over Sonja as if to protect her.

Clara took a deep breath and lowered her voice, carefully.

– Why did you leave the three homes I placed you in?

No answer came. Sonja looked at Elias in a panic, and he gave a calm nod. Carl pulled Sonja a little closer, as if to reassure her, and whispered to Elias:

– Do I… have to say?

– Don't be afraid. I'm sure Clara is kind too.

– But… won't she be angry with us?

– All she wants is to help you, just like me. I know that, because I've seen for myself that they care about children, just like I do.

Carl nodded and seemed to relax a little while keeping his eyes on Elias the whole time. Clara could clearly see that both children were absolutely terrified, and chose not to press further. It seemed Elias was the only adult they trusted. After thinking for a moment, she turned to Elias, her voice soft but firm.

– Well then, Elias. Would you be willing to keep the children for a few more days while I arrange a permanent solution?

– Yes… of course, Elias said, a little uncertainly. A few more days, I can manage that.

– I'm grateful for that, it makes things much easier for me. But under the rules, I need to come home with you to inspect the accommodation from a child safety perspective. I

just need to check that everything is safe and secure for the children.

Elias wasn't keen on that, but he rarely said "no", so he let Clara come home with him and look round the whole house and check every detail. When she had finished, she explained:

– You've already thought of most things. You've got a hob guard and child locks on the oven and kitchen drawers. There's nothing dangerous left out either, which is excellent. It would be better if all the plug sockets were childproofed, and if that chest of drawers and that cupboard were fixed to the wall. Children do like to climb, you know.

When Clara had gone, Elias thought it was a bit daft to have to childproof the place for just a few days. Even so, he did as she had said. That was the kind of person he was. So he drove off with the children to a DIY store and bought a whole box of sockets and plugs. It was about time he replaced them anyway, since he hadn't done it when he renovated, and they looked rather old-fashioned. He also bought angle brackets. He then spent the rest of that day and part of the next replacing all the sockets and securing most of the furniture to the walls.

That afternoon, the doorbell rang. The children were still on their own in their room, with the door locked. Elias checked the camera and saw Clara with a man at her side. He opened the door.

– Hello, Elias, Clara said. I did say, as you may remember from yesterday, that I might make unannounced visits. So

here I am. This is my manager, Anders, who would like a word with you about the children.

Elias let them in, knocked on the children's door, and told them Clara was there. He heard a click in the lock as Carl unlocked it. Anders followed Elias into the kitchen and sat down opposite him with a stern expression. Clara began looking around, since Elias had mentioned he had sorted things out.

– I hope you understand that we need to assess your suitability, given that you have Carl and Sonja with you. We've already run a background check on you, no red flags. But what exactly is your agenda with these children?

– Erm, oh, nothing, Elias said anxiously. I just… sort of… found them… wanted to help them…

– When did you first see them?

– Erm… maybe… nearly 6 weeks ago…

– Wait! Are you saying it was six weeks from when you found them to when you contacted us? When you find children in a situation like that, you ring social services straight away. You don't wait.

– They were… well… they were scared. Of me too… at first. I… I couldn't contact… I needed first to… establish trust. Get them to stop seeing me as… as a threat… so…

– Why won't you look at me? And you… you're speaking incoherently.

– I find this sort of thing difficult… talking…

– You… do you have Asperger's syndrome?

Elias flinched, and his eyes darted about before he answered.

– Well… but it's called autism spectrum disorder now. And… yes, that's right.

– Of course, ASD, yes. But… how can a person with autism take care of small children, I wonder?

– Well… children are so straightforward. If they cry they're sad, if they laugh they're happy, and if they scream they're angry. And they like routines and repetition, just like someone with ASD. So I don't see any problem.

Anders stared hard at him, and Elias dropped his gaze again.

– Hm… possibly. Let me speak to the children now.

Anders got up and went to speak to the children. After a while, he came back and said to Elias:

– Come with me. The children are asking for you. The thing is, I want to know why they ran away from all the foster homes, but they won't say. But Carl said that Sonja told you last night.

Elias went into the room where the children were sitting on the floor, looking frightened. He sat down on the bed, and Sonja climbed up and grabbed his arm. Elias shuddered with discomfort, but stayed where he was. He couldn't push away a child who was looking to him for comfort, even if he found being touched uncomfortable.

– Lias…? Can you tell him? I'm scared!

Anders nodded at him, so Elias swallowed and began to recount what he had found out the previous evening.

– Right, so, at the first foster home, the man of the house said they had to have a bath several times a week. Especially Sonja, because "girls get dirty quickly", as he put it. So he would lock himself in the bathroom alone with Sonja and wash her. He soaped up his hands and rubbed her all over her body. He was particularly thorough between her legs.

Elias demonstrated what the man had done with his hand, his middle finger bent.

– I asked Sonja whether the man's middle finger had been inside her private parts, and she confirmed that it had.

Anders swore loudly and clenched his fists in anger. Elias flinched, but carried on.

– Well, Sonja told Carl, and after a few weeks with no change, they ran away. But as you know, they were found after only a few hours, and they refused to be sent back. So you placed them in another home that had several children. It had boys' rooms and girls' rooms, so Sonja had to sleep without her brother. On the very first night, one of the other boys came into the room. He must have been around 15 years old ± a few years. He got into Sonja's bed and touched her inappropriately. Then Sonja explained that the boy's "thing" got bigger and he did things with it.

Anders stood up and shouted "FUCKING HELL" so loudly that both children flinched. Sonja gripped Elias's arm harder, and Elias reacted.

– STOP. There's no shouting like that in front of children. There's no swearing like that in front of children. Look at

Sonja, you're frightening her. Lower your voice and watch your language. Now!

Anders started at his words. He breathed deeply a few times and sat back down. He fixed his gaze on Elias, and he nodded slowly.

– I'm sorry. Go on, Elias. I'm listening.

– Well, Sonja is quite small, so it probably didn't, you know, but either way, it wasn't many nights before they ran away again. This time, they managed to stay hidden for a few days before they were caught and placed in a third foster home. Carl wasn't going to wait for something to happen to Sonja, so on the very first night they ran away again and just kept walking until they reached the woods, where I eventually found them.

Anders managed to compose himself again, muttered something, and left the room to find Clara, who had been looking round the house again. When he asked about the safety of the house, he was surprised to learn that Elias had already dealt with every single point in less than a day. The whole house was now in top shape from a child safety point of view. He went back to the children's room and said, firmly:

– Can you all come through to the living room, so I can have a word with you?

Elias and the two children went into the living room, all three of them on shaky legs. Anders had sounded so angry! Elias sat down on the sofa, and Sonja curled up close beside him. He steeled himself not to pull away. It was obvious that

the little girl was comforted by his closeness, and he couldn't deny her that. Carl sat down on the other side of Sonja, and they all looked anxiously at Anders, who was pacing back and forth, clearly agitated.

– What has happened to these children is wrong. All of it is wrong. All three foster families did wrong. The people living there did wrong. The children were wrong to run. Clara, you did wrong. I did wrong. And you, Elias, you did wrong.

Elias was getting genuinely nervous. He knew he had done wrong by not contacting social services from the start. Was Anders about to report him to the police?

– Everything that has happened to these children is wrong. Everyone did wrong. Whatever we do now will be wrong too, but the time has come to do something that is actually **right** for the children!

He slammed his fist on the table as he said "right", making both the children and Elias jump. Then Anders sat down, facing them.

– So I am making two decisions here and now. Firstly…

Anders tapped his finger on the table in front of him.

– …from today, this is an officially registered long-term foster home under social services.

Elias thought: *What… what is he saying?*

– And secondly… these two children are placed here as the only children in this home.

He tapped the table again with his finger, while Elias, completely shocked, was screaming: *No, are you out of your*

mind, you idiot! You can't give me responsibility for two children! I'm not ready! I'm not right in my head! Absolutely not, forget it! He realised he was only screaming inside his head, and as usual, nothing showed on the outside.

Clara looked at Anders in surprise and seemed about to object. Anders saw it and continued.

– I know, Clara, that your assessment isn't finished. This is a preliminary decision until the formal review is complete. Finish it. If you don't find anything that directly contradicts my judgement, the placement will be confirmed. Elias, I'm going back to the office to draw up the temporary placement order. You'll receive the paperwork for reading and signing as soon as it's been registered.

Elias breathed a sigh of relief. With his ASD, it was already hard enough as it was to say "no" to someone's face. Now he could simply wait for the paperwork, and then either not sign it, or send back his refusal in the way he was expected to. *It's fine*, he thought. *I'll sort this out later*.

Anders and Clara left the house, and the children went back to their room. Elias made supper for the children and himself, and soon it was time for bed. Carl called to him from the bathroom.

– Unca Eli! Can you help us brush our teeth?

Elias was a little surprised, but went into the bathroom and did his best. Clara had left the children's belongings, so their toothbrushes were now there. After helping them both brush, they went into the children's room, and Sonja said:

– Story?

Elias was even more surprised, but found a story on his phone and read it to the children. They both listened to every word, and when the story was finished, Sonja said:

– Kiss?

Elias had no idea how to kiss a child. You can't kiss them on the mouth, surely? So he kissed Sonja lightly on the forehead, and she smiled happily. Then Carl said:

– Me too!

So he kissed Carl on the forehead as well, and then went out through the door.

– Wait a moment!

Carl ran to the door, took the key out of the lock, and solemnly handed it to Elias.

– We don't need this any more.

Elias said goodnight and closed the door. Then he went into the living room and felt utterly exhausted by everything that had happened during the day. Eventually, he went to bed too but slept fitfully through the night. *Tomorrow I'll sort all this out and let them know they'll have to find another foster home*, was his last thought before he fell asleep.

The next morning, as he was in the kitchen making breakfast, he heard the children singing in their room:

– And we get to stay with Eli, tra-la-la-la!

– And we are so happy, tra-la-la-la!

– For we get to live with Eli, tra-la-la-la!

Elias heard them, and his heart melted like chocolate in the sun. How could he tell Anders that he didn't want to be a foster carer for them? If he let them down now, he would shatter every bit of trust the children had in the adult world. They would probably never trust anyone again.

So when the paperwork arrived from Anders, he signed it and sent it back. Elias was worried sick about the whole situation, but for the children's sake, he felt he had no choice. *I know nothing about how to look after children, and now, all of a sudden, I'm responsible for two of them.* His anxiety grew from his decision.

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– Wow, Lovisa said. What a story! But didn't you enjoy it too, being a foster parent? You love children.

– Of course, but not at first. It was mostly hard going. But after a month or two, I got used to having two children in the house. And I fell head over heels for them. It felt as though they were my own.

– Wow, so you got children of your own, even though you'd never managed to get into a relationship with a woman.

– Exactly. I had the children I'd been longing for. I was planning a future for them: school, homework. And when they turned eighteen, I'd carry on being their daddy and

stand there bursting with pride at their weddings. There were children in the house!

– How wonderful, Elias darling. But what happened to them? They're not here any more.

– I lost them. It nearly finished me. Literally.

Lovisa looked at Elias gravely. His eyes had filled with tears, and she could see it was painful for him to talk about.

– What do you mean, Elias, when you say you lost them? Surely life can't be so cruel that they died?

– Nope. Worse. An aunt turned up, after…

He fell silent for a moment.

– 6 months and 20 days after I became a foster parent.

– I thought the children had no relatives.

– Everyone thought that. Their parents were alcoholics and died of methanol poisoning from home-distilled spirits, but the children also had an aunt. She'd fallen for a bloke and moved in with him. The problem was that she'd become terribly clumsy. Time and again, she had to visit A&E or the health centre because she'd tripped on a staircase, walked into a door, fallen off her bike, tumbled off a kerb, and all sorts of other things. She hadn't been that clumsy before she met this man.

– That sounds more like she was being beaten. I don't believe people suddenly become clumsy.

– Most likely, but she never wanted to report it. It's called "battered woman syndrome". Every time he hit her, he'd apologise and become so kind, give her flowers or a nice dress and show remorse. Until the next time. Doctors

reported it to the police, but since she refused to cooperate, there was nothing the police could do. Then one day she simply vanished, and the boyfriend was remanded in custody on suspicion of murder. But since they never found a body, they eventually had to release him.

– But he hadn't murdered her?

– Nope. Apparently, a female friend from another country came here with her male cousin and helped her understand it was only a matter of time before the boyfriend went too far. So she dropped everything she owned and went home with them to their country, to get away. There was no other family apart from Carl and Sonja's drunken parents, so nobody knew she was alive and happy. Until word reached her by a roundabout route about her sister and brother-in-law's tragic death. She contacted social services and demanded custody of her nephew and niece.

– Elias darling, that must have been dreadful for you when you found out.

– Dreadful? You're joking? I hit the roof! Someone was laying claim to **my** children, **MY OWN** children! How can someone just do that? I challenged her for custody, hired a solicitor and, on his advice, an adoption agency. **I** was going to have these children. They were **my** children. It was **I** who was going to watch them grow up. It was in **my** house they lived, and it was in **my** house they were going to live until they moved out. How could this woman challenge **my** right to **my** children?

– So you took it to the family court?

– Well, I calmed down and listened to myself. There was an awful lot of **I, I, I** and **my, my, my** in there. I already had this firmly held view about children.

He fell silent for a moment, and when he continued, his voice was unusually firm.

– And if you don't accept this, the door is over there!

Lovisa started. What had he said? An ultimatum!

– Well, children are always innocent, at least when they're that young. They haven't chosen their parents. They haven't even chosen to be born. And they haven't, for the most part, chosen what happens to them. So it is the parents' duty, a duty partly in law but above all a moral one, to always act in their children's best interests, even if that means sacrifice on the parents' part. And if the parents are dead, other adults must take on that responsibility. Children should always be able to trust that the adults around them are acting in **their** best interests and not their **own**.

– Yes… that really is how it ought to be, Lovisa said, feeling the tension ease as she understood that this was genuinely how he thought about children.

– I went into the social services system. I only had access to my children's records, but I could see that their aunt, Molly, was registered as a connected person. I found out where she was staying and went there with the children. She was in a hotel with her friend's cousin, Hans, who was now her boyfriend. When I knocked, he opened the door and looked suspicious. "Entschuldigung, kann ich Ihnen helfen?" he asked.

“I… ich möchte… ich möchte nur mit Molly sprechen, bitte,” I stammered out.

He pressed me: “Wer sind Sie, und was wollen Sie?”

I managed: “Nur… die Kinder… äh…”

– Wait, Lovisa said. You’re saying he spoke German to you. Do you speak German?

– Yeah, pretty well, actually.

– Of course you do, Lovisa said, shaking her head slightly.

– He just wanted to know who I was and what I wanted, and I could barely get out that I was there about the children.

– So what happened then?

– By this point, Sonja couldn’t hold herself back any longer, and she called out for her aunt. Molly came running when she recognised the voice, and the children ran towards her and threw themselves into her open arms. I explained to Molly who I was. She looked frightened, perhaps angry, perhaps sullen. How would I be able to tell? Then I explained what I wanted.

“All I want is what is best for the children. I suggest that you spend time with them over the next few days and do exactly what you like. The only conditions are that I am present and can observe, and that they sleep at mine. I am, after all, still legally responsible for them for the time being.”

– Wow, Lovisa exclaimed. You let Molly spend time with the children, even though by doing so, you risked them choosing her over you.

– Molly wondered the same thing and said:

“Why are you letting me spend time with them? I thought you were contesting custody too and that you were my enemy.”

“Enemy is a strong word. I want to understand what you mean to them. If I can see that they’d rather be with you, I’ll withdraw my claim. I want you to do the same in return. Let the children decide instead of us fighting it out in court.”

– That was very big-hearted of you. You love the children, and yet you give Molly a chance with them.

– Well, I wanted it to be the children’s choice and not mine. Molly looked at me in surprise and agreed. Over the following days, I often sat watching them when she took them to play parks, zoos, fast food places, and everywhere else she wanted to go with them. There was also plenty of time to talk with her and with Hans. I came to realise that she’d known about her sister’s drinking problem and had almost been more of a mother to the children than their own mother.

– Perhaps that was why she put up with her boyfriend, so as not to abandon her sister’s children.

– Yes, she actually said that. So with a heavy heart, I told my solicitor and social services that the children were best off with Molly. It was obvious, even to me, that they loved their aunt very much.

– So that was how you lost them. You sort of gave them away.

– Yep. Hans and Molly came to my house with Clara and Anders to collect them. I had packed all their things and

helped load everything into Hans's car. Clara was a little surprised at how much there was, since she hadn't seen any receipts for everything I had bought. But it was the children's things that I had bought for them. When I went to put the children in the car, Sonja threw herself round my neck.

"Wow, Sonja. What have I done to deserve a hug as big as this?" I said.

"Thank you, Unca Eli! We get to go with Auntie! I love you. But love Auntie more."

"Of course, my angel. Go and be happy with Auntie now."

To my surprise, Carl too threw his arms round me for the first time and gave me an equally enormous hug.

"Thank you, Elias. You took care of Sonja. I couldn't. And thank you we get to go with Auntie."

– That must have felt good all the same, Lovisa said.

– Yes, I got a little tearful at that. I put them in the car and watched them drive away out of my life. Then I rushed into the house without even closing the door, threw myself onto Sonja's bed, and wept uncontrollably. Anders came carefully into the room.

"Excuse me, Elias, I just wanted to ask…"

"What do you want, Anders?!" I shouted. "You've torn my heart out of my chest. Are you going to stamp on it as well? Go to hell and never come back! I hate you!"

Lovisa stared at Elias in shock.

– The thing is, Lovisa, I have never had an outburst like that before or since, and I have never used such horrible words either. But I was genuinely out of control right then

and there. Anders turned on his heel and left. I closed and locked the front door and went back to Sonja's bed. I lay there for a whole week and couldn't stop crying. I signed myself off sick from work, ate nothing, slept nothing, and only went to the bathroom when I had to, drinking a little water while I was there.

– Good lord, you must have been in a terrible state. But I understand it. It was as though you'd lost your own children.

– Exactly. Well, after a week, my boss got in touch and asked how I was. There was no problem with staying on sick leave, but a fit note would be needed. So I drove to the health centre. There was a female doctor who sent me to a counsellor, also a woman. You know how awkward I get talking to women, other than you, of course, so I mostly stammered and was probably fairly incoherent. The counsellor fetched a male colleague, who put me in his car and drove me straight to the psychiatric A&E.

– What! The psych ward! Lovisa exclaimed in astonishment.

– Yep. There I had to see yet another woman, quite young, so I could barely get a word out. She decided to invoke the Mental Health Act, and I was sectioned under Section 2. Then everything moved very quickly. Suddenly, I was locked in a padded cell, full of sedatives that left me completely out of it. I understood nothing, and nothing anyone said there made any sense.

– Wow, what a shock. But why, Elias darling?

– I wondered that too. In the notes, which I read later, it said: “High risk of suicide”. Well, after several hours, I got to see Hugo, an older man who was a psychiatrist. He asked how I felt, but I didn’t quite follow the questions. Everything felt muddled and abstract. Eventually, he asked whether he might read my notes, and I said yes. I didn’t understand why he asked. Surely he could read them without my permission? He murmured something and said he could see I’d been given an autism spectrum disorder diagnosis, and asked whether I still had difficulties with it.

– You have got that diagnosis, haven’t you? Lovisa said.

– Yes, from CAMHS. I had to confirm that.

– The Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service?

– Exactly. Then it was as though he became a different person. I suddenly understood everything he said, and he is the first person ever to have reached me completely.

– Well, apart from your parents and perhaps me.

– He was the first, full stop. You are the second. Well, after a few days, he lifted my section, but recommended I stay on as an informal patient, which I did. I was told I have depression. The doctor said I needed medication for it, and I started taking it. He had a trainee fetch my car from the health centre and drive it home, and at the same time, check my fridge so that nothing would go off. I kept an eye on him through the cameras.

– Did you really have thoughts of suicide? And how long did you stay in the adult psychiatric ward?

– I don't think so, actually. Depressed, definitely. I think they mostly misunderstood me. I was there for just over a month in total. Then I was advised to go home with clear instructions about the antidepressants and to try to go back to work. The idea was that having structure would help clear my head, and hopefully the memories of the children too.

– So you went back to the IT company?

– Nope. When I came into the house, it was as though the children's room pulled me in like a neodymium magnet, and I had a complete breakdown on the threshold. I fetched an axe from the shed and went back to chop up everything that reminded me of the children. Beds, tables, wardrobes, everything. In my mind's eye, it all became nothing but a pile of splinters, even the bedding and the mattress, which is actually impossible. Then I thought I would have to set fire to the splinters too.

– Elias darling…

– Although then the room would burn down. But it felt right, because the children's spirit hung over that room. And if the whole house burned down as well, perhaps that would be just as well, because the children's spirit was everywhere in the house.

– Oh my word! But the house is still standing, so you stopped yourself?

– Yes, my ASD brain eventually kicked in and made me realise that none of it would help, other than leaving me homeless as well. I sat on the threshold with the axe in my

lap and tried to think of a solution. Finally, I realised there was only one thing to do.

– What was that? Lovisa asked anxiously.

– I took the axe back out to the shed, got in the car, and drove to social services and asked to speak to Anders. First I apologised for my dreadful behaviour. He was very understanding and said he'd realised I had said it in the heat of the moment. Then he asked what he could help me with.

– Just like that? That shows he's a good manager.

– He still is. I told him I needed children. Other children. New children. Children I could look after instead of the ones I had just lost. He explained that was precisely why he had come to my room, to ask if I wanted to become a foster carer for other children. But I really didn't want that.

– You're afraid of it happening again, aren't you?

– Exactly. That was when he suggested an emergency foster carer, someone who can look after children who've been taken into emergency care for up to a few months. I accepted gladly, but I told him I only wanted to take them for two or three weeks at most, and he agreed to that. Then he said there was a little boy in another room who urgently needed an emergency foster home.

– That was very kind of Anders, Lovisa remarked. He sounds like a remarkable person.

– I agree. No sooner said than done, that little boy came home with me. I applied for a leave of absence from my IT job and focused entirely on the children. They came in a

steady stream. I cannot understand how there can be so many parents who neglect their children.

– It's sadly more common than most people realise.

– Well, then one time I got too many children, five of them, but Anders sorted it out, and I had "only" four, took them to a shop, caught sight of an incredibly beautiful girl, and you know what happened next, don't you?

– Wow, what an extraordinary story, Elias darling. It's so wonderful to see you with children like this. I love you even more, after all this. At the same time, it's getting late, so I really should be heading home. Can I come back again tomorrow?

– You already know the answer, so I don't see why you keep asking, Elias said, smiling.

– See you tomorrow then. But before I go… next weekend is Easter, and I usually visit my parents to celebrate on Easter Eve.

– Do you really mean that you are celebrating on Easter Eve? Aren't you celebrating on Easter Sunday, like most people do?

– Right, you see, my mum is from Sweden, and she talked Dad into having it on Easter Eve, though he'd rather have Sunday. They go to church at six on Easter Sunday morning for his sake.

– That explains your name. Lovisa is a Swedish name, isn't it?

– Yes, it is. Anyway, I normally stay until Easter Monday.

– I don't have any kind of exclusive claim on you. If you want to visit your parents, maybe stay there for a few days since they live so far away, I'm not going to stop you.

Lovisa felt a warmth spread through her. Not only had he clearly shown that he accepted her needs, but he had actually remembered that she had told him how far away her parents lived.

– Come with me. I would be so happy if you came with me to see my parents and let me introduce you to them.

Elias hesitated, and she understood that she had got ahead of herself.

– You don't have to answer now, but think about it until Saturday. I usually go after lunch, and maybe between now and then you can make up your mind. I want you to come with me, so much.

Lovisa walked away with her heart pounding so hard it almost hurt. What a surprise her mother was in for when she got to meet this wonderful man! But for Elias, the panic was already growing at the thought of meeting her parents so soon.

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The next day was a Sunday, and Lovisa came round as usual in the morning. She sensed somehow that Elias had become more reserved since the day before. She was a little confused, given how open he had been and how much he had shared the previous day. But she shook off the feeling and carried on as she always did.

– By the way, Elias darling, I've got a girls' night with some friends tonight, so I'll probably head off earlier than usual, if that's all right with you.

– As I said yesterday, I have no claim over you, so you don't need to ask.

So Lovisa left him early in the afternoon and went to her friend's flat, where the others had already arrived. The moment she walked in, one of them exclaimed:

– Oh my God, Lovisa, you're absolutely glowing today! Are you in love again?

– In love? Not even close. I'm completely mad about this bloke I met a few weeks ago. We've spent every day together for a whole week, and I've already decided he's the man I want in my life. We're going to visit my parents at Easter, and they'll soon see how wonderful he is.

– Wow, that sounds amazing. You've not had the best of luck with love before, so good luck this time.

– This time it's going to work. I'm certain of it.

– Hang on a minute, Lovisa! What did you just say? You've only known each other a week, and you're already introducing him to your parents? I waited several months before I did that with my boyfriend! Are you trying to scare him off straight away, you absolute nutter?

– It can't be that big a deal, just visiting my parents.

– Can't it? When a girl wants to introduce her boyfriend to her parents, it's a big deal for him. Like it's already a **done deal**. Are you sure he's as keen on you as you are on him?

– Well, maybe not. Now that I think about it, he was a bit reserved today.

All her friends then piled in with comments about how daft it was to bring him to meet her parents after just one week. Lovisa realised they were right, especially given how quiet Elias had been earlier.

The next day she went round to his after work, as usual. The first thing she said was:

– Elias darling, I've been thinking. I may have sprung that on you a bit, and you don't have to come and meet my parents. I know I can get carried away sometimes. I'm sorry.

– Sure, no problem, he replied.

The week passed, and she assumed the whole thing was settled. But when she arrived on Easter Saturday, she noticed a holdall in the hallway.

– What's that bag, Elias darling?

– Well, if we're going to your parents' today, we'll probably be staying overnight, so I'll need a change of clothes and a few other bits.

– But I told you that you didn't have to come. You remember that, surely?

– You did say that. But you didn't say you didn't **want** me to come. If you don't want me to any more, I'll stay home instead.

– No, I do want you to, but you don't have to… Wow. You're absolutely incredible. I fall even more in love with you for this, Elias darling. You know you don't have to come, and you probably don't want to yourself, but you're doing it anyway because I happen to want it.

– Mm. I do enjoy spending time with you, and I'd miss your company if you were away for several days.

So just before lunchtime, they both got into Elias's car and drove off. Lovisa's parents lived nearly three hours away,

but the conversation in the car flowed reasonably well. She talked a little more than usual to keep him distracted, since she wasn't entirely sure he was comfortable with meeting her parents.

Eventually, they arrived. Lovisa walked towards the door while Elias got their bags out of the boot and followed a little behind. Suddenly, the door flew open and a very good-looking man stepped out.

– Hey, you must be Lovisa. My name's Steve, and your mum's told me everything about you, shown me photos and videos. Let me show you how interested I am.

He grabbed her face and tried to kiss her. She wrenched herself free and slapped him hard enough to make his ears ring.

– What the hell is wrong with you?! Don't touch me! Get your hands off me, you disgusting creep, before I do something you'll regret!

She saw her parents standing in the doorway, looking somewhat shocked by her reaction.

– Darling, Lovisa, her mother said. There's no need to be so aggressive. I thought you and Steve might make a lovely couple. I just want you to have a chance at happiness too, and your boyfriends haven't exactly worked out, as you know.

– What the hell are you playing at, Mum?! Have you completely lost your mind? Allow me to introduce Elias Nicholson, who is my new **boyfriend!**

She pointed to Elias, who had frozen to the spot. Lovisa's mother looked stunned as Lovisa spun round and screamed at Elias:

– Come on, Elias darling, we're leaving. Now!

She opened the car door and got in. Elias walked round to the driver's side and sat down.

– What are you waiting for? DRIVE BACK HOME, Lovisa screamed.

– The bags… they're still out there… Elias stammered.

– Then get them and drive!

Suddenly, one of the rear doors was wrenched open, and Lovisa's father climbed in uninvited. He ignored Lovisa's protests and spoke in his gentlest voice:

– Excuse me, but I just want to say something. The Lord knows we're both glad you have a boyfriend, Lovisa. Hello, by the way. My name's Kenneth, Lovisa's father.

He extended his hand towards Elias, who simply pulled his own hand away and did not take it.

– I understand this must be a shock for you, Elias. Steve put all the blame on Karin and drove off in anger, so I doubt we'll be seeing him again. But the truth is, the whole idea of him was wrong from the very start, and for that, I apologise on her behalf. Lovisa, my dear… I'm begging you, please don't let Easter be ruined by leaving in anger.

– I'm not ruining anything! That's Mum, and you know it! Lovisa screamed.

– I understand, Kenneth replied, his voice even softer. But Steve is gone, and it's only Mum you're angry with. Can

you at least try to calm down a little, even though you have every reason to be furious? You know Easter is important to me, because it's about the resurrection of Jesus Christ. I'll leave you in peace now, but please… think about what I've said.

Kenneth got out of the car, and Lovisa looked at Elias. He looked terrified. She realised that his ASD made chaos and raised voices very difficult to handle. She breathed a few times deeply to try to calm herself down. She didn't want to lose Elias.

– Elias darling. I'm so sorry about all this. Please!

– I don't accept your apology!

– Oh, I understand, but please, I don't want to lose you now.

– I don't accept your apology, because you haven't done anything wrong. You can't apologise for someone else's mistake.

– Thank you for that. She sighed with relief. But I am sorry for screaming at you, because you haven't done anything wrong either. I understand this has been really hard for you and that I should have consulted you as well. So now… how do **you** think we should handle this?

Elias sat for a long time trying to steady his breathing while Lovisa did her best to calm down, too. Eventually, Elias spoke:

– Right, well, my first instinct is to drive away from here as fast as possible and never come back. But this isn't some stranger. This is your own mother. And you'll have to make

things right sooner or later. Today, tomorrow, next week, next month, next year. The longer you let it fester, the worse it gets, for both of you. So sort it out. Here and now. Minimise the damage.

Lovisa stared at him. She turned over what he had said, then nodded as she realised he was absolutely right.

– You're right, of course, Elias darling. But I'm still going to give her a piece of my mind first, because that's who I am.

– Of course. Just bear in mind how your head is built.

– What do you mean?

– You have one mouth and two ears. That means you should listen twice as much as you talk. And you really should listen and try to see her side as well. Is she genuinely evil, or did she get it wrong out of concern for you?

Lovisa looked at Elias as though she had never seen him before. She realised she still had quite a lot to learn from him.

– Wow, you're right, but I'm still going to say what I think.

– Of course you should. Just try to do it privately. I can see from the windows that there are quite a few people in there. Nothing gets better from humiliating her in front of everyone else. And finally, I'm not comfortable being called your "boyfriend", because I don't feel we know each other well enough for that.

– Okay, okay, Elias darling, she replied, considerably calmer. What should I call you then? We do still have a relationship, don't we?

– Of course. Maybe call me your “boyfriend prospect”?

– I like that, Lovisa laughed. And that makes me your “girlfriend prospect”, doesn’t it?

– Yep. Shall we go in, then?

– We shall, but you’ll be left on your own with everyone while I have a serious word with Mum.

– I’m a grown man. I’ll manage.

Lovisa smiled, got out of the car again and walked back towards the house. Elias followed with the bags. Lovisa’s parents and the guests watched anxiously through the window.

– Brace yourselves for an eruption, a volcanic explosion and burst eardrums, a guest called Teddy said with a wry smile. Lovisa’s on her way in. Hurricane force, category five!

Lovisa opened the door and walked in, eyes blazing. Her parents were standing just inside, looking worried, and the others were watching from the living room doorway.

– Mum! You and me: my room. Now!

To everyone’s astonishment, the two of them went into Lovisa’s old room without a single outburst. Everyone had been bracing themselves for pandemonium in the hallway. Elias made his way carefully inside with the bags, glancing anxiously at all the people. Lovisa’s father showed him into the living room, where he found an empty chair.

– Blimey, Lovisa’s boyfriend. Not bad. Hi there, my name’s Theodor, but everyone calls me Teddy. I’m Lovisa’s good-for-nothing cousin and her best friend.

He put out his hand, but Elias simply placed his right hand flat against his chest at heart height and gave a small nod. The others introduced themselves one by one:

– Victor. I'm Lovisa's cousin. This is my wife, Viola.

– Hi, Viola said warmly, nodding at Elias.

– Oscar, Lovisa's little brother, the next person said.

– And I'm Maya, the woman beside him said with a smile. His girlfriend.

Elias was anxious that there were so many of them. Seven people in the room, he counted quickly, including himself. Everyone seemed to be staring at him, and he shifted uncomfortably in his chair. Voices rose in a single jumble around Steve and Lovisa. How could Steve have thought he'd done the right thing? How angry was Lovisa, really? The noise became unbearable.

– Right, everyone, calm down. We'll find out everything in good time. I'm more worried about Karin's safety, to be honest.

– I'm not worried, Kenneth replied. I can't even hear raised voices from the room. Perhaps Lovisa has managed to keep herself in check.

– About as likely as the Easter Bunny turning up, Teddy commented dryly.

After a quarter of an hour, Lovisa and Karin came out of the room and rejoined the others. Lovisa sat down next to Elias on a separate chair, which, to everyone's surprise, she moved about a foot away from his. After a short, awkward silence, Lovisa spoke:

– Relax, everyone. Mum and I are friends again.

– Good to hear, Kenneth said. Your boyfriend looks rather uncomfortable with all of this, which is completely understandable.

Elias turned his head sharply and looked at Lovisa, who understood immediately.

– Actually, Elias isn't really my boyfriend. He's my boyfriend **prospect**, for now. We've only known each other for four weeks, after all.

– Two, Elias corrected.

– Right, two weeks. But I've already decided he's the man I want in my life. So just you all be careful about trying to scare him off, because you'll have me to deal with if you do!

– Hang on a moment, Teddy said. Is it two weeks or four? And Elias, what on earth have you done to Lovisa? I've never seen her give in to anyone before!

– Right, here's the thing, Lovisa continued. We met four weeks ago, but we've been spending time together regularly for two weeks. So in a way, we're both right.

– Fair enough, that explains it, Teddy replied. But Elias… what do you do for work?

– Um… children, mostly…

– Children? What qualifications? Maya said.

– Er… systems… programmer…

– IT and children? That's a bit of a contradiction, Victor said.

– Got an IT job as well…

– So which is it, IT or children? Oscar said.

– Who do you work for? Kenneth asked.

– Um… Silent Pixel IT… part-time…

– Part-time? How do you live? Viola said.

– House…

– Are you handy? Oscar asked.

– Well…

Elias's gaze drifted. He was looking for somewhere to land.

– Moving in together? Viola said.

– Not really…

– Children, then? Lovisa loves children! Teddy said.

– Er… I… yes… well…

– Oi, **oi**, **OI!** Stop it, now, Lovisa shouted. What is this, the Spanish Inquisition?! Are you trying to scare Elias off already?! Do you really want to fall out with me?!

– Sorry, Elias, Teddy said. We're just so curious about you, because I don't think I've ever seen Lovisa this excited about someone before. Not that she hasn't had boyfriends.

– Oh, right… he said.

Elias's gaze drifted, and he went quiet. It was obvious he was uncomfortable. He simply couldn't focus on any one person, and meeting anyone's eyes was out of the question. He glanced at Lovisa and looked down as he always did. *No, I'm staring at her breasts*, he thought. *There are loads of people here!* His gaze moved on to the table, the floor, and finally his own hands.

– Lovisa, darling, could you give me a hand with something in the kitchen? Karin asked.

– Of course, Mum, no problem.

They went out to the kitchen, but Karin didn't seem to need help with anything. Instead, she asked her daughter:

– Lovisa… I was just wondering… Elias, does he have a diagnosis or anything like that?

– Mum! Stop! Do you really think I'd tell you something like that? You know I hate to gossip. If you want to know whether he has any mental health conditions, you'll have to ask him yourself!

– Oh, I'm sorry. I really am making a mess of things today.

– The only thing you need to know about him is that I've decided he's the person I want to spend my life with.

They went back to the others. Elias looked at Lovisa and raised one eyebrow slightly. Lovisa understood at once.

– Right, so Mum just asked whether you're a psycho or something, and I obviously refused to answer.

– Lovisa!

– What, Mum? Did you really think I wasn't going to tell him that you asked?

Kenneth stepped in to defuse the situation again.

– How's the food coming along, my dear? Is it nearly ready?

Lovisa breathed more slowly, grateful for Kenneth's move.

– The lamb probably needs another quarter of an hour, maybe half an hour, Karin responded.

– I'm very much looking forward to it. Aren't the rest of you?

– Karin's lamb is always fantastic, Teddy said.

– ASD, Elias said.

The room went completely silent, and everyone turned to look at him. Teddy blinked in surprise.

– Sorry, what did you say, Elias?

– ASD. I have it.

– What's ASD?

– Google it.

Teddy pulled out his phone and tapped away for a moment. Soon, he read out what he had found:

– Got it. Here's what it says. Let me read this out: "Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is an umbrella term for a range of autism diagnoses, including autism, autism-like conditions and Asperger's syndrome."

– Ah, so you're an Aspie. You can tell, but there's nothing to be ashamed of, Karin said.

– Could you explain in medical terms what autism spectrum disorder actually means? Teddy asked. Not anything specific about you, just what ASD really is.

– Lovisa? Elias said, glancing at her.

– All right. I'm describing ASD, not Elias, Lovisa began. So, ASD has three letters. The first is A for **Autism**. That can mean many things. Take social interaction: it can be hard to read what other people are feeling or meaning. One might come across as insensitive or socially awkward, but it's not about lacking empathy. Many people with ASD actually feel

things very deeply. They just express it differently. Body language, facial expressions, and other non-verbal communication are difficult to read. Eye contact is basically impossible. Starting or ending conversations is hard. But when one does say something, it's straightforward and without a filter. What else?

Lovisa paused, as though running through a mental checklist.

– Right, one tends to have certain special interests that take up a lot of time, and focus on them with extraordinary intensity, but find change very stressful. Breaking routines is difficult, and one can react strongly to sounds, light, smells, or touch. Generally, one is hypersensitive to sensory input, though sometimes it's the opposite. One might need more stimulation than others to feel present. Making friends is hard. There can be repetitive or stereotyped behaviours, and one follows rules to the letter. Have I missed anything?

Elias shrugged, but she continued before he could reply.

– Some people struggle with the pragmatics of language: sarcasm, irony, humour. Social flexibility can be difficult. One doesn't always understand how others see things. Planning, starting or finishing tasks can be a struggle, too, and working memory doesn't always function as it should. Sleep is often a problem. And when it all becomes too much, one either explodes or shuts down completely. But the special interest can make one extraordinarily skilled in certain areas.

Lovisa paused for a moment and then continued.

– That doesn't mean Elias has all of this, she went on. Because the second letter is S, for **Spectrum**. Every individual is unique, just like their personality. You can't know exactly where on the spectrum someone sits, which autistic traits they have, or how strong those traits are. So in reality, you know absolutely nothing about what Elias is actually like from any of this.

Everyone in the room was listening intently, visibly impressed that Lovisa knew all of this so well.

– Finally, and this is important, Lovisa said warmly, the last letter is D, for **Disorder**. Though many in the autism community prefer the term **Condition**, because that's really what it is. Not a disease, not something wrong, just a different way of thinking, feeling, and experiencing the world. So don't any of you dare complain if you notice anything autistic about Elias. He can't help it, and I love every single thing about him!

Silence settled over the room like a heavy blanket as everyone tried to take it all in. Elias felt almost nauseous, though nothing showed on his face.

– Right, good, now we know, Teddy said. Fine, cool, so you're one of a kind! You must be, to have caught Lovisa's attention so completely. You be exactly as you are. I'm sure you're absolutely brilliant. I know Lovisa. She wouldn't be like this otherwise.

– I couldn't agree more, Kenneth added. Be who you are, just as God made you. But there is one thing I require of you. I can see that Lovisa has set her heart on you, more than I

have ever seen her do before. As long as you make her happy, I shall welcome you with open arms. Can you promise me that?

Elias looked uncertain, but realised he had to respond.

– That's the plan, at any rate.

– Good, then we'll leave it there. My dear, shouldn't the food be ready by now?

– Oh, yes, it probably is. Let's move to the kitchen and have some Easter dinner.

Elias finally got a reprieve from all the attention. This had turned out to be far harder than he could ever have anticipated. But the food was good, and everyone round the table moved on to other topics. One couple, whom Elias gathered were Lovisa's cousin Victor and his wife Viola, had a little boy of three who caught Elias's attention.

After the meal, all the adults went back to the living room while the little boy, whose name was Sebastian, was left to play in another room. Everyone began chatting away animatedly about various things, and Elias zoned out. After quite a long while, he heard repeated whimpering. He looked at Lovisa, and she gave a small nod. He slipped quietly out of the living room while the conversation among the others moved up several gears. They talked about all sorts of things, partly heatedly, but without falling out. After nearly another hour, Karin finally asked:

– Viola, how's Seb doing? Shouldn't he be asleep by now?

– Oh God, I've completely forgotten about him! It's strange that he's been so quiet.

– I heard him whimpering an hour or so ago, Lovisa said.

– What, and you didn't say anything! Hang on, where's your boyfriend now?

– Boyfriend prospect. And I think I know where he is.

Viola hurried down the corridor to the room where Sebastian was, with Lovisa close behind. She stopped abruptly in the doorway. Elias was sitting on a chair beside the bed, reading a story to the little boy who lay tucked under the duvet.

– What on earth is going on in here?

– Eli's just reading me a story. Then I'm getting a goodnight kiss so I can go to sleep.

– Hang on! You need to brush your teeth and put your pyjamas on first!

– But Eli already helped me! Look! He played with me, too. He's ever so nice!

He lifted the duvet, and sure enough, he had his pyjamas on. Viola leaned in and caught the smell of toothpaste as well.

– You can kiss me too, Mum. Then Eli can tuck me in.

Astonished, quite nearly in shock, Viola kissed him and walked back to the living room with a broadly grinning Lovisa.

Viola described what she had seen Elias do and was met with a good number of surprised faces. Lovisa exclaimed happily:

– Do you understand now why I love him?

– You can't seriously be saying what he did is normal? Viola said. I mean, Seb's usually so shy with strangers.

– Yes, this is what he does. He did say he works with children, didn't he?

– Yes, but where? Nursery, like you? Teacher? Youth worker? Does he have children of his own?

– Calm down. I don't gossip, you all know that. If he wants to tell you where he works, he will.

The conversation about Elias faded, and soon it drifted on. Viola and Victor strained to hear if Sebastian became unsettled again, but heard nothing. Eventually, Elias quietly slipped back in and sat down in the chair beside Lovisa again. No one but Lovisa noticed him at first. She fell silent and just gazed at him with a longing look. Teddy noticed that she'd gone quiet, followed her gaze, and realised Elias had come back into the room.

– So, Elias, Teddy said at last. We're all wondering what you do, given how brilliant you seem to be with children.

– Er… right… Children's Social Care, I suppose.

– Oh, so you deal with children in compulsory care, or is it foster care?

– Not only… compulsory…

– What he means, Lovisa put in, is that sometimes children need someone to look after them in situations like accidents or illness. Sometimes it's agreed with the parents, but compulsory arrangements do happen as well. For instance, in cases of substance misuse or neglect.

– Wow, but isn't that difficult? Kenneth said. I mean, the children must sometimes be quite traumatised.

– Not sometimes, try always, Lovisa continued. But Elias is brilliant at calming down children who are frightened or shy. He gets them settled in about five minutes.

Elias felt uncomfortable at her words but showed nothing outwardly. Even so, Lovisa picked up on it immediately and swiftly changed the subject, and soon he was able to zone out again. After a few hours, the guests began to drift off. Before long, only Teddy, Victor and Viola remained, Sebastian included, of course. Karin then asked Elias and Lovisa:

– I assume you'll be sleeping in Lovisa's room tonight, Elias?

Elias flinched and looked at Lovisa, who immediately sensed what he didn't dare say.

– The thing is, Elias and I don't sleep together. Not yet. He's not entirely comfortable with physical contact. I thought he could sleep in the guest room.

– But that's where Victor, Viola and Sebastian are sleeping.

– The living room, then?

– That's where Teddy's sleeping. You know he lives in the same city as you.

Lovisa looked a little worried and glanced at Elias.

– I can check with the motel down in the village, Kenneth said. They usually have rooms. Otherwise, I can look elsewhere. We'll pay, of course, so don't worry.

– We'll sort it, Elias said, with unexpected firmness.

– But how were you thinking of sorting it, Elias darling?

– We'll sort it, he repeated, in a tone that left no room for argument.

– Right, of course. We'll sort it then, Lovisa replied. Come on, Elias darling, come and have a look at my room.

Lovisa's room was not particularly large, and the bed was little more than a single, barely big enough for two.

– So, Elias. What's your plan?

– I don't have one.

– But you said we'd sort it, so you must have a plan.

– No, I haven't a clue. But when your father started looking for a hotel for me and offered to pay, that felt wrong. This is my fault, and I can't expect your father to pay to fix it.

– I don't entirely agree. It's more my fault. I should have realised the guest room was taken.

– All right, then it's our fault. You didn't think of it, but at the same time, you didn't know I was coming, so that makes it my fault. Let's agree that it's **our** fault, which means it has to be **us** who sorts it. I'll just sleep on the floor.

– Absolutely not. Right, it may be our fault, but you're not sleeping on the floor. I'll grab some pillows, and we'll build a wall down the middle of the bed.

Lovisa ignored Elias's protests and threw herself into arranging the bed for two. Then they brushed their teeth and lay down fully clothed. Tomorrow was another day. Though not quite the day either of them had expected!

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9



Lovisa woke up that morning wondering where on earth she was. Oh yes, she was in her childhood home. But wait, where was Elias? She looked round and spotted him at the far end of the room, asleep on all the pillows she had fetched the night before.

– Elias, wake up! I told you not to sleep on the floor!

– Oh, hi. Good morning. The thing is, you kick in your sleep, so I moved down here to get some rest.

Lovisa couldn't be cross. She just laughed at the whole situation.

– Right, well, tonight I'm the one sleeping on the floor!

– If you like. But isn't the guest room free tonight? Sebastian said they were going home today.

She realised that was true after all, so they got washed and dressed, then went out to the kitchen where the others were having breakfast.

– I take it you already went to church with Mum as usual, Dad? Lovisa asked politely.

– Yes, I met Oscar there. Your mother didn't want to wake you up.

Elias was just as quiet as he had been the day before. After breakfast, Sebastian left with his family. Teddy drove off as well to visit some old friends nearby. Before long, they were sitting in the living room, and Kenneth was very keen to find out more about Elias, though he knew there was no point asking his daughter.

– Elias, I still harbour a certain concern as to whether you are the right man for my daughter. At the same time, I have learned, not without pain, that a father does not own his children's choices. Lovisa is a grown woman, and it is she alone who must walk the path she believes has been laid out for her. Life has taught me that lesson the hard way.

– Exactly, Dad, don't forget it.

– But there are two questions I would very much like to put to you, Elias. You need not answer today, but I should appreciate hearing your answers when the time feels right. The first is how you, an expert in computers, come to work with children. The second is of a more personal nature: how

on earth did you manage to charm my daughter so completely.

Elias looked down at the table and said nothing. Lovisa broke the silence and stepped in to defend him again.

– You know, Dad, that's none of your business. If Elias wants to tell you, he will. Otherwise, you'll just have to live without knowing. All right?

– Yes, my dear daughter, I understand that very well. There is, however, one thing I consider of the utmost importance, and on which I hope to gain some clarity. You are not the most talkative of men, Elias, and there is nothing wrong with that. All people are created differently. But I do fervently hope that you are open and honest with Lovisa. A good relationship is built on truth, trust, and conversation. Without these, the path becomes difficult to walk together.

– Don't worry, Dad. Elias and I talk a great deal when we're alone, about everything and nothing.

Lovisa gently steered the conversation onto other things. The talk moved on, and nearly half an hour passed. Then, suddenly, Elias spoke:

– Right. So. I work for Silent Pixel IT as a programmer, but I didn't like sitting in an open-plan office.

Kenneth and Karin fell silent, surprised that Elias had started talking.

– The pandemic was great because I got to work from home. But once it was over, I felt cooped up and started going for walks in a woodland area nearby. It was wonderful

to hear birdsong, small animals in the bushes, and to smell flowers, leaves and sweaty joggers.

– Sweaty joggers! Karin exclaimed.

– Yes, that was less enjoyable, so I went deeper into the woods and found a couple of children in a clearing. They were alone, dirty and worn, so I guessed they had run away and were living in the forest. So I used all my patience to win their trust, mostly by giving them food. After several weeks, I managed to get them to come home with me. Then they let me take them to Children's Social Care.

– Had they run away? Karin asked.

– Yes. Their parents were alcoholics and died suddenly. The children were placed in 3 different foster families, but were treated very badly there. Confidentiality prevents me from saying how. One thing led to another, and suddenly, a manager at social services said I should become a foster parent for the children. I was in shock, but I couldn't let them down. After a few months, I realised I had fallen completely in love with them, as though they were my own children.

– Wow, do you still have them?

– Nope. An aunt turned up and applied for custody. After a great deal of anguish, I realised the children would be better off with her, so I let it happen. I felt so unwell that I had to go on sick leave. After a week, my manager at Silent Pixel demanded a fit note, so I went to the health centre. When they heard what was wrong, they took me straight to the psychiatric emergency unit because of suicidal

tendencies. A decision was made for compulsory psychiatric care, and I was given sedative medication. It took over a month before I was considered well enough to go home. But I broke down when I saw the children's room and got destructive thoughts.

– Blimey, how destructive?

– Burning the whole house down. But I pulled myself together and went back to social services and asked for more children, though nothing long-term, so I wouldn't bond again. So I became an emergency foster carer instead and asked for leave from Silent Pixel. One day, I already had two children when I was given three more, one of whom was a teenager. I didn't even have beds for everyone, so the teenager had to sleep on the sofa. It was chaos, and I couldn't even get to the shops. So I emailed my contact at social services saying I was quitting as an emergency foster carer and contacted Silent Pixel to end my leave.

– But I thought you still work for social services? Karin said, surprised.

– Yes, the manager reacted strongly to my email and came to my house to sort things out. He offered a gold-edged deal: double the usual rate, nearly as much as I had been earning at Silent Pixel. Plus a number of specific ASD adjustments, like rules about how they were allowed to contact me. I would be responsible for two or at most three children at a time, for two to three weeks. He even rang my manager at Silent Pixel IT and negotiated a 10% contract for me there.

– He was very keen to keep you.

– Mm. I signed, and he promised to deal with the three most recent children. When he told the children and took full responsibility, the teenager immediately grabbed his bag and went with him. He promised to sort out two of the four younger children before the end of the day as well.

– Then things calmed down, did they? Karin put in, as Elias paused to catch his breath and drank a little.

– Well, I went into the living room to settle myself down. Then all four children came in and looked at me. They promised to behave and begged to stay until a permanent solution was found. Who can resist eight pleading children's eyes? Not me, so I texted the manager to say I was keeping all the children. The next day I had to go shopping, so I squeezed four wild little children into the car and drove to a shop. Just as I walked in, I froze on the spot, because I saw the most beautiful woman I had ever seen.

– Steady on! Don't say that in front of your girlfriend! Karin exclaimed.

– Girlfriend **prospect**. And she knows. Well, the woman saw me staring and insisted on speaking to me. She tricked me into going to McDonald's the next day by suggesting it in front of the children. There she introduced herself and said she wanted to marry me and start a family.

– What! Was that the first thing she said? What a nutter!

– Exactly what I thought. She's completely out of her mind. Naturally, I was frightened and tried to fend her off, but she still managed to nick my phone and get my number.

Two weeks later she turned up at my front door. She absolutely refused to leave me in peace and wanted to drag me to her parents'. So two weeks later, here I am.

– Hang on! What do you mean? Are you saying that Lovisa is the mad woman from the shop?

– Exactly. Completely round the bend, that's what she is. Though in a rather pleasant way, all things considered.

Lovisa's parents stared in astonishment at both Lovisa and Elias, completely lost for words. Eventually Kenneth exclaimed:

– Well now, this has shaken me to my very soul. Let me explain why. Yesterday you sat here, Elias, grunting out the odd word like an imbecile, God forgive me, and now all of a sudden a whole, long, coherent story comes pouring out of you. It is as if the Lord has loosed your tongue. Then I am shaken by what has befallen the children you found. Truly, the Lord moves in mysterious ways. But what shakes me most of all is that you so openly confess before us that you suffered a mental breakdown.

– It's remarkable what a woman can do to a man, isn't it? Elias said with a slight smile.

– Yes, I suppose so. I have a serious question for you, and I ask you to answer it honestly. That Lovisa loves you is beyond all doubt. It is plain to anyone with eyes to see. But I must know whether you love her in return, with all your heart.

– Define love!

Lovisa burst out laughing. Her parents looked at her, baffled as to what was so funny.

– That's so typical of Elias, that comment. "Define love." How do you expect someone with autism to understand what love means? Come on now, Dad! Define it!

– All right, Kenneth said. I accept that it's hard to define, but you understand intuitively what it is, don't you?

– Not if you're on the autism spectrum. Isn't that right, Elias?

Elias glanced at his phone, which had pinged. Then he looked up again.

– Yes, that's probably right. Well, after just a couple of days with Lovisa, I felt comfortable with her. I've never felt that with any other woman. Is that love?

– It's certainly a clear sign of it, Kenneth responded.

– A week ago she said she **wanted** me to come here with her, but that I didn't **have** to. And yet I came anyway, just because she wanted it. Is that love?

– That definitely sounds like love, wanting to please another person. But if you do love her, why do you keep insisting on calling her a "prospect"?

– Well, it's because…

Elias fell silent. The phone pinged again, and he glanced at it quickly and typed a reply.

– I probably shouldn't answer that, he continued.

– That's perfectly all right, whatever it is. I don't judge anyone.

– Well… it's not exactly flattering…

– For whom?

– For me.

– A man who admits his own weaknesses has my full confidence. Go on.

– That sounds like something people say right before they get angry.

– No. I swear before God I won't get angry. Not at you, and not at Lovisa.

– All right, then. Well, the thing is, I'm convinced that Lovisa will leave me eventually, and if I've let myself get too involved and fallen completely head over heels in love with her, I'm afraid I'll end up in the psychiatric ward again when she does. Or worse…

– What in the Lord's name are you sitting there saying?! Kenneth roared. Are you trying to shift some kind of responsibility onto her and threaten suicide if she leaves you? How can you…

– Dad, SHUT UP! Just stop it!

Kenneth's expression turned irritated, and he looked at his daughter, who continued angrily:

– You heard what Elias said. He didn't want to say it, but you pushed him. And you promised not to get angry. I don't like what he said either, but I love the fact that he's always completely straight with no filter. So accept it!

Kenneth looked at her and nodded slowly.

– All right, you're right, Lovisa, my dear. I'm sorry, Elias. You did say you didn't want to say what you said. It's just so sad that you have to feel that way.

Elias had become distracted and was sitting with his phone in his hand, typing frantically. Several messages came in, and he replied to them. The other three wondered what he was doing, as it was a little rude. Suddenly Elias handed the phone to Lovisa.

– What do you think I should do, Lovisa? Look what Anders has written!

Lovisa read through all the messages and Elias's replies. Then she said plainly:

– We're going home. Right now.

– Hang on a moment, Lovisa, Kenneth said quickly. Don't get angry again. I've apologised to Elias.

– That's not what this is about. Elias has had texts from social services: three children at the police station who need to be picked up immediately. Apparently they're completely out of control and absolutely wild. Elias has tried to get out of it, said it's far away and so on. But apparently everyone else who could take the children is abroad, so it's Elias or no one. So we're going now. The children come first.

– You don't have to come, Lovisa. I can go on my own.

– No, I may as well come with you.

– I want you both to understand that this has nothing to do with either of you, or anything you've said or done, Elias explained. It's simply about three out-of-control, distressed children. I hope you can understand that. We had planned to stay until tomorrow, but this was completely unexpected.

– Of course, Elias, Kenneth replied. God bless the work you do. Go home and look after the children. We understand completely.

– Exactly, how old are they, and why are they with the police? Karin asked.

– They're between 2 and 5. Why they're at the police station I'm not allowed to say, because of confidentiality.

– Of course, you work for social services, Karin continued. We're very glad you chose to come and visit us, even so. But now it's your turn to bring Lovisa to meet **your** parents, isn't it?

Elias's face went completely blank.

– We don't talk about Elias's parents, Lovisa said quickly.

– Well, I only mean…

– Seriously, we don't talk about them. It's fine. I'm not angry at all, but we really need to go now. It's a long way home, and three children are in a very bad way.

Elias and Lovisa quickly packed their things and set off in the car.

When they had been driving for a while, Elias said somewhat anxiously:

– I don't think your father likes me.

– You're probably right about that. Not just because of his outburst just now, but yes, he seems a bit uncertain. I don't care, though.

– Well, I'm hardly likely to marry him. Or your mother either, though she seems bothered by my diagnosis.

– Don't worry about it. They just need to get to know you better, and it'll sort itself out, you'll see. And in the worst case, I know they'll accept you regardless, because they love me and they're happy as long as I'm happy.

Elias went quiet again, turning over what Lovisa had said. It felt so illogical that she was prepared to disregard her parents like that.

– But, Lovisa! What on earth are you playing at?

– What do you mean, Elias darling?

– Am I completely transparent to you, or what? You defend me without me showing the slightest sign that I'm uncomfortable, and yet you still see it. Like when they asked about my parents.

– Would it be a bad thing if you were transparent to me?

– Bad? Would it be **bad**? It would be absolutely wonderful. If you can see how I'm feeling without me having to say it… Wow, the possibilities.

Lovisa felt a genuine rush of warmth and wanted to stroke his arm, but resisted the urge. After a while, she said:

– You know, Elias darling, you don't have to talk to me about your parents, but if you do, I'll listen with interest and without any judgement.

– I simply don't want to. It will only make me sad, and right now I want to be happy. Happy with you.

Lovisa smiled so broadly that her whole face lit up.

– That's completely fine. But you should know that if you need to talk about something that makes you sad, it's best to

do it with someone who makes you happy, because then the sadness passes quickest.

– Maybe, but I still don't want to.

– Don't feel I'm pressuring you. If you never want to talk about them, that's perfectly all right too.

Elias wondered whether Lovisa might be right, but said nothing.

– But I'm wondering about something else entirely, she said after a moment. It's completely fine if you say no, of course. Could I come in with you at the police station when you pick up the children? It would be wonderful to see how you do it!

Elias was quiet for a moment, then replied.

– If you were to do that, you'd have to promise not to interfere with what I'm doing and to follow my lead exactly. I don't mean that I'm better than you.

– I'm sure you are, Elias darling.

– Well… If you want to criticise or correct me, you're welcome to, but you'll have to do it afterwards, and not where the children can hear. I'm completely open to constructive criticism, but I can't be interrupted when I'm doing my thing.

– I promise, Elias darling. I'm not trying to show you how it's done. I just want to observe quietly.

Elias glanced at Lovisa and replied:

– All right, fine. It's ultimately up to the police, though, whether they allow it. They don't let just anyone in, especially not at a weekend.

– Of course, Elias darling. But don't mention that I'm not really supposed to be there, since I'm a nursery teacher.

– I don't want to lie.

– Neither do I. You could just ask generally whether I can come in, without specifying my role. How does that sound, Elias darling?

Elias felt a little uncomfortable about her constant use of "darling", but didn't object, because at the same time it felt rather nice.

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Several hours later, they pulled up outside the police station. Elias walked up to an intercom and pressed the button.

– Hi… my name's Elias. The duty officer, Jan, knows I'm coming.

The door opened shortly after, and Jan came out.

– Welcome! From social services, I hope.

Elias ignored his outstretched hand and showed his driving licence. Jan looked at it for a moment and nodded.

– Perfect, that matches the details we received from the Emergency Duty Team.

– Would it be all right if Lovisa here came in with me?

– Of course, the more the merrier, probably. The children are acting out quite badly and will likely be a real challenge for you.

Elias and Lovisa were shown into a room with a sofa and a few chairs. There were three children and four police officers in the room. The officers were holding the children firmly as they wriggled and tried to break free. Elias positioned himself just inside the door and said:

– All adults except Lovisa, leave the room now!

– Forget it, one of the officers said. We're here for your safety.

– I said: "All other adults leave the room!"

Lovisa stared at Elias in astonishment. In an instant, he had transformed from his usual uncertain self into a man of complete and unexpected authority.

– This is a police station. You don't give orders here!

– Officer Jan, have these children been arrested or are they to be interviewed?

– No, neither.

– So, who has authority over them, the police or social services?

– You already know the answer to that, don't you?

– Yes, I do. Then you'll order your officers to leave the room before I report them for assault or child abuse.

– You heard what social services said. We're leaving the room!

– Good luck with these little tearaways, one officer called from the doorway as they filed out.

All four officers left the room, and the children began to thrash, scream and hurl themselves at everything in sight. Elias sat down on the floor near the door with his legs

crossed, and Lovisa sat down beside him. Then he began to speak to the children in a quiet, calm voice.

– Hi, my angels. My name's Elias and I'm from social services. I'm here to help you get out of here and make sure you get what you need. If you just calm down a little and tell me what you want, I'll help you. I want you to know that I never lie, so if you have any questions, I'll answer them. And hugs from me are always free, but always your choice.

None of the children seemed to listen at first, so Elias repeated what he had said several times, varying the words slightly, but always keeping his voice low. Eventually, one of the children began shushing the others so they could hear what Elias was saying. Slowly, slowly, they calmed down and stopped screaming.

– There we go, now we can have a little chat, Elias said. What do you want to do now? I'm guessing you don't want to stay here. So what can I help you with?

– We want to go to Mummy! Alvin said. Now!

– Mummy! Alice exclaimed.

– At Mummy and Daddy's! Melvin screamed.

– I can sort that, no problem. The thing is, they're locked up here with the police who dragged you in. Do you want to be locked up too, without being able to do anything at all, still here with the police?

– I don't want to be here!

– Noooo!

– Don't want to!

– No, of course not, that makes sense. Maybe you'd like to go home instead? Live on your own, cook for yourselves, do your own shopping, get jobs so you can afford to. Would you like that?

– What?! No! That's not possible!

– No! Don't be silly!

– No? Let's think, then. Maybe I could drop you off in a forest where you can live completely free, eat grass and sleep under a bush?

The children pressed close together and stared at Elias with wide eyes. They were completely quiet now and beginning to look frightened. Lovisa looked at Elias in bewilderment. What was he up to?

– Wait, I've just thought of something. You could come home with me as well. I've got beds for all of you, and I can cook your favourite food. There are a few toys there, too, that you can play with.

– Any good toys? Alvin asked.

– Let's do this. I promise to take you to a toy shop where you can choose any toy you like in the whole shop, within reason.

– One toy each or just one to share? Alvin continued.

Lovisa was almost stunned. In just a few minutes, Elias had not only calmed them down, but had them listening.

– One toy each. But it has to be a toy that's right for your age, so you can't choose a grown-up toy.

– Yesss! Alice said.

– Want a teddy! Melvin said.

– No problem, you can have a teddy if you like.

– But how do we get out of here? Alvin asked. The police are stupid! They will never let us out!

– It's simple. We just walk out, trust me. I can carry you if you like, Elias said, pointing to Alice, and then you can hold my hand, Melvin. And then Lovisa here can hold Alvin's hand, and we just walk out. Trust me!

Alice ran to Elias and held her arms up to him, and he lifted her up. Then he held out his hand to Melvin, who took it without hesitation, and Alvin took Lovisa's hand. Then Lovisa opened the door, and they walked out calmly. The children pressed anxiously against them and stared wide-eyed at the police officers, whose jaws dropped. Elias addressed the loudmouth from before:

– You there, the one with the big mouth! I know there's a box of the children's things somewhere. You can carry it out to the car!

– Look, you don't tell me what to...

– Kent, take the box out now, Jan ordered.

While Jan walked towards the exit, Kent picked up a box and followed them out. Elias put the children in the car while Kent put the box in the boot. He couldn't help asking:

– How the hell did you manage that? Those brats were absolutely feral before.

– They're not brats, they're little angels. I'd suggest you stick to catching criminals and leave those of us who know what we're doing to help with children. And mind your language in front of them.

– Fair enough. I deserved that. Good luck now!

Alice giggled, and Elias got into the car to drive off. It was a bit of a squeeze in the back and not entirely legal, perhaps, but it would do. He glanced towards Kent and waited until he had gone back inside. Then he turned to the children and said:

– Right, here's the thing, my little angels. The toy shop is closed today. Would you like to go to another shop that has just a few toys to choose from, or shall we go tomorrow instead, so you can get exactly what you want?

– BIG teddy, Melvin said.

– Better to wait, then! Alvin said.

– Wait! Alice said.

– Brilliant, home it is, then.

Elias drove home, and then the children were allowed to look round and choose where they wanted to sleep. There were two rooms: the children's room with two beds, and the study with one bed. They wanted to sleep in the same room, so Elias got the children to help him move the bed into the children's room, and then rearranged it however they wanted.

Lovisa was really fascinated, both by how calmly yet firmly he had taken control of the chaos earlier, and by how he now seemed to let the children decide everything. She realised he had been guiding them in the right direction all along, but making it feel as though the decisions were theirs. Her heart was beating so hard it was almost ringing in her ears.

– I think I'll head home now, Elias darling. You probably don't need my help here, do you?

– No, I don't think so. I assume you'll be back tomorrow?

– You know I will, Elias darling.

– I'm looking forward to your feedback on how I handled the children.

– We'll talk about it later. Will you lock up after me?

– Mm, Elias replied. Soon.

Lovisa smiled and headed for the door, and heard Elias go to the children to ask what they wanted to eat. She lingered in the doorway and listened as he was met with a flood of different requests, but handled it all calmly. Finally, she went out.

When Lovisa got home, she rang her mother on video.

– Hi, Mum. Just wanted to say we're home now. And, wow, I love Elias so much! He let me come along when he picked up the children, and you cannot imagine how incredible he is with them. They were completely wild, but it didn't take him long to calm them down, win their trust, and get them to come with him voluntarily. Absolutely unbelievable! You have no idea what a wonderful man he is. He's the type of man you marry, Mum!

– Oh, hello yourself, Lovisa. Goodness, you're chatty. I really hope you're not still angry with me.

– No, I got it all out yesterday. And it was mostly Steve who was an idiot, anyway. Who tries to kiss a woman he's meeting for the first time?

– Who tells a man the first time she meets him that she wants to marry him and start a family?

– Touché! You got me there. But I seem to have pulled it off anyway, haven't I? He even came home with me to see you, even though he didn't really want to.

– Well, he does seem a little overwhelmed by you. At the same time, he seems quite calm by nature. Maybe he can get you to slow down a bit.

– If you only knew! What did you make of our chat yesterday about Steve?

– Well, first I was, well, we all were, surprised that you actually came inside the house, angry as you were. Then you were unexpectedly calm compared to what I'm used to. I really thought you were going to explode at me.

– It was Elias who said I should sort the conflict straight away, since I'd have to deal with it sooner or later, so the sooner the better. He also said I have one mouth and two ears, so I should listen twice as much as I talk and try to understand your side of things as well.

– So you're seriously saying it was thanks to Elias that what we all expected to be a huge row turned into a reasonably calm discussion?

– That's exactly what I'm saying. I hope Elias can become a bit more spontaneous as we go on, while he helps me become a bit calmer. At least things are moving in the right direction so far.

– I really hope so, for your sake. I noticed something that I'd have thought would irritate you, or at least bother you.

Elias seemed to be staring at your breasts rather a lot. Have you noticed?

– Yes, I know. It was me who told him he could. Someone on the autism spectrum finds it uncomfortable to look another person in the eyes, so I gave him permission to look at any other part of my body instead. Yes, you saw what he chose. In a way, it feels rather lovely, you know. I've always been self-conscious about them being so small. But at least he likes looking at them.

– Well, well. As long as you're happy, we're happy. We are a little worried about his diagnosis, but we'll simply have to trust you. Is he good in bed as well?

– We haven't been intimate yet, so I don't know.

– Darling, you don't need to hide anything from me. You've always had quite a strong drive. I don't believe you're suppressing your own needs for his sake. And you know I won't say anything to Dad.

– Yes, I know. It's just that Elias isn't comfortable with physical contact yet, so we don't even hug. He slept on the floor in my room, by the way.

– Not even hugs? Isn't that hard for you?

– Yes, it is, rather. But I'm counting on it not being like that forever. Anyway, I should try to get some sleep, even though I'm buzzing after everything I've seen today.

– Goodnight, darling, sleep well.

– Goodnight, Mum. Tomorrow I'm going to carry on courting my dream man, and I'm hoping I might get a hug

soon! I'm starting to despair at never having any physical contact with him at all. Something has to change soon!

Lovisa ended the call and went towards the bed. Her body trembled with restlessness, and she knew her mother had been right. It hurt that Elias wouldn't even touch her. Not the way she needed. But she made up her mind: she wasn't going to give up. Soon… soon he would let her come close. She would make sure they hugged.

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10



Sadly, Lovisa's hopes of getting a hug from Elias were dashed after Easter at her parents'. The months passed, and when they sat in the living room, she would carefully try to place her hand on his arm or his hand, and every time, he pulled away. She took him for walks through the city's parks under the summer sun and along busy streets. Elias's mind was boiling with stress: people everywhere, bicycles, loud music. But still he went. She noticed his resistance, but she kept on trying eagerly to get closer to him. Sometimes, when the rain was pouring down, she dragged him to the swimming baths, but the fact that everyone around him,

Lovisa not least, was so lightly dressed made him even more stressed.

All she really wanted was a simple gesture, a hug that could say “we’re here together”, or just for him to want to hold her hand when they were out. But summer was coming to an end, and her frustration grew at how slowly the relationship was moving forward, and every attempt to get near him was crushed by his caution and his phobia of physical contact.

Towards the end of summer, she felt like she just wanted to grab hold of him and hug him tightly, but realised it could backfire. *What on earth can I do to make him want to touch me?* The thought felt almost paralysing.

One Sunday in August, she arrived at Elias’s fairly late, since he had mentioned that two new children were coming that day via the police. She knew from experience that Elias would be completely absorbed and focused on the children when they were new, and would therefore give her no attention. She was not only fine with that. She loved watching him always put the children before her. She rang the doorbell and waited for him to open.

– Hi, Lovisa. Welcome. I’m a bit busy, as you know. The children.

– Yes, you mentioned it before, that’s why I’m quite late today. How are they getting on?

– They're absolutely wonderful. Twins. Not the least bit sad about being here. Almost happy about it, in fact. Come and meet them.

Lovisa followed him into the children's room, where two children who were about four years old were sitting on the floor playing.

– Hi, I'm Lovisa. You two are so adorable. What are you playing with?

– We're building a tower, Liam said decisively.

– It's going to be really, really tall, Noah echoed.

– Lovisa, could you watch my little angels for a few minutes? I just need to pop to the loo.

– Of course, Elias darling. We'll be fine.

Elias headed to the bathroom. Lovisa noticed he was limping badly on his left leg and wondered why. Then she turned her attention back to the children, who laughed when their tower fell over. She carried on playing with them and could only agree that they were really wonderful to be around.

After a while, she checked the time. *When did I actually get here?* she thought. *Surely it's been nearly half an hour since he went to the loo!* She was starting to worry, especially considering that he was limping. Who spends that long on the toilet? After a moment, she went over and knocked.

– Elias darling! Is everything all right in there? You've been in there quite a while!

She got no answer, so she knocked harder.

– Elias darling! Can you hear me?

She pressed her ear to the door and thought she could hear a faint whimpering sound, which made her genuinely worried. She fetched a kitchen knife and began hammering frantically on the bathroom door.

– Elias darling! Elias! I'm getting worried! Elias!

No answer.

– Elias, I'm coming in now. Say something if you're not decent.

When she still got no answer, she took the kitchen knife, turned the lock from the outside, and opened the door. To her horror, Elias was lying in the foetal position on the floor, shaking violently and breathing fast. Lovisa crouched down beside Elias, took hold of his shoulder, and gave it a gentle shake. He gave a start and pushed himself backwards, then hauled himself to his feet with difficulty.

Lovisa looked at Elias's face, which, for the first time, was not expressionless but appeared to be in complete shock. His eyes were glassy, and he was pale and clammy. She took a step forward and threw her arms round him in a hug to calm him down. He went rigid as a board and seemed to freeze on the spot. Lovisa remembered that he didn't like being touched. She had tried to take his hand many times, and he had always pulled away. And now here she was with full body contact. She let go and stepped back.

– Oh, wow, sorry, Lovisa blurted out. You don't like hugs, and I know that. I don't know what I was thinking.

Elias looked at her with a reproachful expression. Then he suddenly jolted and exclaimed:

– The children! My angels!

He began to make his way out of the bathroom, and Lovisa stepped back and to the side as Elias walked towards the children's room like a robot. In the doorway, he turned round and said:

– It's probably best if you go home now.

Then he went in to the children and greeted them cheerfully, as though nothing had happened. He carried on playing with them for an hour or so and then began the bedtime routine. After teeth-brushing and a trip to the loo, he read them a story, then tucked them in.

– Goodnight, my little angels!

– Night night, Kind-Eli, the twins said as one.

Elias smiled at them and closed the door. Then he made his way to the living room, his head feeling as though it might burst. He was in pain, and the memories of the day were tormenting him. The lights were off, but as he came into the room, a shadow moved towards him and startled him.

– Oh, Lovisa, you're still here? You nearly gave me a fright.

– I'm worried about you, Elias darling, I hope you understand that. And I want to apologise for hugging you in the bathroom earlier. I know you don't like it. Can you forgive me?

– I don't accept your apology.

– Please, Elias darling, I really am sorry.

– Aren't you going to ask why I won't accept it?

– All right, why won't you forgive me?

– Because you should never have to apologise for who you are. You're spontaneous, you saw something and reacted without thinking. So you have nothing to apologise for.

Lovisa let out a sigh of relief.

– You know perfectly well that I don't like hugs. Not from anyone. Unless they're from small children, of course. That I actually do like. And besides…

Elias took hold of Lovisa's hands, to her great surprise. He paused for a few seconds, then drew her closer and put his arms round her.

– …from you. I've been thinking about that hug ever since I got it, and I've come to the conclusion that I like this, much to my own surprise.

She hugged him back and felt a wave of happiness as he met her hug with a contented sigh instead of going rigid. He held her really close, and she definitely had no objection to that.

– Now I finally understand why children always want hugs. It feels as though all the bad things are just draining out of me right now. I do hope they're not draining into you, though.

– Don't worry. All the bad things draining out of you land on the floor and disappear.

They stood holding each other for a long while, until he suddenly let go and stepped back with an embarrassed expression.

– Oops. Something happened there. That wasn't intentional.

– What happened?

– Something…

– I think I know what you mean. You got an erection, didn't you?

He went bright red and stammered something inaudible.

– You really don't need to be embarrassed about it, trust me. I know how erections work, that they can happen completely without warning or control. I also know they don't happen because of bad feelings, but because of something positive and pleasant. You don't need to hide it from me. And an erection doesn't mean we have to rush off to the bedroom right now. An erection is just one part of things. It's not the only thing that determines whether you should have sex.

– Can we… please… stop talking about my erection now?

Lovisa laughed and replied:

– Of course, Elias darling. But you know you need to tell me what happened, don't you? I found you completely out of it on the bathroom floor. Why?

– I don't want to tell you.

– I understand that, but you need to tell me anyway.

– Yes, I know. I don't want to, but I have to.

Elias switched on a lamp and went to the sofa, and Lovisa sat down beside him for the first time. He breathed deeply a few times and Lovisa took his hands, and this time he didn't pull away.

– Right, so as I mentioned before, I was going to pick up two children from the police because they'd been taken into care. That's nothing unusual. You've been there yourself when I've collected children. But this time it was different. When I arrived, I was shown into what I'd call a "war room". A whole group of police officers in black, most of them in bulletproof vests and with stern expressions. On a side table lay carbines, riot helmets, shields, and breaching tools. The atmosphere was extremely tense.

– Wow, and that's where the twins were? Liam och Noah?

– Nope, just police officers. The officer in charge explained that they were about to raid a flat where a couple of habitual offenders lived. Drug-related, I think. Their whole gang was there, and the police were going to break in. The problem was that there were also two children in the flat. The police were worried that the children would either be terrified by all the commotion when they broke in or come out of their room and be in direct danger. In the worst case, they could be used as a human shield or held hostage, and the whole situation could become very serious. So they wanted someone from social services there to secure the children and calm them down immediately.

– And that was you, was it?

– Exactly. I was to be part of the operation itself.

– For goodness' sake, with a weapon and everything?

– No, of course not. I was to go in last, behind a heavily built police officer with a bulletproof vest, a riot shield, and a helmet. When I walked behind him, he sort of shielded me.

– Well, that's a relief at least.

– Yes, in theory. So we were standing outside after creeping up to the flat door. The officer in charge counted 1-2-3 on his fingers, and two officers broke the door open with enormous crowbars in a matter of seconds, and everyone rushed in with their weapons drawn, shouting. Right after them ran the officer who was meant to protect me, a bit too soon, I thought.

Elias paused and breathed heavily before continuing.

– The moment I stepped over the threshold, the bullets started flying round me.

– What! You mean pistol bullets?!

– Pistol, revolver, rifle, I don't know. They hit the riot shield and slammed into the walls round me.

– Good grief, how awful! No wonder you were traumatised. You could have been hit by a bullet.

– Right, well… could have been…

Elias paused while Lovisa studied his face.

– The first bullet hit here.

He pointed to the left side of his body, a few inches to the side of his navel. Lovisa gasped.

– Bloody hell, you've been shot?! Are you still bleeding, or has it been dressed?

He lifted his T-shirt and showed a large, ugly bruise.

– I was wearing a bulletproof vest as well. But it still hurts badly. Most people don't realise how much it hurts when a bullet hits a vest. But I was so focused on the door to the

children's room a few metres in and so full of adrenaline that I just kept going.

– Wow, that you managed to do that!

– The second bullet hit my leg.

Lovisa paled.

– I'm going to do something extremely embarrassing now. You have to promise not to look in the wrong place and make it uncomfortable. I'm going to drop my trousers to show you where I was hit.

– I promise!

Elias undid his trousers and let them fall to his ankles. Lovisa felt her stomach turn when she saw his left leg, high on the outer thigh. A fair amount of blood had run down the thigh from a gash left by the bullet. That was why he had been limping!

– Blimey! Have you really been walking round all evening without even cleaning it?! I need to clean that. Wait there, I know where you keep your first aid kit.

Before he had time to protest, she half-ran to the kitchen and fetched the first aid kit. She also filled a bowl with lukewarm water from the tap and came back.

– I can clean it myself, but thank you anyway.

– Now you're going to let me help you! I know you can manage on your own. You can manage everything. But right now, you happen to have a girlfriend prospect, and this is what we do out of love.

She dipped a clean sponge in the water and moved towards his leg.

– STOP, STOP IT, I mean it!

– Don't be so stubborn! I'm going to help you whether you want me to or not.

– You can do it, you stubborn young lady, but first I want you to document it. Here, take my phone and take some photos. Just avoid photographing my bits.

Lovisa smiled slightly and took a number of photos from different angles. Then she set about cleaning the wound and his leg. Elias flinched when she touched it, so she made every effort to be as gentle as possible. When it was clean, she opened a packet of antiseptic wipes and began to disinfect the wound. Elias cried out as the antiseptic stung sharply.

– I'm so sorry, Elias darling, but I have to clean it properly.

– Just carry on, Lovisa. Ignore the fact that I'm crying out. Try to get right into the wound as well. I do **not** want to get an infection.

Lovisa carried on cleaning, and Elias bit his hand to stop himself from crying out again. Eventually, she was satisfied and picked up his phone again to take more photos. Then she applied a sterile dressing and a bandage. Finally, Elias was able to pull his trousers back up and sit down. Lovisa sat beside him and looked at him anxiously, hoping he wasn't too cross, given how much it had hurt.

– Wow, he said with a wry smile. I didn't know love could hurt this much.

Lovisa laughed.

– You'd better get used to it, because I'm not going to stop loving you. But shouldn't you carry on now? So you were hit in the leg. I assume you collapsed at that point?

– No, actually, I didn't. The adrenaline was coming out of my ears, so I couldn't feel anything right then, just that my leg had stopped obeying me. I had such tunnel vision that all I could see was the handle of the door I had to get through and the fact that there was a key in the lock. The only thing in my head was getting to that door and through it. Soon I reached out and took hold of the handle, and realised the door was locked. I turned the key, opened the door, took the key with me, and went in.

– Goodness, how I love you right now. That you can focus like that just to help children you've never even met!

– Well, focus is what I'm good at. Anyway, once inside the room, I tore off the bulletproof vest and threw it in a corner so as not to frighten Liam and Noah. Then I sat down on the floor as usual, though it was more like falling down because it was excruciating in both my leg and my side. I pressed my hand hard against the wound in my leg to try to stop the worst of the bleeding. To stop myself from collapsing, I leaned against the door and reached up and locked it from inside.

– That you can be so present despite being in such terrible pain…

– I had to be. I didn't want to frighten the children. I started talking to the twins. You've been there yourself, so you know how I usually do it. When they understood what I

meant, they were quick to say they wanted to come with me most of all. They said they were frightened even of their own parents because they often had “strange eyes”. They were probably high a lot of the time.

– Yes, drugs can make your eyes go red or give you a very fixed stare. That could be frightening.

– Exactly. I felt the door shudder, looked up, and spotted a hole. I realised bullets could easily pass through, so I shuffled closer to the twins after asking if that was all right. I found a towel that looked clean and pressed it against my leg. The children weren’t frightened of me at all. They started packing toys into big bags. I asked them to pack their clothes as well, mostly to keep them occupied so they wouldn’t hear all the noise from the rest of the flat.

– I can’t understand how you managed to stay so calm! I’d have been hysterical in that situation.

– Well, another thing I’m good at is brainlocking certain thoughts so I can focus on what matters in the moment. I kept pressing on the wound. The burning was there, but the real pain didn’t register. The adrenaline took over. Anyway, after a while, the police officer knocked on the door in the agreed code: long, long, long, pause, long, short, long.

– What a strange signal.

– It’s Morse code for OK. Anyway, I struggled to my feet and unlocked the door. The officer said quietly for me not to let the children see the rest of the flat, so we played blindman’s buff out to the car. I took a quick glance into the flat and immediately regretted it. There was blood on the

walls and floor, several people were lying there bleeding, and at least one appeared to be dead. That sight is probably going to haunt me for a long time.

Lovisa shuddered.

– Well, then I got out to the car and the twins climbed into their car seats while a police officer loaded the bags into the boot. Fortunately, I have an automatic, because I couldn't have managed a clutch pedal. Then, when I got home, they came inside with me and helped carry the bags in. Then you arrived, and you know the rest.

– Goodness, no wonder you collapsed in the bathroom. If it had been me, I'd have just sat on the floor sobbing. I love you so much for being so strong when it matters.

– Well, I first tried to decompress in front of the mirror, leaning on the basin. Then I looked up and saw this.

He tilted his head down, and Lovisa saw a vivid red streak across the top of his head and put her hand to her mouth.

– A bullet must have gone through the door and grazed me. I thought about what could have happened: the first bullet could have destroyed my abdomen and caused me to bleed out internally, the second could have shattered the bone and meant an amputation, and the third, well… just half an inch lower…

Elias shuddered.

– That's the last thing I remember until you came in and took hold of my shoulder.

Lovisa took out a fresh wound wipe and cleaned his head as well. Then she took several photos.

– Do you feel a little better, now that I've dressed your wounds, Elias darling?

– Right now, I just feel exhausted. I'm going to take some painkillers and go to bed. Thank you for cleaning and dressing my wounds.

He got to his feet and headed towards the bedroom, still limping badly. He tuned round and looked at Lovisa with a strained expression.

– I assume you're heading home now, Elias said quietly. See you tomorrow.

– I'm staying here tonight. I'll sleep on the sofa.

– You are not! The sofa isn't made for sleeping on.

– Yes, I am! You're going to need me tonight.

– You are not staying the night, Elias said, his voice cutting through the air.

– Yes! I am!

– No! I'm saying no!

– And I'm saying yes!

Silence. Elias was breathing fast, his body trembling, his eyes wide.

– You can't just… decide! he cried out.

– I'm only trying to help you, Lovisa whispered.

– Help? You're taking over! You… you're deciding! I… I hate it!

– Elias… calm down.

– CALM DOWN?! You have no idea! I… I…

– I'm staying because you need me.

Elias drew a sharp breath.

– This is **my** home. **My** house. **I** decide here. You are **not** staying the night!

– I don't care what you say! I'm staying! Throw me out if you want!

– I am not going to let that happen!

– And I'm not leaving either!

Elias looked genuinely furious. For a moment, Lovisa thought he was going to hit her, but instead, he just growled angrily, turned sharply on his heel, and went into the bedroom. He slammed the door shut with a hard but controlled bang.

Lovisa was really worried now. Had she gone too far? In that sound, there was something final that made her feel cold inside. Was this the end of their relationship? She tried lying on the sofa and realised it was going to be an uncomfortable night. There were no pillows, no blanket, nothing. But she was too stubborn to back down now.

Suddenly, Elias came out of the bedroom with his arms full. Without a word, he dumped a sheet, a duvet cover, a duvet, two pillows and pillowcases on the sofa, turned on his heel, and went back. Surprised, she made up the sofa and lay down to sleep.

She thought: *I really hope Elias has calmed down by tomorrow, because I really don't want to lose him now*. She tossed and turned but eventually fell asleep.

☆☆☆

11



A few hours later, she was woken by the bedroom door opening and Elias coming out in his dressing gown, his face completely blank and his whole body shaking. She went to him and held out her arms towards him without getting too close. He closed the distance and hugged her again, much to her relief.

– I had the most terrible nightmare about yesterday.

– Breathe, Elias darling. I'm here, and everything's all right now.

Elias's breathing was jerky and strained at first, but gradually grew calmer. Eventually, he let go of Lovisa and went back to the bedroom without a word. Lovisa went back

to the sofa with mixed feelings. It was wonderful that Elias had sought her arms, but he still seemed irritated. She didn't know whether the irritation was about the nightmare, or about her staying the night on the sofa despite him being against it.

The following morning, Elias was unusually quiet. Lovisa hesitated, unsure whether to apologise. She thought: *If he doesn't bring up what happened yesterday, neither will I.* Instead, she said:

– Elias darling. You really should tell Anders what happened yesterday.

– There's no reason to, he replied, with unexpected sharpness.

– I think there is. This is serious enough that he needs to know, with the twins in mind. Perhaps he can offer you some support.

– I don't need any support!

– I only mean that he simply has to know. If you don't tell him, I might ring him myself.

– You will **not**, he snapped. It's none of your business. Shouldn't you be going? You're working today, aren't you?

Lovisa checked the time and realised he was right. She had to leave now to get to work. She felt quite wretched as she got into her car. For one thing, she wasn't sure whether Elias was cross with her and, if so, whether it would pass. Then she was worried about what had happened to him the day before. Most of all, she was deeply concerned that Elias was suppressing some kind of panic and could break down at

any moment. *His autism must be making it harder for him to cope with everything happening right now.*

She couldn't shake off the worry, so at lunchtime she tracked down Anders's phone number and rang him. She simply said that something serious had happened the day before and that she was worried about Elias. The result was that Anders drove round to Elias's to check on him. He grimaced when he saw who was at the door, but let him in all the same.

– Hi, Elias. How are you? Your girlfriend was worried about you, so I thought I'd pop round and find out what happened yesterday.

– Prospect. She's just a prospect. Or perhaps not even that any more. Everything's fine. You can leave.

Anders looked at Elias thoughtfully. He knew about his diagnosis, so he wasn't going to give up that easily. Besides, the tone had been quite clipped, which he found particularly worrying.

– Can't you just tell me what happened yesterday? Lovisa didn't really say anything, except that she was worried about you because of something that had happened then.

Elias turned and walked into the living room without a word, and Anders followed. Then he irritably recounted everything that had happened during the police operation and showed the photos Lovisa had taken of his wounds. True to form, he left nothing out, not even what had happened in the bathroom. When he had finished, Anders was in

complete shock and genuinely troubled by everything he had heard.

– Elias, this is dreadful. I thought you were going to collect the twins at the police station, or perhaps outside the flat. I will absolutely be making a complaint to the officer in charge. But right now it's about you. I know you're strong and brilliant with children, but this is extreme, even for you.

– I can handle it.

– That may be so, but I have to follow our procedures. I need to pause you as an emergency foster carer until you've seen a psychologist and we're satisfied you're fit to work again. We have a very good psychologist connected to the emergency foster care service, called Petra. I'll book you an appointment with her. Until then, I'll make alternative arrangements for Liam and Noah.

– No problem, Elias said tightly. Give me a few minutes, and I'll print out my resignation. Problem solved.

– Hang on! Resignation? That's absolutely not what I want.

– You don't trust me. I'm certainly not going to talk to Petra. And if I can't work until I've done that, then I can't work for you any more. Consider this my notice!

Elias struggled to his feet and began to limp towards his study. Anders was completely taken aback. The conversation had taken a very different turn from anything he had anticipated, and it was not at all what he wanted. Elias was the best he had, so he had to find a way to keep him.

– Hang on a moment, he stopped Elias. Let's just take this slowly. Can you help me understand why you can't talk to Petra? You know she's bound by absolute confidentiality?

Elias took a few deep breaths to calm himself down a little.

– She's a stranger. And a woman. I won't open up to her. Which means she won't be able to assess me and determine if I'm fit for work.

– But you've worked with psychologists before, haven't you? There must be someone you've opened up to in the past?

– Yes, a psychiatrist called Hugo Jeppsson at the adult psychiatric unit. But it's not an open-access clinic you can just book with.

Anders took out his phone and rang the hospital switchboard. After a few transfers, he got through to Hugo, while Elias listened in astonishment and sat back down.

– Hello, Hugo, thank you for taking the call. My name's Anders and I'm a unit manager at Children's Social Care. We have a matter concerning Elias Nicholson, one of our emergency foster carers, who has been through a traumatic incident in the course of his work. He's mentioned that he was admitted to your unit at some point.

– I hope you'll understand that I'm unable to confirm or deny that for reasons of confidentiality.

– Of course. That's not what I'm asking. But I want an urgent assessment for him prioritised. We're dealing with an

ongoing placement and an acute stress reaction following a violent incident.

– I understand, Hugo replied. I'll arrange an urgent assessment. He'll be seen as soon as possible, likely within the next few days.

– Can you ensure the assessment covers his level of functioning and any impact on his suitability to work with children? This is a safeguarding concern. He finds it difficult to initiate contact himself, but has expressed trust in you.

– I'll carry out a full clinical assessment at the appointment, Hugo said calmly. He can get a written report to take with him.

– Good, Anders said. That's important for us.

Anders ended the call and turned to Elias.

– Hugo will see you for the assessment. You'll be given an appointment time. Now we just need to sort out the situation with the twins. I trust you, I really do. But I owe it to the children to make sure they're safe. It's not a question of confidence. It's a question of process. What would you say to having someone here, someone you yourself choose, who doesn't need to do anything other than be on hand in case something unexpected happens? Anyone at all from us at social services that you feel comfortable with. Anyone at all.

– I can't have a stranger in the house.

– Can you help me find a solution here? I'm completely open to unconventional suggestions. Is there really no one at all? Perhaps a man, Robert, for instance?

– No. The only person I can think of is Lovisa.

– She's the one who rang me, isn't she? She's a nursery teacher and works for the council?

– Yes. Willow Tree Nursery.

Anders picked up his phone again and rang the nursery manager. He explained the situation and asked for Lovisa's help for the week. The manager was surprised at first, but Anders explained that everything would be arranged without disrupting the nursery's operations. Eventually, she gave her approval, after asking Lovisa.

When Lovisa found out that Anders was requiring her to stay at Elias's, she felt anxiety tighten in her chest. She would be there around the clock for several days, and he had been furious just because she had stayed over a single night.

Her heart was pounding hard when she rang the doorbell. Elias opened without even looking at her, turned his back, and disappeared into the living room where Anders was still waiting. Anders extended his hand to her and greeted her.

– Thank you so much for being willing to come here. You don't need to do anything at all here, just be ready to step in if Elias breaks down again, like he did yesterday. I don't think that will happen, but I can't risk it. Unfortunately, I'll have to ask you to spend the nights here as well.

– No problem at all, I'll do that. But only if it's all right with you, Elias, she said, looking at Elias, who looked away.

– I've made this decision, Lovisa, and he does as I say, Anders said flatly.

Then Anders walked to the door, and Elias followed quietly and locked the door behind him. Without a word, he

walked past the living room where Lovisa was sitting and went in to the twins. In there he chatted cheerfully and started playing with them as though nothing had happened.

Lovisa stayed in the living room and didn't dare speak to Elias right now. He had treated her as though she were a cockroach or worse. At least that was how it felt. She was beginning to fear that her relationship with Elias was permanently destroyed. But she was here at any rate, and made up her mind to wait him out.

The rest of the afternoon passed painfully slowly because Elias didn't say a single word to her or bother to look in her direction. She watched as a police officer came to visit, and Elias spoke with him in the kitchen. Lovisa couldn't hear everything, but gathered it was about Anders having complained that Elias had been put in danger like that. It was perfectly obvious that the police officer was upset about what had happened.

By dinnertime, Elias went out to the kitchen without so much as glancing in her direction. Lovisa began to wonder what she was going to eat. She took out her phone and looked for a takeaway that delivered. She was quite convinced that Elias would simply let her go hungry, given how angry he was with her. She couldn't find anything appealing, mostly because the whole situation had killed her appetite.

She sat listening, and then she heard Elias call to the children to come into the kitchen and eat. *I probably need to find something to eat, though*, she thought. Quite

unexpectedly, Elias came into the living room with a tray. On it was a plate, cutlery, a glass, her favourite drink, apple juice, and a very generous portion of food. He slammed the tray down on the table and walked away without a word.

– Thank you, Elias darling, she called after him, but got no answer.

Later that evening, she lay down on the sofa again. The bedding and pillows were still where she had left them. Tuesday passed in much the same way, and she was beginning to despair of the relationship entirely. Even so, he brought her food three times a day, not uttering a single word.

On Wednesday morning at half past nine, he suddenly appeared in the living room doorway and said curtly:

– You're in charge of the children now.

Then he went out through the front door without another word. Lovisa went in to the children and kept them entertained, and herself too. *These children really are wonderful!*

Just before twelve, she heard the front door and understood that Elias was back. He came into the children's room with a piece of paper in his hand, which he practically slammed onto the table in front of her.

– Cleared! You know where the front door is!

– Elias, please…

He pointed towards the door, and she walked out with heavy steps. The drive home felt endless, and her eyes were so full of tears that it was hard to see the road ahead. The

night was long and restless. She could barely sleep, overwhelmed by her thoughts.

The next day, she went to work, but it was obvious to everyone that she was utterly broken. She tried to hold it together, but her colleagues could see she'd been crying. At lunchtime, her supervisor told her to go home and take the rest of the week off to try to pull herself together.

On Friday evening, she was lying in bed trying to motivate herself to cook something. She had barely eaten anything since Wednesday morning, but her appetite had completely vanished. Suddenly, her phone pinged, and she saw that it was her mother, wanting to video call. She answered automatically.

– Hi, Mum.

– Hi, Lovisa, darling. You haven't been in touch for over a week, so I just wanted to have a chat. Oh God, what do you look like? Have you been crying?

Lovisa couldn't hold back her sobs.

– Has something happened?

– I've ruined everything, everything, everything. Elias doesn't want anything to do with me any more, and it's my fault! I can never learn to control my feelings!

– But what happened? Last time we spoke, it all seemed to be going so well. You were grumbling a little about not making progress in getting through to him. But how could everything fall apart in just one week?

– I… I can't bring myself to talk about it… but I ran roughshod over him. As usual. He said no, and I just… carried on. I always have to take over and decide everything! This time… this time I went too far, and he doesn't even want to talk to me any more.

Her voice broke, and the crying took over completely.

– You mustn't give up now, darling. Your dad and I have had our share of confrontations and rows, but we've worked through them every time. Go and find Elias, apologise and see where it leads. And if he refuses to listen, then maybe he's not for you after all.

– Do you think it can work, given his autism?

– I'm sure of it. Because of his ASD he responds well to logical explanations, and that makes things easier.

Lovisa thought a great deal about what her mother had said during the night and decided she had to try.

✯

Early the next afternoon, Lovisa rang Elias's doorbell, feeling almost sick with worry. Her stomach was in knots. She could hear sounds from inside the house, but he didn't answer. Her finger trembled as she pressed the doorbell again, and she held her breath as she waited. Eventually, he opened the door. He looked at her with a completely blank expression, as though she meant nothing to him at all.

– Hi… please, Elias… please… can I come in and explain? I don't want to lose you. I… I love you.

He simply turned his back to her and walked into the house. But he didn't close the door. She hesitated for a second before following him into the living room. His face was utterly cold as he looked past her towards the switched-off television.

– Elias darling. I'm so terribly sorry for all the stupid things I've done. First, I hugged you even though I know you don't want that. Then I stayed the night even though I knew it's **your** house and home. Not just one night, but three whole nights. And then to ring Anders is completely unforgivable. I'm so stupid, stupid, **stupid**.

Elias didn't even look at her, but she carried on talking anyway, in desperate hope that he was listening all the same.

– Everything I do goes wrong, and I understand if you can't forgive me. But what can I do for us to be able to move forward? I love you so much, and I don't want to lose you. Please… is there anything I can do now? Please… talk to me. Even if you're angry and have every reason to be.

Elias finally turned his face towards her and met her eyes for a few seconds before lowering his gaze again, as he always did.

– I'm not angry with you. I was furious.

– I understand that, and it's my fault that you're angry and furious with me. What can I do for you to want to stay with me?

– The first thing you need to do is listen to me.

– I promise I'll listen. Oh, how I'll listen!

– Right, so what did I just say?

– You said you're furious with me.

– No, I didn't.

Lovisa felt uncertain and tried desperately to understand what he meant and what he had said.

– Preterite, Elias said.

– What?

– Preterite. The tense was preterite.

Lovisa tried to control her breathing and think.

– Hang on! You said: "I **am** not angry with you. I **was** furious." Past tense. So you **are** not angry with me now.

– **Now** you're listening. You're wrong, by the way, when you say you're stupid. You're probably the cleverest person I've met. It was what you did that was stupid, not you. As for what you said about hugging me, we've already talked about that, haven't we? Are you scared of me? You're sitting so far away.

Lovisa was surprised by the last comment, but was quick to move over to the sofa beside him. He shifted closer to her and put his arm round her shoulders, to her surprise and delight. Lovisa's phone pinged, but she ignored it.

– I owe you an apology, Lovisa. Yes, it was wrong of you to decide to stay the night when I didn't want you to, but it was my fault that it went from a disagreement to a row. I have ASD, which means it's **me** who should have backed down. Started a discussion, calmly put my views across and then listened to yours. Then we probably would have reached an agreement. Instead, I stamped my feet and started shouting. Will you forgive me, Lovisa?

– Of course I do, Elias darling. But it was me who was in the wrong, and I'm the one who needs to apologise.

– I forgive you, especially since you were right. You know what happened in the night after that. I probably would have got through that night without you, but it would have been insanely harder. But you were there with one single agenda: to help me through what had happened.

– You're used to dealing with things on your own, of course, but sometimes a bit of support doesn't hurt.

– Evidently, and I'm grateful for it. But then you rang Anders, despite me explicitly telling you not to.

– Yes, that was completely unforgivable. I know. I should have discussed it calmly with you instead and tried to persuade you with logic.

– Well, perhaps it was unnecessary to ring him, Elias continued. But what if I had collapsed again, as I already have once? As it turned out, I didn't, but what if I had? What if the children had come to harm because of it? I could never have forgiven myself. So again, what you did was right. I was wrong. Just as it was my fault that it turned into a row. Again. I have no explanation, and any excuse feels pathetic. Perhaps I was simply traumatised. Will you forgive me?

– Wow, you have nothing to apologise for. Of course, I forgive you, without a second thought. But the worst thing I did afterwards was to come back and stay here for two more days, even though I knew you didn't want me to. I should have told Anders he needed to find someone else.

– There's something you don't know. I actually handed in my notice, partly because he was insisting that someone had to be here to keep an eye on me. Anyone would do, he said. That's when I suggested you. He agreed, even though you don't work for him. If you hadn't gone along with it, I probably wouldn't be working for them any more.

– What! It was you who wanted me to stay over again?

– Mm. I knew you wouldn't disturb me if you were staying over, so…

Lovisa was so astonished she couldn't find anything to say. Her phone pinged again. Elias had heard it several times, and this time he commented on it.

– Your phone's pinging. Aren't you going to check who it is?

– It's probably Mum, worrying about me. She rang yesterday and could see I was upset. I told her we'd had a row, but not the details.

– Well, I don't think you should keep her waiting.

– I know, but I'm so enjoying finally sitting here in your arms, and I don't want it to end.

– Whether you step away to talk to your mother or stay here, my arms will still be here. I'm enjoying this too, and I'd very much like to carry on holding you.

Lovisa smiled, shifted slightly to one side and took out her phone.

– I'm going to play a little trick on Mum, she smiled, and rang her mother.

– Hi, Lovisa, darling. How are you feeling today, you poor thing? Have you managed to talk to Elias yet?

– Yes, and at first he looked at me as though I was nothing. Then he said he isn't angry with me. He was furious.

– Oh, that doesn't sound good.

– Then he said I needed to listen. Did you hear what he actually said, Mum?

– Yes, he's furious.

– Nope. "Preterite," he said. Which means it's past tense. So he's not angry, but **was** furious. In other words, he **isn't** any more. And then it was he who apologised, because it was he who caused it to become a row instead of a discussion.

– So what does all this mean? Are things all right between you now? Is that what you're saying?

– Well, what do you think?

Lovisa snuggled closer to Elias, who put his arms around her again so that her mother could see them embracing.

– Good day, Karin, he said. I assume you already know that your daughter has a very fiery temper, but is also very forgiving and considerate.

– Oh yes, I know that. Wow, that looks cosy! Does this mean everything is back to how it was before?

– No, absolutely not! Elias said. Not even close!

– But it looks as though you've forgiven each other.

– We have, but our relationship now is much **better** than it was before. We hug and talk about deep things, and I don't want to go back to how it was before.

– Oh, is that what you mean? Almost too good to be true.

Lovisa smiled and confirmed that what he said was true, then hung up to show Elias that he was her focus. She pressed closer to him and enjoyed the fact that he no longer pulled away.

– I'm just wondering one thing, Elias darling. What was it that I said earlier that made you forgive me?

– Well… this sounds like a cliché, but it's true. You had me at "hi".

Lovisa laughed with delight.

– For sure?

– Mm. I'm hopeless at reading faces, but it was obvious you'd been crying a lot. And the simple fact that you came here was enough.

– Of course, Elias darling. I came here to ask for forgiveness.

– Well, if you had tried to blame me, it would have been an uphill struggle to come back from that. Even worse if I'd had to seek you out and apologise without you accepting your part in it.

– God, Elias darling. Do you really mean that you would've come to me?

– Yes, I'm sure I would have done it. But I don't think we'd have managed that hill. But you came here and took the whole blame on yourself, so it was ridiculously easy to forgive you.

– Wow, seriously? But when you opened the door, you looked so serious, as though I meant nothing to you any more. And it took a long time before you opened it.

– Yes… I had to focus hard on composing a neutral face, because what I actually wanted to do was fling the door open and beg for forgiveness. But my ASD brain wanted to hear first how you were going to handle things. Then, once you had… bam, done!

– You calculating wretch! God, I love you for that. So typical of autism spectrum, isn't it?

– Probably. Though this business of enjoying the warmth of your body is rather the opposite of how I usually function.

– Perfect. Then let's stop talking and go to the bedroom and have sex.

– No! Elias said, in a panic, and pulled away.

– Calm down. I could eat you up right here and now, if I'm honest, but I understand you're not ready yet.

– Right, he sighed with relief, and snuggled closer again. Do you know something I've come to understand through all of this?

– That I love you, right?

– Nope, I've known that for a long time. No, more that you're an expert in emotions and social interaction. So the best thing for me is to always do what you say when it comes to that sort of thing. Even if, yes, especially if, it seems wrong to me.

– I wouldn't exactly call myself an expert.

– You are, at social interaction. I'm an expert on computers, so I'm better than you there, but socially, you're the best.

– Well, I'm probably better than you at any rate. Possibly.

– Can we put this behind us now and watch Shaun again, like before?

– Nothing would make me happier. How many episodes have you watched since we last watched together?

– None. This is **our** series that we watch together. What about you? Have you watched it?

– No, not at all. I agree. I just want to watch the series together with you.

They watched a few episodes together as they had done so many times before. The big difference was that when Lovisa laid her head in Elias's lap, he didn't pull away, but simply stroked her hair gently and let her stay.

After a few episodes, Elias suddenly paused the programme, looked at Lovisa and said seriously:

– Do you know what? I'm almost glad we had that row.

– What! I thought you hated rows and conflict.

– I do. But the thing is, I'm still convinced that you're going to leave me. We'll start having rows, and then they'll get worse and worse until you give up. But we've already had one row now, and nothing got worse. On the contrary, it got better. On top of that, we've already agreed that next time we disagree about something, we'll just talk it through rather than row. That feels good to me.

– Sometimes you're so wise, she responded. No, most of the time you're so wise. Never forget that. You're better at feelings than you think.

– I don't know, maybe. It's interesting that Anders actually rang Hugo, of all people. He is the psychiatrist at the

adult unit, the one I've seen before. And he did it just because I asked him to. Would you like to hear what we talked about?

– I need to be careful here. Of course, I'm interested in everything that concerns you, but if you're in therapy, you **have** to be able to speak freely. If you feel you have to report back to someone else about what you've said, you don't open up fully. Everything you say to a therapist is completely private.

Elias didn't reply, but started the programme again. Lovisa simply enjoyed being close to him. This morning, she hadn't had the faintest hope that anything like this was even possible. The day passed far too quickly for her liking, but she understood that she really did need to go home as usual. In the doorway, she asked:

– I hope it's all right with you if I come round tomorrow as usual, Elias darling.

– No, it's not all right, he replied.

– What do you mean? I thought we'd made up?

– It's not **all right** if you come. It's **wonderful**. Though if you want to come in, you'll have to pay me.

– Oh, she said with a smile. And what do I have to pay?

– It'll cost you a hug.

– My goodness, that's steep, she laughed. But didn't you just say you'd think it was wonderful if I came? So if you want me to come, you'll have to pay me as well.

– So what will that cost?

– A hug, of course.

Elias laughed with delight. She didn't hear him laugh very often, so when he did, it was like music to her ears. She drove home and could barely wait until the next day. *Can it get any better than this?* she thought before she fell asleep.

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12



The next day, Lovisa arrived earlier than usual and walked with a light step up to the door and rang the bell. Elias opened it, and Lovisa tried to step inside, but was stopped by Elias, to her surprise.

– Pay first, he said sternly.

She was a little uncertain at first, but then remembered and held out her arms to him and gave him a hug.

– There we go, that's better, he said contentedly. Does my payment count for coming round as well?

– Without a doubt, she smiled and went in.

The twins were gone, but she already knew that. They spent time together now in a much more relaxed way. When

they sat on the sofa watching "The Good Doctor", everything felt as it had before, only cosier and better. After a number of episodes, Elias paused the programme and sat quietly for a moment, then suddenly said:

– Right, so the first thing Hugo asked was why the person who had rung him was from social services and not Silent Pixel IT.

– Oh, are you going to talk about it anyway, even though you don't have to?

– Yep, because **I** want to, not because **you** want me to. Well, I explained everything about my breakdown when I had left the psychiatric unit a few years ago, the thoughts about destroying everything, but how I had then chosen to work with children to forget instead. He thought it was a brilliant idea. Then he wanted to know what had happened on Sunday, and I had to tell it all **again**. But it was helpful, because as you've probably heard, that's exactly what therapy is about: talking about the difficult things over and over until they stop feeling difficult. So, thanks to you and what you did, I've been forced to tell it four times, and it actually feels a great deal better now.

– Wow, so what I did was good even though it was wrong?

– Exactly my point. Anyway, he asked questions about the whole police incident in a different way from everyone else, more about feelings and so on, but as you said, I don't need to talk about that. But I told him everything, including what happened afterwards in the bathroom. He then asked

what I feel for you, and I mentioned the thing your father reacted so strongly to, if you remember?

– You mean the bit about possibly ending up in the psychiatric unit again if I leave you?

– Exactly. That's when he started talking about love, to help me understand what it is. He cited Sigmund Freud, who said that libido is a fundamental life drive in human beings, connected to, among other things, care and reproduction. That's why we love our children so deeply and are prepared to die for them. So if you lose your children, it's extremely painful and can drive you to depression or worse. When I lost Carl and Sonja, I had developed paternal feelings for them, because those feelings can be projected onto children who aren't your own, which is why it was such a catastrophe for me.

– I can completely understand that, Elias darling.

– The love for a partner is of a different character, however, since it's largely driven by the search for a suitable partner to start a family with. According to Hugo's interpretation of Freud, at any rate. So if I were to lose you, it wouldn't be as devastating as when I lost my children. Besides, he said, I can always contact him and get antidepressants again if needed.

– Wow, did he really say exactly that?

– Maybe, more or less. But what I took away from what he said is this. I should go all-in on you, or on my relationship with you. Because if it falls apart, I can manage it, in the worst case, with his help. Besides, if I **don't** go all-

in, and carry on keeping you at arm's length because I'm afraid of losing you, it easily becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. You'll eventually get tired of it, because you won't be able to reach all the way through to me. Am I wrong?

– I can't say you're wrong, Elias darling. It's true that I get frustrated when you still keep me at arm's length. Even so, I'm nowhere near giving up.

– Good to hear. Right now, I feel terrified of what I'm about to do, but I just have to do it.

– You don't need to be afraid of…

Lovisa stopped when Elias went down on one knee in front of her, took her hands and looked her straight in the eyes without lowering his gaze, for the first time. *Surely he's not going to propose? Am I ready?* she had time to think before Elias said:

– Lovisa Emilia Lawson, I understand now that I love you. Will you be my girlfriend?

– Oh… wow… is this real? Wait, you said "girlfriend", didn't you? Yes, yes, Elias darling, I don't want to just be a prospect any more. I want to be your girlfriend. And I want you to be my boyfriend. Come here.

Lovisa stood up and pulled Elias to his feet and hugged him hard, and to her enormous joy, there was not the slightest hesitation when he hugged her back.

– A kiss to confirm it all? Lovisa ventured.

– Oh God… wow… Exchanging bodily fluids? That does seem genuinely frightening, but I suppose it's part of going all-in.

Lovisa took his face in her hands and kissed him for the first time. He seemed hesitant at first and went stiff, but then relaxed and returned the kiss.

– You know what, that wasn't half bad, Elias said. Again?

Now it was Elias who took the initiative, and Lovisa's heart beat so hard it almost hurt, and tears of happiness filled her eyes. At last, it really seemed to be opening up between them. After a long while of hugging and kissing, Elias said with a smile:

– Do you know what, Lovisa darling? All of this has made me hungry. How about I rustle us up something to eat?

– That sounds lovely, Elias darling, Lovisa replied, her heart full of happiness when she heard him call her "darling" for the first time.

After a while, Elias let go of the hug and went to the kitchen to cook. Lovisa wondered whether she should offer to help, but didn't want to push too hard too soon. So she waited until Elias called that the food was ready. While they were eating, Lovisa couldn't help saying:

– Do you know what, Elias darling? I admire you so much for giving me food before, while you were angry with me. And for giving me pillows and a duvet for the sofa, even though you didn't want me sleeping there. It was absolutely incredible!

– Well, even though I was furious with you at the time, that doesn't mean I no longer loved you.

– Wow, it's remarkable how you can keep your feelings so separate like that. Is that part of the autism spectrum?

– Yes, it actually might be.

Elias sat quietly for a moment. Then he suddenly asked:

– I'm thinking of introducing you to my parents next weekend. What do you think?

– I'd love that, Elias darling. I'm sure it will be absolutely wonderful to get to know them.

– It will **not** be wonderful, but it's probably time now, Elias replied in a strained voice. If I'm going to go all-in, I suppose I don't have a choice.

– Elias darling. I've already gathered that something difficult is going on between you and your parents, but it doesn't matter. You're no more responsible for them than I am for mine. You've seen yourself that things can be tense between us sometimes. So don't worry now. I promise to be my best self.

– Impossible, you're always perfect, he smiled. How could you be any better?

Lovisa laughed happily, and then the day continued pleasantly. The rest of the week went as it usually did. Elias took in a little boy for a few days. Just as he preferred, it was on weekdays. He liked to keep his weekends free.

Lovisa's heart did somersaults, both from watching him with a small child and from the fact that even so, he didn't forget about her. She could hardly wait until the weekend when she would get to meet his parents. *I wonder what the problem is between them*, she thought. *I'd better brace myself for the worst... drink, drugs, religion, old wounds,*

endless rows… or something even worse that I can't begin to imagine

✯

The weekend arrived, and Lovisa began to wonder where Elias's parents lived. Would they have to drive a long way, or did they live in the same city? Elias said nothing and seemed to have almost forgotten about the whole thing. After Sunday lunch, he suggested a walk outside and Lovisa happily joined him. At last, he was the one suggesting an activity! First, he showed her the clearing where he had found Carl and Sonja. She could see his mood dip a little, so she hugged him, and his smile came back. On the way home, they passed a cemetery. Elias turned in and carried on walking, and Lovisa was mildly amused.

– It's so peaceful here, isn't it? he said. Not too many people, but lots of trees and greenery.

– Yes, it is, Elias darling.

They walked seemingly at random along several paths. Lovisa then noticed that Elias was walking more and more slowly, until he stopped altogether. She turned her head and looked at him, and got a shock when she saw the tears running silently down his cheeks.

– What's the matter, Elias darling? You look so sad.

– I was thinking about the fact that I promised to introduce you to my parents this weekend.

– You don't have to do that, if it makes you sad, Elias darling. Really, you don't!

Elias sighed deeply, hesitated for a long while, and then turned towards the grave beside them. He drew a breath and wiped his eyes before saying:

– Hi, Father and Mother. I just want to introduce you to my girlfriend. Her name's Lovisa, and I love her very much. I really hope you can accept her.

Lovisa was completely stunned. She looked at the gravestone and tried to read the names on it.

– May I…? she said at last, and held her arm out towards the grave.

– Of course, you can step up. I don't think they're in any position to object.

Lovisa walked up to the gravestone with a solemn expression and crouched down beside it. She ran her hand over it as though it were alive.



– Let me see… 2012… that means you were, goodness, I'm terrible at maths. Seventeen?

– 16, actually. My birthday's in early December.

– Foster care?

– Mm…

Lovisa stood up and put her arms around him. He was still crying quietly, the tears running steadily. She thought about what she could do to comfort him, but was too stunned to come up with anything. This was the last thing she had expected. They stood in silence and looked at the grave.

– Do you know what we could do, Elias darling? I'm not criticising you or anything like that, but it looks a little bare. What would you say to me, if I helped you feel a bit better by brightening it up a little? Perhaps plant some flowers and add a few grave decorations.

– I suppose I say "thank you". But I have one condition.

– You want the final say on what I put here, don't you?

– Nope, you decide. The only thing is that I pay for everything you want to buy, and you don't look at any price tags. I mean, in the worst case, I can always take it all away again. Though I very much doubt that will happen.

They went home, and Elias drove to a garden centre where Lovisa went round and put together a selection of flowers for planting, patterned stones and a couple of solar-powered grave lanterns. She managed to avoid looking at the price tags, but saw the total at the till. She was shocked at how much it had come to, but Elias didn't seem to care. Then they drove back to the grave, and Lovisa planted and arranged everything round it. Elias dug where she pointed. Eventually, she was done, and they stood looking at the grave with their arms around each other. Elias said nothing at first, but then suddenly took Lovisa by the back of the neck, leaned forward and gave her a soft, warm kiss.

– You're welcome, Elias darling, she whispered as he drew back. I'm glad we did this.

– It's wonderful. It actually feels a little better now.

– If you ever want to talk about what happened when they passed away and you ended up in foster care, I'm listening.

Elias didn't answer. He simply turned round, still with his arm around her waist, and they walked away. He drove home, and they settled on the sofa again. Both were a little tired from all the digging and arranging, so after just a few episodes of their series, Elias paused it and said:

– Thank you for today, darling. But I'm really tired now. Now that you know about my parents and the foster care, I hope you understand why I've always felt alone.

– Yes, but I'm here now, and I'm not going anywhere, Elias darling. I'm so glad I finally got to learn something about your childhood. I'm quite tired from it all, too, and it really is time for both of us to sleep. You can barely keep your eyes open.

– You're quite right about that.

– I assume you don't want me to sleep here, on the sofa?

– Nope.

– Even though I've already done it several nights?

– Yep. I hope you're not thinking of starting a discussion again that might lead to a row?

– Nope, Lovisa mimicked. No more rows, ideally. It's work tomorrow anyway, so I'll drive home now.

– Aren't you going to ask whether you can come back tomorrow?

– Why would I ask when I already know the answer?

Elias smiled and gave her a kiss at the door on the way out, much to her joy. She practically floated down the path. She really wanted to know more about his childhood, his parents and his foster family, but knew she would have to wait until he was ready, however hard that was for her. And sooner or later, he would give in and let her sleep there. She convinced herself of that.

The very next weekend, Elias opened up completely, and at last she heard how his parents had died and how he had ended up in foster care.

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13



Elias sat at his desk on a Wednesday evening towards the end of September. He was methodically going through his notes for the German test, memorising vocabulary, grammar and word order while trying to connect each one to the bigger picture. It was his first test at Sixth Form, and he really didn't want to fail.

His parents had gone out to do the shopping, but the doorbell rang before he had finished studying. He looked out through the window and saw a police officer standing on the driveway. Next to him stood a woman in plain clothes.

Elias recognised the scenario. Police officers had knocked before, always in connection with his half-brother's petty

crimes or drug problems. His parents would give the same weary looks, then disappear somewhere to sort it out. Afterwards, the atmosphere at home would turn sour, sometimes for days, sometimes for weeks. He was tired of it. He didn't want to open the door. Besides, his parents had always told him not to let strangers in, and these were not people he knew.

The officer rang the doorbell again, but Elias did not open it. He could see the officer and the woman, so they could see him too, and the officer waved at him to come to the door. He was always careful to do as he was told, especially by police officers, so he eventually walked over and opened the door.

– Good evening, the officer said gently. Are you Elias Nicholson?

Elias gave a small, anxious nod.

– Could we come in and sit down for a moment?

– I'm... I'm not allowed to let anyone in...

– That's a good rule. But I'm a police officer, and I need to talk to you about something important. It's all right to let us in.

– No... you can't come in...

– I understand you're being cautious. But right now we need to talk to you, and for that we need to come inside.

– I... I'm not... allowed...

– Elias, I need you to listen to me carefully. This is a serious matter, and I am asking you, formally, to let us in.

– I... you... you still can't...

– I'm afraid I must insist.

Elias was growing tired of his persistence.

– Do you… do you have a search warrant?

– No, but that's not what this is about.

– Then… then you can't come in.

He took a breath.

– And if you're going to arrest me… you can do that out here.

The officer leaned towards the woman beside him, and they had a brief, whispered exchange. He realised they were not going to be let in, so he said, gravely:

– Your parents have been involved in a car accident.

Elias felt a surge of anxiety. He reached for his jacket, pulled it on, and said quickly:

– Can you… can you drive me to the hospital?

The officer showed no sign of intending to let him come along. Elias hesitated and stood on the threshold while the officer spoke. He kept his voice low and even, without any change of expression, and tried to explain calmly what had happened.

But Elias's brain seemed to have half shut down. The words fell as nothing more than disconnected police terminology he could not quite take in, especially when he heard that his parents had "not made it". *Not made what?* he thought. Eventually, the officer realised he had not understood, and said, with deliberate clarity:

– Your parents are dead. They died in the accident. I'm very sorry for your loss.

Elias's brain shut down entirely. He crumpled in front of them like a rag doll, with no way to stop himself. The woman was startled and bent down towards him. When he noticed this, panic seized him. He managed to scrabble backwards like a crab. He collided with the furniture and eventually made it into the living room and up onto the sofa. The officer and the woman followed, quiet but watchful. In an emergency like this, no permission was needed to enter. Every movement was registered by Elias as fragments of a chaos he could not interpret.

Both the officer and the woman spoke to him and tried to calm him down, but he heard nothing. All he could hear was an intense ringing in his ears.

After a while, the woman stepped out, came back with two empty trunks, and headed down the hall with them. Elias did not dare move, as the officer was sitting directly across from him and appeared to be watching him. When the woman returned, the trunks were visibly heavy. The officer hurried over and took them from her.

He gestured to Elias. A clear signal to follow. Elias saw it and understood, despite the ringing in his ears that made everything else incomprehensible. His heart was pounding as he followed. The woman pulled the front door shut behind them. The lock clicked. The officer loaded the trunks into the car, opened the rear door, and Elias carefully climbed in. Everything was moving too fast. Inside, he was certain of one thing. He was under arrest. His thoughts came in fragments. The world made no sense.

Elias did not dare protest as the officer drove away. When a police officer tells you to do something, you do it. His heart was thudding. He was struggling to draw breath. The officer glanced at him in the rear-view mirror. The panic only rose. He wondered: *Maybe my half-brother has done something and blamed it on me?* He was surprised, then, when the officer did not drive towards the city-centre police station. Instead he headed round the city towards a street of modest terraced houses.

The officer pulled up outside a house where the woman had already arrived. The officer waved for Elias to follow her towards the door. It opened, and a young woman stood in the doorway. Elias registered her body reflexively. The weight of her breasts and the curves of her hips hit his senses.

The woman in the doorway looked at him and understood at once that he was in total shock. He stood rigid and silent, almost as though he were not really there, and she instinctively drew him into a comforting embrace.

But Elias's brain exploded the moment he felt her body against his. Breasts against his chest, groin against his. Reflexively, his hands shot up and he lashed out with all his strength, his whole body behind it. She flew backwards, legs in the air, and hit the floor with a heavy thud, unable to break her fall.

Elias instantly regretted it and spun round to flee. But there stood the police officer, together with the woman who had come with him. The officer dropped the trunks and

moved towards him. He curled up into a little ball on the floor, convinced he would be beaten with a truncheon and then perhaps handcuffed. He shook with terror, just waiting for everyone in the hall to grab him at any moment.

The ringing in his ears was intense, impenetrable. Everything else became fragmented sounds and shadows. In the middle of the chaos, he heard a scream, sharp and clear above the ringing:

– STOP! DON'T DO ANYTHING! BACK OFF! BACK OFF! BACK OFF! I'M FINE! LEAVE HIM ALONE!

Elias looked first at the woman he had hit, who was screaming at the top of her lungs. Then at the officer, who raised his hands and stepped back. He turned his head anxiously back to the woman on the floor, who was getting to her feet and swaying with a sudden dizzy spell. Elias could not understand why she had defended him after he had just assaulted her.

She gestured with her hands for him to stand up and come towards her, making calming movements he could barely take in. The ringing in his ears made everything incomprehensible and chaotic. He got to his feet carefully, panic-stricken, and managed to make his legs hold him up.

She took a step back and beckoned him forward. Elias hesitated, and she stepped back again. He took a step forward. She took another step back, and he took another step forward. The whole thing lasted perhaps a minute, but in his head it felt like hours.

It continued, step by step, until the woman was finally standing at the far end of the corridor and Elias was at an open doorway. He peered in and saw a normal room: a bed, a table, a few chairs, and a wardrobe. He took a careful step inside to get away from everything. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the woman moving towards him, so he went further in. He sat down on the bed, as far from the door as he could get.

The woman stopped in the doorway and said something Elias couldn't hear. Behind her he caught sight of the police officer and flinched, but the officer stayed outside when the woman gave him a signal. Instead, the officer pushed the suitcases into the room without stepping over the threshold himself.

He said something that Elias could not hear above the ringing in his ears. At the same time, he raised his hand in a clear signal, which Elias read as an order: stay in the room. The woman also said something and gently pulled the door towards her without closing it fully.

Elias lay down on his back and stared at the ceiling. The ringing in his ears held him trapped in a vacuum of noise and chaos. He tried desperately to get his brain working again.

It was like a bad film where the hero has to get away fast, but the car won't start. The engine just turns over and over: rrr-rrr-rrr… and then splutters and dies: splutter- splutter…

He lay on his back in bed, staring up at the ceiling while he tried to understand what had happened.

– What's happened? I've been arrested!

rrr-rrr-rrr…

– No, then I'd be at the police station!

splutter- splutter…

– My brother's pointed the finger at me!

rrr-rrr-rrr…

– No, then they'd be questioning me right now!

splutter- splutter…

Nothing added up. His brain refused to cooperate. His thoughts lurched back and forth like a car without a driver. Elias just wanted to switch off, to press pause, but he couldn't. All the noise, all the newness, all the chaos pressed down on him like a ceiling he couldn't lift.

He lay there all evening. The ringing held him captive. The woman appeared in the doorway from time to time without entering.

When the woman came in carrying a tray of food, Elias pressed himself against the wall of the bed. He had no appetite, so after an hour or so she came back for the tray. He could see that she was speaking, but he could not make out what she was saying.

Elias desperately needed the toilet, but the officer had signalled that he should stay put. Only late at night, when the house had gone quiet, and he assumed everyone was asleep, did he creep silently out to the bathroom. He urinated without a sound, draped towels over the toilet cistern when he flushed, and then restored everything to exactly how it had been so as not to raise any suspicion. He slept only in

short bursts that night, tossing and turning, but his brain kept racing and refused to settle.

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The following morning, the phone rang at the school office.

– Cavendish Sixth Form College, this is Linda.

– Hello, it's Anna Taverner from Children's Social Care. I need to report Elias Nicholson as absent. He's not well today.

– Of course, let me just find him here… There we go. Could you repeat your name?

– Anna Taverner.

– Right, we do have a strict rule that only a parent or guardian can report a pupil absent, so either Martin or Margaret. Perhaps you could ask one of them to ring in and possibly authorise you?

– As you may have gathered, I'm ringing from Children's Social Care, which means…

– That doesn't really change things, I'm afraid. Only a parent or guardian may report a pupil absent.

– I'm perfectly aware of that rule, and I think it's entirely reasonable under normal circumstances. But please listen carefully: the situation this time is anything but normal. Elias has been taken into the care of Children's Social Care following the tragic passing of his parents last night.

– But, even so… Wait, did you say "passing"?

– That's right. You may have read in today's paper about the serious collision between a car and a lorry in which both the driver and the passenger in the car were killed. Those were Elias's parents. He has no family left.

– Good God, how dreadful! Has he no other family at all?

– There is no one else who can look after him. You should certainly verify what I've told you with Children's Social Care. His caseworker is Jessica Clarke. He moved in with my husband, Peter, and me last night. The plan is for us to look after him going forward, but everything is still very new. He'll probably be placed with us as a foster child.

– Of course, I'll do that. How is the poor boy?

– Confidentiality prevents me from going into any detail, but he is not well. That much is obvious. My feeling is that he won't be able to manage coming to school for some time yet. Please make sure that all absence notifications, homework reminders and the like are suspended, so that he doesn't feel any worse.

– I'll see to that. I assume you've been in touch with a psychologist.

– I've been in contact with CAMHS.

Linda thanked her and rang off, then called Jessica Clarke to confirm the details before going to the Principal. He was initially irritated at being interrupted, but when Linda showed him the front page of the newspaper and explained the situation, he grasped the gravity of it immediately. He activated the school's crisis plan at once.

He then contacted the Head of Year and the school counsellor to brief them. Together, the three of them went to Elias's classroom, where the German teacher was about to hand out the assessment papers. The Principal turned to the class.

– I need to tell you something sad about one of your classmates. Where does Elias sit?

The German teacher pointed to an empty desk and replied:

– He's absent today. It came through this morning.

– I need to tell you why Elias isn't here.

The class sat in silence. No one whispered, no one moved. Everyone just looked ahead.

– His parents… they were killed in a car accident last night.

The pupils looked at one another and tried to take in what they had just heard. Agnes drew her hands over her face and began to sob.

– What about Elias? she asked, her voice full of panic.

– He was at home, so he's physically unharmed, the Principal replied calmly. At the moment, he's in an emergency foster placement and isn't doing very well.

The school counsellor then took over:

– We know this is very hard to hear, and it's completely natural to feel sad or worried. We're here to support both Elias and all of you. If any of you would like to talk to an adult at school, whether on your own or together, please do come and find us.

The silence was complete. The only sound was the hum of the air conditioning and Agnes quietly sobbing.

– At the same time, Elias needs someone who cares about him, someone who can be there for him if and when he comes back to school. So… is there anyone in this class who's a friend of his, someone who'd like to go and see him this evening?

Everyone in the class looked at one another, looking uncomfortable.

– Is there really no one he has any kind of connection with? Someone he's spoken to, eaten with, or perhaps become friends with?

No one answered. A few shook their heads, looking troubled.

– This is awful, the school counsellor said. Does he really not have a single classmate who could be there for him?

Eventually, Daniel leaned over towards Agnes and nudged her gently.

– Agnes, you've got a thing for him, haven't you? Come on, let's go together, yeah?

Agnes blushed and sobbed a little more.

– Oh… I mean, I love him! she sniffled. But he just… said "no", and basically didn't even want to talk to me.

– Come on, Daniel said. You and me. We'll go round and show him we care.

– O… okay… Agnes said quietly.

And so it was decided. Through the school caretaker, Daniel and Agnes were given access to Elias's locker, so they would have a reason to go round and drop off his textbooks.

In the meantime, Anna was trying to get Elias to eat something. When he hadn't come out after she called, she had left breakfast in his room, without success. Lunch was also left untouched, and she was growing increasingly worried about him.

That evening, Daniel and Agnes came to visit. Anna was pleased when they rang the bell and hoped that the visit might cheer Elias up a little. She showed them into the room, where Elias was still lying on his back on the bed, staring up at the ceiling.

– Hey, Elias, Daniel said. Me and Agnes have brought your textbooks. We heard what happened… it's just awful. I mean… I don't know… But everyone in the class is with you.

He kept trying to get through to him, and Agnes tried to take Elias's hand, but he just pulled it away without turning his head. Eventually, they left the room. Anna asked how it had gone.

– God, it's awful… he's like a zombie, Agnes sniffled. It feels like there's nothing left of him. Just a shell. I properly like him, but he doesn't even see me.

– We'll definitely come back next week, Daniel added. Really hope he's doing better by then, because this is just messed up.

The days passed, and Elias left the bed only to use the toilet. When Anna smiled and nodded as he made his way back, he eventually understood that it was actually permitted. He still ate nothing. By the weekend, the ringing had gone, and he was beginning to think that it was not he who was in trouble with the police, but that his brother had led his parents into some sort of trap. At the same time, it dawned on him that he had a sort of obligation to attend school: even though there was no legal requirement at the Sixth Form level, you were expected to turn up if you had accepted a place.

So on Monday morning, he gathered up all his textbooks. He couldn't find his school bag, so he carried everything tucked under his arm. As he passed the kitchen where Anna and Peter were having breakfast, Peter called out:

– Hey, where are you off to?

Elias lifted his textbooks and pointed towards the door.

– Are you heading to school? Anna asked gently.

Elias gave a brief nod.

– You haven't eaten anything since you arrived, Anna said. Have something before you go.

Elias tapped his watch.

– I'll drive you, Peter said. That way you'll have time for breakfast.

It sounded like an order, so he sat down and was given cornflakes with milk. Anna also put out a glass of milk to drink. He took two spoonfuls only because they expected it and nearly gagged. His stomach was completely empty, and

he disliked both corn and full-fat milk. Anna noticed the problem and let him leave the rest.

Peter drove him to school and walked with him all the way to the classroom. When Elias walked in, the class was surprised to see him, and everyone wanted to pat him on the back or hold his arm. He simply shrugged it all off, shuddering with discomfort, and sat down in his place.

When the maths teacher came in, something happened in his brain. Suddenly, everything was normal. Daniel and Agnes watched him in astonishment. He seemed like himself again, in sharp contrast to how he had been during their visit. He opened his book, wrote in his exercise book, and worked at his own pace, without waiting for instructions or looking round.

At lunch, he went to the canteen and joined the queue. When he saw that his favourite food was being served, he immediately helped himself to a generous portion and ate it eagerly. He got up to take a second, just as large. When he went back for a third, the canteen supervisor raised an eyebrow, and he wasn't sure whether three helpings were allowed. He picked up some granary bread, salad, and vegetables instead, and made several large sandwiches, surprised that his stomach still had room for them.

After school, he went outside to cycle home, but his bike was not where it usually stood. He looked round in confusion for a moment and then set off on foot. Without hesitation, he headed in the direction of his childhood home, along the same route he had always taken, and didn't stop.

– Hi, I'm home, he called as he came in.

The house was quiet. He was alone, but he was used to his parents being out. Far too often, there was some trouble with his half-brother that they had to deal with. He went to his room and got his textbooks out to catch up on what he had missed, according to the school portal.

Anna grew worried when Peter came home without him. She rang him, but he didn't answer. She tried again. The same thing happened.

What she didn't know was that Elias found talking on the phone deeply uncomfortable. When his mobile rang from an unknown number, he didn't answer the first call and cut off the second. Eventually, a stranger sent a text asking where he was. "Home", he replied briefly.

Anna automatically assumed he meant with them and asked:

"Which room?"

"My room," he replied.

He kept his answers to a minimum, but he was too used to complying to stop altogether. Anna looked into his room, but he wasn't there. She wrote:

"Can you go out to the kitchen?"

"Why?"

"Please, just do it."

"I'm in the kitchen now."

"Are you alone?"

"Yes."

Anna was in the kitchen herself. Then she understood. Out of old habit, he had gone to the only home he truly knew. She went straight to Peter.

– Peter, love. It seems Elias has walked to his childhood home instead of coming here. We'll have to go and fetch him.

Peter was already irritated by the time they got in the car, and they drove over together. When Elias saw a car pulling into the driveway, he felt a flicker of hope. *At last, Dad and Mum are home,* he thought. But he didn't recognise the car. When the doors opened, he saw Anna and Peter get out and walk towards the front door. The switch in his head flipped to the dark setting again, and he understood that he had done something wrong. He walked over anxiously and opened the door for them.

– What were you thinking, Elias? Peter said, his voice sharp. You know perfectly well you're supposed to be with us, not here. You're a bright lad, and I know you understand what's right, which is exactly why I'm so disappointed. You're better than this. We expected more from you than to deliberately do the opposite of what you know is right.

Anna patted Peter on the arm to settle him down, and he fell silent.

– We're not angry with you, Elias. We understand you're having a hard time right now. Would you mind getting your things and coming with us?

Elias went to his room without a word, found his school bag, packed up his school things, and left the house. Peter was standing by the rear door of his car with a stern

expression. Elias didn't look at him but went straight to the garage and pulled out a bike. Peter seemed about to object, but Anna got in first:

– Are you sure you know the way to ours?

Elias gave a brief nod and cycled off. He was fast and could take shortcuts, so he arrived before them. Anna said gently that he should put his bike in their storage shed. Two bikes were already in there, so he put his alongside them, went inside, and lay down on his back on the bed, staring at the ceiling again. He tried to work out what had happened and why he had to stay with these strangers.

The following day, Elias had three spoonfuls of cornflakes and cycled to school. Once there, the switch flipped back to the normal setting. After the last lesson, he cycled home as usual, to his childhood home. Soon, his phone buzzed with a text from Anna. This time, the switch flipped straight away, and he replied briefly:

"Got homework."

"Can't you do it here?"

"No."

"All right, finish your homework and come over afterwards. Don't leave it too late, okay?"

Elias hurried to finish and then cycled to the other home, even though he didn't understand why or who this woman really was. The rest of the week, the same routine repeated: cycle to the wrong place, get a text, argue about homework, then go to the other home to lie on the bed and stare at the ceiling.

Friday was no exception. The switch was in the light setting. He cycled home and got a text almost immediately:

"Hi Elias. You can't have any homework today. Please come straight home."

He read it. The switch flipped, and he thought: *What do you mean, "home"? I am home.* But he cycled there anyway. When he arrived, Peter was in the hall and told him sternly that they wanted a word. Elias walked anxiously into the living room and sat down across from Anna and Peter. He noticed Anna patting Peter's arm repeatedly, as if to calm him. Then Anna began instead:

– Elias, we're both worried about you. You've probably realised by now that we're responsible for you and for what happens to you. When you're at your childhood home, we don't know whether you're safe. We've talked it over, and we understand that you feel more comfortable there, so we're going to let you be there during the day if you'd like. But first, you'll need to agree to two conditions. All we ask is that you're here between eight in the evening and eight in the morning, except when you have school or if you want to do something like go to the cinema with some friends.

Elias thought about what she had said. He had no idea who they were or why he had to be here, but understood that for some unfathomable reason, he did.

– Right then, Elias, here's my condition, Peter began. I want you to agree to installing cameras in every room of your childhood home, except the bathroom, of course. Then we

should both be able to monitor everything through an app or similar.

Elias took out his phone and started tapping at it. Peter grew irritated at what he took to be inattention and raised his voice, while Anna patted him all the more insistently.

– You need to understand that if you don't agree to our conditions, we will hire a locksmith and change the locks. After that, you will never be allowed in there again.

Anna tried to interrupt while Elias focused more and more on his phone.

– Love…

But Peter went on, agitated:

– I'm trying to solve a problem here, and it's important that you…

Elias suddenly put his phone down on the table, turned it round, and slid it across to Peter. He looked and found that Elias hadn't been tapping aimlessly but had pulled up a shop page for a set of four security cameras.

– Right, okay. So if I buy these, will you put them up?

Elias nodded, and Peter was satisfied. He took a photo of the screen with his own phone and nodded to Anna.

– That's brilliant, Elias, Anna said, her voice calm. My condition is that you see someone at CAMHS, a psychologist called Elda. I've booked an appointment for Monday. We know you don't want to open up to us, and we understand that, so I'd like you to talk to her instead.

Elias began shaking his head frantically, and Anna spoke in her gentlest voice, almost a whisper:

– This is because I care about you and want to make sure you're safe. I'm afraid I must insist that you speak to the psychologist, so that we don't have to change the locks.

Elias sighed, dropped his head, and eventually nodded. Anna thanked him warmly and let him go to his room. Peter drove off and returned about an hour later with two boxes containing a total of eight cameras. Elias was slightly surprised. They were not cheap cameras. He unpacked them, paired them with the app, then went to Anna and Peter with a note containing the login details and the name of the app. He got their phones and set everything up for them.

The next day, Peter drove him to the house, and Elias mounted all the cameras in the various rooms. Peter was surprised at how capable he was. He didn't ask for any help at all. Peter then drove Elias back, and he lay in bed, utterly miserable, for the rest of that day and all of Sunday.

On Monday, Anna collected him from school, and they drove to CAMHS, where the psychologist Elda Forsyth received them. When she asked whether Anna could sit in, Elias shook his head. Anna was shown out to the waiting room.

Elias sat stiffly in the chair, and Elda tried to catch his eye. For a fraction of a second, their eyes met before he quickly dropped his gaze as usual. A tremor ran through him. A flush spread across his cheeks, and his eyes skittered to one side. His hands rested clasped in his lap, but his fingers twisted restlessly.

– So, Elias, how are you feeling today?

Elias flinched and mumbled something inaudible.

– You understand that you can speak completely freely here. I'm bound by total confidentiality.

He gave a brief nod and stared intently at his hands.

– Don't you want to talk to me? Elda asked carefully.

– Have to, really… Elias mumbled.

He lifted his gaze to her for a second, then it slid away again. Elda noted the pattern. Each time he looked at her, he reacted: the flush spread, and he looked away quickly. It wasn't ordinary shyness. It wasn't her as a person. It was the fact that she was a woman that seemed to be blocking him.

Elda sat quietly for a moment, observing his body language: the small twitches, the brief eye contact, the redness in his face. She realised she would need someone he could feel at ease with. A man.

– Wait here a moment, Elias. I'll go and fetch a colleague who's on placement here.

Elda went out and returned with Erik, who took her chair. She sat herself in a corner and let Erik lead the conversation, occasionally giving small, discreet signals to him. Elias relaxed considerably and answered Erik's questions briefly but straightforwardly. Eventually, Elda was satisfied with the session and said:

– Thank you, Elias. I have three questions I'd like to ask. I already know the answer to the first, and the third question depends on the answer to the second. Is that all right?

Elias's eyes widened slightly at her words, and he nodded after a brief pause.

– First question. Are you doing well today, mentally?

– No, Elias mumbled, staring down at his hands.

– That was expected. How long have you been struggling?

Elias hesitated, his gaze drifting. Elda rephrased.

– Have you been struggling for days, weeks, months, or years?

– Years.

– There we are. Not unexpected either. Third and final question. Would you like us here at the clinic to help you feel better by carrying out a thorough assessment?

– Yes.

She nodded and brought Anna back in. Elias continued to stare at his hands. Anna came in calmly and leaned towards Elda, keen to know how the session had gone.

– Can you say anything about what I asked when I booked the appointment? she said.

– I understand what you're referring to, Elda replied. At this point, I see no signs that Elias has any destructive thoughts.

Anna gave a slight nod. A relieved smile played on her lips.

– You can't imagine how glad I am to hear that, Elias. What do you think, Elda, does he need further contact with the service?

– I see it as an important next step, Elda replied. A full psychological assessment would give us a much clearer picture of how he's doing.

– That sounds reasonable. I'll speak to Jessica about getting him referred for a full assessment. There's just one more thing I'd like to ask… Elias doesn't talk to us at all, not not a single word. That's completely fine, Elias, I understand. But has he talked to you?

– We've had a clear and direct exchange, so yes, Elda replied. I have a certain idea why he finds it difficult to talk to you, but confidentiality prevents me from sharing that.

Anna was satisfied with the answer. To show Elias that she meant what she had promised, she dropped him off at his childhood home. Elias was content knowing he could now be there alone without anyone objecting. He set an alarm on his phone so he wouldn't forget to head back to the foster home in time to be there by eight in the evening.

The week went on, and he cycled home after school, then, when the alarm went off, cycled to Anna and Peter's so as to be there before eight. Now the switch in his head flipped when the alarm sounded.

At the weekend, he cycled off at exactly eight o'clock in the morning, without breakfast. Anna and Peter were not happy with the arrangement, but he was visible on the cameras and was scrupulously punctual about arriving by eight. Once he had adjusted his alarm, he was never late.

On Monday, Anna began talking to Elias about a funeral that Thursday. He couldn't understand why he should attend

a funeral on Anna's account. Then it suddenly struck him whose funeral it was. It was like a punch to the stomach. That meant his half-brother must be dead, and the reason his parents hadn't come home yet must be that they had killed him.

Elias tried to work out how it could have happened. The best outcome would be if it had been a fight that ended in an accident in which his brother had died. Then it would be involuntary manslaughter, and his parents would probably be home soon. But if it was voluntary manslaughter or, worse, murder, they would likely be in prison for a long time.

Anna and Peter picked him up from school, and soon he walked nervously into the chapel in the uncomfortable suit Anna had bought him. *Why are there two coffins? Did my brother have a girlfriend, or even a wife?* Then he saw a large photograph of his parents and felt a surge of rage. *What the hell! Have they actually staged this whole charade just to control me?* He ran up to one of the coffins and began hammering on the lid with his fists, screaming:

– OPEN THIS! OPEN THE COFFIN! OPEN IT! OPEN IT!

Elias kept screaming and hammering on the coffin. Anna was completely shocked and didn't know what to do. Elias was out of control and was screaming with increasing hysteria. A man in a suit, white shirt and tie came forward and conjured up a tool from somewhere. After a glance at Anna, who nodded, he began unscrewing the lid. Elias realised he must be from the funeral parlour. When the

coffin was opened, he saw his mother lying inside. He shook her to try to wake her, but she was ice cold.

He turned to the other coffin, which, by this point, the man had already managed to open. There lay his father, his face barely recognisable. There was no doubt that he was dead. Elias threw himself forward, flung his arm around him and began to weep loudly. He clung on desperately as he cried. He could hear the chapel beginning to fill with guests, but he simply could not control himself.

Anna had rushed over and was desperately trying to calm him down. She was utterly helpless and didn't know what to do. She had only ever cared for young children before, and this was something else entirely.

Eventually, she more or less forced Elias to leave the coffin and sit down on a chair by placing herself between him and it. That left him with only two choices: touch her or follow her. Soon he was sitting in a chair, still weeping loudly, while the coffins were closed again.

The ceremony could now begin, but Elias remained completely out of control throughout. Anna passed on packet after packet of tissues that she was given by others among the mourners.

Eventually, the ceremony was over, and the coffins were to be carried out. Elias was instructed to walk directly behind the coffins, which were carried by several of the guests. Two roses were placed in his hands, and Anna said softly that he was to lay them in the grave when she told him.

Soon, everyone stood at a graveside with two freshly dug holes. The coffins were lowered carefully, and the priest said a few last words before nodding to Elias to lay the roses down. He was still crying loudly, but he had heard and understood everything that had happened.

He walked towards the graves in stiff, jerky movements, threw one rose hard into each, then spun round and ran off as fast as his legs would carry him. Not because he was frightened, but because he knew exactly what would happen next. Everyone else would come forward and approach Elias to offer their condolences, take his hand, or worse still, try to hug him. He knew he couldn't cope with that, and so he ran. Peter made to go after him, but Anna stopped him.

– I know where he's headed. Let's check the cameras.

It was a long way home from there, but he ran flat out the whole way without stopping. Anna felt a wave of relief when she saw him come into the house and throw himself down on one of his parents' beds. Peter told Anna he could keep an eye on Elias while she looked after the guests. She had found all the names in an address book she had come across at Elias's home.

Suddenly, a text arrived on Anna's phone from Elias. She read it with surprise:

– Can I sleep here just tonight? Please? PLEASE?

Anna smiled a little, all the same. It was clear that Elias had understood they were watching him. She sent back an "OK" and carried on talking with the guests. Many were

worried about Elias, but Anna assured them they had it all under control.

There was a wake with refreshments after the funeral. Elias's half-brother had been invited but had not attended the funeral, and was not here now either. Several of the guests gave speeches, and Anna and Peter slowly began to understand just how difficult Elias's life had been before, and felt deeply saddened by it.

Afterwards, they both drove to Elias's childhood home. Anna said it was best if Peter drove back to theirs, while she stayed to help Elias. Peter agreed. Anna was, after all, the one who had the better relationship with Elias, even if that was still fairly limited.

Anna went into the bedroom and sat down on the other bed. She looked at Elias. He had stopped crying, but the pillow was soaked through. His eyes were red and swollen, his face blank and rigid. He was looking in her direction without appearing to see her.

She struggled to find something to say, but felt the knot in her chest tighten and couldn't think of how to reach him. Elias looked as though he was about to say something, but stayed silent, as he so often did.

Since she had never heard him speak before today, she had no idea how to reach him, let alone comfort him. *How do you comfort someone who doesn't even speak?*

She knew almost nothing about what was going on inside him. Not what had made him so withdrawn and quiet, how long it had been going on, or how deep it ran. Yet she felt

certain that this was only the beginning. Before long, she would understand just how deep Elias's trauma went.

Elias opened his mouth and began to speak for the first time.

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14



Elias pressed closer to Lovisa. His grip round her waist tightened, as though something inside him might fall apart if he let go. He said nothing. When the tears came, he didn't seem to notice them at first. She did. She took a tissue and gently wiped them away without pulling back.

– You don't need to wipe my tears as though I were a small child, he mumbled.

– I know, she said softly. But that's the sort of thing girlfriends do.

– It's illogical. But I suppose girlfriends aren't logical. I'll have to get used to it.

– Some of them might be, Lovisa smiled. But not this one.

It was almost a minute before he spoke again.

– It still hurts. Even though it's more than 10 years ago.

– Mm.

– Right up until that day, when my parents were buried… I understood nothing. Everything carried on round me, but my brain wouldn't take the information in.

– Like being in a fog?

– Yes. As though it had switched off. I knew something was missing, but I couldn't reach it.

Lovisa ran her hand gently through his hair and said nothing. He didn't need any more questions just then.

– But now there's something else to do. Something far more important than this.

– And what's that? Something serious?

– I'm hungry. Will you help me cook?

– Of course, Elias darling. I never thought you'd ask me for help in the kitchen.

They went through to the kitchen. Elias began preparing the food as he always did. Lovisa stood ready to chop vegetables, waiting for a signal from him. He gave a brief nod, and pointed to the vegetables. She began rinsing and cutting them while she quietly enjoyed the fact that yet another barrier between them had come down.

Soon they were sitting at the kitchen table eating together. Elias was his usual self, as though he hadn't just been so sad talking about his parents' deaths. The food was excellent, as always. As Lovisa chewed, her thoughts drifted to a mundane problem. She knew Elias was interested in

technology and thought a new topic might give him a welcome distraction after their intense conversation on the sofa.

– Elias darling, Lovisa said. I need a new laptop. My old one has really started to give up the ghost. And I found such a good deal! It's £699 outright, but they have an instalment plan that's brilliant.

Elias looked up.

– Brilliant, how?

– Only £37.20 a month for two years! Lovisa exclaimed enthusiastically. It's nothing! It means it doesn't all hit at once, you know. Perfect for spreading it out!

Elias chewed slowly and calculated for a few seconds.

– Right, Elias said. The monthly instalment for the laptop is £37.20. But there's a setup fee of £29.50 on top. And an admin fee of £4.90 a month. The actual monthly cost, including all mandatory charges, comes to £42.10. Multiplied by 24 months, that's £1,010.40. If we add the setup fee of £29.50, the total you end up paying is £1,039.90.

Lovisa dropped her fork onto her plate with a clatter.

– £1,039.90? But the laptop is only £699 outright! That's a difference of… of…

– £340.90, Elias said immediately. That's about 49% more than the outright price.

– But how can you just work that out in your head, that fast? Lovisa asked. It's unbelievable!

– It's just mental arithmetic.

Lovisa shook her head.

– I don't understand how you do it.

– I'm not entirely sure either, he smiled. It just works.

Lovisa saw him smile for the first time all evening. It warmed her to see him looking a little brighter. The story he had told was devastating, but she hoped he would have the strength to carry on. She so wanted to hear him tell her more, and wished with all her heart that what lay ahead would be a little brighter.

After the meal, they went back to the sofa. Elias prepared himself to continue his story. Putting his past into words for Lovisa had been a relief, and at the same time, one of the hardest things he had ever done.

He took a breath. Her quiet support gave him the strength to carry on. But the hardest part hadn't been said yet: what happened in the time after the funeral.

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15



Peter came home from work earlier than usual the day after the funeral. He was worried about how Anna was doing, given that she'd spent the night with Elias. He was also concerned about how Elias was feeling, given that he'd been utterly devastated the day before. When he kissed Anna, she returned the kiss, but without looking at him.

– Hello, love, he said gently. How's Elias today? Yesterday's funeral hit him hard. I came home early to support you both. Do you think it might help if I had a word with him too?

He headed towards Elias's room while Anna caught her breath.

– That's kind of you, she said quietly. But Elias is at school.

Peter stopped short. He looked at Anna in astonishment.

– At school? Is that really wise? He was completely beside himself yesterday at the funeral.

She finally looked at him, and now the sadness on her face was impossible to miss.

– You look upset yourself, he continued. Like you've been crying. Why?

– I got so sad trying to comfort Elias last night. You must have seen it all on the camera.

– Was he unkind to you? Peter said, upset. I saw you talking to him, but I couldn't tell if he answered. Did he raise his voice at you? Did he say anything at all? We've never heard him say a word before, not until the chapel.

Anna shook her head.

– No, he wasn't unkind at all, so calm down. Well, I came in and sat down on the other bed, which stood a little way from his, with a nightstand between them. I'm fairly certain it was his mum's bed, while he was lying in his dad's, judging by how the rest of the room looked. I tried to think of what to say to comfort him, but drew a complete blank.

– I can understand that. What do you say to a teenager who's had such a rough day?

– Exactly, what **can** you say? He seemed to want to say something, but wouldn't meet my eye, which I'm sure you've noticed before. I waited for him to speak, but at first it felt as though he couldn't manage it. Eventually, he said quietly:

“I didn’t understand until today that I’m an orphan.”

Anna fell silent and looked at Peter.

– Think about what that means, Peter. Think hard.

– That’s devastating. So he hadn’t understood before that his parents are dead! And yet it explains why he was so distraught in the chapel.

– Exactly. I tried to reassure him and said everything was under control and that he could ask me anything. What he asked next is what nearly made me cry, Anna continued.

– So what was that, then?

– He simply asked, “Who are you?” I was completely taken aback and tried to grasp the full weight of what he’d said. I eventually asked who he thought you and I were. “I don’t know… something to do with the police, maybe… connected to my criminal half-brother… who dragged my parents into something.”

Peter visibly paled.

– Now think through everything you and I have said and done up to this point. He didn’t even know he’d been taken into care, that this is a foster home, or even what the two of us are called. He’s been living in complete darkness.

– Good grief… wow. This is just awful.

Anna simply nodded, struggling to hold back tears, as Peter went on.

– But wait. So when he kept going back to his childhood home, it wasn’t because he was being disobedient. It was the opposite. He thought that’s where he was expected to be. And I tore into him for it! Then I demanded cameras and all

the rest. I've behaved like an absolute pig towards him. What we've done is bloody unacceptable. And yet he's done everything we've told him to do. Good grief... now I understand why you're upset. What did he say after that?

– First, I told him everything: our names, that we're a foster home, that Jessica is his caseworker, that you had been given legal responsibility for him, all of it. And then, carefully, about his parents... that they died in a car accident, caused by a drunk lorry driver. He barely seemed to be listening before he answered me.

– What did he say, then?

– After a long silence, he asked, "What happens now?" When I asked him to explain, he said:

"Well, when I turn 18, I'll be an adult. Then I'll have to move out of yours. I can't even apply for a flat until I'm an adult, and then it takes years to get one. So I'll end up homeless like my half-brother and have to stay in some shelter with people who are alcoholics or drug users. I can't cope with that!

"Then I'll have to find a job straight after Sixth Form, but the course I'm on is A-levels, not vocational, so I might have to switch. But I don't want to. Everything just turns to chaos after that."

Peter looked completely shocked.

– I was speechless, Peter. This torrent of words, in such total contrast to before. He spoke in one long, logical chain about what would happen when he turns eighteen. I realise now just how sharp he actually is, even though I'd previously

assumed he had certain mental challenges. And yet… for all his logic and clear thinking… there was panic in it. Desperation. A kind of quiet terror.

– What a chain of consequences to work through. And his reasoning isn't entirely wrong either. What did you come up with to say?

– Well, what could I say except that it'll work out? It's still well over a year away, after all. He was quiet for a moment and then asked, to my surprise, "Who am I supposed to obey now?"

– Obey? Did you hear that right? What does he mean by that?

– I asked him to explain again, and he said:

"Well, when you're a minor, you're supposed to obey your parents. But now, Children's Social Care is basically my parents, so I'm supposed to obey that. But how do you obey an institution? Is it Jessica I'm supposed to obey, or is it you and Peter?"

– Good grief, what a complicated way of thinking.

– Well, everything he says sounds logical and rational, but I don't have any answers. I told him he doesn't need to obey anyone, but that we're his point of contact with Jessica and social services.

– Well said, love. Good call, playing down that idea about obeying someone.

– He lay quietly for a while, then suddenly sat up and said he couldn't stay there. He asked if he could go to his room, and when I said "yes", he asked if I needed a phone charger. I

said “no”, but he came back with one anyway. “You’ll probably need power when you’re watching me on the camera all night.” Then he went to his room.

– You’re right, he’s got a genuinely sharp mind, thinking one, two, three steps ahead.

– Well, I did watch him on the camera. He dropped off after a while, and eventually so did I.

– I imagine you slept badly, too?

– You can be sure of that! In the morning, I was woken by him moving things around in the kitchen. When I came in, he looked over at me and asked in a completely calm voice, as though yesterday had never happened at all: “You do eat scrambled eggs for breakfast, don’t you?”

– “Yes”, I said, “but I can sort breakfast later.” But he was already at it, cracking eggs into a frying pan where bacon was already sizzling. Then he added some peppers, onion, and I don’t know what else. Finally, he seasoned it with all sorts of spices. It happened so fast, and then I had the best scrambled eggs I’ve ever eaten.

– But did he eat anything himself, then? Here, he barely eats any breakfast at all.

– Yes, he had a big bowl of Alpen and Gut Sense kefir. He noticed me looking at the packets and reeled off a load of facts. I can’t remember it all, but the gist was that his breakfast, compared to what I’d been giving him, cornflakes with whole milk, has roughly the same number of calories, but the oats make his version more nutritious and more filling. The live cultures calm the stomach, which he needs,

and the higher sugar content generates more dopamine, which he desperately needs.

– Sounds perfectly logical. Not entirely accurate, perhaps, but convincing enough.

– I thought so too, so I've bought his breakfast in now. After we'd eaten, I suggested it would be best if he came here with me instead of going to school. But he reacted straight away and said, "Do you really think it's better for me to come back with you and brood instead of being at school, where everything is normal, and schoolwork occupies my mind?" So I went with him to school, again, because it's logical.

– How did he seem when you left him? Was he still upset?

– He was his usual self. Except that he was finally talking. He said, "The office is that way. Through that door and up the stairs."

– Why did he say that, exactly?

– I asked, and he answered, "Don't you think I realise you have to tell them what happened to me yesterday?"

– Wow, I mean, wow. So understanding, and, despite everything we've seen before, so present.

– Exactly my thought too. So I went to the office and told them what had happened yesterday so that they could keep an eye on him. I also asked Linda to contact his personal tutor to book a progress review. Then I took the bus home.

– I suppose if the school hasn't been in touch, he must be all right, all things considered.

– Probably, but right now I'm worried. He should be at the house by now, but I can't see him on the cameras. It's a shorter walk there than here. I really hope he hasn't…

Suddenly, they heard the door, and Anna and Peter went out to the hall, surprised, to see Elias coming in.

– Oh, hello, Elias! Anna exclaimed. I didn't think you'd be home until eight.

Elias looked at Anna, or rather, past her.

– Well, I assumed you'd be worried about me, given yesterday.

– It's wonderful that you thought of that, Elias, Peter said. I'd like to have a word with you, if that's all right.

– Have I done something wrong? he asked, anxious.

– Not at all. It's Anna and I who have done wrong. Anna told me what you said yesterday. I'm truly sorry for the way I've treated you. You haven't done anything wrong, based on what you understood. And yet I shouted at you and made unreasonable demands of you.

– I don't accept your apology.

– Thank you… wait, what did you say? You **don't** accept it?

– No, because you didn't do anything wrong **based on what you understood**, so you have nothing to apologise for.

– Fair enough, fair enough. Then I apologise for not making sure you understood the situation you're in. Anna and I are responsible for you, and we should have made sure you understood everything.

– **That** apology, I accept. I just want to ask…

– Yes?

– Am I… am I still allowed to be at the house until eight?

Peter looked at Anna, who nodded.

– You've handled everything admirably, given the circumstances, so I see no reason to change that arrangement.

– Can I go to my room now?

– Of course. Just one last thing. You asked Anna yesterday who you were supposed to **obey**. The truth is, you don't need to obey us. Think of us as your protectors instead, and you can ask for anything, and we'll do our best to help you.

Elias nodded uncertainly and went to his room. Peter and Anna went through to the living room and sat down on the sofa.

– I really hope Elias starts feeling better soon, Anna said. I think about him constantly, worry about how he's coping with everything, and I genuinely want to be there for him, especially now that he knows what's happened.

– Yes, we'll have to take it one step at a time, Peter said. He needs time, and we have to stand by him every step of the way.

– We do. But isn't it wonderful that Elias has finally started talking to us?

– Yes, not a day too soon.

– I'm not entirely comfortable leaving him at his childhood home until eight every evening, as we've

promised. But I suppose he needs it for his own sense of security.

– I understand the concern, but with the cameras, you can keep an eye on him, and I'm always available if you need me.

He looked at Anna, who whispered:

– You know what, Peter? We simply **have** to find a way for him to keep the house. He needs that security.

– I agree, but it seems impossible. The house is almost the entire estate, and his brother is entitled to half.

– I know, but we have to think of something, even if it's not entirely by the book.

– Let me have a think and see if I can find a way.

Elias brooded over what would happen now that his parents were gone. He read up on it and understood that under the rules of intestacy, with no will in place, the estate would be divided between him and his half-brother. When he ran the numbers, the house was essentially the only thing of any value.

His half-brother was, like himself, a direct heir and would therefore inherit half. Either they would own the house jointly, but if his brother moved in, Elias felt he would be forced out, and the house would eventually be lost to his half-brother's debts. Or Elias could buy him out, but even with a loan, he did not see how he could keep up the payments and would eventually lose the house anyway. Selling the house and splitting the proceeds was the final

option, which would also leave Elias homeless. Whatever happened, in his mind, he ended up homeless.

A few days later, Elias realised that Peter was also working on the estate. He came round with tradesmen, had them measure up, knock on walls, and talk in numbers about what it would cost to "make the house ready to sell." Elias knew the house was run down, but only now did he understand what Peter was planning. To sell it. Split the proceeds between him and his half-brother. It was the only logical thing Peter could do.

The thoughts dragged him into a downward spiral. Without the house, there was nothing left. He pictured himself with no roof over his head, nobody to turn to, nobody who would help. The sense of loneliness became suffocating. It felt as though his entire world had caved in.

He began to prepare in silence. He got a VPN. Searched. Read. Wrote a farewell letter to Anna. Bought what he needed. He put it all in a plastic bag and hid it in the bathroom where no one would find it.

He thought: *When the house is gone, I'll carry out the plan.*



Elias received a notice for a progress review a week after the funeral, which came as a surprise. It was almost a month early, according to the schedule the school had provided at the start of the term. He said nothing about it at the foster

home, as he simply assumed he would be expected to go alone. He was quite used to sitting by himself at school meetings.

When he arrived at the staffroom to meet his personal tutor, he was surprised to find Anna sitting there too. He sat down and let his gaze move uncertainly between the tutor and Anna. The tutor noticed his unease and opened the meeting.

– Welcome, Elias. I hope it's clear to you that the school has called this as a routine progress review, nothing more.

– Um… I have… a question… Elias said, stumbling over the words.

– What's your question, Elias?

– I'm just wondering whether it was you or Anna who asked for this progress review about a month early. That doesn't sound routine.

– I asked the school to call you in, Elias, Anna replied. I'm worried about you, and I've realised I know nothing about you because you don't talk much at home. That's fine. I understand your reticence.

– Here's the thing, Elias. The school has a procedure: when a pupil changes guardian or experiences another kind of trauma, we're supposed to call a meeting with the personal tutor. I'm genuinely sorry it didn't happen sooner. My intention, though, is to run this as a straightforward progress review, given how well you're doing at school.

Elias didn't respond, but seemed satisfied with the answer.

– Right, I've gathered feedback from all your subject teachers, so let's go through them. Starting with maths. It's quite clear you find it easy. Your teacher says you're about… two chapters ahead of the rest of the class?

– Three.

The tutor raised an eyebrow.

– There you go. He was actually a little concerned before the first assessment, precisely because you're so far ahead. But there were no problems at all.

He glanced at his notes.

– Computing is going just as well. You're ahead of the coursework schedule, and your teacher says you clearly have prior experience. Physics is strong, too. You're very well regarded in practicals. You take responsibility and get things to work.

The tutor took a breath, as though bracing himself to say something difficult.

– German was the big question mark, though. Your teacher was convinced it would go badly. The first test fell the day after your parents' tragic passing. When you then sat it the following week and got full marks, she honestly thought it had to be cheating.

He looked at Elias.

– But after the speaking assessment, there was no doubt left that you didn't.

– That's incredible, Anna said. What sort of grades are we talking about overall?

– In all likelihood, A stars across the board.

He leaned back.

– I should also mention enrichment. All our sixth-formers do games on Wednesday afternoons. Now, a student as academically minded as you doesn't usually shine on the football pitch. Your games teacher said at first that you'd miss an open goal from six yards out.

A wry smile.

– But then he told me something interesting. You nearly always position yourself correctly on the pitch and receive passes when you're completely unmarked. Then you draw the defence onto yourself just to play it on to someone else who scores.

He nodded.

– Apparently, you read the game better than anyone in the year group. Can't kick a ball straight, but you don't need to.

The tutor paused and looked at Anna for a long moment before continuing.

– Then there's the social side. You don't really have any friends you spend time with, do you, Elias? You always seem to be alone at school. It's… a little sad to see. Does that bother you?

Elias thought. Not about the question itself, but about what was actually true.

– I prefer being on my own.

– Mm, perhaps. Do you mean that's an active choice, or… is it that you're being bullied and that's why you keep to yourself?

Elias shook his head, quickly. Too quickly.

– Are you quite sure? Is there anyone who treats you badly or says unkind things about you?

– Um… no. I mean… Gaz sometimes calls me a nutter. But… it doesn't matter. So…

The tutor frowned.

– That does actually sound like a form of bullying, all things considered.

– Well, I was bullied at primary and secondary school, so… this isn't really like that…

– Would you like to have more friends?

The question landed wrong. Elias stared at the tabletop.

– I'm not entirely sure what that means. I just… I don't want more problems. People talk a lot. It gets… messy.

The tutor slowly drew in a breath. He looked at Anna, who seemed concerned.

– Elias, school isn't supposed to feel messy or lonely.

– It's quiet sometimes. That's good.

– I'll definitely have a word with this Gaz, Anna said when Elias fell silent. It's not on for him to call you names.

– No… I mean… I don't want to tell tales… it won't end well…

The tutor and Anna had nothing more to add, and the conversation dissolved into silence. Anna walked Elias back towards his classroom. The whole way there, he was afraid she might make a scene. In the corridor, Gaz came walking towards them. He broke into a wide grin when he spotted Elias.

– All right, Nutter. Been swotting hard then?

Anna reacted immediately and spoke to him.

– Excuse me, who are you?

– Gaz, love.

She took him aside at once. Elias stood frozen while the other pupils filed into the classroom. He tried not to look, but could still hear the voices, low but sharp. After a moment, Anna let go. Gaz walked back into the classroom, noticeably quieter than before.

After the lesson, Gaz came over to Elias, who braced himself.

– Your mum… foster mum, I mean… had, like, a word with me. I didn't know about your folks. What happened is bloody awful.

He scuffed his foot along the floor.

– I don't mean nothing bad when I say Nutter. You just do things your own way. It's… cool, though. I'll lay off, yeah?

Elias walked away, his thoughts spinning round and round. Anna had requested the progress review. She had confronted Gaz and got him to apologise. What had actually happened today? He couldn't stop trying to work it out for the entire weekend.

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Directly after the weekend came the day Elias had been dreading. Peter had booked a meeting with a solicitor to go through the estate and carry out the preliminary division of

inheritance. He was collected from school, but his thoughts were scattered. School felt pointless. Today, he would find out that the house was gone. So why bother with lessons?

The solicitor received them. Elias walked in alongside Peter as though in a haze. Inside, he was shaking. Every fibre of his body screamed against what was about to happen. He knew exactly how it would end. Today was most certainly the last day of his life.

– Welcome, both of you. Christopher, your brother, appears to be running late. We'll begin when he arrives.

They waited a long time, and Peter began to grow impatient. After half an hour, he objected.

– We can't wait any longer. He was notified, and I have proof he collected the letter. If he doesn't want to come, that's his choice. We need to start now.

– Noted. We'll record that Christopher is not present and proceed with the estate.

Peter presented the estate accounts and handed Elias a copy. He noted that two repair quotes had been deducted from the house's value, along with various other deductions. There were also both his parents' life insurance payouts, which had apparently been paid into the estate. Elias did the sums quickly in his head and worked out that the house came to just **under** ¾ of the total estate. He thought it made no difference, but let Peter sign it anyway.

Then Peter produced a folder he'd brought with him.

– Before we go any further, there's something you need to see. Given how much of this rests on Christopher's share, I

looked into his background properly. I don't believe he was ever legally adopted by Elias's father.

The solicitor took the folder, frowning.

– That would be a significant matter, if true. What evidence do you have?

– Records from the General Register Office and the local authority. There's no Adoption Order on file, not under the father's name, not under any name that matches this family. There's a court application from over twenty years ago that was probably not completed. No final hearing on record. No order ever issued. The family raised him as a son in every practical sense, but the legal process never seems to be finished.

The solicitor turned through the pages carefully, taking his time.

– This does appear to be correct. If no Adoption Order was ever granted, Christopher most likely never legally the son of the late Mr Nicholson. His legal relationship remains solely with his birth father, whoever that may be. Under intestacy, he'd only have a claim on his mother's estate, not his stepfather's.

Peter nodded, his expression carefully still.

– The house was held jointly between the parents, he said. If Christopher only has a claim on his mother's half, then Elias, as the sole child of both parents, inherits his father's half in full, plus half of his mother's half.

The solicitor was quiet for a moment, running through the implications.

– That would leave Christopher entitled to a quarter of the estate, and Elias to three-quarters. I'll need this verified independently before anything is finalised, but if the records hold up, this isn't a matter of interpretation. It's simply the legal position.

Elias sat very still. A quarter. Three-quarters. Enough, maybe, to keep the house. He didn't dare believe it yet.

The solicitor turned to Elias.

– I have to ask this, given the circumstances. Do you believe your parents considered Christopher to be their son in every real sense, whatever the paperwork does or doesn't show?

Elias felt his anger rise. *Of course they did. They raised him as their own son his whole life. They never once said otherwise, not to him, not to me*. He was screaming, but only inside his head.

Instead, it was Peter who said, calmly but firmly:

– Elias is placed with us through Children's Social Care. It's my responsibility to ensure he is not subjected to questions of this kind.

The solicitor leaned forward, persistently.

– I understand, but the answer could have a genuine bearing on how this is interpreted.

– Then you may record that he declines to answer.

The solicitor gave a brief nod, but then turned directly to Elias regardless.

– Did they ever say Christopher was their son? No pressure.

Elias swallowed hard. The words stuck in his throat. He could not tell a lie, not directly, but he did not have to hand over the whole truth either.

– I… I don't know, he mumbled at last. We never talked about it.

Peter cut in, brief and firm.

– And that's quite enough questions.

– Noted. I'll write to Christopher directly to inform him of this and give him the opportunity to respond, the solicitor continued. Given how little engagement he's shown so far, I wouldn't expect a swift reply, but he has every right to challenge the proposed distribution if he believes the records are wrong or incomplete.

– Understood, Peter said. I'd only ask that the administration proceed on this basis in the meantime.

– Very well. Christopher will be formally notified of both the estate administration and the adoption finding. He'll have twenty-one days to respond or raise an objection. If he does, the distribution will be paused until the matter is resolved. If not, the estate will proceed on the calculated basis. And if he intends to make a claim under the Inheritance Act, he should be aware that the usual time limit is six months from the date the grant is issued. A late application would require the court's permission.

The solicitor asked everyone to sign the estate distribution document. He said he would submit the estate to HMRC and send Christopher a copy before closing the meeting.

Since school was already out, Peter drove Elias home to his childhood home and left him there as usual.

– See you at eight as normal, I expect? Peter said.

Elias thought: *you probably won't see me again*, and gave a non-committal reply.

He went into the house and walked straight to the bathroom. He took out the plastic bag and laid its contents out in front of him, arranged exactly as he had planned. This was it. This was how he had decided it would happen. His thoughts were calm, almost still, as though everything were already settled. He went through every step in his mind and pictured Anna reading the letter and understanding that this was the best thing that could happen.

But he couldn't stop thinking about what Anna and Peter had done. Peter hadn't broken any laws, not exactly, but he'd dug up a technicality, a gap in the paperwork nobody else had thought to look for, and used it without mercy. He'd pushed to have everything settled before Christopher had any real chance to respond. His half-brother should have got half. Should have. And yet the house might end up Elias's own. It shouldn't have been this easy. It shouldn't have been possible at all. And yet Peter had made it happen.

Then again, Anna had arranged the meeting with the school the week before. She had been there. Listened with genuine interest. Even acted when he had hinted that he was being bullied.

Peter was trying to help him. Anna was trying to help him. They had only been hired by Children's Social Care to

look after him. And yet… it was strange. And yet true. Illogical. But true.

He stared ahead of him. Then a thought struck him hard: his whole life, he had been alone. Always alone. Always overlooked. His entire life had proved that nobody had ever cared.

And now… now they did. They had done everything for him. No logic. No rules. No system. Just… care.

He couldn't silence the thoughts. Eventually, he put everything back in the bag.

– Not yet, he said quietly to the bag. Not yet.

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The weeks that followed passed with agonising slowness for Elias. Every day when he came back to the foster home, he worried that Peter might have received some news about his brother, causing trouble again, as had happened so many times before.

After what, in his opinion, felt like too many weeks, the thing he had been dreading finally happened. Peter stopped him when he came in one evening. He had an envelope in his hand. Elias looked at him warily. Something's gone wrong after all, he thought. Peter said nothing but handed him the envelope. With trembling fingers, Elias opened it and pulled out a sheet of paper headed "Official Copy of Register of Title." At the top were the words "HM Land Registry." He scanned down the dense blocks of text until he saw it:

“The land is held on trust for Elias Nicholson”.

– What does this mean? he asked.

– It means the twenty-one days ran out, and Christopher never objected, Peter said. As of today, you’re the owner of your childhood home. You’re still under eighteen, so I’ll take care of the practical side of things for now. But the house is yours. When you turn eighteen, it’ll be up to you.

Elias was flooded with a rush of joy but showed nothing. He couldn’t meet Peter’s eye as he said:

– Thank you.

He held the document to his chest and went to his room. There, he read every single word on it and tried to understand it. That night he laid it beside him on the bed and lay looking at it until he fell asleep.

The next day was Saturday, so he went to the house as usual. He fetched the plastic bag from the bathroom and looked at it for a long time.

– I don’t need you any more, he said to it.

Then he took it into town. He threw it into a skip. Then he bought a gilt-coloured picture frame, went home, framed the document, and hung it on the wall of his room.

At exactly eight o’clock that evening, he returned to the foster home as usual. He normally had a knot in his stomach when he came home, whether to the foster home or, before his parents died, his childhood home. There was always something to worry about, some new kind of disaster waiting on the other side of the door.

To his surprise, that knot was gone now. He was completely calm when he crossed the threshold. It was the first time he hadn't been bracing himself for something to go wrong, and that alone made him almost more alert than before.

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– So… yeah. That's how I got this house, Elias said to Lovisa. Then I stayed with Anna and Peter until I turned eighteen. It was… quiet. Nothing much happened, really. I knew the house was mine, and that was… a relief.

He gave a slight shrug.

– On my eighteenth birthday, I just packed up my things and moved in here full-time. Turned off their login to the camera app, of course.

– Just like that? There's usually some sort of transition period after eighteen. You can stay on for a while, settle a bit. Wasn't that an option for you? Or did it just feel like you had to disappear straight away?

Elias shrugged again.

– Someone mentioned it, but I didn't think it applied to me. You're just… done then. When you're of legal age, you're expected to manage on your own. I just left.

– Do you mean to say you didn't even say "goodbye"?

– Well, not exactly. I was so anxious about turning eighteen. I counted the months, the weeks, the days. Then I lay awake the night before my birthday watching the clock. When it hit midnight, I started wondering whether I had to leave them at that exact moment. I absolutely did not want them complaining that I hadn't left yet. Maybe they knew what time of day I was born, and that was the deadline?

Lovisa smiled crookedly.

– Wow. That's… extremely pedantic. But also very **you**.

– Anyway. I couldn't sleep, so I put my bedding in the laundry basket, cleaned the whole room, wiped down the wardrobes, the floor, the bathroom, everything. When I finally heard Anna and Peter wake up, I picked up the last bag and headed for the door. I looked into the kitchen and said: "Goodbye, time to go." Because that's what was expected.

He paused.

– They both seemed surprised, and followed me out. I said clearly, "Thank you for everything", and cycled off.

– You do understand that "thank you for everything" can come across the wrong way?

Elias frowned.

– Not really, no. Everything is everything. Nothing left out. How can that be wrong?

– For someone who doesn't work the way you do, it can sound sarcastic rather than grateful. But I understand you, Elias darling. You meant no harm by it, and I hope they understood that, too.

– Anyway, for the first few months, I cycled round looking for cardboard and polystyrene in skips and dragged it all home to insulate the whole house. Then I turned the heating down to a minimum everywhere, except a little in my room. I had to wear outdoor clothes indoors on cold winter days because I couldn't afford the electricity bill. I switched off everything else: the fridge, the freezer, my phone contract, the internet, anything that wasn't strictly necessary. I looked up which foods give enough nutrition to survive at the lowest possible cost. A lot of oats and potatoes. I allowed myself nothing nice to eat. Then I was in the sixth form building and the library practically all day, because it was warm there, and there was internet and a microwave. It got a bit better at university because of the student loan, but it still wasn't enough.

– Wow, what a sparse life. Did you have any fun at all?

– What life? I **had** no life. Just study and sleep. But I got top marks in everything, so eventually I was done and applied for four jobs in total. Got called to interview at all of them. I played two off against each other to maximise my starting salary, and Silent Pixel IT won. Suddenly, I had considerably more money than before. I took down the

cardboard and polystyrene and turned the heating back up. Switched everything back on, started eating properly again, got my driving licence and then bought a car.

– Just like that? You can't have been on that high a salary straight away?

– Ah, it took many months. First, I paid off all my debts. That took about six months. Then I started treating myself to things, like a new computer and so on. I could see the house was very run-down, so I started renovating. I began with my parents' bedroom, which my half-brother had cleared out, because I thought: I'm the owner now, so the master bedroom is mine.

– What do you mean your brother cleared out the bedroom?

– Well, he did complain about getting too little from the estate, but it took him over half a year to do so. He rang the doorbell and was quite aggressive. I explained that I was a minor in care, so he'd have to speak to social services, and he hates them, so he calmed down. Then I suggested that if he promised never to ask for anything more, he could clear out the master bedroom. I imagine he thought there'd be something valuable in there, jewellery perhaps, but I already knew my parents didn't keep valuables in their bedroom because it's the first place a burglar looks.

– Yes, I've heard that too. But why that particular room?

– I couldn't bring myself to go in there any more. It was like an invisible wall. The memories were too painful. So he came with a mate who had a van and started carrying things

out. I think Peter broke every speed limit, because he was there within minutes and started tearing into him. But I said it was fine, that I couldn't bear looking at my parents' things any more. So he stood there with a stern expression and crossed arms, watching him. Then he drove off and came back with Anna, who went in and cleaned the room out completely, and after that, I could bring myself to go in again.

– I hope you thanked them for that.

– Yes, I did. Probably not enough, but I hope they understood.

– Probably, Elias darling.

– As I said, the bedroom was where I started renovating. I ripped out the old wardrobes and built new ones with sliding doors. I put up boarding on the ceiling, hung new wallpaper and laid laminate flooring.

– Wait, you did all of that **yourself**?

– Yes, so I got it exactly as I wanted it.

– Wow, Elias darling. You're really handy as well. I love you more and more the better I get to know you.

– Right… yes. When I finished the bedroom, it felt like **my** room, not my parents'. I bought a new bed and a new bedside table and moved in. Then I carried on one room at a time, and it was properly chaotic everywhere for a good while. The bathroom was a nightmare. I did almost all the work myself, apart from the bits that had to be certified. I put in a shower cubicle as well. In the meantime, a chemical toilet was my only option.

– You really didn't give up.

– I just wanted it done. For a while, the garage was full of windows, because I replaced all the windows in stages with modern triple-glazed ones. Well, you've seen them yourself. Even the garden got a complete overhaul eventually. Out with all the old shrubs and in with new ones.

– That must have taken you years to do all by yourself, Lovisa said in astonishment.

– It took a good bit over a year before it was all finished, but in the end, I was happy with it. Most of the furniture, appliances and everything else, I replaced those too.

– I did think everything here looked new.

– Anyway, when it was all done, I went round the house and liked what I saw. I was exhausted, but it was worth it. Before, I'd spent all my time in my own room, maybe a little in the kitchen. But now it felt as though the whole house was open to me. Got a telly and enjoyed lounging on the sofa watching some series.

– Mm, I've noticed. You still do.

– Well, you know what happened next. I missed the sound of little footsteps and tried dating, as you already know. I also explained already how I eventually ended up with Children's Social Care, and you came crashing into my life like a hurricane.

Lovisa laughed.

– A friendly hurricane, I hope?

Elias smiled warmly at Lovisa.

– The best hurricane there's ever been.

They both laughed, and it was a release for both of them.

✯

The days passed, and Lovisa felt her feelings for Elias simply growing. She visited every day, as though her heart pulled her there of its own accord. Elias always welcomed her, but there was a certain reserve about him she couldn't quite read. He didn't seem to dislike her company. He just seemed uncertain how to handle her being there so often.

Sometimes he became more withdrawn than usual, almost as though something was troubling him. When that happened, she stepped back immediately, worried about pushing him too hard. At the same time, she couldn't ignore the feeling that the relationship was standing still while everything inside her wanted to move forward.

She couldn't help dwelling on how difficult Elias's childhood must have been. His dark thoughts, his loneliness, his complete inability to socialise. *Everything that had happened to him must be why he doesn't dare give himself over completely, despite everything,* she thought. *I really need to show him that I'm here and that I'm not going to disappear. But how?*

Lovisa just wanted to get a proper foothold in Elias's life, and began planning a way that would gradually give her one.

One Saturday morning, they were curled up together on the sofa. Elias was a little tired but happy after settling some

new children the previous evening and through the night. The children, Leo and Elin, had been upset after a row that had ended with their parents being taken in by the police and the children placed with him. They could be heard laughing in the children's room, and Lovisa was once again struck by how Elias had managed to calm a pair of children in under a day. She gathered her courage and asked:

– Elias darling. There's something I've been thinking about. I'm here every day, and I think you like that. I love it because I love you. At the same time, it's starting to get a bit wearing, driving home every evening and then coming back early the next morning. How would you feel if I slept here just on Saturday nights?

– Today is Saturday. Were you thinking of staying tonight?

– Oh no, I'd never be that cheeky. Not before you've agreed to it. I'd bring an overnight bag and sleep on the sofa. It's not very comfortable, but it'd do for me.

Elias was quiet for a moment.

– The thing is… I've been worried about exactly this. That you'd start wanting to sleep here, and everything that comes with it.

– It's not a demand, Elias darling. I just want to calmly discuss the possibility of staying over one night a week.

– You're not being entirely honest. Of course, it's a demand. I know you. You're just easing in gently.

– All right, you're right. It is a bit of a demand, but we can go at whatever pace you want.

He drew a breath.

– But I've already thought about this, and all I can see are problems. I do like solving problems. But every solution I find just leads to new problems, and I can't find a way through that doesn't cause more problems.

– Elias darling. I understand you don't like change, but…

– Could I possibly finish? I know I can ramble, but you'll survive. My problem is that things are out of balance between us. You always come here, but I never go to yours. You spend more time here than at home, but this is my home, not yours. So you tiptoe round here, not quite daring to do anything without asking permission. That's not balance. That's just unfair. The solution would be to do what couples do during courtship. But which of us is courting which? Normally, it's us men who court the woman, but here it's really more you courting me. Not that I have anything against that. I'm not hung up on gender roles. But we've barely been on dates. Well, yes, one date when you took me to McDonald's, but I was, to put it mildly, a little reserved.

– That wasn't really a date, was it?

– You arranged the time, the place, and paid. By definition, that makes it a date you took me on.

– Right, well, you're probably right about that in a way.

– Really, what should happen is you stop coming here every day and start courting me properly instead. Taking me out to restaurants, the cinema, for walks… whatever it is couples do.

– That doesn't actually sound very good. I wouldn't like that.

– No, that's the problem. We'd be going backwards in our relationship. The solution is to move things forward, and that means you staying here sometimes. But you can't sleep on the sofa. I won't have that. My study has a decent bed, but I may need that room if I get more than two children. And I'm sometimes on call, with my computer in there, so how could I respond to an alert in the middle of the night if you're in there? So that doesn't work either. Should I put a mattress in the utility room? I'm not that heartless. So the only solution is for you to sleep… well, come with me.

Elias stood up, walked to the bedroom and opened the door. Lovisa followed and saw it for the first time. It was large, with a single bed in one corner, which he then pointed to.

– That bed is too small for two. It's actually smaller than yours, the one you kicked me out of at your parents'. So that's the problem with you sleeping here. I can only see one solution to all of this, and it creates other problems. The solution would be for us to buy another bed, or perhaps replace the one I have with a double, or maybe two singles. Then I'd need to move them to the middle of the room, otherwise you'd have to climb over me if you needed to get up in the night. We'd also need an extra bedside table.

– Do you really mean we'd sleep together in a bed here in the bedroom?

– Well, it solves the bed problem. But it doesn't solve the main problem, which is that you're only ever a guest here and don't feel at home. The only solution I can think of for that is for you to bring your things here and try to make this house your home. I can move my things from those four wardrobes into one, so you can have three. Women have far more clothes than men, from what I understand.

Lovisa looked at Elias with astonishment, almost shock, written all over her face. Did he really mean…?

– Elias darling. This sounds as though you want me to move in here permanently, for us to actually become live-in partners. That sounds wonderful, but… won't that be quite hard for you?

– No, it won't.

He took a deep breath, and Lovisa looked at him.

– It will be **very** hard for me. That's the problem.

– Have you thought of any solution to that problem?

– Yes. If I'm going to have any chance of managing this, we need some ground rules. I've come up with three. We'd need to discuss them, of course, and agree on them together.

– What rules did you have in mind, Elias darling?

– I'll start with number one. You do whatever you need to do to feel that this is your **home**. You bring your things in, your clothes, whatever. Plants, perhaps. Jewellery and ornaments. Clutter up the bathroom with your things. In short: you do everything you need to do to feel at home here. Rearrange the furniture, maybe. The important thing is that you do it without asking my permission. You'd never ask my

permission to change things in your own home, your flat, would you?

– You're transparent to me, as you've said yourself, so I think I have a fairly good sense of what you'd be willing to let me do here. So there probably won't be any problems.

– That's exactly the point. You mustn't even think about what you imagine I might or might not like. You just do everything you need to do to make this your home.

– Without giving you a single thought, Elias darling?

– Precisely. Now, rule two.

– Right, here comes the exception, Lovisa smiled.

– As I said, you do everything without asking me or thinking about what I want, **until I speak up**. If I find something too difficult, I'll say so, and then we discuss it. The only thing you have to promise is that you'll listen, and then we'll find a solution together. For example, if you want a very large plant in the living room and I think it's in the way, perhaps the solution is that we move the sofa a bit, and the telly with it, and you move your plant so it's no longer in the way. You get what you want, and I get what I want. But the important thing is that you never ask in advance. You wait until I raise an objection. That's rule two.

– Wow, so I just come at your house with everything I've got, without asking you or even thinking about what you want, as long as you don't complain under rule two.

– Exactly. Like the hurricane you are. Finally, there's rule three, which you probably won't like, but it matters to me.

– Tell me. I really do want to hear it.

– Rule three means you keep your flat. I can pay the rent for you if you like. But you don't give it up until I feel comfortable enough for you to do so.

– Why? Lovisa said sharply. Is that so you can just point at the door and tell me to leave whenever you feel like it? That doesn't sound like you're going all in on me.

– That's not what I mean. What I mean is: if things fall apart with you living here and you've nowhere to go, you'd have to stay here anyway. Then we might start arguing, and the relationship could break down as well. You can't find a flat here in under several years, so you'd be forced to stay with me. It's not that I **want** to send you away. It's just a valve, a pressure-relief valve.

– I think I understand, Elias darling. You're right that I don't like rule three, but you need it to feel safe about me being here permanently. Is that it? You have absolutely no intention of ever using that rule?

– You understand me so well. The rule is just to make me feel secure. What do you think of my three rules? Can we discuss them and agree?

– There's nothing to discuss. You've already decided what the rules are. What I understand is that if we follow them, especially rule one, it will end with us living together. There's nothing I want more. I'll agree to any rules that can lead there.

– There is one more rule, actually. It's the most important of all, and it's not negotiable.

– Wow, all right. What rule is that?

– Well, it's not really my rule. This house is my home, as you know, but it's also a workplace of sorts. So, Children's Social Care naturally has quite a number of requirements regarding the safety of children in this house. I imagine you have the same kind of rules at your workplace, so none of this will be strange to you. No toxic plants or anything that children could hurt themselves on.

– That's the most obvious thing of all. I want to have children with you, so our shared home simply has to be safe for children. But thank you for reminding me.

Lovisa threw her arms round Elias and kissed him. He held her and kissed her back. At the same time, she felt a deep worry that everything was moving too fast for him.

– Are you absolutely sure about this, Elias darling? You don't want to take it one small step at a time?

– Rip off the plaster!

– What do you mean?

– You know, when you need to take off a plaster, you can either peel it away little by little. It hurts less that way, but for longer. Or you rip the plaster off. It hurts a lot, but for a much shorter time. So I'd rather rip the plaster off than feel a bit rotten for six months or more.

– You can look at it that way, yes. Well, I am absolutely not going to complain if you go from baby steps to giant leaps.

– So we're agreed, Lovisa darling?

– Of course we are. Now I don't want to wait a single second longer! We're going now! We're buying a double bed, Elias darling.

– Blimey… I wasn't quite ready for that. I suppose this is the new normal: you just decide things without me getting a say. All right, let's go and have a look. Shall we go to IKEA?

– If it's all right with you, I'd rather go to Dunelm. I think the quality is better. It just feels a bit more homely.

– Of course, darling. We'll have to take my angels, but I'm sure that won't be a problem.

Soon they were wandering around looking at beds. Lovisa stopped at one she liked the look of. Elias preferred another and made his case: it had legs, so you could store things underneath. Lovisa thought a divan bed, one that went straight to the floor, simply looked better.

– Lovisa, go and fetch a shop assistant so we can get his opinion.

When Lovisa came back with the assistant, Elias pointed to the bed she liked and said:

– This is the one we'll have, two mattresses, so we can each get a different firmness.

– Elias darling, we don't have to do it my way. Your opinion matters just as much as mine.

– I know. But right now, my biggest problem is that my children have disappeared. Have you seen them, Lovisa darling?

– Have you lost the children? You don't usually do that.

Lovisa called the children's names, but to her surprise, Elias was completely calm and not the least bit alarmed. Suddenly, there was a knocking sound from inside the bed. Then a panel in the base swung open, and the children scrambled out, laughing.

– Here we are! Leo laughed.

– We're hiding in the bed! Elin cheered.

– There's my point. You want a certain look. I want storage. The bed you liked has hatches underneath where you can keep things. That's why we're getting your bed.

Lovisa smiled and turned to the assistant, who had followed her over.

– Right, we've decided. We'll take this continental bed, but with two separate mattresses instead of one shared one. Do you have it in stock?

– We'll need two bedside tables as well. The children and I found one over there that looks nice.

Lovisa looked at the table Elias was pointing to and said to the assistant:

– One continental bed with two mattresses, and two tables, please.

– What firmness would you like for the mattresses?

– One firm and one medium, I suppose, Elias chimed in.

– The bed is about a week's delivery time. The tables we have in stock. Come to the till and pay, and I'll put the order in for the bed and mattresses.

When it came to paying, Lovisa said:

– Elias darling, we should each pay half.

– Could we please talk about that at home? I'll pay for everything here, and we'll sort it out later.

– Of course, Elias darling. But if we're going to live together, we'll need a joint budget. But, as you wish. We'll talk about it later.

They went home with the bedside tables and sat down in the living room after Elias had set the children up in the playroom.

– So I'll pay you back half of what you paid at Dunelm, right?

– Maybe. But Lovisa, how much do you earn?

Lovisa told him her monthly salary, and Elias continued:

– So I earn roughly twice as much as you. In that case, I think the fair thing is for you to pay one third of our shared expenses and me two thirds. We could set up a joint bank account with a card for shared costs, and each month we put in an appropriate amount, with me putting in twice as much as you. That way, we have a joint budget that's fair.

– There we are, that's what happens when you love someone who's brilliantly logical. All right, Elias darling, I'm on board with that. It sounds sensible. So I pay one-third of the bed furniture, yes?

– Don't sell yourself short, darling. You're logical too. One third of the bed is perfectly logical. The plan sounds reasonable, doesn't it?

– It does, Elias darling. Right, I think we have a plan for the finances.

– Precisely.

– If I'm going to move in here, I'll need to spend most of this week at my flat packing my things into boxes. I'd love to ask you to help, but you've got the children to look after, and I know the children are always the most important thing for you. That's one of the reasons I love you so much.

– Um… Elias said, blinking several times.

He felt almost paralysed by the speed at which she moved. Buy a bed, pack boxes, move in… all at once!

– Okay… I'll miss you all week when you're not here. But perhaps I can help with a box or two when I get the chance, as long as it works round the children.

And so it was. Lovisa stayed at her flat and began packing a great many moving boxes she bought on the way home. She thought carefully about what to take. Most things weren't needed. There was already plenty there. But all the plants had to come. And curtains. Elias had no curtains at all. Then ornaments, pictures, and all her bathroom things. There was a lot to pack, and she was busy the whole week. Just as Elias was busy on his side with the children.

On Saturday, she hired a van and got Teddy to help her load all the boxes. The plants came too, and a few pieces of furniture, including a dressing table with a mirror. Once everything was loaded, she thanked him for his help and drove to Elias's on her own. When she got there, Elias helped her carry the boxes in. The children had moved out that same morning, so there were just the two of them in the house. It took a long time, and it was late in the evening

before they were done. Both were completely shattered by the time they finally collapsed onto the sofa side by side.

– Elias darling… I'm done in. Please, can I sleep here on the sofa tonight? I'm too tired to drive home, and I've nowhere to leave the van in town.

– I've already told you that you're not sleeping on the sofa here, so the answer is no.

– Elias, please, just tonight, Lovisa begged.

– Nope.

Lovisa sighed deeply but didn't want to risk another row, so she made ready to drive home after all.

– But I have another idea, Elias continued. Come with me.

Elias got up and headed for the bedroom. Lovisa followed but stopped dead in the doorway.

The new bed had been assembled. The bedside tables were in place. Everything was even made up and ready.

– It's considerably better if you sleep here. The sofa is, as you know, rather uncomfortable, he said with a slight, almost apologetic shrug.

Lovisa struggled to take in what he was suggesting.

– The bed and the mattresses arrived yesterday, he continued. I drove and collected them with Leo and Elin, and then they helped put them together. Mostly, they just handed me tools and screws. So I hope you have a handle on your boxes and can find what you need over the next few days.

– I had planned to wait a couple of weeks before moving in here properly, to give you time to get used to it. Do you really mean we're moving in together for real today?

– Rip off the plaster! I mean, since requirements gathering, risk assessment and implementation are all done, why wait to push it to production?

Lovisa smiled, but wondered whether she herself was ready to move in here and now.

– I was going to buy some nighties first.

– Don't you already have some?

– No, I sleep in just my knickers, but I thought it would be so awkward and difficult for you that I was planning to buy a few nighties to make it easier for you to sleep next to me. A bit like at my parents'.

– I see. But under rule one, you're supposed to do what you need to do to feel at home here. If you have to sleep differently from how you usually do, it's not really like being at home, is it? So if you're used to sleeping in just your knickers, you should carry on doing that.

– I was only thinking of you and wanted to take small steps, not push too hard.

– I understand, and I appreciate that you think that way. But rule one still applies: you're not supposed to consider what I think. You just do whatever makes you comfortable. And I am a man as well... I have to admit, the thought of having a half-naked woman next to me at night is both appealing and terrifying. I've actually never seen a naked woman before.

– Don't lie, Elias darling. You've looked at porn like every other bloke.

– Yes… well… I meant… three-dimensionally.

Lovisa laughed warmly at his dry way of putting things.

– Right then, Elias darling. As long as you promise to remember rule two and speak up if it becomes too much. That only means we talk about it, nothing more. I can always buy nighties later if it comes to that.

– I promise, darling. If it gets too much, you'll be the first to know. At the same time, I hope you understand that I want this too, so my threshold for complaining will probably be fairly high.

– One more thing. I know how men work when they look at women. Please don't be embarrassed if something happens down below. Just because you get an erection doesn't mean we have to have sex. I'm prepared to wait until you're ready.

Elias looked a little uncomfortable.

– At the same time, Lovisa continued. Let me put it this way: I'm giving you the same thing you're giving me with the house. You're free to do what you like with my body without asking permission, without even thinking about what you imagine I want, until I say "no". If that happens, we'll talk about it calmly. And lastly, I'm aware that men always get erections at night and in the morning, so please don't worry about that.

Elias went completely scarlet. At last, he managed to say:

– Let's take it one step at a time, and it'll be fine. But you have to stop talking about my erection. It's embarrassing, and you know it. We've already discussed this.

Lovisa smiled and hugged Elias again. It was remarkable how he seemed to remember everything they had ever talked about. What an extraordinary man he was, she thought. Then she began rummaging through some of the moving boxes to unpack her bathroom things before she could go through her evening routine.

Soon they were lying side by side on the bed, dressed in nothing but their underwear. It was exactly as difficult for Elias as Lovisa had feared. But he didn't complain. He simply said "goodnight" and turned his back to her.

– Goodnight, yourself, Elias darling. Sleep really well!

– You too, darling, Elias replied without turning round.

Both of them struggled to sleep, though for different reasons. Elias lay rigid, feeling wretched at being so close to a woman wearing so little. Lovisa, meanwhile, was floating. This was different from when they'd shared a bed before, fully dressed. This was real. She pictured a home that would slowly become theirs.

What she didn't realise was how each step in that direction would wear on Elias, bit by bit, until he could barely keep up the pretence.

☆☆☆

17



Every weekend, Lovisa tore into her moving boxes with energy and enthusiasm. Her clothes soon filled the wardrobes Elias had emptied for her. Flowers were placed on windowsills and floors. Pictures and ornaments appeared everywhere. Before long, she was hanging curtains in every window. All the while, Elias watched without saying a word.

– Are you all right, Elias darling?

– Yep. Absolutely fine, he said, far too quickly. It's nice to see you so happy.

Lovisa looked at him thoughtfully and realised he was not happy at all. As the contents of the boxes found their place, Elias grew increasingly uncomfortable. He wandered round

his house, watching everything being utterly transformed. Lovisa had to stop herself from asking, knowing he would simply refer her to rules one and two. *He'll get used to it soon enough,* she thought, and carried on decorating and arranging the house.

Lovisa thought it looked as though Elias was suffering every single day. He seemed miserable when he looked at everything Lovisa had brought into the house. Her hairbrush, the kitchen knives, the decorative cushions, the flowers. But he said nothing to her. *This has to work,* he thought, *because if it doesn't, I'll never be able to have a family of my own.* So he gritted his teeth and tried not to show Lovisa how unsettled he was. He was managing fairly well, he thought, but as usual, Lovisa saw straight through him. She kept quiet all the same.

One evening, Lovisa was hanging a picture in the hallway when Elias came out of his study. He nearly tripped over a plant there and looked thoroughly irritated. He said, his tone clipped:

– I need to get out. This isn't working.

Before Lovisa could answer, Elias was out the door and driving away. Worried that things had gone too far, she moved the plant he had almost collided with. *I hope he calms down soon,* she thought.

An hour later, he came back with three utterly distraught children. After some persuading, he got them into the children's room. There he sat down on the floor and spoke calmly:

– Don't be frightened, my little angels. Everything's all right now.

– But Daddy hit Mummy, Nova sobbed.

– Yes, that was a stupid thing for him to do. But Mr Policeman was there, and he took him away.

– Mummy's bleeding, Anton sobbed. She is!

– Loads of blood, Ida shrieked.

– It wasn't that serious. The kind man from the ambulance took care of her. You can stay here now until things are calmer at home. This is the first time this has happened, isn't it?

The children nodded and carried on crying, and he carried on soothing them. Lovisa stepped carefully into the room.

– Hello, it sounds like you've had a rough day, she whispered.

Ida spotted Lovisa and ran over to her. She picked her up and stroked her hair.

– That's right, Elias said. Their parents turned violent in front of them. It makes me so angry when adults behave like that in front of their children. Sorry I shouted at you earlier, darling.

– It's all right, Elias darling. Here I was thinking you were cross with me and my flowers.

– Flowers? he smiled. You mean like these three little flower angels?

Nova giggled.

– There's no such thing as flower angels!

– There is now, because you're my little angels and just as lovely as Lovisa's flowers.

All three children soon stopped being sad as Elias began distracting them by bringing out toys. Lovisa put Ida back down, and soon all five of them were sitting playing together. Elias looked thoughtfully at Lovisa as he watched how naturally she got on with the children.

The days passed, and the children grew steadily more settled, thanks to Elias and Lovisa's care in equal measure. Anders kept Elias updated on how things were going with their parents. True to form, Elias told the children himself.

– Do you know what, my angels? I've heard your mum's doing really well now, and she says she misses you.

– Can't we go home, then? Nova asked.

– Don't want to go home, Anton said bluntly. Lovisa's so much fun.

– Mummy best, Ida said.

– You'll be going home to your mum soon, I think. But your dad has to move out first, because he wasn't kind to your mum.

He was quite right, because a few weeks later, the children's mother was granted a non-molestation order against the father, and the children were able to move back home. Elias could then turn his attention to Lovisa again, who carried on reshaping the house to Elias's silent torment.

Meanwhile, they cuddled up together on the sofa in front of the telly. Lovisa was sitting next to him when her phone pinged. She read the message silently:

“Lovisa, isn’t it your turn to host girls’ night soon? 😉”

Lovisa realised it was true, but she needed to think carefully before inviting them to Elias’s. So she asked one of her friends to host the girls’ night at hers instead. It was a lovely evening, which went on very late. Autumn leaves rustled under her shoes as she walked to the car, and the evening air had a bite to it that made her pull her coat tighter around herself. When Lovisa checked the time on her way home. *Oh, it’s so late. Elias is usually asleep by now*. So instead of going back to the house, she stayed the night at her flat so as not to wake him and disturb his routine.

The next morning, she drove back to Elias’s. To her surprise, he seemed angry. At first, she ignored it, but eventually she could not hold back.

– Elias darling. You seem cross today. Have I done something wrong, or has something else happened?

Elias sat quietly for a moment. Lovisa was patient and waited him out. She had learned that he sometimes needed time.

– The thing is, I’m furious with you right now, but I’m even more furious with myself for being furious with you.

– Goodness, why is that? You know, we can talk about anything without a filter and just calmly discuss each other’s faults?

– Yes, I know. The thing is, I’m so irritated that you always move about in bed and wake me up, but I didn’t want to say so. You kick as well. I’ve had so many bruises. But last

night, when you slept at the flat, I couldn't sleep. That made me even more irritated with you.

– Why?

– Because you were **not** lying next to me, moving about the whole time and kicking me. I'm irritated that you chose to sleep somewhere else. At the same time, I'm angry with myself for being angry with you, because, of course, you're allowed to have your own private life. Besides, I understand that you slept at the flat so as not to disturb me. So I'm mostly angry with myself right now.

– Wow, Elias darling. So you missed me last night after all? I've been feeling as though you're mostly just put out by me being here, turning your house and your life upside down.

– The thing is, I haven't activated rule two yet.

– I know. At the same time, I've realised you're suffering because I'm disrupting your home and your life like this. Why haven't you complained about it?

– Well… the thing is… I can explain why. At night, as I said, I keep being woken by the bed moving, and I turn over, feeling thoroughly irritated. Then I suddenly see… that the pillow is on fire.

– What! On fire?

– Yes, it's your red hair, spread all over the pillow. And sometimes you kick the blanket off, so… I mean, I don't know… but then I feel happy instead. I then lie there watching you, my heart pounding, until I fall asleep again.

Lovisa felt a small thrill when she understood that Elias had been looking at her body in secret. He continued:

– Then in the morning, I go into the bathroom to shave, but I can't find my razor. It irritates me enormously… until I see the brush lying there, full of red hairs that I realise are yours. Then suddenly everything feels calm again. Then I go to sort out breakfast, but I can't find the knives, and I start looking for you to complain… but you're nowhere to be seen. Then I suddenly spot a burning bush, a flower really, and I realise it's you watering your plants. And yes… then I lose it, but in a strangely peaceful way. When I go into the living room and look at the sofa, I see these decorative cushions that feel completely pointless. I get irritated and think about removing them. But then I see a few red hairs on them, and I think: *"This is my beloved's hair."* So I leave them be.

– You mean you get frustrated by my chaos… but then you see my hair, and suddenly everything is fine again. Interesting.

– The thing is… what I'm trying to say is that, well, of course it's hard having you here and disrupting my house and my life, but then I feel… I love you. And so… I love everything you do. So, darling… I haven't given up yet on being able to get used to having you here. So you mustn't give up either. Not yet.

Lovisa moved closer, and Elias gratefully accepted her embrace. He felt a warmth in his body that far exceeded her body heat. She thought to herself: *I need to learn to adapt to*

him as well. There are two of us in this relationship, and we both need to change.

She quietly stopped moving things about and instead began organising everything carefully, which stood in contrast to her usual spontaneous disorder. To her surprise, it actually felt really good for her too, to have a bit of order and structure. She realised she could now find her own things without having to spend ages searching, as she used to. She also began following his routines more and more, and found, to her surprise, that they made it easier for her to relax.

In time, Elias, too, grew better able to relax as Lovisa stopped rushing about. She learned to wait him out when he spoke, never pressing him for answers. In fact, Lovisa found she enjoyed taking things more slowly and not placing so many demands on herself and those round her. Her girlfriends noticed, and began joking about the new "Laid-back Lovisa."

As Christmas drew near, Lovisa sensed that Elias seemed considerably more settled, but at the same time, something seemed to be troubling him. She had a suspicion what it was, so she asked:

– Elias darling. You seem worried about something.

– Right, well… I've heard you talking to your mother about spending Christmas there.

– Is it Christmas with my parents you're worried about?

– Well, you know what happened last Easter… and, well…

– Do you know what, Elias. Let's spend Christmas together here instead, just the two of us.

– What will your parents think of that?

– Mum will understand, I'm sure, but Dad will be furious. Well, he'll just have to be. We're a family now, and who knows, you might end up with foster children over Christmas. Fights are common enough at the holidays.

Lovisa guessed correctly on every count. Kenneth felt they were showing no respect for Christmas. Lovisa blamed it on Elias having taken in a couple of children to look after, which also turned out to be true. Lovisa thoroughly enjoyed spending Christmas alone with Elias and the children, and dreamed of one day celebrating with children of her own.

It felt unfamiliar for Elias to celebrate Christmas, but nice too. He had never really celebrated Christmas before, apart from once at the foster home. Generally speaking, he was considerably more relaxed now than before. It was the nights that Elias found difficult. He could not bring himself to look at Lovisa when they were settling down to sleep, and turned his back instead. She was a little sad about that, but then again, he had already explained that he used to look at her while she slept. Something in that confession moved her, and it still thrilled her to feel seen, wanted, in secret.

She began to challenge him, waiting to pull the duvet over herself so that she lay topless, smiling at him before he quickly turned away. But his curiosity was too strong, and he

began sneaking glances at her body anyway, when he thought she had fallen asleep.

His inability to truly let her close left her growing increasingly impatient, but she didn't complain, and instead waited for him to find the courage to reach out himself.

One evening, something happened that she was not prepared for at all. She was drifting off to sleep when she felt him rest his hand against her, first by accident, then with intention. Just the warmth. Just the contact. She opened her eyes but did not move. He waited, ready to pull back, but nothing happened. Her breathing remained steady. That gave him courage.

The touch was careful, tentative, as though he were still asking permission. Lovisa looked at him without saying anything. She stayed still, let him continue, and in her stillness there was a clear answer. His hands grew bolder as they explored different parts of her body.

She began to moan softly at his touch, and then suddenly she pushed him aside and rolled him onto his back in one motion. Elias barely had time to react before she was on top of him, and all the carefulness was gone.

Before he had time to defend himself, the closeness became overwhelming. His body reacted faster than his will. It was over quickly. When it was done, he felt shame hit him before he had even caught his breath.

Lovisa lay down beside him again. He looked at her and thought he could sense a disappointment he could not bear.

Without hesitating, he turned back towards her. This time, he was calmer, more present. He let everything take as long as it needed, until her body was no longer still, until she drew a sharp breath and clutched him as though she wanted to stay inside the moment.

Afterwards, they lay pressed close together, with no space between them. Lovisa held him tight, as though she needed to make sure he was there.

– Sorry, he said quietly.

She looked at him, puzzled.

– For what?

– For it… ending so quickly.

Lovisa smiled faintly and laid her hand against his cheek.

– It didn't, she said. Everything counts. You didn't stop until I was satisfied.

Elias smiled a little, but she could still sense he seemed slightly worried.

– Is this how you planned to start a family? he asked anxiously.

She was briefly unsure what he meant. Then she gave a quiet laugh and said softly, still with him close against her:

– No, not like this. Not yet. I have a coil, so don't worry.

Then she noticed clearly how he relaxed. She smiled and felt something between them genuinely release, as though a barrier he had carried for a long time had finally collapsed, silently.

Now a wild time began for both Elias and Lovisa. He was completely captivated by the thrill of novelty, of finally

daring to loosen up and let her in bodily as well, whilst she felt how Elias had at last opened up entirely, both physically and emotionally.

Her naturally strong libido found free expression, and she reached for him constantly, hungry and impatient. At the same time, Elias was completely relaxed in her company, caressing her in return and often taking the initiative himself, almost playfully, as though their shared desire had found its own rhythm.

And every time, she was the one he thought of first. His calm focus and attentive hands ensured that her intensity was always met with equal care and presence, so that she felt seen, desired, and entirely content.

The only thing missing now was a ring on her finger. *I can wait years, if I have to. I can do this,* she told herself, over and over, as though repeating it would make it true.

Soon…

✯ ✯ ✯

18



Several months passed without their passion for each other diminishing or turning into a habit, and the small frictions of the early days had settled into something that simply worked for them both. Lovisa's friends, and even her parents, were struck by how much calmer she had become, without her former mood swings, and above all, much more predictable. It was a thoroughly welcome improvement. At the same time, Elias became significantly more spontaneous and could come up with things for them to do on his own. No one could doubt that they were drawing ever closer to each other.

But one morning, Lovisa was hit by a sudden wave of dizziness and nausea. It passed quickly. The weeks went by, and the nausea came almost every morning. She refused to believe what it could mean. *Could it really have happened? Impossible!* Everything she'd thought she had under control fell apart. On a Friday, she bought a pregnancy test at lunch. Then she sat on the toilet at work and held her breath, staring at the stick, feeling her heart race as two lines slowly showed that the result was indeed positive.

Lovisa had very mixed feelings. It was completely wonderful that she was pregnant, of course, but at the same time, she was not quite ready yet. And Elias, how would he react? This would definitely be an enormous change for them both, and she already knew that he found change difficult. On top of that, her father would not be pleased, and would insist they get married. She struggled to focus for the rest of the day, turning over in her mind how to tell Elias so that he would not react too strongly.

When she got home, Elias did not meet her at the door as he always did. Instead, he was pacing back and forth in the living room. Lovisa saw at once that he was already in a state of panic. *How can he know?* she thought.

– Elias darling. You look terrible. What's happened today?

– It... it's the social. There's a new manager there now, John, who clashed badly with me in a meeting. He... he seemed angry with me. Going on about my fee being too high, sort of thing. He wanted me to stand up in front of

everyone to “explain why I was better than everyone else,” as he put it. I didn’t want to, of course, so when he became threatening… at least it felt that way… I just walked out. Th… then he rang loads of times and sent messages and… and… he’s terminating the contract… and… and I’m not allowed to look after any children either, and… and…

Lovisa wrapped her arms round him, and he gratefully accepted the hug. She felt how tense he was and realised this was not the moment to add to his burden by telling him she was probably pregnant.

– Elias darling. Calm down, it’s not the end of the world. I’m here, and we’ll sort it out together. Do you mean to say you’ve actually spoken to this John on the phone?

– No, you know I can’t do that. That’s another thing he had a go at me about in his texts, that I hadn’t answered the phone.

– He has absolutely no right to carry on like that. You need to contact the union, because this seems completely wrong. You are a member, aren’t you?

– Yes, I’m with the Prospect Union, but I don’t know how to contact them. I can’t ring them, and… and…

Lovisa pushed her own anxiety aside. She helped Elias over to the sofa and then picked up her phone and looked up the number for the Prospect Union. After various transfers, she got through to the right person and explained what had happened. But when they found out Elias was an emergency foster carer and not an employee, they explained they could not help him. Lovisa then rang Elizabeth instead, an

employment solicitor she'd met previously through UNISON.

– Hello, Elizabeth. I don't know if you remember me, but we met last year. My name is Lovisa Lawson, and I work at Willow Tree Nursery.

– Hello, Lovisa. Yes, I do actually remember you. You had a great many questions at a meeting, if I recall. How can I help you today?

– It's not me who needs help. It's my boyfriend Elias, who works as an emergency foster carer for Children's Social Care. He's come into conflict with a manager who's threatening to terminate his contract, reclaim his fee, and goodness knows what else, because he didn't speak at a meeting or on the phone. Unfortunately, Elias can't get help from his union.

– This is, unfortunately, a problem that can arise when one lacks a formal employment contract, Elizabeth said. That's also why the union cannot represent him. However, as I no longer work for the union, I can take him on as a private client and ensure his rights are protected. There will, unfortunately, be a fee. My rate is £220 per hour.

Lovisa had had the phone on speaker throughout, so she looked at Elias, who nodded.

– That's fine for him. How do we proceed?

– I understand this is causing concern. But my recommendation, though, would be that he simply weathers the situation for now, as long as this remains at the level of statements from the contracting party. Otherwise, the costs

could mount quickly. I would therefore suggest the following: if he is called to a formal meeting concerning his contract, or if they take similar steps, you can contact me again, and we will arrange a meeting at that point. In the meantime, you can ask Elias to gather and prepare all documentation related to what has occurred, including any text messages and, if possible, transcripts of telephone calls. His contract is also of great importance. Does that seem a reasonable way forward for you?

– That sounds excellent, Elizabeth, Lovisa said, after glancing at Elias. With any luck, it will all blow over on its own.

Elias sat for a long time holding Lovisa before he slowly began to calm down. She decided to be completely certain of her pregnancy before telling him. So over the weekend, she bought another test of a different brand, which, to her dismay, also gave a positive result. On Monday, she rang the GP surgery to book an appointment with a midwife and was given a slot on Wednesday.

In the meantime, Elias had calmed down, since John hadn't contacted him again. He wasn't given any children to look after, either, but that wasn't unusual over a weekend. When Lovisa got home from work on Wednesday, via the GP surgery, Elias did not meet her at the door again. She called into the house:

– Hello, Elias darling. I'm home now. Sorry, I'm late, but you have to hear this! It's big news, important news, and it's going to change **everything!**

She stopped short when she saw Elias sitting on the sofa in the living room, panic on his face again. He pointed at the table with a trembling finger. On the table lay an open envelope and some papers. Lovisa sat down beside him, put one arm round his shoulders, and examined the papers. One was a formal written warning with a threat to reclaim the fee already paid. The other was a summons to a meeting with the manager on Friday at two o'clock.

– Calm down, Elias darling. I'm ringing Elizabeth here and now. She can go with you on Friday.

– It… it says I have to come alone.

– Let Elizabeth deal with that.

Lovisa rang Elizabeth, and they agreed that Elias would come to her office at one o'clock on Friday, and then they would go together to see John. Elias slowly began to calm down, but was still filled with anxiety.

– Thank you, darling. I… I don't like conflict or problems I can't solve myself.

– I understand, Elias darling. I'm here, and I'm not going anywhere. We'll sort this out. Do you want me to come to the meeting on Friday?

– It feels embarrassing. I'm still in a panic about the meeting. I'll go myself. Well, with Elizabeth, of course.

Elias slowly began to regain control of his breathing. Lovisa kept holding him, and he let her warmth settle him. Then he remembered something and asked:

– Didn't you say when you came in that you had big news to tell me?

– Yes, but that can wait. You're more important to me.

– But you said it was important. If it's important to you, then it's important to me. You know that.

– All right, then, I'll tell you. You should know, Elias darling, that what I have to tell you is actually good news, though a little unexpected. The thing is, Elias darling, that I've just had it confirmed that I'm pregnant.

– What? Impossible. You have a coil! Are you sure it's not a false positive?

– I thought so too, at first, on Friday. So I took another test over the weekend, which was also positive, and I saw a midwife today. It's confirmed now. I even got to hear the foetus's heartbeat, so there's no doubt any more. They removed my coil so as not to risk harming the foetus. What's wrong, Elias, what on earth…

Elias had gone chalk-white and began to hyperventilate. Lovisa was terrified when it looked as though he could not get air.

– Breathe, Elias. Breathe calmly! You're frightening me! Come here, my darling, take it easy. This is not the end of the world! It's even good news, in a way.

Elias began to breathe in short bursts, a little more slowly, but was still in a state of panic. Lovisa watched him struggling to hold himself together, but she needed to know whether she was facing this alone.

– Just answer me first, Elias darling. What do you want? Shall I have an abortion?

– The… ans… answer to th… that is obv… obvious. Your body… your choice.

Lovisa was completely taken aback. Elias looked as though his entire world had collapsed, and he was in total panic. And yet he had answered with extraordinary maturity, perhaps entirely against his own wishes.

– Wow, what an incredible answer. I love you so infinitely for that. But can you just tell me what you **want**, regardless of what you think I want?

Elias took a few deep breaths to gather himself for an answer. Lovisa waited him out.

– The thing is, I think the best outcome for me would be for you to have the baby, even though I know it's difficult, and then leave the child and me so I can bring it up on my own.

Lovisa was completely shocked by the answer. How on earth could he reason like that? Rage began building inside her, but even so, she understood there had to be a logical explanation she wasn't seeing. She controlled her voice as she replied.

– Why do you say that, Elias darling? It's **our** child.

– The thing is, I understand that. But I don't believe in **us**. If we carry on like this, we'll start arguing sooner or later. Then it will get worse and worse, and the child will suffer, caught between us. You know very well that I've seen exactly that countless times in my work. In the end, you'll leave me, and the child will be miserable. I want children, but I don't

want a child to have parents who can't stand each other and split up. It always goes badly for the child.

Lovisa saw how his hands were shaking violently and realised he was genuinely in shock. She took hold of his hands to steady them.

– But why on earth don't you believe in **us**, Elias darling? I do, and I would never leave you.

– Surely you must see it, though? I can't see how it's possible for a perfect 10 like you to put up with a weak 2 like me in the long run. It's completely illogical.

– What on earth are you saying, Elias darling? You're not a weak two! And I don't see myself as a ten either, more like a mediocre average at best. We clearly need to talk now about what we think of each other, to clear the air.

Elias made an effort to pull himself together and understand what Lovisa wanted.

– How… how do we do that?

– First, you can tell me why you think I'm so perfect!

Elias was taken aback and had to think for a long time. *How do you explain the obvious?* Eventually, he answered:

– For a start, you're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen.

– Hold on… beautiful? With my body, how can you think I'm beautiful with all my flaws?

– I don't know… you just are…

– Help me understand. What's the first thing you look at when you check out other women? Because you do. Remember, straight talk and no filter.

Elias took a few deep breaths and managed, despite everything, to focus on the task and began speaking reasonably calmly.

– The first thing I notice is the hair. I like it when it's a bit different, and brown is the most common. Black hair, really black, almost with a blue sheen, is lovely, but that's becoming increasingly common, too. I have absolutely nothing against immigrants, not that it even needs saying. Anyway. Blonde hair is lovely as well, but there are all those stereotypes about blondes. If it's not to be dyed, that really only leaves red hair, and you know I prefer what's natural. Your hair is so intensely red, and long and wavy on top of that. It's completely extraordinary.

– To think I hate my hair. Bad colour and frizzy.

– Absolutely not. How can you think that? Then there's the face. Everything sits in perfect balance: the eyes neither too close together nor too far apart, the mouth a good width, lovely cheekbones, a defined chin. Yes, everything is balanced and wonderful.

– Apart from my skin, which is all blotchy. You can't claim you haven't noticed.

– Yes, I have. It reminds me of a girl with freckles running across a summer meadow. I know it's psoriasis, but it makes no difference to me. It looks good all the same.

He shrugged slightly, as though the matter were self-evident. Lovisa was completely overwhelmed by his words.

– Everything else is perfectly proportioned. You're slim without being skinny. You have a fantastic bum that I love

watching when you rush ahead of me, and a defined waist as well. Everything is natural. A clear 10.

Lovisa shook her head and let go of Elias's hands, cupping her own beneath her breasts instead.

– But what about my breasts? I'm so self-conscious about them being too small. I've actually seriously considered having them made bigger.

Elias looked almost offended.

– What, are you mad? Do you really think I want to squeeze silicone bags? Large breasts might be considered attractive, but if they're natural, they sag. Small ones don't. Yours are perfect, both in shape and size.

– Wow, you genuinely mean you like how I look. I can't quite believe it. But what about my temper? Am I not too fiery for you, really?

– Yes. You're fiery. Spontaneous. And yes, I've had a certain amount of trouble with that at times.

He paused, as though adjusting his reasoning.

– But you've also rubbed off on me. And I like that. Above all, you just… get people. I've never met anyone as considerate and as understanding as you. And you're the first woman who has ever truly understood me. Wait a moment…

He fell silent mid-sentence and stared intently at his hands, as though seeing them for the first time.

– Carry on, Elias darling.

– This. This is exactly what I mean. Look at my hands! A moment ago, they were shaking, but now they're completely

steady. This is exactly what you do to me. You make me relax regardless of what's happening round me.

Lovisa nodded slowly.

– Okay, right. Now I'm starting to understand what you see in me. Wow. Absolutely incredible. Here I've always been so self-conscious about how I look and act, and you see the exact opposite. And all this time I've been walking round thinking I've just been difficult for you.

– Lovisa darling, you're the best thing that's ever happened to me. Full stop.

– I love you for those words. But then it's about time you explained why you think you're a weak two when I think you're a ten.

– The thing is, there's so much. Just the way I get wound up by any change. Small things as well, not just big ones. Like when plans change, or when something doesn't go as I expected. And work… the whole situation there. The fact that I avoid conflict and so let things go on for too long.

He drew breath, as though the list were actually longer than he cared to admit.

– And my inability to say that I love you. Or even to look you in the eye when it's something important. Your eyes are extraordinary, by the way. I'm hopeless at all social interaction, full stop. Small talk, groups, all of that. The phone is the worst. I just can't manage it. I also miss things. Signals, hints, whatever you want to call them. You'll say something and mean something else entirely, and I won't have a clue until it's too late.

He touched his fingers, sorting them almost methodically.

– Then there are all my peculiar routines. The way things have to be. And how I get stressed when you move my things, even when it's perfectly reasonable, and I actually understand that. It just… grates. Or if we're halfway through doing something and the plan suddenly changes, I can't just switch, not the way you can. I need a moment. Sometimes more than a moment.

He shrugged.

– I can carry on with the rest as well. But isn't that enough to explain why I'm a weak 2?

– Hmm, I see. Do you know what, Elias darling… I think I need to file a complaint with EHRC.

– The Equality and Human Rights Commission? Why?

– Because you're discriminating against yourself! Everything you bring up really comes down to you being on the autism spectrum, doesn't it? I know that you are, and I love you for it.

She took a deep breath, almost as though steadying herself.

– Like how you've given me routines as well, the fact that you have such order and structure. Your conflict avoidance made you mediate between me and my mom. Then you rarely get irritated, and if you do, you don't show it outwardly but deal with it internally. You can focus on what truly matters, like when you're caring for children, and completely disregard things that don't matter in the moment.

She continued without pausing, almost with a laugh in her voice.

– Then your fanatical insistence that everything must be in order and in the right place has made me adapt in a way that means I can now find all my things without searching. And finally, your extraordinary ability to separate the action from the person, like when you were angry about what I'd done but were still kind to me. All of this is **because** you are autistic.

– Wow, I've never looked at it that way.

– Elias darling. Stop thinking that your autism makes you worth less. You're simply different, and yes, just like everyone else, you have good sides and bad sides. But your good sides… they're something like a thousand times stronger, and they mean everything to me. The few bad things? I barely give them a second thought. You're also good-looking and a wonderful lover. So I genuinely don't understand what you're worried about, Elias darling.

– Good-looking? I'm not that. What I'm worried about is that some hunk with a six-pack, a V-shaped chest, big muscles, and a face like an Adonis will come along and sweep you off your feet with romance and sweet nothings, and then you'll forget me.

– Do you know what? Elias darling. I've already met him. He's so incredibly manly and handsome and romantic that my knees go weak.

– You can't seriously be talking about me.

– No, his name is Hank, and he's my ex. But there was a downside. When I wanted to snuggle up with him on the sofa like this and lay my head on his stomach, it was like lying on a brick, rock solid. And when he hugged me, it was like being hugged by tree branches. He also always hugged me hard, to show how strong he was. It hurt. He also loved to wander round the house with his top off, flexing his muscles in front of me.

– Did he really?

– Yep, and then I had to say how sexy he was, otherwise he'd get angry. When I wanted to cuddle, he didn't have time. I think he was more in love with the gym than with me, because he always wanted to go there to pump iron. He'd say "these don't come for free, baby", and flex his biceps. But he was so handsome, and I was so in love that I put up with it.

– So why did you break up?

– Well, I started talking about us having children together. He stood up in front of me, ripped off his T-shirt, flexed his muscles, and said:

"You definitely want more of these genes. But forget about me wiping snotty little brats' noses, because looking after children is women's work."

– That sounds completely warped.

– Exactly. When I protested, he carried on, just as coldly:

"You should be grateful I want you. On your own, you're just a flat-chested, skinny bloody witch with blotchy face and fire in your hair."

Elias gasped.

– He said exactly that, Lovisa explained.

– Oh God, that's a horrible thing to say especially when you've told me how self-conscious you are about your breasts, your psoriasis, and your hair colour!

– He made me so sad, and he'd get angry the moment I brought up children. And when he got angry, he said things he knew would hurt me, deliberately. He never hurt me physically, but the words he said… flipping heck, how much they hurt.

– I would never want to hurt you like that.

– That's exactly my point. When I then held firm about having children and told him he'd need to be involved, because children need a father too, he said: "If you don't like it, don't let the door hit you on the way out." So I didn't wait for the door to hit me. So, Elias darling, I've met my hunk, I fell for him, and I rejected him. You're his exact opposite, and that's why I love you.

Elias was silent for a long while. Lovisa decided to give him time, understanding that what had just happened was overwhelming for him. Eventually, he said:

– Do you know what, my darling Lovisa? I now understand two things. The first is that you've given my self-esteem a real boost, and perhaps I've given yours one too.

– Yes, I promise you have. Beautiful… wow!

– The second is that it doesn't matter whether I think I'm a weak 2, or completely worthless, or whether you think you're mediocre or utterly hopeless. That doesn't affect **us**. The only thing that matters for whether we'll want to stay

with each other is what **I** think of **you**, and what **you** think of **me**. Since we apparently both see the other as a 10, I'm beginning to believe in **us** now. But you still can't claim I'm particularly good-looking.

– Well, you have a nice face, lovely glasses. And you keep in shape, without being excessively bulky. But I'm still struggling to take in the fact that you think I'm beautiful.

– Well… when I saw you in the shop, I lost my breath. I thought you were so beautiful. At McDonald's, I was mostly terrified of you, but you were just as… breathtakingly beautiful then, too. Your smile is hard to defend oneself against. When you then didn't get in touch, I hoped at first that you'd realised I wasn't interested. It seemed simpler that way. At the same time I couldn't stop thinking about whether you might be the answer to my wish for a relationship.

– Yes, you have tried to date before, after all.

– Mm, so… part of me was relieved when you turned up again. And now I know that your personality is extraordinary. You've already changed me, more than I thought possible. After this conversation, I actually think we suit each other. Not in everything. But in what matters.

– Elias darling, you can't imagine how long I've been waiting to hear you say that. So what does all this mean for the baby in my tummy?

– I suppose it means we're going to become a mother and father together, and make a child very happy. It's just that…

Elias fell silent again and grew serious.

– What is it, Elias darling? Lovisa asked after a moment.

– Well… the thing is, there's still the problem with my job…

– Not at all. Your job is not a problem, because we'll sort it out together. You and me! We can manage anything we set our minds to. Is the job the only thing you're worried about? Aren't you worried about becoming a father?

– That part doesn't worry me in the slightest. Well, I'm a little curious. Will it be a boy or a girl? Will it have colic? But worried? Not in the slightest.

– Wow, this is why I love you so madly. I'm absolutely terrified of becoming a mother myself. Will I be able to cope? What happens if, say, I come home from work completely exhausted, and our baby won't sleep? How will I handle that?

– That's simple, Lovisa. You put earplugs in and go to bed. I'll take care of the baby at night and calm it down. If I can't manage it, I'll just have to take the pram and walk round outside all night so you can sleep in peace.

– Wow, triple wow. You genuinely mean that, and I believe you. You're incredible! I don't know if all my worries are gone, but right now, with you saying that, I actually believe we'll manage.

– Well, there is one thing. You should worry about not getting any time of your own with your child, because I'll always want to look after it. But I suppose we'll have to draw up a schedule.

– Right, I'm taking maternity leave first at any rate. You can carry on working for at least six months while I look after the baby.

– Then we'll start arguing again, because the baby is mine and mine alone. Forget about it coming from your womb. I'm going to want to look after my child every single day and every single night. You're welcome to watch if you like.

Elias smiled broadly, a rare sight. It was obvious he was joking. Lovisa could not help laughing, and Elias joined in. But she noticed something else as well.

– You're laughing, but I know you're nervous about Friday, she said quietly.

Elias blinked, shrugged, and tried to carry on smiling.

– Nervous? Maybe a little…

Lovisa nodded, as though she had heard it a thousand times before, but was not fooled. And Elias knew she was right. The thoughts of the solicitor, the letter, and the meeting sat in his stomach like a heavy stone. Friday. Suddenly, it was very hard to feel truly calm, no matter how hard he tried.

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19



Lovisa came home on Friday with careful steps. Even Elias noticed that she seemed to want something. She hesitated, knowing the day had been hard for him.

– Elias darling… I'd like to ask you something. But first… how are you feeling? Are you calm, or still worried?

– Right now I'm completely calm, Lovisa darling.

– Wonderful. Do you think we could go to my parents'… like, now? It's three hours in the car, so you'll have time to tell me everything. I want to hear absolutely all of it.

– Why do you want to go to your parents' now?

– Because I really want to tell them in person. That I'm pregnant.

– I assumed you'd already told them, by phone.

– No, I want to say something like that face to face. I know it's a bit sudden… but please…

Elias turned his back on her without a word and walked into the bedroom with jerky steps, as though irritated that his plans had been upended.

– Are you cross, Elias darling? We don't have to go if you don't want to.

– No… no, I'm not cross, he said, sounding almost as though he was trying to convince himself. But if we go now we'll almost certainly be staying the night, so we'll need to pack some clothes and things, won't we?

Lovisa was surprised but pleased, and helped to pack for a few days. Soon they were in the car with Elias driving.

– So, Elias darling, what happened at the social services?

– Shouldn't you ring your mother and let her know we're coming? What if they have other plans for the weekend?

– You're right as usual. I'll ring, but I don't want to say why.

– Just say you have some news you want to share.

Lovisa rang her mother.

– Hi, Mum, it's Lovisa. I was just wondering whether you've got anything on this weekend?

– No, nothing at all. Why?

– Elias and I are in the car on our way to you now. Something important has happened and we want to tell you in person.

– Oh, is it serious?

– We'll tell you everything when we get there. See you soon, Mum!

– Of course, you're always welcome!

Lovisa hung up and turned back to Elias.

– There we go, Elias darling. I've rung. So, tell me everything about today. How did the meeting at work go?

– I got fired, Elias said calmly.

– What? He fired you? But Elizabeth was there! How are you so calm? I'd have hit the roof!

– Well... technically, I terminated my emergency foster care contract myself, but I felt I had no choice. Perhaps I should start from the beginning?

– Absolutely! I'm all ears, I promise!

Elias took a deep breath and began telling the whole story from the start as the car rolled on.

✯

At one o'clock, Elias sat in Elizabeth's office. She sat up straight and worked methodically through every document and letter Elias had brought with him. She nodded approvingly at how carefully he had organised everything, and asked precise questions to get the full picture. Once she had the information she needed, she asked him to step outside for a moment while she made some calls. Then they drove to the social services office.

When they arrived at reception, Nadia, the local union branch chair, was waiting for them. She had already started

collecting concerns from other staff about John's conduct. She showed them to John's office, and Elias knocked nervously. He was supposed to come alone, but now there were three of them. John extended his hand towards him. Elias ignored it, as usual.

– I thought I'd been clear that you were to come here alone, John said, irritated.

Elizabeth stepped forward immediately and took control of the situation.

– That's noted. It's also irrelevant. He has the right to representation, which is why I'm here.

She took John's outstretched hand, but released it quickly.

– Elizabeth Shaw, employment law solicitor. I represent Elias. What you are attempting here amounts to a disciplinary procedure in all but name, and if that is the case, proper procedure applies. The union should have been notified, and the correct process followed. That has not happened here. That is why I asked the chair of the local union branch to attend.

John stood there, visibly caught off guard and speechless. They went into the room and Nadia fetched an extra chair. Once everyone was seated, Elizabeth produced her papers, laid them methodically in three piles on the table, and tapped lightly on the first.

– Text messages and calls. This is fundamentally a question of communication. You have not had the right to use the language or the approach evident in your calls and

text messages. Furthermore, there is no contractual obligation for a contractor to answer the phone or respond to texts, particularly when contact is made via a personal mobile.

John tried to say something, but was cut off.

– I am speaking now. You will listen.

Elizabeth tapped on the second pile.

– Emergency foster care contract, letter regarding fee adjustment, and demands for constant availability. A contractor does not have the same obligations as an employee, and fees and terms set out in the contract cannot be altered unilaterally. These terms may be unusual, but they are valid and binding, and you cannot simply disregard them or demand repayment.

Elias sat quietly, marvelling at the torrent of words. *She's not holding anything back,* he thought. He relaxed and simply enjoyed watching John's discomfort. Elizabeth tapped on the final pile.

– Warning and reclaim of fees. You assert there are grounds to reclaim the fee and issue a formal written warning. All of this on the basis of poor communication and difficulties with cooperation. John, let me be clear: a formal warning issued to someone who is not an employee is completely meaningless, particularly as HR was not even consulted. And the problems you claim, those of communication and cooperation, do not exist. None of it exists.

John opened his mouth again, but closed it when he met Elizabeth's gaze.

– I have spoken with every caseworker who has worked with Elias. Not one of them has reported any difficulties in cooperating with him. On the contrary, he has been described as unusually easy to work with. Several use the nickname "MiracEli" because he performs miracles. Against that background, there is no factual basis whatsoever for your assessment. If any difficulties with cooperation exist in this context, it is hard to see how they could be attributed to anyone other than yourself.

When Elizabeth was finally done, she leaned back.

– I expect a full, sincere apology to Elias, here and now. If that is not forthcoming, this matter will be formally escalated to the head of social services, documented in full, and pursued with legal support.

John said nothing. They stood up and walked out of the room.

Elizabeth disappeared down the corridor and came back with a man Nadia said was Claes, the head of social services. He went in to John and closed the door behind him. It became rather loud inside, but the three waiting outside could make out no words.

– Now we wait here for a bit, Elizabeth said, with a smile.

The door soon opened again, and Claes came out. His parting words to John were heavy with consequence.

– You know what's required: produce an apology, or start packing your things.

Claes turned to Elias.

– I apologise on behalf of this department. This has not been handled in accordance with our procedures. I want you to know that we take the situation extremely seriously. Might I ask for a little extra time for John to formulate his response?

– Fifteen minutes from now, Elizabeth said firmly.

– I'm grateful for that.

Claes nodded to them and withdrew. After only five minutes, they were called back in to John. He looked tightly wound as he said:

– I've been informed that I've acted incorrectly, so I apologise.

– That sounds pathetic, Elizabeth said drily. Do you accept his apology, Elias?

Elias shrugged and simply nodded.

John placed a sheet of paper in front of him on the table. Elias pushed it across to Elizabeth without looking at it.

– Regardless of everything, I hope you can see that this situation isn't working. If you voluntarily terminate the contract today, you'll receive this month's fee plus two extra months as a settlement. It's all in that document.

– This is completely unreasonable, Elizabeth said. Elias has done nothing to justify this and can perfectly well continue as before. The caseworkers have, as I said, no issues with him.

John produced another sheet of paper. Elias pushed it across to Elizabeth again without raising his eyes.

– Let me make it more attractive, John said, in a strained tone. Under this agreement, you receive three months' additional fee, and everything currently in your possession passes to you. That might include, for example, clothing, changing tables, child car seats, and toys. These items may, in my estimation, prove fraught with considerable value.

– I see nothing here that makes any sense. Elias, there is no reason to sign any agreement. Your placement is entirely secure, Elizabeth said.

Then John took the document and crossed out "three," writing "four" in biro instead, on both copies. For the first time Elias opened his mouth, turning to Elizabeth.

– Is it legally binding when he alters it like that to four months' compensation in biro?

– Yes, with ink and both parties' signatures the amendment becomes valid, particularly as he has initialled the change. But let me be clear. I still recommend you do not sign. This agreement is nothing more than a piece of paper from a hostile manager. It may be formally valid, but it is completely pointless. You can and should ignore it, Elizabeth said drily.

Elias read carefully through the entire agreement. Elizabeth continued to object, but he registered her words only as sound at the edge of his attention. He studied each clause in turn, exactly as they were set out.

Then, to everyone's astonishment, he reached for a pen and signed. The room fell dead silent. Even Elizabeth said

nothing. Elias broke the silence with a cool certainty that made John lose his footing entirely.

– I'm signing because I have no wish to work for a manager as brainless as you. You take the children away from me as punishment for not answering the phone and issue warnings as though I were an employee. Yesterday I sent enquiries to several nearby councils. This morning, I met with one of them and received a concrete agreement. The others also wanted to meet me, and two have already sent over their contracts. On Monday, I begin working for a manager who actually has a brain. The only thing I regret… is that I won't get to see Claes's face when he realises you've paid almost £20,000 just to lose your best carer.

Elias rose on surprisingly steady legs and walked out with Elizabeth, without giving John a single glance. Out by the cars, he turned to her.

– I apologise for signing the agreement against your recommendation.

– You don't need to apologise. What matters is that you're satisfied with the outcome and with my work, Elizabeth said.

– I genuinely am. Thank you for your help.



He kept his eyes on the road, a faint smile still lingering from the memory. But underneath it, a quiet unease remained. Lovisa nodded at him from the passenger seat.

– What did you mean by almost £20,000?

– I can get about £1,300–£1,500 per child per month, he said. I almost always have two or three children, and they're high-needs, so there's an additional allowance on top of that. If you add it all up over five months, it comes to just under £20,000.

– Goodness… and you worked that out on the spot?

– Yes, just a bit of mental arithmetic. I hope Elizabeth understood that I'm grateful to her. It was thanks to her that I got such a generous offer.

– I'm sure Elizabeth understands.

– The other council is smaller, so there'll probably be considerably fewer children in future, which means less pay. That's why I've already contacted Silent Pixel IT about going back to full-time. They've booked a Teams meeting to discuss it, but my boss said he'd love to have me at 100%.

– Won't you miss having children here all the time?

– No, it suits me well. I mean, in about 7 months, I'll have my own little angel to look after, so I won't need the therapy of taking children from social services any more.

– Wow, so you no longer have any conflict with social services, and you still have more than enough work. I understand better now why you're so calm despite everything.

– Yep. It's a little nerve-racking to change contractors, but with you at my side, I'll manage it easily. I've just thought of something, by the way.

– What is it, Elias darling?

– We could have a bit of fun with your mother. When we arrive, she'll probably ask what's so important that we've driven all this way tonight. You take your time answering, and I just slip in something like "I've lost my job" as though that's the news. Then I tell her what happened, but pretend to let slip and call her "Grandma." Then we wait and see how she reacts.

Lovisa laughed happily. *Wow, look how much my darling has changed for the better,* she thought. *All that's missing now is a ring on my finger, but there'll be time for that too*. She realised she would probably have to propose herself in the end. But she intended to wait at least a year and ignore her father's inevitable demand that they marry before the baby arrived.

After several hours, they arrived and went inside. Both kept straight faces, and sure enough, Karin soon asked what was so important. Elias jumped in and told her animatedly that he had been forced to leave Children's Social Care. Karin and Kenneth were shocked, and Elias ran through the whole story again in a shorter version. When he was done, Karin asked whether they would like some coffee.

– I'm not terribly keen on coffee, Ka… gran, Elias said. Especially not this late in the day, but perhaps a cup of tea?

Karin put the kettle on and soon returned with tea and a plate of biscuits.

– Thank you very much, Grandma. That's very kind.

– Would you like sugar or milk in your tea?

– No, thank you, Grandma. It'll be perfect as it is.

– I assume you'll be staying the night?

– If that's all right, Grandma. It's a bit late to drive home now.

Karin looked at Elias, smiled, and then said:

– I've noticed something about you, Elias, that I find rather amusing. Sometimes you can't quite find the right word, and the wrong one comes out instead. It doesn't matter in the slightest, but it can be quite funny. Like this evening, when you've kept calling me "Grandma." Don't be upset now, I just mean it kindly.

– Not to worry. I have no objection to people laughing at my little slips, like when I can't find the right word. However, that isn't what's been happening this evening, Grandma.

– Hold on, what do you mean? I'm not actually a grandma, am I?

– Are you quite sure about that, Grandma?

– Well… I only have one daughter, and she doesn't have any children!

– Do you really think we'd drive all this way just to tell you I've switched fostering council?

Karin stared at Elias in confusion for several seconds before her expression changed. She turned to her daughter.

– Just a moment! Lovisa, darling… are you pregnant?

– Ding ding, the penny's dropped! Lovisa said, laughing.

Karin stood up and went to Lovisa and hugged her happily.

– This is absolutely wonderful news, isn't it?

Karin glanced over at Kenneth, who sat with his arms crossed and did not look entirely pleased. Elias recalled that Kenneth had turned out to be quite strictly religious.

– I want to be very clear, Elias said. This baby is unexpected, unplanned, and unforeseen, but it is in no way unwanted. The child will understand that from day one. Lovisa said on the very first day we met that she wanted to marry me and start a family with me, in that order, and I was entirely on board with that plan. It just hasn't quite worked out that way.

– Yes, Kenneth said, it is, of course, wonderful to be getting a grandchild. But you really ought to get married now, rather than living in sin as so many people do these days.

– The most important thing right now is what is best for our child, Elias continued, to Lovisa's surprise. We need to give it a safe and stable home environment. Marriage can provide that, but there are other options, such as drawing up a cohabitation agreement. We haven't had a chance to discuss the matter yet, so it's difficult to know what's right for us, but I want… no, I actually demand that we put the child's best interests first, not what makes anyone else comfortable, even if that's difficult or uncomfortable for us as parents.

– Dad, I hope you understand that I agree with Elias completely. Our focus must be on our child, not on your beliefs.

Kenneth nodded slowly.

– I understand that. But one need not exclude the other. God has given you this child for a reason, Elias. Marrying Lovisa now is not only right in the eyes of God, it is also your way of showing her, and the child, that you stand by her side. For life.

Lovisa grew angry and was about to defend Elias, but was not quick enough.

– The fact is, you're right that I didn't believe in us, but that's no longer the case. When Lovisa told me she was pregnant, I went into genuine shock. I didn't believe in **us**, because she is so perfect and I am so inadequate. But then, Lovisa, you forced me to have the most difficult conversation I've ever had, and it ended with me finally understanding **us**. You calmed me down, Lovisa, because you understand me better than anyone. That's why you're so perfect for me. When I ran into trouble at work, you supported me brilliantly, and during the police incident, you helped me decompress and return to reality.

– "The police incident?" Kenneth asked. What's that about?

– I'd be grateful if I could finish while I still have the courage, Elias said, without turning towards Kenneth. Lovisa, darling, you are the best thing that has ever happened to me. I am transparent to you, and you are the first woman who has ever truly understood me. You are my perfect 10, and so, darling…

Lovisa gasped as Elias went down on one knee in front of her and produced a small box, which he opened to reveal the ring.

– Lovisa Emilia Lawson. I want to spend the rest of my life making you happy. Will you make me the happiest man on earth? Will you marry me?

For the first time, Lovisa was lost for words. She simply stared at Elias in astonishment, until he finally said:

– Please don't leave me hanging here. My knee is hurting.

– Yes, Elias darling. The answer is yes. I'll marry you! Come here, you big, romantic lunatic!

Elias stood up, and Lovisa threw herself into his arms and kissed him deeply. Both Karin and Kenneth sat watching with delight. Lovisa had no wish to let go of her future husband, and Elias was equally engaged. When they finally released each other and settled on the sofa, Lovisa made eye contact with Elias, and to her delight, his eyes did not look away this time.

After a moment, Kenneth spoke.

– This is an excellent decision, Elias. I am so pleased that you are ready to marry my daughter. You have my full support.

Lovisa tore her eyes from Elias and looked at her father. Then back to Elias. Then suddenly she said:

– Elias darling, could I have a quick word with you in private?

He was surprised, but followed Lovisa to her room, where she closed the door.

– Elias darling, I'm absolutely delighted that you proposed to me. I just want to make sure it's for the right reason.

– What do you mean, darling?

– It just feels like a bit too much of a coincidence that Dad was going on about us needing to get married, and then suddenly you propose. Are you sure you're not just trying to keep Dad happy?

– Having happy in-laws matters, but what's on your left ring finger right now?

– An engagement ring, obviously.

– Where did it come from? Has your father given it to me? How could he possibly have known he needed to get a ring before we arrived? And another thing, does the ring fit?

– It fits perfectly. How is that possible?

– Do you remember a while back when you were polishing your jewellery, and I was playing with your rings? I tried different rings on different fingers. What I was actually doing was measuring your ring finger.

– Wait, that was well over a month ago. Have you been planning to propose for that long?

– Yep, and actually longer than that. I'd already had my eye on a ring in a shop for some time. After what happened on Wednesday, every last trace of my doubt about this disappeared. So I bought the ring yesterday and decided to propose this weekend. I already knew where. A romantic spot in the woods, you know the one. When you disrupted my plans I brought the ring along and decided to find a

romantic spot up here instead. Then your father started talking, and I just thought: “now is as good a time as any”, and, well…

Lovisa kissed him again, and he returned the kiss, looking intently into her eyes.

– Wow. I’m sorry I doubted you for a moment.

– You’re spontaneous and intense, but I’ve got used to it.

They went back to Lovisa’s parents, who had been waiting anxiously.

– You’re not falling out, I hope, Karin said.

– Not at all, Elias smiled. My fiancée just wanted to be sure of my honest intentions, in case I’d only proposed because Kenneth wanted me to.

– “My fiancée!” Lovisa repeated happily. Wow, how wonderful to hear that, my dear fiancé.

– Now, this is the situation, Kenneth said. I believe that children should always be born within the bonds of marriage, but I have absolutely no wish to force you into anything. But now that you’ve decided to marry, I have a suggestion. Why not get married at the parish church here in town, where we got married? I can arrange everything. I know the vicar well.

– Now, this is the situation, Elias echoed. Since Lovisa and I have naturally not had time to discuss the details, nothing has been decided beyond the fact **that** we are getting married. But **when**, **where**, or **how** have not been decided yet. I do hope, however, that you can accept that the two of us have the final say. We are, I certainly am, open to

wishes and suggestions, but ultimately these are our decisions. Isn't that right, Lovisa darling?

– That's right, Elias darling. You and I need to be in agreement.

– As for **how**, there are several alternatives to a church wedding. You can get married at a register office or at any number of approved venues, such as a hotel or even a converted barn. It could be a civil one, conducted by a registrar. It doesn't have to be in a church or even be religious at all. We could even have a humanist ceremony if we wanted something more personal. And given my particular challenges with ASD, it's important to find a way that I can get through without having a complete breakdown.

– Well… I understand that you have your needs. But do you have any thoughts on what will work for you?

– I already know I'll find the ceremony very difficult. Everyone will be looking at me and Lovisa. Even if the focus will naturally be on her, thanks to the fact that she will look absolutely stunning, I'll be standing next to her feeling dreadful. What I need is predictability. Someone who has done this before, many times. Someone who can explain in advance exactly what's going to happen. Then I can input it all and feel calmer when I know what I need to do and when. That way Lovisa won't have to feel embarrassed on my behalf.

– So who might that be? Karin wondered. Perhaps a registrar from the council? They tend to conduct a great many ceremonies and know exactly how they go.

– Not quite. Someone with real experience. Who am I thinking of, Lovisa darling? I'm transparent to you.

– Let me think, Elias darling… A vicar, is that it? They do this sort of thing all the time.

– There you are, Lovisa understands me so well. A vicar, yes. On the way home from the jeweller's I walked past the Cathedral, and I realised the parish office is right next door, so I went in. I got to speak with a vicar and asked whether one could get married in the Cathedral, and she said it was quite common. So I booked an appointment for us with her on Thursday… if you'd like that, of course.

– Wow… I've created a monster! Lovisa exclaimed.

– What do you mean by that? Karin asked. Elias is anything but a monster!

– Not a real monster, Lovisa said quickly, laughing again. I mean he's actually arguing now. Properly. Before, Elias was always so cautious, always wanting to check absolutely everything with me before he decided anything. As though I were the only thing that mattered. Now not only has he decided we should play that joke on you about my pregnancy, he's also gone and got the ring, proposed, argued back at you quite firmly, Dad. And now he's already decided how we're getting married. And where, too. Not to mention that he's already booked a meeting. All of that before I'd even said "yes". Don't misunderstand me, Elias darling, I love this! And that you've chosen the Cathedral of all places is just extraordinary!

– Thank you, I suppose. But we still need to be in agreement.

– Of course. All right, Mum, Dad. We've now decided we're having a church wedding. It will be in our home city, and most likely in the Cathedral. It makes more sense for the guests to travel to the couple's home city than the other way round. Besides, I have more friends there than here.

– Of course, my darlings, Karin said. We have no trouble coming to you for the wedding.

– The only thing left is **when**, then, Elias continued, to Lovisa's delight. As I see it there are three main options. Either we do it quite soon, before Lovisa's bump becomes too large for it to be plausible that she became pregnant on the wedding night; or round the middle of the pregnancy, before it becomes too unwieldy for you and physically difficult; or finally after the birth. With options 2 and 3 it will be obvious that she became pregnant before the wedding. So, what do you think, Kenneth? Even though the two of us have the final say, I imagine you have views you'd like to share, which we'd genuinely like to hear. Isn't that right, darling?

– Wow… and Elias just keeps going. Wonderful. Yes, what do you think, Dad? Not that I'm going to let it sway me.

– I do have views, rooted in my faith. I don't think anyone wants to rush a wedding, so option two feels the best. Looking back, it was not uncommon in rural communities for the bride to already be expecting when she walked into the church, and people would think: "That's not ideal, but now they're both doing the right thing and making an honest

woman of her." That's not something many people would say today, of course. But it would mean a great deal to me if you were married before the birth, so that the child is born into a marriage and is not, as the phrase goes, born out of wedlock.

– As I said, Dad, I don't care about your narrow-minded ideas about marriage and children. But I do agree it would be best in three or four months' time, because I don't want to wait any longer, but I don't want to rush either. But what do you yourself think, Elias darling? I want to know what you think, regardless of what the rest of us have said.

– Option 1 would have been very difficult. I need time to process it. Option 3 would also have been hard. A baby arrives and takes my complete focus. Option 2 works best: not too early, not too late. It's right for Lovisa, right for me, and right for everyone round us.

– So, Elias darling, Mum, Dad. That's it, then: **that**, **when**, **where**, and **how**. We're getting married in the Cathedral, in three to four months' time, with a vicar.

She gave a huge yawn halfway through the sentence.

– Right… done and dusted. We can sort out the details later.

– You're yawning, Lovisa. It's time to sleep, you two. You'll be sleeping in Lovisa's room, I presume? What's done is done, and the Lord moves in mysterious ways, Kenneth said.

– Have you already forgotten my last visit? Elias asked. I have always struggled with physical contact, and I had to sleep on the floor.

– You can have the guest room, Elias, that's no problem. But if you can't bear physical contact, how is it that Lovisa is pregnant? Forgive me, that was an inappropriate question.

– Pregnancy, in principle, requires only a combination of sperm and egg. Any other physical contact is superfluous, Elias said dryly.

– You're joking again, aren't you, Elias? Karin wondered. I can see Lovisa is struggling to keep a straight face.

– I admit I was joking. There are methods of conceiving without physical contact, but it hardly happens by accident, Elias went on, in a perfectly serious tone.

– You're extraordinarily good at taking the mickey out of us without it showing on your face, Elias.

– Just one of his superpowers that come with his autism spectrum, Lovisa laughed.

– There will still be the issue of Lovisa kicking in her sleep, Elias smiled. But I'm used to it by now and wouldn't have it any other way.

Elias and Lovisa walked hand in hand to Lovisa's room. Karin and Kenneth watched them go, quietly delighted. They had never seen them hold hands before. Now it was only a matter of time before they would have both a son-in-law and a grandchild.

Elias felt anxious about the wedding ceremony. Almost frightened, even. He was certain it would be extremely hard for him. At the same time, he understood it was necessary. It was the only way to be married to this wonderful woman.

There was a warmth in that thought. Actually, being married to Lovisa.

But a small part of him gnawed away persistently. How on earth would he get through the ceremony itself, with all those eyes on him, all that commotion, and the total absence of control, without collapsing completely? Even when he tried to think it through logically, a cold shiver ran down his spine.

Something inside him was bracing for things to go wrong. Terribly wrong. He just didn't know what or when



20



– I thought you were wonderful last weekend, Lovisa said as they sat on the sofa on Saturday morning. The way you stood up to my dad was absolutely incredible!

– Yes, I probably went a bit far there. Could it be that a certain red-haired girl has rubbed off on me?

– That's probably it, Lovisa laughed. But we ought to start planning the wedding now, don't you think? You made it perfectly clear to Mum and Dad that the two of us are in charge of everything.

– Correct, though at the same time we should check whether they have any wishes of their own and take those into account.

– May I suggest we invite them round some weekend to discuss what they would like?

– Hm, I really don't like the idea of having guests, but I've gone and fallen for a wonderful girl who's very sociable, so I'll just have to live with it. Not so difficult with you around.

– That's probably true, but first we need to agree on what we want ourselves. Do you remember the conversation with the vicar on Thursday, about what we should do first?

– Of course, the **other** vicar. Do you remember the first one, that young, arrogant vicar? When I tried to explain that I need extra support during the ceremony, she just became aggressive, or at least that's how it felt to me.

– She was downright disrespectful towards you. I agree with that entirely. And she was a young woman, so that probably bothered you as well.

– Look, I've nothing against female vicars, or female anything. But I get easily get uncomfortable around women. You know that. Fortunately I had you with me. When you took my side… your mouth was erupting lava, as the fire in your hair had gone off. Though I couldn't help feeling the warmth coming off you, and I love you for it.

– Oh, she certainly heard a few home truths, Lovisa laughed. It was quite something when the vicar-in-charge came in and asked what had happened. Anyway, he could see things had gone wrong between us and fetched that older vicar, who was brilliant.

– He really was. He understood straight away that all I needed was to know every detail of the ceremony in advance, and he had no problem with that at all.

– At the same time, he did point out that we need to start with a rough estimate of how many people are coming, so we can find a suitable venue for the reception. Perhaps we ought to start with a preliminary guest list?

Elias agreed, and soon they were sitting together working through names. Lovisa did most of the talking while Elias had his laptop open, typing the names as they went. He had gone rather quiet, and Lovisa suddenly stopped herself and said:

– Elias darling. What's wrong? You look so sad, and that's the last thing I want.

– What are you doing, Lovisa? Am I really that transparent to you? I haven't said a word.

– You don't need to. I can see you've become a bit downcast. What are you thinking about?

– It's just that you have so many people to invite: family, relatives, friends, whereas I have nobody. Though it's fine. It's been my own choices.

– It's not true that you have nobody. You have your friends from Social Care and from Silent Pixel IT, and your old classmates from Sixth Form.

– Those are colleagues, not friends. And classmates, well, I haven't really kept in touch.

– They never bullied you, did they? So neither they nor your colleagues are your enemies, are they? I could come

with you to your workplaces. Bring a cake along, and you've got a way in. And you mustn't forget Anna and Peter. They must have…

– No, Lovisa, Elias said, with unexpected sharpness. I am **not** going there. Not in a million years. You can't make me!

– Good heavens, Elias darling. How can you possibly know what I was going to ask?

– You know full well! You're transparent to me…

Elias paused, looking thoughtful.

– No, wait, it's the other way round. What's happening to me?

– Something rather wonderful is happening. You're starting to understand me properly. But why don't you want to visit your foster family? I'm sure Anna and Peter miss you.

– Well, the way I behaved there… To say nothing of the fact that I've ghosted them for more than 10 years. And something went wrong when I left the foster home. And them. But I don't understand what. They're probably furious with me.

– I promise they're not. All right, wait, let me think how to put this for you. There's perhaps an eighty per cent chance they'll be glad to see you, say a fifteen per cent chance they'll be a bit hurt or angry, and maybe a five per cent chance it'll just feel a bit awkward at first, like they're not quite sure what to say. But whatever happens, I'll handle it. If it gets difficult, I'll talk to them. If it becomes too much for you, I'll step in. You just need to be there. The rest is down to me. Hundred per cent.

– Look… I still don't want to… Stop doing that with your eyes, Lovisa. You know I can't resist you when you look at me like that.

– You know I'm going to get you to go, don't you? We're going right now. Please, darling. Do it for me?

– Can't we at least wait until tomorrow? Or maybe next week?

– No, we're going today. You've always said so yourself. Better to sort things out straight away than let them fester too long.

Elias sighed deeply. He had learnt by now that arguing with Lovisa was pointless. She was a force of nature that couldn't be stopped. And he had also learnt that things usually turned out all right in the end if he just followed her lead.

– All right, darling. You'll get your way, but you have to promise me one more thing, otherwise I genuinely won't be able to cope.

– What is it, Elias darling?

– You have to help me interpret what they say, or rather, what they're feeling. I'm so bad at reading faces. That's an ASD thing, as you know.

– I promise, Elias darling. I'll help you understand. Just say… actually, let's have a word. If you say "read", I'll read the situation for you. Whatever happens, I'm with you. Completely.

Elias was utterly terrified as he drove towards his old foster home. He didn't even know whether they still lived there, and he almost hoped they had moved. Far too soon, they were standing in front of the all-too-familiar door, and Elias asked anxiously:

– What am I supposed to say if they open the door?

Lovisa smiled but didn't laugh. She understood perfectly well what he needed.

– If it's Anna or Peter who opens it, you just say "Hello, Anna. Do you remember me?" or "Hello, Peter. Do you remember me?" Nothing else. And if someone else opens it, you stay quiet, and I'll take over.

Elias reached out towards the bell, but quickly pulled his hand back. He asked Lovisa to ring it, but she simply shook her head and nudged him forward. Several minutes passed and Elias tried a number of times to press the bell, but couldn't bring himself to do it. Then suddenly Lovisa took his face in her hands and gave him a firm kiss.

– Ring the bell now, Elias darling. I'm here for you.

Elias was trembling with anxiety, but at last he rang.

– Come on, let's run, he said to Lovisa in a panic.

She just smiled and shook her head again. After what felt like an eternity, the door opened, and a man looked at them with a questioning expression.

– He... hello, Peter. Do... do you remember me? Elias stammered.

Peter looked uncertain at first, glancing from Elias to Lovisa and then back again. Suddenly his face lit up, and he said:

– Just a moment. It's Elias, isn't it? Anna, Anna, come here. You won't believe who's just rung the doorbell.

Anna came along the hallway and recognised Elias at once. She rushed forward and reached out her arms towards him, but stopped herself when she noticed him step back.

– No, I remember you don't like hugs, Elias. But oh, you must know how incredibly glad I am to see you again, after all these years! Come in, come in, please do.

Anna led the way into the living room and sat down on a sofa with Peter, while Elias and Lovisa took the two armchairs. It was perfectly plain to Lovisa that Elias was anxious to the point of panic and had no idea how to begin.

There was a brief silence. Elias sat rigidly, looking as though he was searching for something to say but couldn't find a starting point. Lovisa cleared her throat softly, as if to give him time, and glanced at Anna, who knew Elias well enough to recognise the situation and understood that the best thing was to wait him out. Peter, however, found the silence harder to bear.

– I agree with Anna that it's good to see you again, Elias. There is, however, something I've been wanting to talk about…

Anna patted his arm and cut in:

– Peter, darling. We're glad he's here, aren't we?

– Read? Elias said, turning towards Lovisa.

– Peter, Lovisa said. It feels as though there's something you want to say, or perhaps to take Elias to task over. I want you to know that he's here precisely because he wants to clear up any misunderstandings, so you don't need to hold back.

– You're right. There is something that's been gnawing at me. Though Anna is also right that it's time to let it go now.

– Peter, Elias said. If it's something that's been gnawing away for so many years, it's probably best you get it off your chest. I promise not to get angry or to run off, even if I don't like what you say.

Peter looked at Anna, who gave a nod. He took a few deep breaths to collect himself, then began:

– It's about the way you left us on your eighteenth birthday. First of all, it seemed as though you were going to leave without so much as saying goodbye. And once you were outside, you could hardly wait to get away, as though we meant nothing at all. Anna had spent weeks slaving in the kitchen cooking food for you. She'd made up a load of tubs filled with things you like and put them in the freezer, so you'd have meals for months. But you didn't take the slightest notice. And the party Anna had prepared for your day, with classmates invited and everything, you didn't want any part of it. You didn't even want to accept the present she'd bought with her own money, a brand-new laptop. Granted, it was a PC, and apparently you prefer Mac, but still. You just shook your head and left, and on top of everything else you only said "thanks for everything." That's

what hurt the most. “Thanks for all the hell we put you through,” you were thinking.

Peter was becoming increasingly agitated, and Anna patted his arm frantically to calm him. But he was in full flow and carried on:

– Anna was completely distraught. She ran into the kitchen in floods of tears and took all the food she’d worked so hard on and threw it into a large bin bag. The same with the cake she’d baked for the party. When she tried to throw the laptop in the same bag, I stopped her and said, “Let’s at least return it to the shop.”

Peter was too wound up to notice Anna’s attempts to calm him.

– I understand that you don’t think much of me, given that I’ve always been fairly strict with you. I had been planning to come to the house with you and help you get settled, perhaps help with a few months’ bills until you were properly on your feet. But that you didn’t care about me, fine. I can accept that. What I can’t accept is you making Anna cry, given that she has always been kind to you. That is completely unforgivable.

Elias sat quietly for quite some time. Anna had finally managed to calm Peter down a little. After a while, Elias said:

– I understand you’re angry, Peter, but I didn’t realise at the time that what I was doing was wrong. I’d very much like the chance to explain myself. This is how it was: I was both terrified of having to leave you and desperate to do so at the same time. But above all, I knew that the law clearly states I

must leave a foster home when I turn 18, regardless of what you or I might want. And the very last thing I wanted was for you to be angry with me for not leaving voluntarily. Because you had been so kind to me, I only thought about doing what was right and proper, for your sake. This was in spite of the fact that, deep down, I wanted to stay here, where I felt safe.

Peter stared at him, his face a picture of astonishment. It was completely unexpected that Elias had thought of it in that way. Yet when he considered it, it was so utterly typical of Elias to think like that, particularly given his ASD.

– So I cleared out my room to save Anna the trouble, and I clearly remember saying "goodbye, time to go now" as I walked past the kitchen. And when I said "Thank you for everything" out there, I meant exactly that. Thank you for the food. Thank you for the roof over my head. Thank you for clean clothes. Thank you for the support at school. And so on. But rather than listing everything and risking leaving out something important, I just said "Thank you for everything." It was the simplest and most accurate thing I could say.

Peter's face fell further with every sentence. He had quite obviously misunderstood almost everything and had given no thought to the particular way Elias's mind worked. Elias continued:

– Anna, I had absolutely no idea you'd been cooking food and baking a cake for me. And the laptop, I couldn't have dreamt of such an expensive present. And the fact that it was Windows makes no difference. I could have installed something like Ubuntu and got a great deal of use out of it.

I'm so terribly sorry for making you upset. That was the last thing I wanted to do. I hope you can forgive my insensitivity, and I want you to know that I genuinely appreciate everything you did for me.

– It's perfectly all right, Elias. I understand, Anna replied.

He glanced uncertainly at Lovisa and said "read?" again, before adding:

– That's not enough, is it? Do I have to…? Even though…?

– I think it probably would be best, Lovisa replied.

Anna and Peter looked at them, puzzled about what they meant. Then suddenly Elias stood up, walked over to Anna and asked her to stand. When she did, he hesitated for a moment, braced himself, and with an inward sigh put his arms round her in a hug.

– I want you to know that I'm truly sorry for making you cry that day. You have always been kind to me, far more than I deserved. And yet I made you cry. Can you forgive me? Read?

The last word was directed at Lovisa, who replied:

– Anna, I can clearly see that you're equal parts surprised and happy right now, and you do forgive Elias, don't you? I can also see from his face that this hug is agony for him, but he holds on.

– That's unfortunately true, Elias said. Can… can I let go now?

– Of course, Anna said, releasing him, her eyes filling with tears. That was absolutely wonderful, you giving me a hug like that. Of course I forgive you. All these years I

thought we'd failed you somehow. It was never that at all, was it? I just wish I'd understood it back then

– I forgive you too, Peter said. I could also see how difficult that was for you, and how happy you made Anna. Forgive me for having a go at you just now. I've clearly misunderstood most of it, and that's my fault.

– Of course, Peter. I'm actually glad you got that off your chest, and I wasn't at all upset by it. In fact, I've been wanting to come here for a very long time to talk about 4 particular things, and that was one of them. But I haven't dared, out of fear that you were both angry with me. It was actually Lovisa who practically dragged me here, not because I didn't want to come, but because I was frightened.

– Frightened? Anna asked. What are you frightened of?

– Conflict. I had understood that I'd handled things badly here and was afraid you'd be angry. Lovisa promised me you probably weren't, and that she'd help me if you were. Well, I'm glad to be here now, and I'd very much like to talk about the other of these 4 things. Is that all right?

– Of course it is, Elias, Anna replied. Go ahead, please!

– You remember what happened when I arrived, don't you? You tried to hug me, and I pushed you away. Hard. I actually hit you. You fell heavily and struck your head on the floor. At the very least you must have had a concussion. What I did to you has haunted me ever since. I simply have to know how you were after that. Did I hurt you?

– Don't worry yourself about it, Elias. I was all right, Anna replied.

– Read? Elias said, turning to Lovisa.

– Anna, Lovisa said. I happen to know that Elias always wants to hear the truth, even when it's difficult. It feels as though something did happen back then, but you don't want to say so.

– The thing is, Elias, when I say I was all right, I mean that I wasn't seriously hurt. I may have had a mild concussion. I certainly had a lump on the back of my head. But as I said to you at the time, I believe it was my own fault. I should have known better than to try to hug a teenage boy, regardless of any diagnoses.

– I'd like to ask something, Elias, Peter said. You've said "read" several times now and looked at Lovisa. What exactly do you mean by it?

– Well, in order to be brave enough to come here, Lovisa promised to interpret for me what you're saying.

He noticed their eyes widen slightly and their brows furrow. They seemed confused.

– It's like this, as you probably already know: research suggests that when people express emotions, only 7% of the message comes from the actual words. The rest is tone of voice, body language, gesture, and facial expression. In purely factual communication, words are of course more important, but I still find I miss most of it. I only understand the words, so I've asked Lovisa to help me interpret the other 93%.

– That makes sense, Peter said. I hope you understand, Elias, that you're among friends here. You can say whatever you like, and we won't be angry.

– Can you try to describe for us, Elias, what was going on in your head during that first period? We both understand that you were deeply, deeply traumatised, because you didn't communicate with us at all. You don't have to say anything if you don't want to. We're simply curious, because we were a little worried about you.

– Right, well, this is how it was. My brain wasn't working. It had shut down completely when I came here. There was a ringing in my ears, and I couldn't hear what anyone was saying, and I couldn't make sense of anything that was happening. Somehow I thought everything was connected to the police, but you already know that, Anna. And the reason I went back to the house after school on Monday, and every day that week, wasn't because I was being disobedient. It was because when I was at school, my mind shifted into some kind of mode where everything felt normal again, and in that mode I was supposed to go home to the house. Then when I saw you, or when you started texting, Anna, the switch in my mind flipped back to the other mode, where everything was chaos.

– Wow, of course, Anna said. Though we did actually understand that on the evening you finally started talking to me. I was so terribly sad for you that day. Well, you know which day I mean. But especially when I heard what you told

me, the darkness you'd been living in until then! I'm sorry for what I made you do that day. It was brutal.

– Hm, the funeral, yes. That was another thing I wanted to talk about. I don't accept your apology. Let me explain why. Even though I hate platitudes, I find I have to use one now. What I want to say is thank you, so very much, for the funeral. It was dignified, it was beautiful, and… well, as people say, it gave me closure. Exactly. It's remarkable that you managed to find all the guests who came!

– Well, I found your mother's address book. So you don't think it was wrong of me?

– Not at all. Though "closure," well, what does that actually mean? I'm still sad today about what happened. Lovisa actually had to dry my tears when I told her about that day. But that day was when I finally understood what had happened. If you had only told me sooner… even then I probably wouldn't have been able to take it in. My brain wouldn't have accepted it. So it was entirely right to let me go through the funeral.

– If you only knew what a relief that is to hear, Elias. Do you mean things started to get better after that?

– Things would get a great deal worse before they got better, which is the 4th of the things I wanted to talk about. You won't like this, but now it's my turn to get something off my chest, because it's been gnawing away for far too long.

– Of course, Elias, out with it, Anna said.

– Well, after I understood that I was an orphan, I read up on probate and inheritance and began working through it. I

realised you had already begun the probate process, Peter, so I hacked into your computer and read what you'd found out.

– You hacked in? Peter exclaimed in astonishment.

– Right, well, I'm good with computers. You really ought to have a different password. It's far too easy to guess. Anyway, I realised I was going to lose the house and with it my last sense of security. So I... well... yes... I bought things to end my life. I even wrote a suicide note to you, Anna, a proper, considered note in which I praised you so that you wouldn't be too sad. Then I'd decided that the day I knew for certain the house was lost, I would execute.

Anna froze. Her hand flew to her mouth and her gaze locked onto Elias. Peter drew a sharp breath, his eyes wide with shock.

– Bloody hell, Elias, Peter exclaimed. Just... my God. Let me read for you. Anna is completely shocked, and I'm every bit as shocked myself.

– Dear God, Elias. Dear God, Anna gasped. And I missed every single sign. How could I not have seen it? How could I not have known?

– Take it easy, Anna. Someone with suicidal thoughts becomes an expert at hiding them, and I also have ASD on top of that, so you had absolutely no chance of seeing anything. Anyway, what happened was, as you know, Peter, that you lied, and your lies kept coming. But the result was that I got to keep the house. Two things followed from that. Firstly, I didn't lose the security the house gave me, and secondly, I realised that you genuinely cared. Because

honestly, Because honestly, Peter, you'd have preferred me to be forced to stay here, instead of being at the house all day, wouldn't you?

– Yes, I have to admit I wasn't comfortable with you always being in the house, but I could see that you needed it.

– Peter. You saved my life there. Not in a figurative sense, but literally. I would have been lying next to my parents in a grave otherwise. You… well… Lovisa, please, do I have to?

– You already know the answer to that.

Elias stood up and walked over to Peter, who rose to his feet and, utterly astonished, received a hug.

– Oh dear, Elias said. This is even harder than the last one.

– It's all right, Elias, Peter said, releasing him. I understand, and I'm deeply moved.

– Luckily, my brother never showed up, because if he had, he could have objected to everything on the spot, right there in the room. That would have been a different story entirely.

– Well, I had a plan B, though I didn't need it in the end, Peter said. But it's Anna you should thank for the fact that your brother didn't come…

Anna shifted slightly beside him.

– That's right, Elias. This has to stay between us. I got in touch with someone I know at the council who's been dealing with your brother's case, and I made sure his benefit payment landed on the same morning as the solicitor's meeting. He'd never miss collecting that, not for anything. So

while we were in that room, he was standing in a queue at the council office, with no idea any of it was happening.

– What! Anna! That's incredibly devious. Oh God, come here, you deserve another hug!

Elias hugged Anna again, to her great delight.

– Hm, that didn't feel quite as difficult as before. The reason I'm telling you all this is simple: what you did meant everything to me. From that day on, I felt so much support from the two of you, both with the house and with what you did at school, Anna. The result was that I found myself in an upward spiral instead, and I threw myself into school 100%. You both did that. You saved me. You were the reason I kept going. You're the reason I'm so happy today. You pushed me in the right direction.

– Wow, what a shock, Anna gasped.

– I regret everything I put you through, Elias continued. I hope you can understand how sorry I am.

– There's no need to apologise, Anna replied. We both understand how dreadfully you were suffering from what had happened, and how traumatised you were.

– I want to be very clear about something. I'm not apologising for what I did up until the estate was settled, because I wasn't myself. But after that, I understood how much you cared about me, and yet I kept you at arm's length. What I should have done during that whole year was to let you in, and I never did.

– We understand, Elias, that it was hard for you, with your diagnosis and everything else. Change is difficult, and that's part of it, Anna said.

– Yes, that's true. At the same time, I've been through so many enormous changes since then. The most recent was when Lovisa moved in. That was incredibly difficult. But after a few months it got easier, and then I became almost irritated when she didn't come home one night. What I mean is that if I'd made more of an effort, I should have been able to adjust to the new situation and let you in. But I didn't even try. For just over a year. That's what I'm apologising for.

– We both understand that you were struggling, Elias. Both Peter and I could see it, and given what you went through, it's hardly surprising.

– Besides, Peter continued, the responsibility is shared. I agree that you could have tried harder, but we should also have done more to help you feel comfortable here, rather than simply respecting your distance and leaving you to come to us in your own time.

Elias sat quietly for a moment, processing what Peter had said. He could feel the tension he had carried for so many years finally loosening.

– That may be so, Elias replied at last. Perhaps now it's time to get to the real reason I wanted to come here. Or rather, yes, I **did** want to come here for many long years, as I said. But I want to explain the reason Lovisa and I started talking about it, and she ended up making me do it. I love

you for that, Lovisa, make no mistake. The thing is, Anna and Peter, Lovisa is not my girlfriend.

– But I thought… Anna began.

– Well… she's still my girlfriend, I guess, but she's also my fiancée. We're going to get married.

– What wonderful news, Elias. Congratulations to you both.

– Thank you, Anna, Lovisa put in. I was genuinely surprised and so happy when Elias suddenly got down on one knee in front of me a week ago and held out an engagement ring.

– Well, given how you've been courting me, I thought it was about time, Elias smiled. In any case, we were sitting earlier today making a start on the guest lists, and Lovisa could see I was getting sad. The reason was that I have nobody to invite, and she has so many. One thing led to another, and… well… I'm wondering whether the two of you would like to come to our wedding as my guests. It's perfectly all right if you'd rather not…

Peter cut in, his tone firm, almost stern:

– You should know, Elias, that not even wild horses could keep me from your wedding if we're invited. It doesn't matter when or where.

– I agree with Peter completely, Anna said. There is absolutely nothing that would make me happier than to be at your wedding. It's wonderful that you want to invite us, after everything that's happened here. Thank you, Elias!

– I'd like to offer you a piece of advice… if that's all right with you… that is, if you'd like to hear it, Peter said carefully.

– Of course, Peter. I always listen to advice.

– Given the diagnosis you have, you have certain difficulties with physical contact. But a girlfriend, a fiancée, and eventually a wife will want to be hugged now and then.

Elias stood up, looking panic-stricken.

– What are you saying, Peter! I have to hug Lovisa?! How often? Would once a month be enough? No? Once a week? More often than that? Lovisa, darling, is this really true?

– Yes, Elias darling. Peter is probably right. I do want hugs from you, perhaps even several times a day.

– Oh God, what a shock! That's going to be difficult for me. I don't think I can manage it. Wow, why have you never mentioned this before? Come here, I'd better investigate just how difficult it's going to be.

Elias stood in front of Lovisa, who also got to her feet, and he tried to find the right position round her waist.

– Like this, is it?

Lovisa nodded and hugged him back, at first gently, then with increasing firmness. Elias looked uncomfortable at first, but soon he drew her closer and ran his hand softly through her hair. It was becoming increasingly clear to Peter that this was not the first time they had hugged. They met in a kiss, and after a long moment they sat back down, this time in the same chair, Lovisa on his lap.

– You were joking just now, weren't you, Elias?

– Well… I suppose I was. The thing is, it feels genuinely lovely when it's Lovisa I'm hugging. I imagine that's what is meant by love. For the record, I should mention that we have in fact done rather more than just hug, because Lovisa is actually pregnant.

– Pregnant! Anna exclaimed. That is even more wonderful news! You agree, don't you, Elias? You always loved children.

– It's wonderful news. I really do want to be a parent to my own children. It's not just that I love children, I…

Suddenly, crying was heard from another part of the house. It was heartbreaking. Elias stiffened for a moment, and Anna gave a start, her heart jumping, before she reacted:

– Oh, little Johanna has woken up and is upset again. She's been like this, I'm afraid, ever since she arrived yesterday. She's probably hungry too, though I haven't been able to get her to eat yet. I'd been planning to cook something I think she likes when you arrived, Elias.

– Have you become an emergency foster carer as well? Elias asked. I thought you were only a foster family.

– Normally, yes, but Johanna was supposed to be with someone called Mireka or something, who apparently has left. Please excuse me, do stay, won't you? It might be a bit chaotic for a while, but we can carry on a little later.

Anna got up and started towards the door. Lovisa made a suggestion that Anna thought sounded completely bonkers:

– How about Elias goes in to comfort Johanna while you and I get on with the cooking, Anna?

– I'm afraid that won't work. Johanna has had several very bad experiences with men, so she'll probably be terrified if Elias goes in.

– That's true, Peter added. I've tried myself, and she just screams when she sees me. Besides, I'm hopeless at cooking. If I boiled an egg I'd burn it.

Lovisa stepped in front of Anna, took her hands, and looked intently into her eyes.

– Anna, I'm certain that Elias can comfort Johanna. You don't know me, but I've seen what Elias can do. It will work. Just. Trust. Me.

Anna was unsettled by Lovisa's utter certainty. She looked over at Elias, who had started fiddling with his phone.

– What do you think, Elias? Can you manage to comfort a small child?

– I don't think so. I know so.

Elias walked out into the hallway and into the room from which the crying was coming. He shuddered on the threshold. This room was all too familiar to him. He closed the door behind him, and Anna grew anxious. At first a piercing shriek came from the little girl, but it fell silent immediately. Lovisa steered Anna ahead of her into the kitchen, and Anna began preparing the food. It was a complicated sort of casserole, with a great deal of vegetables and meat to chop, and Lovisa set to work with enthusiasm. Anna kept glancing towards the room where Elias and Johanna were, though Lovisa tried constantly to reassure her:

– It's going fine in there. Johanna isn't crying any more.

That was true. The room was completely quiet, but if anything this made Anna even more anxious.

By the time the food was nearly ready, Anna heard the door to the child's room open. Elias came out with Johanna on his arm. When Johanna caught sight of Anna, she grew frightened and buried her face against Elias's shoulder. Anna was astonished, almost shocked, to see that Johanna seemed to find comfort in Elias and showed not the slightest fear of him.

– Johanna and I thought something smelled absolutely wonderful from the kitchen, Elias said. Is there any chance of a taste, or is it too early?

– It smells really, really yummy, Johanna said.

Anna was so glad to finally hear Johanna's voice properly, rather than just crying and sobbing. She took out a small spoon and dipped it into the casserole. Elias took the spoon with his other hand and said solemnly to Johanna:

– Now you'll have to help me blow on this, my angel, because it's really, really hot. But don't blow too hard or you'll blow it all away.

Together Elias and Johanna blew carefully on the spoon, and then Johanna had a taste. She clapped her hands happily and said:

– It's really yummy. I want some. I want some now!

Elias carried her over to a wall where a few tall children's chairs stood, and pretended to try to put Johanna into one of them. It was obviously far too small, and Johanna laughed:

– I'm much too big for that chair, Unca Eli. Surely you can see that!

– Of course you are. You're already "the big girl", my angel. But if you sit in a normal chair, your nose will be level with the tabletop, and you won't be able to reach any food. What do you say to this, though?

With one hand, he produced a booster seat that could be placed on an ordinary chair. He pulled a chair up to the table, set the booster seat on top, and lifted Johanna into it.

– Now you must sit completely still while I fasten this, otherwise you'll fall on the floor, my angel.

Elias fastened the booster seat carefully, then went to fetch a plastic plate, cup, and cutlery for Johanna. In the meantime, Anna had set the casserole on the table along with potatoes and milk. Peter had come in as well, and soon everyone was sitting down and enjoying the meal. Both Anna and Peter were completely astonished at how well Elias looked after Johanna and how quickly she had attached herself to him, in less than an hour.

– Don't be surprised if Elias completely ignores the rest of us adults, Lovisa whispered to Anna. He'll focus entirely on Johanna. He always does.

And indeed, Elias sat with his attention fixed wholly on Johanna, making sure she got her food, wiping her mouth when she spilt, and helping her in every way possible. When everyone had finished eating, he stood up and lifted Johanna again, and she said cheerfully to him:

– Thank you for the food, Unca Eli. It was really, really yummy!

– You must thank Anna for the food, because she's the one who made it, with a bit of help from Lovisa. You should give her a hug as well, to say thank you for such a lovely meal.

– Thank you for the food, Anna, Johanna said. It was really, really yummy.

She leaned out of Elias's arms and gave Anna a warm hug, to Anna's great surprise.

– Don't forget Peter, who's the one who bought all this lovely food. He deserves a hug too.

Still in Elias's arms, she reached out and hugged Peter as well, to his great surprise, though not as warmly as she had hugged Anna. Then everyone went back to the living room and sat down. This time Elias settled on the sofa with Johanna and Lovisa. Anna felt deeply confused and asked eagerly:

– It's extraordinary, Elias, the way you handle Johanna. I had no idea you were so good with children. How did you learn?

– Peter, do you have anything from Social Care? A phone, a tablet, or a computer with Outlook? Elias asked.

– Yes, I've got this iPad from Social Care, Peter replied. It's linked to my foster carer account. What would you like me to do?

– Go into Outlook, open the contacts tab on the left, and search for my name.

– No, Elias, that's not right. You won't be there. The ones who were in care are in a different app.

– Do it anyway, Elias insisted.

Peter followed his instructions and searched for the name. His eyes widened when he saw the result.

– Wow… what's this? he asked.

– We're colleagues, Elias said with a wry smile. More or less.

– What do you mean, Elias? Anna exclaimed.

– It's in the contacts list, Peter replied. Elias Nicholson: emergency foster carer. He works with Children's Social Care, looking after children placed in emergency foster care, like Johanna here.

– That's right, Lovisa continued. And he's absolutely extraordinary at it. That's why I love him so desperately much.

– You heard it wrong, Anna. It wasn't Mireka who was supposed to look after Johanna. It was MiracEli. Me, that is. The only problem is that I've left, or rather I was forced to leave owing to a conflict with John. Yes, you know, the manager who took over from Anders.

– What, you're MiracEli? I've heard that name going round the office. What sort of a name is that?

– Miracle-Elias. Well, it wasn't my idea, Elias replied with a wry smile.

Anna raised her eyebrows, and Peter drew a sharp breath, as though they had just been let in on a secret they ought to have known.

– You should know, Anna, that Elias works miracles with young children. I've seen it several times before. Just look at Johanna here.

– My little angel, Elias said. Though she's really your angel. I looked her up in that other app to understand why she was so sad. Social Care forgot to remove my access to Johanna's file. She was originally supposed to be with me.

Elias brushed a strand of hair from Johanna's face. She had already fallen asleep in his lap, perfectly content and at peace.

– Now I can see it all clearly, Peter said. How you were able to put Johanna at ease so quickly, how you won Lovisa's heart, and why you're so calm and eager about having a child. But how did it start, for you?

– It started when I found two children, Carl and Sonja, in a forest, and brought them home. Anders made me their foster carer, since they'd run away from three others.

– Wait a minute! Carl and Sonja, did you say? Anna exclaimed. They stayed here for just one night, before they mysteriously ran away for no reason.

At last, Anna got the answer she'd been wondering about all these years. The children who had almost become hers and Peter's own had ended up with their own foster child.

– Wow, so you two were meant to be their new foster parents? Elias continued. On that subject, I've been thinking about something regarding the wedding. You should know, we have decided that there are no assigned seats in the church. People sit wherever they like. Except for four seats at

the very front, reserved for the parents of the bride and groom. The thing is, two of those seats will be empty. So I was wondering…

Elias paused and composed himself before continuing.

– Yes, I was wondering whether you'd like to come to our wedding not as my guests, but as my parents. That is to say, sitting in the right places, giving speeches, and so on… At the same time, I want you to feel completely comfortable, so the two of you can decide for yourselves how involved you'd like to be.

Anna and Peter looked at each other, stunned. This was completely unexpected. Peter was the first to reply:

– Do you really mean that you see us as your own parents? Despite everything unkind that I in particular did to you. Things like taking you to task without cause, constantly demanding one thing or another. Of course we are both flattered, but also astonished.

– I agree with Peter. We've both understood how deeply you loved your parents, who were lost so tragically.

– Right, well. I don't want to be disrespectful or anything…

Elias glanced at Lovisa, who understood immediately what he meant and replied:

– In this company, that's not a problem at all, Elias darling.

Anna couldn't help chipping in.

– It's quite remarkable how in tune you are with each other. You seem to read each other's thoughts. It's truly lovely to see.

– Yes, I've been transparent to Lovisa for a long time, and recently, to my own astonishment, I've begun to understand her as well. About my parents, then. I have a very vivid memory of them, the last one that's really burnt itself into my mind. It was the last day of Year 11, the last day of secondary school. Everyone was gathered in the hall for the leavers' assembly.

Elias hesitated slightly, unsure whether to continue.

– Go on, Elias, Anna said. Don't worry!

– It was like this… I was badly bullied throughout school. Hurtful words, nicknames, being shoved around, someone taking my beanie or my schoolbooks. I was never left in peace, not even by the girls. My parents had their hands full with the problems surrounding my half-brother. But I could do something else. I could show that I was better than him. So I decided to make my parents proud. I threw myself into school work: homework, homework, homework, revision, revision, revision.

– I've seen that myself, Elias, Anna put in.

– At the leavers' assembly, we were all seated by class. I sat with the girls, because they usually stuck to verbal taunting and didn't go in for shoving or pinching. I heard the boys calling me a freak, a weirdo, a fairy, a div, and worse. But I didn't care. I actually enjoyed all the amateurs performing on the stage. Then the headteacher went up on

stage, gave his speech, and handed each of us our leavers' certificate. He finished by calling my name and asking me to come up on stage again.

– He called you up! Anna exclaimed. By name?

– Exactly. My legs were shaking so badly I could barely walk. My tormentors loved that, of course. He called up one other pupil as well, a girl from another class. Then he announced that the two of us were the only pupils in the entire school predicted to achieve straight A-stars across all our GCSEs. We each received the Head Teacher's Award. I looked over towards my class. Nobody met my eyes. They all stared at the floor, and I thought, "*Ha, I've won in the end.*" I searched the audience for my parents, but they weren't there. I had reminded them that very morning.

– It must have hurt, Elias, that they weren't there on your big day.

– Not terribly. I was used to it. They never used to come to end-of-term assemblies, parents' evenings, or any other school events. Anyway, we went back to the classroom. Then I cycled home. The moment I walked into the house, I heard raised voices in the living room, as so often. I don't know what it was about, but it had something to do with my brother, money, and the fact that we couldn't afford something. I thought, "*Now I'll cheer them up and show them they have **one** good son.*" So I walked into the living room with my certificate and the Head Teacher's Award in my hand.

– Surely they were proud of you, clever as you are?

– My father said quietly, “Not now, Elias.” But I was stubborn that time. I wanted to show how well I’d done. So I said again, “You might like to look at what I got today.” My mother turned towards me and shouted, “Can’t you see we’re busy, you useless boy? You’re always causing trouble! You're completely, totally impossible. Go to your room and don’t come out again today. You’re getting no supper. You haven’t earned it.”

Anna and Peter looked horrified. Elias felt the tears coming and rubbed his eyes, embarrassed by them. Lovisa wrapped her arms round him and comforted him, and he felt her warmth making everything a little easier.

– I tore up the award and the certificate and threw them in the bin. Then I cried myself to sleep that night. The next day I left the house before breakfast and didn’t come back for a week. I slept in the woods, a short way from the house, got food from the kiosk, and told myself I never wanted to go home again. But it started to rain, and I realised I had to. My parents hadn't even noticed I was gone. That was my worst summer ever.

All three of them looked at Elias with deep sympathy.

– Then, when I finished my first term at Sixth Form, I cycled straight here after my last lesson. You came rushing out, Peter, and demanded to see my end-of-term report.

– Yes, I know, Elias. I’m sorry about that, Peter replied. I can be a bit gruff sometimes, and that’s my fault.

– I showed you my report, and you let out a whistle. You called for Anna, and you both read it together and heaped

praise on me. You said you were proud of me. I thanked you and went to my room and cried myself to sleep again.

– But why, Elias? Anna asked. Did we upset you?

– No, of course not. But I remembered the leavers' assembly in Year 11 and thought, "*Why couldn't my own parents have done this?*" On that very day, you showed me what parents ought to be.

– Do you really mean that, Elias? Peter asked.

– I do. Do you remember, by the way, the telling-off you gave me when I went back to the house on the first day I was back at school, instead of coming here?

– Yes, I remember, and I deeply regret it, Peter replied. I think I lost you there.

– I was always being told off by my mother, for things I didn't understand. When someone had stolen my beanie, it was my own fault for losing it. When I was called into school because someone had bullied me, it was my fault. When I got a black eye because someone had hit me, I was the troublemaker. I was always in trouble at home, and most of the time I didn't even understand why. When I looked at the floor, I was "impossible"; when I tried to look my mother in the eye, I looked away, and I was "hopeless." I rarely understood what I'd done wrong.

– Could that be related to your ASD, do you think?

– Probably. But Peter, when you told me off, I knew exactly what I'd done wrong, unlike when my parents did it. And that telling-off, or rather that correction, you gave me was the kindest I had ever received. You didn't call me

impossible, hopeless, or useless: quite the opposite. You said I was bright enough to know what's right. You told me off not because I was hopeless, but for what I'd done. The thing I'd done was wrong, and you explained clearly why. That is exactly what a **good** father does: he corrects his teenager when he does something wrong.

Peter looked relieved. He finally understood why there had been no pushback, and why Elias had actually listened.

– And you, Anna, insisted on a review meeting at school. My parents didn't even come when they were asked. And when you caught even a whisper from me that I might be being bullied by Gaz, you couldn't wait to have a word with him. I don't know exactly what you said, but Gaz apologised afterwards. I could never have dreamt of having such a wonderful mother.

Anna put her hand to her heart, deeply moved by what he had said.

– My own parents were never there for me. When the school called them in to deal with a bullying incident, I sat alone, facing the bully and his parents. Most of the time when I came home, there was some trouble with my half-brother. Either they weren't in at all, or there was a row. Often there was no supper, because they were out somewhere trying to sort out yet another problem involving him. When I was 10, I started cooking for myself, simply to avoid going hungry. Then I was told off for that as well. They never understood that I did it out of desperation. So I carried on, but made sure not to get caught.

– Wow, Lovisa put in. That's why you're such a good cook.

– Here I always had food. Regularly. I had all the support with school that I needed. You made sure to contact CAMHS when it was needed. You took my problems seriously. The two of you can never be my **biological** parents… but you are, and will always be, my **real** parents.

Anna's eyes filled with tears of joy.

– So if you come to our wedding as my parents, you'll be coming as my **real** parents. Not as some sort of officials hired by social services to look after me. But as parents who have shown that they love me, and who I failed to show that I love in return. I will always blame myself for that.

– You mustn't feel that way, Elias, Anna replied, her voice breaking. We understood even then that you were struggling, and that you are, in fact, a remarkable person.

– Hm, I don't feel particularly remarkable.

– Elias, you are remarkable, Lovisa protested. I can fully understand, given your ASD and everything you've been through, that it was hard for you to find any kind of balance at that point in your life. But now I finally understand something I didn't before. I realise how deeply all of that affected you, and why you found it so hard to let me get close.

– I agree with Lovisa, Anna continued. You were still young, and many teenagers struggle with everything that comes with adolescence. That, combined with ASD, the loss of your parents, bullying, and worrying about the future,

became too much. Yes, it's no wonder at all that you felt the way you did then. I'm just so sorry that I wasn't able to help you feel better during that whole year.

– I want you to understand something, Anna. You shouldn't feel like you failed. Considering what I learned about how parents are, during all the years before I came here, you never stood a chance of turning my whole view of you around in just over a year. It took many years before it landed. And my ASD didn't make it any easier.

She hesitated a moment, then answered quietly.

– To be honest… I've sometimes thought that you hated me. For taking you to CAMHS. For the look on your face when you got your diagnosis. You blamed me for it.

Elias shook his head slowly.

– No. Never you. I hated the diagnosis. The labels. Everything that suddenly had a name. But not you. Elda suggested a full assessment after I'd told her I'd been struggling for years, and I agreed. You were on my side and did as I asked.

– Oh, Elias… I'm sorry for every time I didn't realise how hard everything was for you. But it means so much that you're telling us all this.

– The thing is, Anna, I have to tell you one more thing. Every day when I came home from school, I had a knot of dread in my stomach. I mean at primary and secondary school. Sometimes I didn't even want to go home, because I was afraid of what might happen. During my first weeks here with you, it was even worse, and I had to fight just to stop

myself from running off into the woods. I don't know exactly when it changed, but at the end of my first term in Sixth Form… the knot was completely gone. I almost felt eager to come here. That's why I came here that day, instead of to the house as I usually did.

– You can't imagine how glad I am to hear that! Anna exclaimed.

– You probably can't quite picture how hard it's been for me not to have said any of this sooner. I want you to understand one thing: even if I wasn't in a great place when I finally left, I was still considerably better than I had ever been while my parents were alive. What you did was set a process in motion, an upward spiral, in which I gradually started to feel better. So the happiness I feel today is, at its core, a result of that. You set me moving in the right direction.

– So it was you that set him on the right path, Lovisa said. Thank you for that. We're happy together now, and it's thanks to you.

Anna sat still for a moment, moved to tears, before smiling softly:

– You mustn't thank us, she said. You've both done that yourselves, especially you, Elias.

Elias smiled a little and gave a nod:

– I've also had a great deal of encouragement from Lovisa. But you haven't answered whether you'd like to come to the wedding as my parents.

– Wow, Elias, we'll come with pride as your parents, Peter said. I can't quite explain why, but somehow you feel special to us, like our own son. Yes, that might sound strange, but that's how it is.

– I agree with Peter, Anna added. You've always had a special place in my heart, and I feel exactly the same.

Elias leant back on the sofa, stroked Johanna's hair, and then put his arm round Lovisa, who rested her head against his shoulder. He had probably never felt so relaxed before, least of all in this house.

For a moment everything felt completely under control, though somewhere at the back of his mind there flickered an almost imperceptible spark of unease, as though his heart knew that reality is seldom quite as perfect as one would wish.

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– You do agree that things went well yesterday with your foster parents, Elias darling?

– You mean my real parents? Yes, absolutely, it went well, just as you predicted, darling. Everything to do with them has been weighing on me like a stone in my stomach until yesterday, so thank you so much.

– Then you agree it's time to track down a few more people you can invite to the wedding? Would you like me to come with you to work tomorrow with a cake?

– I'm not sure… in one way, but…

– Elias darling. You know I can see right through you. The thing is, there are contradictions, aren't there? Just say what you're thinking.

– If you come along… it'll look as though I can't manage on my own.

Elias fell quiet for a moment.

– But if you don't, I'll say the wrong things. Or nothing at all.

Lovisa tilted her head slightly and thought about it.

– All right. Let's keep it simple. What's your reputation as a cook at work?

– They have no idea I'm any good in the kitchen. We don't talk much at all outside of what we're working on.

– Good. Then I'll come along, and you say that **I** baked the cake. That way it won't seem odd that I'm there.

– That sounds sensible, though it does mean you'll actually have to bake one. I've never seen you bake yet.

– It's fine, I can bake. I'll bake for you. Of course I'll do it for my darling.

And so it was settled. That evening Lovisa baked a cake, and the following afternoon, after an early finish at the nursery, she went with Elias to his workplace. He wasn't entirely comfortable there, but it wasn't unfamiliar territory either. They arrived just in time for the afternoon break, and everyone was gathered in the break room with their mugs of coffee.

– Hi. I've brought cake for the break.

– Brought reinforcements, have you? Patrick said, with a teasing grin.

– No.

– I'm Elias's fiancée. And I made the cake. What are you all waiting for? Aren't you going to try some?

Everyone helped themselves and praised Lovisa. Elias fetched coffees for himself and Lovisa, and took a slice of cake as well. He sat quietly while the conversation flowed on round him, perfectly still in the background. Lovisa, on the other hand, threw herself straight into it, showing her sociable side and lighting up the room. He grew uncertain, wondering when to jump in. He glanced at Lovisa, who understood.

– Right, you lot, all give your mouths a rest for a moment, because Elias has something to say.

– Yes… well, if you'll listen, there's a chance of free food at the end of it.

That got their attention. A moment later the room was quiet.

– As she said, Lovisa is my fiancée. We're getting married, and you're all my friends… like… so I was wondering… yes… would anyone like to come to our wedding as my guest? You don't have to…

Patrick answered straight away:

– Of course, I'll come, if that's all right.

– Count me in too, Michael and Simon said, almost in unison.

– I could be your best man! Patrick burst out. It would be great to help out with everything before and during the wedding.

– Er… thank you, that's kind. I genuinely appreciate it. It feels reassuring to have someone who can take charge of all that.

– Brilliant! Then we'll get stuck into the practicalities… and then I'll sort out a legendary stag do, Patrick grinned. Don't worry about a thing, Elias. I've got it covered.

– The rest of you who'd like to come can message me on Teams, and I'll send out invitations, Elias finished.

Patrick, Michael and Simon nodded and laughed and promised to be in touch. As Elias left the office, he felt unusually relieved. As usual, Lovisa's mere presence had helped him settle into himself.

The following day they went to Children's Social Care and ran through the same routine. Elias had initially been worried that John would be there, but he had been transferred, and the whole thing ended up as an unexpectedly calm and pleasant coffee break. Among those who were there was Jessica, whom Elias didn't recognise at first. She smiled at him and greeted him warmly, and to Lovisa's surprise, he even took her hand when they said hello.

– It's been a long time, Elias. It's so lovely to see that you seem happy now.

– Thank you, Jessica. I hope you know how much I appreciated your help all those years ago.

Lovisa understood who Jessica was and greeted her warmly as well.

Lovisa then tracked down Elias's old sixth-form Facebook group, which was still going. She joined, explained who she was, and wrote a short message about the wedding. That same evening, several old classmates had already replied. A few days later, texts started trickling in, from Jessica and a few others from the social services office. Anders, too, heard about the wedding and wanted to come. Adam, Frederick, Axel, and Emma got in touch too, via Teams. He'd worked with all four of them before, and was currently on the same project as Patrick, Frederick, and Axel.

He had no idea that Patrick was planning an outrageous stag do. Elias was looking forward to laughter and good fun, though deep down he hoped it wouldn't get too wild. What he didn't know was that disaster was already lying in wait, ready to strike and throw him completely off balance.

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– Hello, Elias darling. How was your stag do? You're home early. Wait, what's happened? You look furious.

Elias slammed the door hard behind him. He never did that. He looked absolutely livid. He started shouting at

Lovisa, something he had never done before, not even during their worst rows.

– That bloody Patrick! Yes, and Michael and Simon and the whole sodding lot from my work! I've emailed them to say they're not welcome at our wedding! And don't try to talk me into forgiving them, because it's not going to happen!

Lovisa held out her arms to him and said:

– Come here, Elias darling. You're not angry with me, I hope? Take a few deep breaths and tell me what happened.

Elias closed his eyes and breathed deeply. Then he sought out Lovisa's arms and said:

– Of course I'm not angry with you, Lovisa. You haven't done anything wrong. I'm sorry I shouted at you. It was uncalled for. It's this so-called stag do I'm absolutely furious about.

– Come and sit down, Elias darling, and tell me everything from the beginning. It was Patrick, Simon, and Michael who were there, wasn't it? The other four from your work didn't come, did they?

– That's right. They'd invited me to a bar, and I was already suspicious the moment we arrived, with good reason. But, as my darling, slash girlfriend, slash fiancée has taught me, I decided to do my best to adapt and come across as more sociable. We sat down at a table, and Patrick went to the bar to fetch drinks for all of us.

– Alcohol, I'd imagine.

– Obviously. I told him, as politely as I could, that I don't drink alcohol for personal reasons, but that I could buy

myself something. But Patrick said it was no problem at all and that he'd swap it. So he took my glass back to the bar.

– Swap the drink? There's no such thing as an exchange policy at a bar!

– I thought the same, so when he came back with a Coke I was suspicious and sniffed it discreetly. It definitely smelt of ethanol, so he was quite clearly trying to trick me into drinking alcohol, most likely to get me drunk.

– I can understand why you were so angry.

– Well, I thought of you and kept myself in check. There was a plant next to my chair, so I poured the drink into it. Then I tried to be sociable. I have no idea how well it went, but I tried to listen and chat as naturally as I could. It was actually quite pleasant, all things considered.

– That doesn't surprise me. You handle most things.

– Perhaps. When Michael noticed my glass was empty, he went to the bar to get more. I tried to watch what he was doing, but could only see that he was handed two glasses, one small and one large. Then he came back with only the large one. You can guess the rest.

– He'd probably spiked your Coke again.

– Almost certainly. It smelt that way. This time I deliberately took a bit longer pouring the glass into the plant. Then Simon went to the bar. This time I pretended I was looking for something and took a few steps away. I could clearly see what he was doing. Sure enough, he spiked my Coke.

– Wow, so all three of them tried to slip you alcohol. Was that when you got angry?

– I was probably quite angry on the inside, but I kept it under control. I left the third glass where it was, only poured a little out. I hope the plant has survived, by the way.

Lovisa let out a giggle, somewhere between relief and warmth.

– Then a woman came up to the table. She had… generous attributes, if you know I mean, and very little in the way of clothing. She looked at Patrick, who pointed at me, and then she came over. At first she just stood there, very close, without touching me.

– What did she do?!

– I pressed myself back and protested. Then she started slowly moving in front of me, almost rhythmically. I tried to slide away, but she put her hands on the back of the chair, above my shoulders, so I couldn't stand up. Her breasts were approximately an inch from my face.

– That's absolutely bloody disgusting!

– When she then tried to sit in my lap, I'd had enough. I slid down onto the floor and crawled out under the table. I got to my feet once I was out the other side. Now, I couldn't hold back any longer. I shouted at them, "What the hell do you think you're doing?" Patrick just laughed and said, "Relax, mate. It's your stag do. Let your hair down a bit."

– "Let your hair down," he said that? What an absolute bastard! Does he have no idea how you work?

– Apparently not. Though he was quite drunk himself by then. I kept shouting at him, "You're hereby sacked as my best man. And you can all forget about our wedding. I'll hire a security guard to throw you out if you show up." Then I left and got the bus home. On the bus I sent an email to all 7 from work and withdrew their invitations. They're no longer welcome.

Lovisa's face had gone taut, and Elias knew that particular crease between her eyes very well.

– You look… angry? Did I do something wrong?

Lovisa drew a breath and shook her head.

– Elias darling… you did the right thing. Full stop. He ordered you a bloody lap dance! What was he thinking? I'm not angry with you, I'm angry with them. You didn't do anything wrong. All three of them completely disregarded your boundaries.

She took a deep breath.

– All three of them failed entirely to respect you. And I'm so proud of you for speaking up and walking away. But…

Lovisa paused, and Elias grew anxious again.

– Here it comes. You think I overreacted, don't you? That I shouldn't have shouted at them. And certainly not at you.

– No, Elias darling, that's not it at all. You had every right to shout. And I'm genuinely glad that you finally managed to show your feelings so clearly.

She hesitated slightly.

– It's just that you invited seven people to our wedding. Only three of them were in that bar. It feels a little like collective punishment.

– I find it hard to believe the other 4 had no idea, and at the very least they could have warned me.

– That may be true, but my gut feeling from when I met them is that they might be as introverted as you and simply didn't know. Either way, your reaction is entirely justified.

– Thank you for understanding me, my beloved Lovisa. It's starting to feel a bit better now. I'm just a little worried about how they'll react tomorrow. They are still my colleagues, and I work alongside several of them, that bastard Patrick included.

– I hope you know that I support you completely, whatever happens next. My love for you has, if anything, grown even stronger now.

Elias held Lovisa for a long time and began slowly to calm down. She had always had that effect on him.

– Fine, fine. If the others feel they've been treated unfairly, they're welcome to contact me, but Patrick, Michael, and Simon are banned.

– I agree entirely, Elias darling. If I ever see them again, they'd better run. I'll scratch their bloody eyes out!

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Elias worked from home as usual the following day. After a couple of hours, an incoming call appeared on Teams, and

he pulled a face. It was Frederick ringing, and Elias immediately worried it had something to do with the previous evening. Since they were on the same project, so it was probably work-related. He answered with video.

– Hi, Elias. How are you today?

– Fine, I suppose.

– Right, about that email you sent yesterday. I've asked Patrick what happened at the stag do, but he just says you got angry for no reason and stormed off. Somehow I don't believe him, so I'd rather hear it from you. But also, well…

Frederick hesitated and looked uncomfortable.

– I was thinking that Adam, Axel, and Emma might want to hear as well… and maybe ask a few questions. But only if that's all right with you. We don't want to criticise you or put any pressure on you. We're mostly just curious. What do you say?

Elias felt the unease beginning to creep in, but the memory of what Lovisa had said the previous evening about collective punishment made him hesitate. He understood he would have to listen to them regardless.

– All right, you can bring them in. But only those 3, and no discussions, agreed?

– Of course, absolutely.

Soon the other three appeared on screen. All but Emma had their cameras on, as they knew Elias preferred.

– So, Elias, Frederick continued, what actually happened last night at the stag do Patrick, Michael, and Simon put on?

Elias gave a detailed account of what had happened and how he himself had reacted. He left nothing out, including that Lovisa was on his side and absolutely furious.

– I've been half expecting some sort of response from the 4 of you who weren't there. I'm sorry, but I find it hard to believe you had no idea what was going to happen.

Everyone was silent. Elias could feel the panic almost rising in him. At last he continued:

– Everything I've told you is true, whatever Patrick claims.

– I believe you, Elias, Frederick said. That's not at all what we were told, and what he did is completely unacceptable. I genuinely had no idea about any of this, and after this I want nothing more to do with him. I'm going to take this higher up. I'm bloody well not working alongside someone who behaves like that.

Elias grew worried about how the manager would react to all of this. An awkward silence followed before Adam asked carefully:

– I mean… if it's all right, like, could the four of us still come to your wedding, Elias?

– I've only heard what Frederick has said so far. The rest of you need to say what you think about what happened as well.

– Like… Adam began. What Patrick did is completely unacceptable. I don't know him, which is exactly why I didn't want to come to the stag do in the first place. If I'd had any idea what he was planning, I'd have told you straight away.

– I completely agree with the others, Axel said quietly. I know Patrick's mental, and I want nothing to do with him. You don't need to invite me any more, Elias. I should have warned you about him. I'm genuinely sorry, and I understand how you feel.

– What about you, Emma? Elias challenged. You haven't even dared put your camera on. What do you think?

Emma hesitated before switching her camera on. Her face was red and blotchy from crying, and she let out a loud sob.

– What happened to you is dreadful, Elias. I mean… if my boyfriend had accepted a… yes… a lap dance from… well… wow. We would have been done. I swear. That Patrick could even think of something like that… no, I could never have imagined it. I'm so sorry for you, and I hope your fiancée understands that you backed out.

– She does, Elias replied.

He went quiet, and all four waited nervously for what he would say. At last he continued:

– Right, here's what I'm going to do. I've recorded this entire conversation, and I'm going to ask Lovisa to watch it. She's very good at reading faces and tone of voice. After her assessment, I'll send an email, probably this evening, with my decision. You'll simply have to wait until then.

– That's absolutely fine, Elias, Frederick said. We understand and accept that. Whatever happens, I'm not working with Patrick any more.

The call ended, and Elias was beginning to relax again when the doorbell rang. He checked the camera. It was Teddy, Lovisa's cousin. He went and opened the door.

– Hi, Elias, has everything calmed down a bit? Yes, Lovisa told me about the stag do yesterday. I just wanted to let you know that I'm your new best man.

– No, you're not. I don't need a best man.

– Makes no difference. Don't make me bring out the bazooka.

– The bazooka?

– Yeah, I'll persuade Lovisa, who's my best friend, to come to you and flutter her eyelashes. Then you'll melt like chocolate in the sun. Trust me, I'll do it if I have to!

– Oh God, you're just as infuriating as Lovisa can be!

– Nah, considerably more so. Though not nearly as good-looking.

– Fine, fine, come in then, and we can discuss what you might actually do.

Teddy came in, and they sat down in the study.

– This is what you can do, Teddy, if you absolutely must be my best man, and possibly my toastmaster too. I'm terrified about the wedding, so I need you to support me.

– What do you mean? Are you scared of marrying Lovisa?

– Not of **being** married to her. That sounds wonderful. It's the ceremony itself that frightens me. I need you to learn it inside out and then read the room. Listen to the vicar, watch what Lovisa does, and then force me to do the right

thing at every moment. I don't want to embarrass myself at my own wedding in front of Lovisa.

– I can handle that! No problem. I'll keep track of the rings as well, either carry them or make sure you've got them with you. And then I'll need to run the reception afterwards, including giving a speech. That's what a best man and toastmaster does. Not to mention sorting out a **proper** stag do for you.

– No, thank you. **One** attempt to get me drunk is quite enough.

– Take it easy, I'll check everything with you before I do anything. We could go to an escape room, or play pool. What about bowling? You decide. I'll sort it.

– I'm hopeless at sport, but bowling? Why not?

Elias's work computer rang again, and he saw it was his manager calling on Teams. Stressed, he said:

– You'll have to go now, Teddy. I need to take this call. It is working hours, after all.

– Right, Elias. We'll talk later about the details. Take care for now!

Elias turned towards the computer without answering Teddy and took the call from his manager. Teddy let himself out.

– Hi, Elias. Have you got a moment?

– Of course!

– Thank you. Frederick contacted me and told me about the stag do Patrick organised for you yesterday, and that it apparently went rather off the rails.

– Yes, something did happen yesterday.

– I want to be clear: what you or Patrick get up to in your own time is your responsibility and nothing to do with me. I'm not going to criticise anyone or take any action. But Frederick has now made it clear that he refuses to work on the same project as Patrick, a project you're leading. Axel has hinted at the same thing.

– Yes, I've heard that, but isn't that up to them?

– It is. But what I don't want to see is any drama from outside work affecting the job. Given what's happened, I assume you also refuse to work with Patrick.

– No, that's not right, Elias replied. I can separate work from my private life, and Patrick is an excellent programmer. What happened at the stag do has nothing to do with work.

– Do you mean that? That's unexpected. Though I've come to realise that you don't think the way most people do. But Frederick and Axel don't seem able to separate their private lives from work in the same way.

He hesitated, then continued.

– So if you had to choose between Patrick on the one hand, and Frederick plus Axel on the other, which would you go for?

– Patrick, every day of the week. Frederick and Axel are good, but they're still junior. So it's easier to manage without them than without Patrick.

His manager fell silent out of sheer astonishment, almost shock. This was the very last thing he had expected. How could Elias choose Patrick, a person he must surely despise,

over those who had defended him? At the same time, it was so typical of Elias to think logically and not let his feelings decide.

– Well then, I know where you stand. I'll have a think and come back to you. Just one last thing. If I were to move Patrick out anyway, is there anyone else you'd want?

– Er, yes… well… I do find women difficult generally, but Emma is very good as well.

– Thank you, Elias, for being so straightforward. I'll be in touch.

Elias hung up and looked at his hands. They were shaking from nerves, and he immediately began thinking about Lovisa, wishing she were there to calm him down. He drifted off for a minute, picturing her in his mind. Then he turned back to his computer, hands steady.

He managed to work undisturbed for several hours when Teams rang again. This time it was Patrick, and Elias felt a real stab of anxiety, but answered all the same. They were on the same project, after all.

– Hi, Patrick, what could you possibly want?

– What the hell have you done, Elias! I was only having a bit of a laugh with you yesterday evening, completely harmless. And now I've suddenly been taken off your project! I'm being shoved into a bloody helpdesk, the most brain-dead job there is. And it's your fault, you idiot! How could you do something like this to me?

– May I speak?

– Go on then, you ungrateful muppet!

– Right, the phone, or Teams, has been running hot here today. Most recently our manager rang and told me there are people who don't want to work with you. I explained to him that I'd rather have you on the project than the others. You're the more competent one. It seems the manager has gone a different way, and I can only regret that.

– What! You chose me even though you're so angry with me?

– Yes… what you did yesterday doesn't need to affect the work, does it?

– Oh… wow. Elias. Wow.

Patrik fell silent from sheer surprise before he continued:

– Sorry for having a go at you, and… sorry about yesterday. I probably didn't read the room particularly well.

– No, you were an idiot yesterday. Personally, I never want to see you again, and our wedding is out of the question. But I do hope we can work together on some other project in the future.

– You're absolutely unbelievable! Don't worry though, I've already decided to hand in my notice from this bloody job.

– Good luck in the future, then.

Patrick hung up, utterly confused and shaken by how calm Elias could be after everything that had happened.

Elias sat and looked at his hands. They were completely steady. *Lovisa, I love you so much. You can even calm me down from a distance,* he thought.

It wasn't long before Lovisa came home, mildly anxious, wondering what had happened during the day. Elias told her everything and asked her to watch the recording with Adam, Frederick, Axel, and Emma. She confirmed that they had meant what they said, so Elias sent them an email, apologised, and wrote that they were welcome at the wedding.

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Teddy kept his word, so a few weeks later Elias found himself in a bowling alley for the first time. Teddy had invited the four from work and two friends of his and Lovisa's, so there were eight of them in total. Teddy addressed them all:

– Right, listen up, everyone, we're here to play bowling and nothing else. There's beer here, granted, but out of respect for Elias we're not drinking any alcohol.

– Look, if the rest of you want a drink, that's your business, Elias replied. My choice doesn't have to be your choice.

– True, but we're staying sober, full stop. Elias isn't drinking, so there's no beer for anyone. Fair's fair!

– Can you bowl, Elias? Frederick asked. Brilliant as you always are, you'll probably wipe the floor with us tonight.

– I know everything about bowling, he replied. I've looked up all the rules and the scoring, which is fairly complex. I also looked into the optimal angle of attack for the

ball against the pins. And how to achieve that from different starting positions using spin.

– That sounds promising, Frederick commented. But how do you think you'll do against the rest of us?

– On that I'm not guessing. I know I'll come last, because I'm hopeless at anything involving sport. I know everything about bowling in theory, but nothing in practice.

The others laughed cheerfully, and Elias felt pleased to be able to amuse them. True enough, Elias missed most of the time in the first round, but he gradually got better, and the satisfaction was immense. When the first game was over, he was indeed in last place.

When they started the second game, he began to get his throws right more and more. He knocked several spares and even got a strike. By the end he had come fourth.

Afterwards he thanked Teddy:

– That was really good fun, Teddy! I had absolutely no idea sport could be this enjoyable. I'll definitely have to play again, perhaps with Lovisa.

– Are you sure, despite not doing that well?

– Oh God, what does the score matter? I was competing against myself, and I won by a mile in the second game compared to the first. Thank you all for coming tonight!

Everyone agreed and thanked him in return. They were careful not to offer a hand, since they knew Elias never shook hands. Instead they nodded and waved, and Elias held his hand against his chest, as he always did.

Then they went their separate ways. On the way to the car

park they talked eagerly over one another about how successful the evening had been. And about Elias. How he had laughed out loud when a ball ended up in the gutter, how he had cheered at his first strike, and how, for one evening, he had let loose in a way none of them had ever seen him do before.

✯

Elias stood in the church porch together with Teddy, his best man. He straightened his tie. Three times. It was still uncomfortable.

Through the door came the rustle of guests filling the pews, and Elias silently counted the steps between the door and the altar, for the fifth time. The guests passed him one by one. He greeted his colleagues, his parents and his future in-laws briefly.

When all the guests were seated, Teddy gave Elias a nod to indicate it was time to go in. Elias felt as though everyone was staring at him, though in reality no one even turned their head. Teddy had given the guests very clear instructions not to look at Elias as he came in.

Once he was standing in his place and Teddy had stepped to one side, the tension in his chest eased a little, and he looked towards the entrance and waited for Lovisa. He was still terrified of making a fool of himself, and glanced over at Teddy, who looked entirely composed and gave him a nod.

The wedding march began to play. At first Elias felt relief as the guests stopped looking at him and turned towards the entrance. Then a wave of anxiety hit. Here began what he had been dreading. The page boys and flower girl appeared. First was Sebastian, then two more, giggling and eager, right at the start of the aisle. Elias smiled broadly. He adored small children, and their energy made him forget his nerves for a moment. He gave a small wave, and the children waved back.

Then he saw her. Lovisa came, walking alone, last of all, and everything else faded. His heart beat double time, and he found it hard to breathe. She was utterly breathtaking, more beautiful than he had ever been able to imagine, and he could barely understand how such a wonderful person could want to marry him.

Soon she was standing beside him, and everything he had thought would be difficult washed over him. Lovisa sensed his anxiety and took his hand, though it hadn't been planned. Elias looked at her and tried to get his breathing under control. Teddy nudged him gently in the ribs and whispered, "I've got you."

The wedding continued, and nothing Elias had worried about came to pass. He did everything right, without Teddy even needing to guide him. Walking out alongside Lovisa, he felt proud, not only of himself, but of Lovisa and the whole situation.

The photographs outside the church came next. Elias endured them without a murmur and even managed to

produce a few convincingly happy smiles that got caught on camera. It was strange, he thought, how small things like a camera could make you feel so exposed. But Lovisa's hand in his gave him strength, and he was able to breathe a little more calmly.

The reception began, and the guests took their seats. The top table was at the front, where Lovisa sat beside Elias, with the three small children settling themselves round them. Every table was full. People everywhere, some he recognised, many he didn't. Elias tried to keep his gaze fixed on Lovisa, the children, and the food, but the hum of conversation round him reached him all the same. He let it.

In the background, Teddy moved quietly between the tables, nodding to the servers, checking everything was in order, and giving Elias a discreet smile as he passed, as if to say he had everything under control and Elias could relax.

When the moment felt right, Teddy raised his hand slightly and called for silence.

– We'll start with a short speech from Kenneth, he said. He'd like to say a few words to the happy couple.

The hum of conversation died of its own accord as Kenneth got to his feet. His tone was careful but warm as he gave his brief speech. He remarked that everything had been properly arranged ahead of the baby Lovisa was carrying, and that Elias and Lovisa had done things in the proper order, as any two people who love each other should. He looked satisfied at how smoothly the wedding was going. Elias felt a small jab of nerves. Kenneth's watchful gaze

always carried a hint of pressure, but he smiled a little at Lovisa and let out a breath he hadn't known he was holding.

As Kenneth sat down again, Teddy raised his hand again.

– Now it's Peter's turn. He'd also like to say a few words to the happy couple.

Peter rose calmly and gave a warm, personal speech about Elias. He spoke of how he and Anna had watched him grow, how they had followed him through difficulties and always admired his strength and determination. Anna added several warm words about what a wonderful person her son was. Elias felt pride and warmth, though also nerves. It was strange to hear his foster parents speak of him as though he had been their son all along.

Finally, Teddy stepped forward and took the floor. His speech was light and humorous, with small anecdotes about Lovisa's childhood and how Elias had managed to enchant her. He drew plenty of laughs and spontaneous outbursts. But Elias did overhear one of his old classmates whispering something about Peter having to be lying, since Elias's biological parents had died when they were all in the Sixth Form class together. He felt the tears threaten, not from sadness, but from the mixture of pride, nerves, and relief.

At last Elias himself stood up, to many people's surprise.

– Right… I was thinking… this is wrong, because I've been excused from the speech and so on… also, it's completely impossible for me, with my ASD, to speak spontaneously in front of so many people. I don't even have a script… and yet

here I am. Isn't it remarkable what a woman's love can do to a man?

A few guests laughed, others nodded encouragingly.

– Lovisa, darling. My wife. Oh God, that sounded strange to say, but it's true. My wife. How wonderful. Yes, what I wanted to say, or... to set the record straight... I don't like being called a liar, and I think I heard something of the sort. Over there sits my father Peter, next to Anna, who is my mother. Though my parents are dead, I've said. And yet here they are. You have to admit my mother is looking remarkable for someone who's been dead for nearly 12 years.

Several guests looked puzzled. A few laughed slightly awkwardly, as though not quite sure whether they were allowed to.

– Well, seriously. My dead parents are here today. I promise. They're here watching their only child together getting married and being happier than ever.

He pointed to a large photograph behind him.

– May I introduce Martin and Margaret, my **biological** parents. By the way, is everyone all right? How are the drinks?

Confused looks were exchanged around the table at his abrupt change of subject.

– Everything here today is alcohol-free. Lovisa insisted on it, for my sake. I love you for that, Lov... my wife. The thing is... nearly 12 years ago, a man decided to drink alcohol. He drank quite a lot. And yes, perhaps that wasn't a problem in

itself… until he got behind the wheel of a 25-tonne lorry and drove off.

Elias fell silent and irritably wiped a few tears from his eyes. He really didn't want to cry on the happiest day of his life!

– A few hours later, a police officer and someone from social services came to my door and explained that I was an orphan and was being placed in foster care.

He swallowed.

– That was the worst day of my life. And it was caused by alcohol. So forgive me if I'd rather not see alcohol on my happiest day.

The guests nodded in understanding, and several began murmuring in agreement.

– Well, it was Anna and Peter here who had the difficult job of piecing me back together again. And, Oh God, the support they showed me, the comfort, and yes, genuinely, the love. So sitting here today are my **real** parents. The ones who took care of me when I just wanted to give up. So thank you, Anna and Peter, for everything you've done for me. I know I've said "everything" before, but you probably know by now what I mean by "everything."

Elias sat back down to the guests' applause. Lovisa leant into him and drew him into a warm hug. He hugged her back and let his hand rest on her stomach.

– Soon we'll be complete, he whispered. With our little angel on the way, everything will be perfect, won't it?

Lovisa smiled and took his hand.

– Yes, my darling husband. Nothing can go wrong now.

Elias smiled back, but let his gaze rest a moment too long on her stomach. Something stirred inside him, a faint, inexplicable unease that he immediately tried to shake off.

Round them the celebration continued. Glasses clinked, someone laughed loudly, music began to play again. The evening drifted slowly towards its end, and the wedding left behind it a feeling of quiet happiness.

Yet, Elias would later remember that particular moment.

How everything had felt complete.

How close they stood to the life they had longed for.

And how little they knew of what lay ahead.



22



Elias was sitting at his computer when Teams pinged on his phone. He clicked “answer with video.” When Ulrika’s face appeared, he tried to manage a small smile.

– Hi, Elias, it’s Ulrika from Children’s Social Care. Is everything all right with you?

– I suppose so. What can I help you with?

– We have a child who needs emergency foster care. I’m aware that you prefer children of pre-school age, but we’ve run out of options.

– How old is the child?

– About an hour. The thing is, the moment the mother and her parents arrived at the maternity ward, they told the

midwife to take the baby into care immediately. The mother wasn't even allowed to touch it. And the hospital was to "dispose of the bastard as best it could", to quote them directly. Can you come to the hospital right now, and do you think you can manage such a young infant?

– I'll come. But I don't **think** I can manage a newborn. I **know** I can.

Elias soon arrived at the maternity ward and was handed the little girl.

– Be careful with her head, the nurse said. She can't balance it herself yet.

– I know, Elias replied. They covered all of that in the antenatal classes. My wife is, as it happens, heavily pregnant. Where is the mother right now?

– She's in Room 5. The birth went well despite her young age. She's only fifteen.

Elias nodded and walked out into the corridor. But instead of turning right towards the exit, he turned left. Ulrika followed anxiously behind him. Then he went into Room 5, where a teenage girl lay in the bed, and a couple he assumed were her parents stood beside her along with another nurse. He carried the baby over and laid her on the bed next to her mother.

– Here is your child, he said shortly. You could at least say goodbye to her before you throw her away.

The teenage girl immediately wrapped her arms round the baby, broke into a wide smile and kissed her. Her father flew into a rage and rushed round the bed towards Elias. He

shoved the nurse hard, sending her stumbling backwards, then grabbed the baby without thinking to support her head. He thrust her forcefully at Elias, who staggered back, doing his best to hold on to the baby and keep her head supported. The father turned back to the bed and struck the young mother across the face with his fist. Once. Twice. When he raised his hand a third time, Ulrika, who had followed Elias in, shouted and grabbed his arm. She turned to Elias:

– You'd best go now, and take the baby with you.

Elias went out and quickly tracked down a doctor, asking him to examine the baby. They went into a treatment room, and the doctor gently felt the baby's neck to check whether anything had been injured. Ulrika appeared shortly afterwards, and Elias felt uneasy, though as usual he showed nothing.

– You know that was foolish, Elias.

– Yes, I know. I'm sorry. I was just so provoked by a child's own parents rejecting their offspring like that.

– I agree in principle. Well, what's done is done. Can you manage the baby on your own from here?

– Yes, the doctor has confirmed she's fine, so I'll just drive straight home.

– Do you have a car seat and everything else you need?

– We've already bought everything for our own little angel, so I'll manage. I'll pick up some infant formula, nappies, and clothes for this little angel on the way home.

– Right, good. Send the receipts to the office, and we'll reimburse all your expenses.

A few hours later, Lovisa came home. Elias met her at the door and told her about the new arrival. Lovisa was utterly enchanted to meet such a tiny newborn.

– Has she had anything to eat yet? she asked Elias.

– Yep, I bought some infant formula on the way home. After a little milk on her lips, she fed quite enthusiastically, brought up her wind, and she went back to sleep. I didn't buy any clothes, but perhaps we could go out together and get a few things for her?

– I love you, Elias darling, for waiting for me. Shopping for baby clothes sounds absolutely wonderful. We could buy some for our baby at the same time, couldn't we?

– Of course. I'll just need separate receipts.

The following day Ulrika rang again on Teams.

– Hi, Elias, it's Ulrika. How is the baby getting on? Any problems?

– None at all. Both my wife and I are thoroughly enjoying it, and the baby is very settled. Yes, it's a fair amount of work and some sleepless nights, naturally, but that's to be expected.

– Good, I'm glad to hear everything is working out with the baby and that she's safe with you. I'd also like to mention something else. The police were called after what happened at the hospital. Julia, the baby's mother, is subject to a care order following the incident, and the hospital takes the view that it isn't safe for her to remain there. Her father, Mark,

was arrested but released after questioning, for now, so he's still considered a risk.

– I understand. But why are you ringing me?

– Julia herself has expressed a strong wish to be placed in emergency foster care together with her baby, and I fully share her view based on our assessment of the situation. At the same time, you've been clear that you prefer to have children of pre-school age, and that's something we naturally need to take into account.

– Is she really fit to be discharged from the maternity ward already?

– Yes, that's their conclusion. Her vital signs are stable, she's up and moving about, and everything looks fine. She won't be discharged to her home, however. We need an emergency foster placement for her. We have very few options, which is why I'm asking you. If you can consider it, I could bring her to you in a few hours.

– Does Mark know my name or where I live?

– No, not at all. He doesn't even know which town you're in.

– Bring her here, and we can talk it over.

And so, shortly afterwards, Ulrika arrived at Elias's door with Julia. He was alone at home, apart from the baby, of course, as Lovisa was still at work. Julia looked a little frightened and seemed to be looking for something. Elias showed them both into the living room and turned directly to Julia:

– This is the situation, Julia. Ulrika tells me you'd like to stay here as an emergency foster placement while your circumstances are being assessed.

– That's right, Julia replied, unnerved by his serious expression.

– I have one unconditional requirement for agreeing to that. There is one thing you must do, in addition to your schoolwork.

– Julia is in secondary school, Ulrika put in. But we've temporarily found her a place at a different school, to separate her from her parents.

– I promise to help with cooking, cleaning, laundry, and anything else you need, as long as I can stay with my baby.

– Forget that. I'm responsible for you, which means the housework is my responsibility too. I'm talking about your baby. You are not simply to play with her and have fun. You are to take care of all her needs: feeds, walks, nights, dirty nappies, everything she requires. Are you ready for that, little mother?

– Yes, though… I'm not entirely sure how…

– I'll show you what needs to be done. During school hours I'll take over the care of the baby. Otherwise the primary responsibility is yours. That is not negotiable.

– Of course, I'll do that, Julia replied nervously. It's Dad who doesn't want me looking after the baby. But I do want to, absolutely.

– Very well, Ulrika. You can go now and leave mother and daughter in my care. What happens next for them?

– Mark and Lena have the right to have the care order reviewed by the Family Court. But that doesn't affect the fact that the girl and the baby are safely placed with you here and now.

Elias showed Ulrika to the door, then went back to the living room where Julia was still sitting.

– May I… Julia hesitated. May I see my daughter now?

Elias turned without a word and walked towards the bedroom. Julia followed tentatively. There she saw her baby in the same cot that had been intended for Elias's own child. The baby was sleeping peacefully, and Julia let out a long, contented sigh.

– Isn't she just the most beautiful thing there is? she exclaimed.

– All children are, Elias replied, rather more bluntly than necessary.

Elias showed Julia to the children's room.

– You'll sleep in here. We'll move the cot through when the baby wakes up.

– Alva.

– Who?

– My baby is going to be called Alva. I've already decided.

– I see. Formally it's your guardian who decides, but I shall inform Ulrika of your wishes.

Elias went into the study and sat down at his computer to work. He could hear Julia moving things round in the room but chose to ignore it.

After about an hour, Alva began to cry, and Elias waited a moment. Satisfied, he heard Julia go to her, pick her up, and take her into her room. Alva went on crying, and after a while Julia called out loudly:

– Elias, please, can you come!

Elias went into the room and stopped short. Julia had taken off her blouse and was sitting topless with Alva in her arms.

– I can't get Alva to latch on. Please, help me!

Elias put his hands over his eyes when he saw Julia's bare breasts and couldn't bring himself to go in.

– Please, Elias, come in and help me. I don't mind you seeing my breasts. Alva is all that matters.

Elias took a deep breath, went in, and sat down beside Julia. He studied Alva, who was screaming a few centimetres from Julia's nipple.

– Alva doesn't understand that there's food there, Elias said. Massage your nipple a little and try to squeeze out a few drops of milk so she can smell it.

Julia did as he said, but Alva carried on crying.

– All right, hold Alva steady now, don't forget to support her head, and wet her lips with the milk. Then you need to brace yourself, because this is going to hurt.

Julia did as Elias said, and when Alva got a taste of breast milk on her lips she clamped on. It was fortunate for Julia that she had no teeth yet, because it felt almost like being bitten by a shark.

– Ow! Aah! Ooh… darling, gently. You're hurting Mummy.

– She'll settle down once she realises she's getting food. Just hold on for a moment.

Sure enough, Alva calmed down and began to suck rhythmically, and Julia felt a rush of happiness.

– Do you know how to wind her afterwards?

– Yes, I've watched loads of videos online when Mum and Dad weren't looking.

Elias hurried out of the room and went back to his computer. He struggled to focus on work and to push aside what he had just seen.

The day continued, and soon Lovisa came home from work. As so often, she was met at the door by a kiss from Elias. It was plain to Lovisa that he had something to tell her.

– Welcome home, darling. Things have happened here… that are… rather embarrassing…

Lovisa took her jacket off slowly and gave him a smile and a sideways look.

– Right. That sentence doesn't usually mean small things when it comes from you.

– It involves bare teenage breasts and a screaming baby.

Lovisa stopped in the middle of the hallway. She looked at him for a few seconds, as though weighing his words against his expression.

– I see, she said at last. You're going to need to explain that, as I'm sure you realise.

Elias sighed heavily and began to explain. About Julia. About Alva. About the feeding, the panic, how he had felt completely at a loss and yet gone in anyway. Lovisa listened without interrupting.

Then they went through to the children's room, which Julia had by this point made more of a teenager's den. The cot had been moved in, and Julia was leaning over it, gazing tenderly at her sleeping baby.

– Hi, Julia. This is my wife, Lovisa. I've told her everything about you and the feeding and so…

Elias checked himself and went bright red.

– Forget that, Elias darling, Lovisa said calmly. You helped a new mother feed her baby. Nothing more.

Elias took a deep breath and let his shoulders drop. He relaxed again.

– Hello there, by the way, Julia, I've heard a bit about you. Though I thought you didn't want to look after your baby?

– She's called Alva, if I get to decide. It's Dad who doesn't want me to. Just look at her, isn't she wonderful!

– She is, yes. I was looking after her just last night. As you can see, I'm going to have my own little bundle to hold and love before long.

Lovisa placed a hand on her pregnant belly.

– There's one thing I want you to know, Julia. It's about Elias.

– What? said Julia, glancing uncertainly at Elias, who didn't so much as flicker.

– Elias here is the kindest person in the world, and there is nothing he wouldn't do for your daughter or for you. He usually looks serious, but that's just how he is. He never means any harm.

– That's actually true, Elias said, attempting a smile. Though I'm completely transparent to Lovisa.

Julia smiled too, and relaxed a little.

Over the following days, Julia began to find her feet with Alva, and she was happier than she had ever been. At the same time, she worried about what her parents might do next, as her father had been absolutely furious when he received the news of the care order and refused to accept the situation.

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A few weeks later, Elias was sitting in the Family Court with Julia, Alva, and Ulrika. Several solicitors were also present. Mark and Lena were there too, of course, ready to argue that Julia should be allowed to come home. Elias was a little uneasy, though reasonably calm, since he had been promised his identity would be protected. Mark turned to him with questions after the judge had permitted it:

– So, you're the person Julia is living with. What's your name?

– For reasons of confidentiality, I'm unable to give my name.

– I'd like to know who I'm speaking to. Your first name?

Elias sat in complete silence. Mark grew irritated and raised his voice:

– You have to say it. I demand to know who I'm talking to!

– I've already answered the question. You won't get a different answer by repeating it.

The judge raised a hand and intervened:

– Mark, the court has decided that his identity is to be protected. You may ask relevant questions, but you will not be told who he is.

– Well, if you're going to be so obstinate, Mark went on irritably. Do you really think it's reasonable for a fifteen-year-old to have and raise a child?

– Of course not. But…

– So you think Julia has done wrong, then.

– Your Honour, may I finish without being interrupted?

– Of course, please continue, the judge said, with a stern look at Mark.

– I believe that as a parent, you are responsible for your own child. Partly legally, but certainly morally. The child did not ask to be born, so the parent owes it their best efforts to provide care, even when that involves difficulties. That applies even when the parent is young.

– But this is a bastard who should never have been born! By someone who is herself a child! It isn't right! What would you have done if your daughter had had a baby so young?

– Julia is a minor, but evidently mature enough to carry out what is required to bring a child into the world. She, or her parents, made the decision, despite her young age, not to have a termination.

– Murder, you mean?

– Termination of pregnancy, as defined by law. As for my own daughter doing something like that: I don't have a child yet, but I would naturally have given her a thorough telling-off and perhaps grounded her for a month. Then I would have recognised that a teenage brain is not fully developed, and that the capacity for consequential thinking isn't fully formed until round the age of 25. I would have forgiven her, because I love her, and then supported her in every way possible so that she could care for her child, your grandchild. Your own flesh and blood.

Mark grew increasingly agitated the longer Elias spoke. The only reason he didn't interrupt was the stern looks from the judge.

– I would never take care of a bastard whose father isn't even British and has fled the country. It's obvious you have nothing sensible to say, so just keep quiet.

Elias gave a slight, wry smile, stood up, lifted Alva, and walked over with her to Julia's mother, Lena. He held Alva out to her, and she took her carefully and tenderly. Mark roared, leapt to his feet, and rushed round the table, fists clenched, face red with fury. Elias stepped into his path and, to his own considerable astonishment, said:

– Go on then, hit me, just like you hit your own daughter. I'm sure that will do wonders for your chances of regaining your daughter's custody and respect.

Mark pulled up short, and Elias didn't move an inch. The judge intervened firmly:

– I'm stopping you there. These proceedings must be conducted without altercation. Would the emergency foster carer take the baby and return to his seat?

Elias took Alva back and returned her to Julia. He couldn't resist adding:

– This nonsense about Julia not being allowed to touch her baby after the birth, so as not to bond with her, shows a complete lack of understanding. A mother bonds throughout the nine months she carries the child in her womb. Separating her from the baby at delivery is exceptionally stupid.

– I agree with you in substance, the judge said, but these outbursts during proceedings are not acceptable.

Elias sat down and thought: *What on earth am I doing? I never go at things like this. But sometimes you have to stand up for the children*. He stayed quiet for the rest of the hearing, which naturally concluded with the expected outcome: both Julia and Alva remained under the care order.

The following day, Elias was contacted by Ulrika again. This time it was Lena who wanted to see her daughter. Elias was hesitant, but said he could take Julia and Alva to the local library, on condition that a police officer was present. A

few days later he was there with the girls, the officer was in place, and Ulrika sat quietly by his side. Lena came through the door and was met immediately by the officer:

– My name's Frida. Police. You can go in and see your daughter.

Lena took a deep breath and stepped inside. Her expression softened when she saw Julia sitting with books in front of her, reading to Alva. Frida remained where she was, calm and still, and the peace held. Elias and Ulrika sat quietly and watched.

– Hello, darling. I'm so sorry for all the trouble with Dad. But I love you so much… and… may I hold your baby?

– She's called Alva, Mum. Here you go.

Lena took Alva carefully in her arms and looked at her with love, beside her daughter.

– Wow, Alva looks exactly like you did at this age. What a little miracle. So innocent and untroubled. You seem to be taking good care of her.

– I've had a bit of help from Elias… oh, I shouldn't have said your name, she said, turning to Elias. Sorry.

Lena turned towards Elias. He felt a flicker of unease, though as usual showed nothing.

– Elias, was it? Don't worry, I won't tell my husband. I'm very confused right now and don't know what to do. This is my beloved daughter and her beloved baby. I understand exactly how Julia feels, because I've been through the same thing myself.

Elias hesitated slightly before responding:

– I imagine you need to think about what matters most to you. Your child or your husband. Ideally both. But if you have to choose, then choose.

Lena fell quiet and thought it over. This Elias seemed to talk sense. She really did need to think carefully.

A couple of weeks later, everything had been resolved. Elias wasn't pleased about how the situation had unfolded, particularly since he had, in a way, set the whole thing in motion.

Lena had been awarded sole custody of Julia, and Julia had been given custody of Alva, though as a minor she would need her mother's support in exercising that responsibility.

Mark signed the divorce papers when Lena forced through her ultimatum: if he didn't accept Alva, he didn't accept Julia, and if he didn't accept Julia, he didn't accept her either.

Elias could finally breathe again and focus on Lovisa and their forthcoming baby. He was glad to have had the experience of caring for a newborn, though he still felt unsettled by all the drama, if somewhat less so than he usually would at such upheaval.

✯

Lovisa's bump grew larger by the day, and both she and Elias were looking forward to meeting their daughter. The scans had shown everything was progressing well, though

Lovisa was beginning to feel heavy and cumbersome. Elias helped her more and more, taking over almost all the work at home.

One morning they were both lying in bed, taking it easy before the working day began. Suddenly Lovisa cried out:

– Ow, ow, it hurts so much. What's happening?

– Where does it hurt? Could it be contractions already? There are still over three weeks to go, but perhaps our little angel is as impatient as we are.

– No, it feels different. Ow, ow! And I'm starting to feel dizzy too.

She lifted the duvet and saw blood on her underwear. Fear flooded through her instantly.

– Elias, my baby! Elias! Something's wrong! Do something!

He leapt up and got dressed, filled with terror. Now he was the one who had to show stability and calm. He was too stressed to call an ambulance. Instead, he rushed outside and reversed the car out of the garage. He left the car door open while he ran back in. There he wrapped Lovisa in blankets and helped her out to the car. He was sweating from nerves, but mostly from the effort of almost carrying her.

He drove to the hospital as fast as he dared. Lovisa moaned and whimpered. The pain came in waves. She slumped forward against the dashboard, her body heavy with exhaustion and pain, her eyes drifting as she fought to stay conscious.

When Elias pulled up at the maternity ward, Lovisa was too weak to get out of the car. He rushed through the door and shouted for help. He grabbed a wheelchair that was standing nearby, and a nurse who immediately grasped the seriousness of the situation joined him. Together they helped Lovisa into the wheelchair, and the nurse raised the alarm at once. Soon staff were swarming round her and she was wheeled towards an operating theatre.

Elias was left in the waiting room, sick with worry. He paced back and forth across the floor. After a few minutes, a nurse came out to him with bad news:

– You're the woman's husband, aren't you?

– Yes. What's happened?

– We believe it's placental abruption. The placenta has detached. She's bleeding heavily and is barely conscious, and the baby is showing signs of oxygen deprivation. We're doing everything we can for both of them. She's unable to make decisions herself right now, I'm afraid, so I have to ask, in case it becomes relevant during surgery: if the surgical team is ever forced to choose between them, what should they do?

– *You have to save Lovisa. I can't live without her. We can always have another baby*, Elias thought. Aloud he said:

– What should I choose?

– That's not for me to decide, the nurse replied, calmly but firmly.

– I mean… should I say what **I** want, or what I think **Lovisa** would want?

– The latter.

– Then… save the baby.

The nurse gave a brief nod and hurried back. Elias was filled with dread. *Did I choose wrong? Oh God, maybe, though perhaps not. I always put children first.* The minutes ticked by. It felt like hours. But in less than half an hour, a midwife came out carrying a baby in her arms. The baby still looked slightly messy, but it was the most wonderful thing he had ever seen. Even so, he asked anxiously:

– And Lovisa? How is she?

– I promise you, Elias, that we have the very best doctors doing everything they can to make sure she pulls through. Let me take you to the room they'll bring her to when they're done, so you can wait there.

Elias was left alone in a patient room with the baby. He took towels from a cupboard and methodically cleaned away what remained from the birth. She was unexpectedly still and quiet. He held her in his arms. The small body was warm and alive against his chest. His heart beat hard, almost to bursting. *This is my child,* he thought. *The child I have longed for my whole life.*

And then it struck him. The words he had said when Lovisa told him she was pregnant. That he wanted her to give birth to the baby and then leave him. *Oh no,* he thought. *It's become a self-fulfilling prophecy. But that wasn't what I wanted.*

He tried to gather himself and looked at the baby in his arms, and joy filled him again. He laid her gently in the transparent plastic cot on wheels that stood in the room and took a few photographs. The baby began to fuss, so he picked her up again, and she settled.

After a while she fell asleep, and Elias gently laid her back in the plastic cot because he needed the toilet. Then he sat down on the visitor's chair and felt wretched, his face as expressionless as ever, even though his thoughts were spinning with worry for Lovisa. A nurse looked into the room, but Elias said nothing.

At last a doctor came in, his expression grave.

– Hello, I'm the doctor responsible for stabilising Lovisa following the complications during delivery. I have both good and bad news. She is alive, and she'll be brought into this room shortly. I have to inform you, however, that she is currently in a coma, but we are doing everything we can for her. She'll be transferred to the ICU as soon as possible.

Elias went cold inside and found it hard to take in what the doctor had said. He tried to speak, but the words caught somewhere in the chaos of his mind. The doctor gave him a brief nod and left.

Shortly afterwards, Lovisa was wheeled into the room on a hospital bed, where the team would work to stabilise her before she could be safely transferred to the ICU. She was so pale that Elias almost thought she looked dead already. A midwife stood at her side monitoring her vital signs, while a nurse kept a drip and blood transfusions running. Elias

didn't dare touch her. The slightest contact felt as though it might make things worse. His expression was, if anything, even more blank than usual when the nurse turned to him. His empty gaze and absence of visible emotion made the nurse increasingly certain that the baby would at least temporarily need to be taken into social care. Calmly but professionally, she said:

– I just want to let you know that we've contacted Children's Social Care regarding your newborn baby. They'll be here shortly.

– Why?! Elias replied sharply.

– It's standard procedure when the mother has serious complications, the nurse said, slightly on the defensive. They'll be here soon, and you'll need to accept that.

– Fine, fine, Elias replied curtly.

The nurse looked at him for a moment, troubled by his sharp reaction and his shut-down expression. She noted everything down and waited impatiently for Children's Social Care to arrive.

A social worker arrived soon afterwards. The nurse met her in the corridor and asked her to wait there while she went back to fetch the father. When she walked back into Lovisa's room, Elias wasn't there. She felt her anxiety rise. Had he left? How long had he been gone? She had been focused on Lovisa. She looked round and eventually found him in a treatment room, sitting with the baby in his arms and a feeding bottle in his hand.

– You're not giving her ordinary milk, I hope!

– Infant formula. It was in the fridge. I can buy a replacement if I wasn't supposed to take it. My daughter is hungry.

The nurse glanced at the bottle.

– It's not cold, is it? And the bottle is clean?

– Why wouldn't it be? The sign there says "clean bottles and teats," so I took it from there. Then I warmed the milk to wrist temperature in the microwave. Do you think I'm an idiot, or what?

– I do beg your pardon. The social worker is here now and would like to speak with you.

– Who is it?

– From Children's Social Care. I'll fetch her.

She thought: *He hasn't understood yet. Thank goodness Social Care is here.* Elias looked towards the corridor, thought it over, and quickly ran through in his mind which social workers he knew who might be called out at this point. When he caught sight of her, he was still surprised.

– Oh, hello, Jessica. What are you doing here?

– Hello, Elias, are you here? I'm looking for a father whose partner has gone into a coma… oh, is that a new little one you've got there? Wait… are you the one who's… For goodness' sake! Is it Lovisa who's in a coma?

– I'm afraid so. Yes. This is our baby.

Jessica turned to the nurse and said:

– Thank you for contacting us, but no further action will be taken. Elias is perfectly capable on his own.

The nurse looked surprised.

– How do you know each other?

– That's confidential.

– Jessica was my social worker when I was in foster care about 10 years ago.

– Oh, what a coincidence. But that doesn't necessarily mean anything, does it?

– Well, also…

Another nurse passed in the corridor. He recognised her by her two-toned hair.

– Ask her, by the way, Elias said, pointing.

The nurse looked uncertain but called after the woman:

– Mira! Could you come here a moment?

In the meantime, the baby had let go of the bottle, and Elias moved her to his shoulder with a practised hand, patting her gently on the back to wind her. Mira came into the room and caught sight of him.

– Oh hello! Elias, isn't it? Looking after yet another baby?

– My own, actually. Could you explain to the nurse here, who still hasn't told me her name, that I know how to care for a newborn?

– Of course I can. Annika, this is Elias. He's an emergency foster carer for Children's Social Care. He took in Julia's baby. Ring any bells? Her father went berserk and hit her. Julia ended up being taken into care as well.

– He shoved you too, Elias said. I hope you're all right. I'm sorry.

– I needed a bit of patching up, but it wasn't your fault. It was his, hundred per cent. How did things turn out afterwards?

– Well, you're all bound by confidentiality, I assume? The outcome was that Alva, as the baby was named, was placed with Julia, who came back into the grandmother's care after she filed for divorce. Not ideal, but I expect the girls will be fine.

Annika felt her assumptions about Elias's complete detachment and incompetence begin to shake. Suddenly the reality was clear: Elias was not merely capable. He was experienced and confident with babies, and known for it on the maternity ward.

– I'm so sorry, Elias, Annika said. I seem to have completely misjudged you. With your background, you'll make an excellent parent, I'm sure. I was just worried because you seemed totally unaffected by what had happened here.

– I have ASD, so I'm good at hiding my feelings. If you really want to know, I'm desperately worried about my beloved Lovisa, and it's genuinely distressing to see her like this. But at the same time, I'm over the moon about this little angel, and not in the slightest bit worried about looking after her.

By this point the baby had finished burping, and Elias had shifted her back into his arms and was gazing at her tenderly. Annika could see clearly that Elias knew very well how to hold a newborn and support her head. She tried to

think of something comforting to say but couldn't find anything. It was Jessica who spoke instead:

– You know where to come if you need any respite or other support, I assume.

– Yes, I suppose it'll be here in town, since that's where I'm registered.

– Exactly. I can be your contact if so. But there won't be any investigation into your family.

Elias had already begun to drift, lost in thoughts turning round and round in his head. Annika hurried back to Lovisa's room while Jessica headed for the exit.

Elias gazed tenderly at the baby and suddenly realised he ought to contact Lovisa's parents. He pulled up the photo of the baby on his phone and sent it to Karin. He had been given her number precisely for this moment. Then he sat with the phone in his hand, knowing he also had to tell them what had happened to Lovisa. What time was it? He glanced up at the clock on the wall. It was still early afternoon.

The phone pinged. It was Karin. "Oh, what a little angel! Did the birth go well?" Elias typed: "The baby is fine, but Lovisa is dying." *No, no, I can't write that*. He deleted it and wrote instead: "Lovisa has gone into a coma." *No, I can't write that either*.

He sat with his thumb over the screen, feeling his thoughts stall and go in circles. *How do I tell them this? Should I ask someone from the ward to ring them? No, this is my responsibility,* he thought. *Should I use Lovisa's*

phone, since she can make video calls? No, that would be violating her privacy.

There was only one option left. And he hated it. He pressed the call button, with a hand that barely wanted to obey.

– Hello, it's Karin. Oh goodness… hello, Elias?! You're ringing me?! I can hardly believe it! Is everything all right?

– Not all right… Elias said. The words came in fragments, as though they ran out somewhere in his throat. Lovisa is… she… she might not make it. She's in a coma. I don't know… I can't…

His voice broke. He began to sob and couldn't get any more words out. Karin understood immediately that this was serious.

– Do you mean there were complications? That Lovisa might not survive?

– Yes, Elias said between sobs.

– You're not on your own, Elias. We'll come down as fast as we can, and we'll get through this together.

Karin hung up and immediately rang her husband. He didn't answer but sent a text: "In a meeting." Karin replied: "Ring me. Ring me now. Sod your meeting." He realised something was seriously wrong. Karin never wrote like that. He apologised to the room, stepped out, and rang back.

– What's going on, darling? This is an extremely important meeting that I've had a great deal of trouble arranging, he said.

– Lovisa has had her baby, but it went very badly wrong, and she may not survive. Elias rang, and you know how much it takes for him to speak on the phone. I'm going to them right now, whatever you say!

– I'll pick you up at your office. It's on the way. We'll go together. Our daughter is more important than this meeting.

Kenneth went back in and said, to everyone's astonishment, that he regretfully had to end the meeting for personal reasons. Soon he was on his way. When he picked Karin up, she already had the phone to her ear, trying to reach someone in charge on the ward. Eventually she managed to speak to a nurse, but was given no further details.

Meanwhile, back at the hospital, a porter came and wheeled Lovisa up to the ICU, and Elias went with her. There was no cot for a newborn there, so Elias stayed by Lovisa's bed with the baby in his arms. The baby was unexpectedly calm, and he was able to focus on keeping her warm and safe while the staff attended to Lovisa.

After a few hours, his phone pinged. It was a text from Karin:

"We're nearly there, Elias. Has anything changed since we last spoke?"

"They've moved Lovisa to SICU."

What's that? she had time to think before the next text came.

“Surgical Intensive Care Unit, Central Block, Level 6, Lift Lobby A.”

While Kenneth drove faster than he should have, Karin thought about Elias. *He must be completely shattered. And yet he has enough self-control to send exactly the information we need. So unexpected, and yet so like him.*

Soon they walked into the room and saw a pale Lovisa in her bed. Elias was sitting beside her, looking as though nothing had happened. He had laid the baby next to Lovisa inside the bed’s safety rail. Karin reached out her arms to Elias, who simply stood up without coming closer. Karin gave him a hug, and he let her, mostly for her sake.

Then he turned his gaze to the baby and stayed completely still. Karin lifted her and smiled:

– Just look at her! She’s the image of Lovisa as a baby, isn’t she, darling?

Kenneth nodded, but discreetly pointed towards Elias. He looked unmoved, but Kenneth understood it was only a mask.

– I’ll go and track down a doctor so we can get some information about Lovisa’s condition, while you talk to Elias, he said.

Karin tried to reach Elias, but he was more withdrawn than usual. Kenneth couldn’t get any clear information about Lovisa’s condition either. All he could gather was that the next few days would be critical.

Karin and Kenneth stood in silence for a while, watching Elias, who sat still beside Lovisa and the baby. A nurse came

by and gave a brief summary of the routines and visiting hours. She pointed out that normally a maximum of two relatives were permitted in the ICU at one time, and that three was therefore one too many. But with a gentle smile she made an exception on this occasion, since this was their first visit and Lovisa had only just arrived with the small baby. Elias barely looked up. His eyes stayed fixed on the baby, and nothing the nurse said seemed to reach him.

Karin reached out carefully towards him, but he didn't react.

– It's already evening, Elias, Kenneth said. Come with us to the hospital restaurant and have something to eat. Our treat.

He simply shook his head.

– You need to get some food inside you, Elias, Karin said with gentle insistence. The staff here have got Lovisa completely covered.

No response. They realised Elias wasn't himself right now and that nothing they said would reach him. Kenneth looked at Karin. They didn't need to say a word.

– We have to go now, Karin said. We'll come back next weekend, when we're not working. Take care of yourself until then, Elias.

Elias didn't answer and stayed where he was. The silence felt heavy. His thoughts spun faster than he could follow them, and a pressure was building inside him, a mixture of anxiety, guilt, and helplessness. *I don't know how much*

more I can take, he thought as he finally left the hospital when visiting hours were over.

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23



Elias drove to the hospital every day that followed and spent most of the time at Lovisa's side, for as long as visiting hours allowed, from eleven until eight. He had brought the pram, where the baby slept when she wasn't lying next to Lovisa. It also held nappies, bottles, infant formula, and everything else she needed. After a few days with no change, his spirits began to sink. The doctor spoke only of all the possible complications that might arise, and he grew increasingly desperate.

He was sitting at home on the sofa one evening, feeling more and more low. It felt as though it was only a matter of time before Lovisa would die. *I can't live without her,* he

thought. *If she dies, I'll end my own life*. He recognised these as destructive thoughts and suddenly remembered Jessica, who had told him he could contact her if he needed support. So he sent her a text message without stopping to think that it was already late:

"Hi, Jessica. I'm not doing well. Don't know how I'll cope. If Lovisa doesn't survive, I see no future for myself. I'm not functioning right now, and I need help."

Elias sat looking at his phone and wondering whether she would reply. Then he heard the baby starting to whimper. It wasn't her usual cry when something was wrong. It was something altogether different. He went into the bedroom, feeling almost irritated with her.

– What's the matter, my angel? You've just been fed, and your nappy is dry. Why are you fussing? I really can't manage right now.

He picked her up and confirmed what he had suspected: she was perfectly dry, warm, and apparently had nothing wrong with her. The moment she was in his arms, she fell silent at once and looked up at Elias. He was confused and wondered what she wanted. Then suddenly he understood. The baby simply wanted **him**. Nothing else. Him.

He carried the baby through to the living room and looked at her tenderly. His whole body filled with happiness and love for her. This was exactly what he had longed for over so many years, almost since he had been a child himself. Now his life was finally complete! His ears sang with pure joy.

His gaze fell on his phone, still lying on the table, and he froze. *The message to Jessica! Oh God!* He picked it up and read it again. *This could be completely misunderstood,* he thought. There was no way to take it back either. It was an SMS. He quickly typed:

"Hi again, Jessica. Please ignore my last SMS. Everything is fine here, and I'm happy with the baby."

He carried on interacting with the baby, talking to her and trying out different names. When he pulled funny faces, her little arms would wave around, as though she was trying to join in. Then suddenly he hit upon the baby's name and said it several times over.

– Sonja, you know I love you, Sonja. You're the best thing that's ever happened to me, Sonja. Yes, my angel, you are Sonja.

When he said "Sonja", he thought he could see a response from the baby, as though she liked the name. He was completely and utterly absorbed in Sonja when the doorbell rang. He lifted her up and went to the door. It was Jessica outside, and Elias felt a little embarrassed.

– Hi, you didn't have to come over. Especially not this late. Everything I need right now is right here in my arms, he said, rubbing his nose against Sonja's.

– May I come in all the same? I know you far too well.

Elias nodded and went through to the living room. Jessica sat down opposite him.

– Elias, how are you really? I understand that you don't send a text like that without a reason.

He hesitated for a long time. Jessica waited patiently for him to explain.

– Well, that SMS... I was just sitting here brooding about Lovisa, who probably isn't going to make it. The doctor said, "all the indicators are pointing in the right direction", but then listed every possible complication that could arise. It feels as though there's no chance, and I don't know how I'll manage without her. Even though I've been alone my whole life, I don't want to be alone any more. At the same time, I have Sonja here. She really does light up my whole life. This little angel is everything I've ever dreamed of, so everything is actually fine.

– I understand, Elias. You're going through a very difficult time right now. Do you trust me? Can you answer a few questions, honestly and without questioning why I'm asking them?

– Of course. I do know you, after all.

– Can you describe how you first met Lovisa?

Elias talked enthusiastically about everything: his first impression, the panic at McDonald's, and then how Lovisa hadn't given up. Jessica continued to ask about his happiest memory, his worst memory, and how he had proposed to her. Elias was puzzled, but answered all her questions as best he could. Then suddenly Jessica said:

– Do you know what, Elias? Lovisa can't die. It's impossible.

– What do you mean? The doctors...

Elias fell quiet, feeling confused.

– What I mean is that I got you to smile happily when you were talking about her. That means that whatever happens to her in hospital, she will always live on in your memories and in your heart. Isn't that right? And then look at the baby here! You're calling her Sonja, aren't you? She only has a few wisps of hair yet, but what colour do you think it is?

– Hm, it looks a bit reddish.

– Exactly, and why? Because Lovisa's genes are in her, which means Lovisa will live on in Sonja.

Elias worked through everything Jessica had said. It was true, in a way. But Jessica wasn't finished yet. Not even close.

– Then I rang the hospital and managed to speak to one of the night staff. What they mean by "all the indicators are pointing in the right direction" is that she's on the mend. She's young and strong and is expected to come through this. They have to mention potential complications so as not to lose credibility, but that doesn't mean those complications are likely. They simply can't make any promises, so they're deliberately vague.

– Oh God, wow. Vague, you said? So it's perfectly set up for me to misunderstand what they're telling me!

– That's precisely my point. And finally, Elias, you will never be alone again. You have Sonja, haven't you? And Lovisa's parents will always be there for you. You're the man their daughter loves with all her heart, and on top of that you've given them a grandchild. That means more than you realise. And don't forget that I came rushing over the

moment you breathed a word about needing help. Anna and Peter will naturally support you too if you need it, won't they? You have a support network now. One that will always be at your side.

Elias sat quietly for a long time, thinking. *She actually means it… I'm not alone… Someone… some people genuinely care about me*. Jessica let him think in peace. She remembered from when she had been his social worker that he often needed time to process. At last he said:

– Do you know what the worst part is? With my logical mind, I should have been able to work all of this out for myself. You're right about everything, and now I feel bad for worrying you.

– You shouldn't, Elias. In fact, I'm very glad you thought of me when you needed support.

Jessica left after talking a little more about the baby, just to make sure Elias was calm again.

He had a good deal to think about, but there was one thing he realised he should have done days ago. He took Sonja and drove round to Anna and Peter's. When he then rang the bell at the familiar door, his face was entirely expressionless. It was Anna who opened the door.

– Oh, hello, Elias.

– Hi. I'm sorry for coming so late.

– That's all right. We haven't gone to bed yet. Who've you got there? Is it another little one from Social Care, or… wait… is it your own?

– Actually, yes. You've become a grandmother.

– Wow, congratulations. May I hold her? Peter, Peter, come here. You've become a grandfather.

Elias lifted Sonja across into Anna's arms. Peter hurried over and was equally enchanted by the baby. He reached out his hands to Anna and was given Sonja to hold himself. Anna turned to Elias:

– Did the birth go well? Is Lovisa at home resting?

Everything broke inside Elias at that. He began to sob and took a few steps forward, wrapping his arms round Anna. She was taken aback but put her arms round Elias, and the only response this time was that he hugged her even harder. His tears soaked into her shoulder while Peter, stunned, stood beside them looking as though he couldn't make sense of what he was seeing. Sonja started to whimper in his arms.

– Elias, just tell me one thing, Peter said. Is Lovisa alive?

Elias gave a nod against Anna's shoulder.

– Then everything will be all right, I promise, Peter continued. She's young and strong, so she'll very likely make a full recovery.

– You've come to exactly the right place, Elias, Anna said softly. We're here for you. Come inside and tell us everything.

She stroked his back and was surprised to find that he didn't pull away but seemed to welcome it. Then she led Elias inside with her arm round his back while he tried to control his tears. Soon they were sitting on the sofa. Anna

still had her arm round him and, to her surprise, he didn't object. At last he managed to get himself under control:

– I'm sorry about that. I don't know what came over me.

– Humanity came over you, Anna replied. You're human, and we all cry when we're sad. Tell us what's happened and how we can help you when you're ready.

Sonja was still in Peter's arms, still whimpering. Elias gently disentangled himself from Anna and reached out his arms for Sonja. Peter placed her in them. She fell quiet again. Elias took a few deep breaths. Then he told them everything that had happened, in his usual matter-of-fact way.

Anna was appalled by all that had happened to Lovisa, and said in her gentlest voice:

– Is there anything we can do for you, Elias? Anything at all, because we think of ourselves as your real parents. If you need someone to look after Sonja, for instance, just say the word.

– Everything I needed I've already been given. People who care, a shoulder to cry on, even, he said with a wry smile. But what I truly need is right here in my arms. Did you hear how she whimpered until I took her back? That's her way of comforting me.

Elias stayed with them for several hours. Anna asked whether he had eaten anything all day, and when he shook his head she made a light supper for him. Slowly he began to feel that what Jessica had said was actually true.

The following day he went to the hospital as usual and asked to speak with the doctor when he had time. After a few hours the doctor was free to see him, and Elias began:

– Thank you for making time. I need to understand what Lovisa's chances are. I'm asking you for two figures: the first is the probability of her surviving, and the second is, assuming she does survive, the probability of lasting damage.

– I understand that you're desperately looking for promises, but as a doctor, I'm unable to promise you specific figures, I'm afraid.

– I have ASD, so I don't want promises. I want straightforward statistics. I know that even 99.5% certainty is not the same as 100%. Do you see Sonja here? Statistically, she shouldn't exist. We used contraception with 99.5% reliability. And yet here she is.

Elias gazed tenderly at the baby in his arms.

– I'm not asking you for a promise. I'm asking for a qualified estimate, based on all your knowledge and experience. An educated guess, not a promise. Right now I believe her chances of surviving are below 10%. Anything above that would reduce my stress levels.

The doctor thought for a moment. He had never been asked this kind of question before. But he was aware of ASD and tried to come up with the best possible answer.

– Thank you for telling me. I'll explain things as clearly as I can, and I'll do everything I can to help. Lovisa is young and otherwise in good physical condition. Based on what I

know at this point, I would say her chances of survival are somewhere between eighty and ninety percent.

– All right. Oh God. That is unexpected. Thank you, Doctor. And what would you estimate the risk of lasting damage to be?

– That depends entirely on the definition. If you include scarring and the like, I'm afraid I would have to say the risk of lasting damage is essentially one hundred percent. But if you mean lasting, **disabling** damage, that is quite another matter. In that case I would estimate the risk is probably below ten percent. Any remaining impairments should also be manageable through rehabilitation to such a degree that they won't be life-changing.

Elias let out a breath, looked at Lovisa, then back at the doctor.

– Any estimate of when she might wake up, if she does?

– If everything goes as we hope, days to a couple of weeks. But again, I can't make any promises.

– Thank you, Doctor. I feel considerably better now that I have accurate information. And I know you're all doing your very best.

– We are, and let's all hold on to the hope that everything turns out well in the end.

Elias went on running through the options, building tables in his mind of every possible outcome. He filled in the boxes with figures and tried to prepare himself for every eventuality. He continued to let Sonja lie next to Lovisa, in

the hope that Lovisa might sense her presence and draw strength from it.

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Time passed, and Elias was at the hospital for almost the entire visiting period every day. Lovisa's parents came down every weekend and stayed overnight. He didn't particularly welcome their presence. It felt mostly heavy and intrusive, as though their own anxiety filled the room. Even so, he understood that they were probably there primarily for his sake.

He himself had fallen into the habit of stopping off at Anna and Peter's every day on his way home from the hospital. Anna reached him in a way that calmed and steadied him, and she would offer him food that he almost automatically accepted. Peter was equally warm and dependable, and their presence made the pain a little more bearable.

Despite all the support, despair still continued to grow inside him. Would Lovisa ever wake up? He felt the panic creeping up on him, the pressure building in his head. For the first time, he began to wonder whether his capacity for logical thought might not be enough this time.

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24



On a Friday afternoon, Elias was sitting quietly in the visitor's chair as usual, his own thoughts his only company. Sonja had just been fed and was sleeping peacefully in the pram at the foot of the bed. Suddenly he heard a faint moan. At first he thought it was Sonja, but when he realised it was coming from Lovisa, he pressed the call button at once and took hold of her hand.

– Where… where am I? Lovisa whispered, trying to open her eyes.

– In hospital. You've been ill. Very ill.

She closed her eyes again. A few seconds passed before she opened them once more. A couple of nurses came into

the room, calm but watchful, to check why Elias had pressed the alarm.

– What… happened?

– There were complications during the delivery.

She frowned slightly. The delivery. Her hand moved tentatively towards her stomach. It was flat. It took a few seconds for the realisation to land.

– Oh… my baby?

She kept holding her stomach and looked at Elias with a worried expression.

– It became very urgent. I… I was forced to choose between you and the baby.

Lovisa's eyes opened wider. Her breathing quickened.

– You… you chose…

The patient monitor beeped. Her pulse was rising. Too fast for Elias's liking.

– Calm down, darling. You mustn't get agitated.

– Where… WHERE is she?! Elias… you… you chose… WHERE IS MY BABY?!

He went quickly to the pram and lifted Sonja. With careful movements, he laid her on Lovisa's stomach, on top of the blanket, so as not to disturb the lines.

– Here is our daughter. She's fifteen days old now.

Lovisa's tears began to fall. She tried to draw the baby closer, but could only manage to let her hand rest there.

– I… can't…

– You don't need to, Elias said quietly. She's comfortable there.

Minutes later there were quick footsteps outside the door again. The doctor came in, glanced at the monitors, and gave Elias a nod. Then he turned his attention to Lovisa.

– You've woken up. That's excellent, the doctor said. You've been unconscious and in intensive care for two weeks as a result of blood loss following a complete placental abruption. The emergency caesarean made the situation even more critical, but you're stable and conscious again now.

He paused, letting the words sink in.

– Let me do a brief check so we can see how you're doing. No, no, the baby can stay where she is.

When the doctor had finished his examination, he looked at Elias and smiled.

– Could I have the updated figures, Doctor?

– I'd say around ninety-five per cent and a few per cent, respectively.

– Thank you, Doctor.

The doctor and nurses left the room, satisfied that Lovisa's vital signs were stable, and Lovisa looked at Elias and Sonja in confusion.

– You… have to explain, Elias darling… she whispered.

– One moment. There's something I need to do first.

Elias took out his phone and dialled a number. Lovisa was astonished to see Elias actually making a call, he who could never manage to talk on the phone. When the other person answered, Elias said:

– Hi, it's Elias. I did promise to let you know if Lovisa's condition changed. Today it did… I… well, I can't… Here… I'll pass you to someone…

Karin called out to Kenneth, realising that Elias never rang without good reason. Something bad must have happened, perhaps the very worst. Elias held the phone to Lovisa's ear, and she answered weakly:

– Hello?

– Hi, this is Karin, Lovisa's mother. Has something happened?

Kenneth was now standing beside her, anxiously waiting as well.

– Hi… Mum…?

– Lovisa…? Darling?! Is it really you?

– Mum… I've had my baby.

– Wow! You're awake! We've waited so long. We're driving down right now. Oh, I can't wait to talk to you again!

– So tired…

Elias took the phone back and listened for a moment.

– You're of course welcome as usual. Text me when you're nearly here, and I'll help you get in.

He hung up without saying goodbye, and Lovisa said in a weak voice:

– Tell me everything… later… need to rest…

– Of course, darling, Elias said, and gave her a kiss.

Lovisa fell asleep, but Elias wasn't worried. The monitor showed different values and patterns. Besides, she was moving the way she usually did in her sleep.

Elias smiled as he thought of all the bruises he had collected from Lovisa's kicking. To be on the safe side, he placed Sonja back in the pram.

After a few hours, Lovisa opened her eyes again and looked round, not quite as confused as before.

– Are you feeling a little better now, darling?

– I… feel a bit better… you're… still here?

– I've been sitting here every day during visiting hours, hoping you'd wake up. I've finally got my reward.

– Our… baby? I… want to… hold her… again.

Elias fetched Sonja from the pram.

– Here she is, our little angel.

Elias helped Lovisa to lift her arms so she could hold the baby. She gazed at length at Sonja's face and tiny features, her eyes filled with both wonder and warmth. She blinked slowly.

– She looks… well. You've really cared for her. Has it… been hard… on your own with her?

– Not at all. She's been very good. Yes, she does keep me up at nights, but you know me.

– Apart from that? Any… problems?

– It hasn't been pleasant having you lying here, as you can imagine. And, well… I've been… sort of unfaithful two, maybe three times. It doesn't feel at all good…

– Unfaithful…?

She blinked slowly again. Her mind couldn't quite form the rest of the question. Elias looked at his phone and typed something.

– Who are you… texting?

– Your mother. They've arrived now, and once they've come up I'll need to let them in.

– Why?

– It's well past the end of visiting hours. But I've spoken to the staff here, and we have an arrangement: as long as I behave myself, I can stay as long as I like, as long as I don't sleep over.

Lovisa closed her eyes and tried to take in everything Elias had said. Had he really dared speak to the staff about bending the rules? And unfaithful? She tried to focus, but her mind wasn't quite with her yet.

After a while, Elias went to let her parents in. Soon they were sitting beside Lovisa and hugging her warmly. Even Kenneth hugged her. They talked about how worried they had been, and how grateful they were that she had finally woken up.

– We've had constant updates from Elias, who has faithfully sat here with you every day from morning to evening.

– Ah, typical of my Elias…

– Well, Lovisa, darling. As I understand it, visiting hours ended over an hour ago, so I imagine we ought to leave you now. You still seem tired. But we'll come back tomorrow. With your permission, we'll follow you home, Elias.

– Of course, you're always welcome in our home.

As on the previous weekends, Elias made up their beds in the children's room. Karin put together a late supper for them all, and Elias let her. He was considerably calmer than before and spent time with Sonja. Soon everyone went to bed and slept better than they had in a long while.

The following morning Elias made breakfast for Karin and Kenneth. It was plain to them that he was considerably more composed and at peace now.

– We are going to the hospital soon, aren't we? Karin asked.

– Of course, Elias replied. Though Lovisa will probably mostly be sleeping today too, according to what they've told me. There'll likely be others coming today as well.

– Oh, who then?

– My parents, naturally. And Teddy wanted to visit too.

– But how can they know that Lovisa has woken up?

– I told them yesterday, of course.

Kenneth looked at Elias thoughtfully. Soon Elias was driving them to the hospital. Lovisa was asleep when Karin and Elias came in, while Kenneth waited in the relatives' room. Elias sat down beside her and took her hand. As though Lovisa sensed his presence, she woke and said:

– Hello, Elias darling. Back again?

– Of course. Your parents too.

Elias remained at her side while Karin leant over the bed, speaking quietly but quickly, asking questions and dabbing

at the corners of her eyes with the back of her hand. Lovisa answered briefly, smiled faintly, and closed her eyes between words.

Then the door opened again. Anna, Peter, and Teddy had already arrived at the hospital. Elias got to his feet at once.

– How did you get in? he asked.

– Kenneth let us in, Teddy replied.

– Wait a moment, Elias said calmly. Two at a time. The rest wait in the relatives' room.

His voice was quiet but firm. He turned to Karin:

– You need to go out for a while. Anna and Peter will take the next turn.

Karin looked as though she wanted to protest, but Elias pointed towards the door until she nodded. Teddy received a brief gesture from Elias.

– You too. All of you wait in the relatives' room.

Soon more people arrived: Oscar, Maya, Victor, Viola, and little Sebastian, who couldn't understand why he had to be quiet. The ward was filled with voices, questions, laughter, and small feet running about. Elias went out to them.

– This is intensive care, he said. Maximum two at a time with Lovisa. She can't manage more than that. Hospital rules, besides.

To keep order, Elias always accompanied those he allowed in. At the same time, he made sure Lovisa had calm and quiet. She was still sleeping a great deal. When Sebastian grew restless, Elias picked him up without

hesitation and settled him while he methodically worked out the order of turns. The visits were kept short and focused, so that Lovisa wouldn't be overstimulated.

When it was time for the next group, he escorted them out to the relatives' room and said quietly:

– We're swapping now.

Everything was controlled and methodical. The chaos in the relatives' room, with voices, laughter, small feet, and protesting adults, was his responsibility to manage. However, inside Lovisa's room, the calm was total. Throughout everything, he also kept on top of Sonja's care: feeding her, changing her nappy, letting her sleep, and above all letting Lovisa hold her as often as she wanted. When Lovisa's eyes grew heavy, he made sure she was left to sleep in peace.

– She needs to rest now, he explained, ensuring quiet fell over the room.

Kenneth found it hard to take in how Elias was behaving. So calm, and yet with a quiet authority that made everyone comply without question. Every movement, every word seemed to command respect and order, and Kenneth couldn't help marvelling at the complete control he radiated.

When visiting hours were over, he calmly explained that everyone needed to go home, himself included. He drove home with Kenneth and Karin, who slept in the children's room again, while the others made their way back to their own homes.

The following day, Elias and his parents-in-law returned to the hospital after breakfast. Lovisa was a little better and was helped to take a few steps with Elias supporting her. The doctors had said it was important that she moved about as much as she could manage. The pain was still intense, but Elias made sure she didn't overdo it and encouraged her gently when needed. Kenneth studied Elias with a thoughtful expression.

– Elias, I have something I'd like to say to you, Kenneth said. It's both seriously meant and a little profound. I particularly want to say this in front of my wife and my daughter. It concerns what I think of you as a person.

– This probably isn't necessary, darling, Karin said.

– I rather think it is. Elias, since the day I first met you, I've harboured a reservation about your suitability as Lovisa's husband. I've seen you as uncertain, at times unsteady, and I've watched our daughter carry you more than once when you haven't been able to carry yourself. That has worried me. A marriage must rest on mutual strength, and I've doubted whether this one would truly endure.

– Dad… stop it!

– Let me finish. During this ordeal, Elias, you have shown a strength that is remarkable. This is one of the heaviest crosses a person can be asked to bear, and you have borne it without Lovisa at your side. And yet you have done so with grace. You have not only endured the grief, you have also taken responsibility for everything practical. Our grandchild is safe, healthy, and well cared for. You have visited our

daughter every single day, kept us informed of her condition, and even ensured that her child has come to know her mother, despite her lying in a coma.

– Dad… that's exactly why I wanted Elias. From the very beginning.

– I understand that now. But he has also looked after us, your parents.

Kenneth turned his gaze to Elias.

– Am I wrong in suspecting that you haven't always found it easy having us here every weekend?

– I'll admit it has been a strain for me, but you needed it as much as I did, Elias said.

– So my view of you today, Elias, is this: we could not have asked for a better son-in-law. You have been a testament to what a man can be when it truly matters. I am truly sorry that I did not see it sooner.

Elias felt embarrassed and wasn't quite sure how to respond. At last he simply said:

– Thank you, I suppose. That means more than you might think.

– Now, I was thinking of taking you to lunch here at the hospital restaurant, Kenneth said. Then we'll head home and leave Lovisa in your extremely capable hands.

Karin and Kenneth gave Lovisa warm farewell hugs. Then Elias let himself finally be treated to lunch before returning to Lovisa alone. She was still tired and slept a great deal. Elias let Sonja sleep beside her as much as possible. The

closeness meant she could rest undisturbed while Elias sat patiently beside her.

When he drove to the hospital on Monday, it was with a considerably lighter heart.

– Hello, darling, are you feeling better today?

– Actually, yes, Elias darling. Considerably better.

– Here, I imagine you'd like to hold Sonja again.

Elias carefully lifted Sonja from the pram and placed her in Lovisa's arms. Lovisa held the baby with great care, studying every small detail, but Elias noticed her arms trembling slightly. He quickly slipped a pillow under Sonja for support and let Lovisa rest quietly while she looked at her daughter.

– She's so wonderful, absolutely amazing. Has she been good for you?

– She has, yes, Sonja is the sweetest thing. A lot of work, naturally, but that's normal.

– What have you been calling her? Sonja?

– Yes, I'm sorry. I just didn't want her to be a nameless baby. We hadn't discussed names, and if you'd like something different, that's fine. I haven't registered it yet.

Lovisa turned the name over in her mind.

– Sonja… Sonja! Yes, she looks like a Sonja.

– Yes, I was thinking of my first foster children. You know, Carl and Sonja, the two I looked after.

– Wow… that's beautiful… You're giving her the name of the child you lost…

– It feels completely right to me. As though I never really lost her. And Sonja seemed to like the name too.

– And she seems… settled with me…

– I let Sonja lie beside you every day so she could get to know you. Get used to your scent and so on…

– You always think ahead… So logical.

Lovisa closed her eyes and remembered something that had shocked her earlier.

– But… you rang my parents. Actually rang! Who are you, and where is Elias?

Elias laughed openly. It felt so liberating to be able to laugh after all these weeks.

– Right, well, you see, when the doctor had told me you'd gone into a coma and might die, I realised I had to let your parents know. I'd already sent a photo of our little angel to your mother, and she was asking how you were after the birth. So I typed that you were in a coma and might die.

– Gosh! Did you actually send that?

– No, even I realised that would have been wrong. I sat there thinking about what to do. Ask someone else? No, I'm your proxy and their son-in-law. In the end I concluded I had no choice, so I rang her. It was difficult in so many ways. But when you have to, you have to. They drove straight down.

– Doesn't surprise me. Have they… come down several times?

– Yes, every single weekend, Saturday to Sunday.

– Were they staying at a hotel?

– What do you take me for? They stayed with us, of course.

– Was that… hard?

– It was incredibly hard. Your mother rushed around cleaning and hoovering and cooking. I really struggled with her going at everything in the house.

– Did you complain to… her?

– No, I guessed it was probably her way of coping with the worry about you. Perhaps it was also her way of supporting me, even if that wasn't quite the support I needed. No, I let her get on with it. Your father sorted the post and papers in the living room. Though it was only two nights in total while you were in a coma, so I survived.

Lovisa closed her eyes and thought for a moment. Then she remembered something else he had said.

– But now… wait… you said you'd been unfaithful?! I don't believe it… What do you mean?

– Yes, your parents leapt into the car and drove straight here when I'd rung them, as I said. They must have left their respective jobs. So when your mother came in, she had tears in her eyes and tried to hug me. I let her, mostly for her sake. But it felt as though I was betraying you. As though I was being unfaithful.

– No, Elias darling. Not at all… Did it feel better?

– Well, yes, once she let go, it felt good. But it got worse. A few days later I was sitting at home feeling dreadful. I almost felt I didn't want to live without you.

– But… Sonja then?

– That was just it. I don't believe in telepathy or any kind of mystical bond between parents and children. But every time I'm genuinely sad, Sonja starts to whimper. When I then pick her up, she says, "Daddy, don't be sad. You've got me, and I love you."

– She can't talk yet.

– Not with words, no. But it feels as though that's exactly what she's saying when I'm low. Anyway, one time when I was really down, I texted Jessica.

– Your old social worker? Why her?

– Well, the nurse on the maternity ward raised a safeguarding concern with Children's Social Care because you were in a coma and I was… well… I was me. Guess who turned up?

– Not Jessica, surely?

– Yes, Jessica. Rather funny, really. In any case, she got them to understand that I'm perfectly capable with children, even without you. But she also said I should contact her if I needed support. That's why I texted her.

– Yes… that sounds like you. Logical.

– When she came over, she did three things. Firstly, she helped me understand that you can't die, because you'll always live on in my heart. Then she explained that what the doctor had been saying means you'll most likely pull through, whereas I'd been understanding it to mean you were going to die. She talked to me so that I felt calm again. Can you see now in what way I was unfaithful with Jessica?

– No… my brain isn't quite back to full working order yet. Explain?

– Isn't it obvious? It's always you who calms me down when I'm anxious. And it's always you who interprets what people say when I've misunderstood. But this time it was Jessica doing it instead. That gives me a guilty conscience.

Lovisa laughed out loud, then winced in pain and pressed her hand to her stomach.

– Please… don't make me laugh. It hurts.

She rested for a moment before continuing, more quietly.

– Jessica being there… it simply means you had someone who gave you support. That's not a betrayal. But… three times?

– Well, Jessica also said that Anna and Peter ought to be part of my support network, given that I call them my **real** parents. I realised I hadn't even told them I'd become a father. So I drove round with Sonja and introduced her. When Anna asked after you, I completely fell apart. Totally out of control.

– How?

– I threw myself at Anna and hugged her hard, and she hugged me back. It went on for quite a while, and that's where the third time came in. Somehow all the awfulness drained out of me, and I felt better. It really did feel as though I was being unfaithful. Seeking comfort from a stranger like that.

Lovisa looked at him for a moment. She smiled faintly.

– Oh, Elias…

She took a careful breath.

– I love the way you think. But Anna isn't a stranger. She's your mum.

Elias nodded slowly.

– It's the most natural thing in the world… that she comforts you when everything falls apart, Lovisa said.

A brief pause.

– That's not unfaithfulness, she continued. That's a son who needs his mum. I've hugged my mum when I've been sad.

– So I haven't been unfaithful to you, then?

– Not at all. You simply used… your support network. There's nothing wrong with that.

– "Support network." Exactly what Jessica called it.

– I'm proud of you, Elias darling. You're holding everything together. Even with two jobs on top of it all.

– Well, I know the plan had been for me to take parental leave later, but with you in hospital I had to start it immediately. I notified HR at work, then told my manager and my Social Care supervisor. Neither of them was particularly happy about it, but once I explained the situation they had no choice but to accept it. I also contacted your workplace, told them what had happened, and kept them updated with what the doctors have said.

– Wow, as I said, who are you and what have you done with Elias? How did you manage all of it?

– Well, you were lying here, so I had no choice. And looking back on it now, it actually feels quite good.

Lovisa closed her eyes a little, and Elias let her take the time she needed. Suddenly she thought of something else that had seemed strange.

– By the way… the doctor and the "updated figures." What was that?

– Well, the doctor kept talking so vaguely about "indicators pointing in the right direction", so I made him give me two numbers instead. The probability of you surviving and the probability of you having lasting damage. Two weeks ago it was roughly 80-90% and under 10%, respectively, if you don't count scarring and that sort of thing. You'll very likely get some of that. Since then he's been updating the figures as things have progressed, and today it's over 95% that you'll make it and around 1% that you'll be seriously disabled. Those sound like excellent figures.

– Incredible!

Lovisa fell quiet, impressed that Elias had actually had such a serious conversation with the doctor and got answers in a form he could understand. Then she remembered that he had also mentioned getting the staff's permission to stay beyond visiting hours.

– And you've been allowed to stay late as well…

– Yes, I spoke to them and asked. I tried to be polite and friendly, the way I've learnt from you. Look them in the eye and so on. Well… I suppose I must have conducted myself adequately, because they were happy for me to come and go as I pleased.

– Honestly... not even that is a problem for you. Is there anything that's still hard for you?

– Yes. Having to wait until you come home again. That's going to be difficult. More than anything I'd like to carry you out to the car right now and drive you home.

Lovisa tried not to laugh again, because her stomach was still quite painful. She looked at Sonja, who was still lying in her arms, and studied her small face.

– Sonja is completely calm with you too, Elias said. When she's with other people, she usually whimpers until I take her back. She's quiet now. We can sit like this for a while. There's no need to hurry.

She nodded and smiled faintly, took a few deep breaths and felt the warmth from the baby giving her strength. After a long while, she let Elias take Sonja back to the pram. Elias said she should try to walk a bit more, so she got up, with him at her side for support, and took a few careful steps round the room. Her legs trembled, but every step was a small victory.

When she grew tired, they sat on the edge of the bed. Lovisa leant against Elias. Sonja lay in the pram in front of them, and they sat quietly for a while. There was no need to talk. Just breathe, look at the baby, and let her body rest.

Then came more careful questions. Lovisa wanted to know more about Sonja's routine, the doctors' assessments, and everything that had happened over the past weeks. Elias answered methodically, as he had before: short, precise explanations, repeated when needed. She listened, nodded,

and took in the details, but every exchange cost energy. Soon it was time to rest again.

While Lovisa slept, Elias sat and simply looked at her with tears in his eyes, though this time they were tears of happiness.

At last visiting hours came to an end and Elias drove home. The house felt so empty now, emptier than ever before. But soon Lovisa and Sonja would really be home, just the three of them. How would things go with Lovisa still so weak? Would the nights be sleepless? Would ordinary life collapse around them?

His thoughts kept turning. The inability to organise everything felt total. Something was about to happen, something that would change everything, even if he still couldn't understand in what way.

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25



At last, the day came when Lovisa could finally leave hospital, after several more weeks. Elias came alone, which surprised her and made her a little curious.

– Where's Sonja? she asked. Why isn't she with you?

– I asked Anna to look after her at home for a bit, so I've got both hands free to help you.

– Wow, you asked Anna for help! What have you done with Elias? You still haven't answered that question.

– Perhaps the old Elias disappeared when you went into a coma. What do you make of your newly reborn husband, then?

– Time for me to finally go home. I just need to wait for the doctor.

The doctor confirmed Lovisa was fit for discharge, and a nurse went through the paperwork with them, including instructions on how to continue her rehabilitation exercises at home. Elias listened carefully and committed everything to memory. Then, at last, it was time to leave hospital.

– Right, we're leaving this place. Can you help me up? It still hurts.

Elias helped Lovisa to her feet and then walked her out with careful steps. On the way out, Elias stopped at the nurses' station to thank everyone. He also greeted everyone he encountered in the corridor by name and thanked them as well. Lovisa could hardly believe her eyes and ears.

Soon they were home, and Lovisa wanted to go straight to the sofa. Anna was already there with Sonja in her arms. It was perfectly clear to Lovisa that Sonja had already got to know Anna, so they must have been meeting regularly. Lovisa sat and chatted with Anna while Elias took Sonja off to feed her.

– How has it been for you, Anna? I imagine it hasn't been entirely easy for you either.

– No… Elias was a wreck while you were in a coma. He came to us late one evening and… for the first time, he wanted a hug of his own accord. He needed comforting.

– Yes, he actually told me. Said it felt as though he was being unfaithful to me, just because of the hug.

Anna laughed cheerfully.

– That's so typical of our Elias, to think about it like that. Logical, and yet entirely wrong. After that he came every evening. I don't think he was eating during the day. I made sure he got something in his stomach. He'd stay for a few hours and just talk with us.

– It's absolutely wonderful that he's genuinely let you and Peter into his life at last.

– It really is. And at the same time he was completely focused on looking after both Sonja and you. He has a remarkable ability to set aside his own feelings when something more important demands his attention.

– That's the way he is, Lovisa said softly. My wonderful Elias. When it truly matters, he's there. It also shows that he really does love me and Sonja.

Elias came back and said gently:

– I only do what I can… and hope it's enough. But I want you both to know that I really do love you and Sonja.

Lovisa got to hold her daughter again, with Elias at her side. Sonja lay peacefully in her arms while they chatted and laughed a little with Anna. Soon Sonja fell asleep, and Lovisa felt the tiredness creeping over her after everything she had been through. When Anna got up to leave, she smiled at them both and said:

– Goodbye, Elias and Lovisa. See you tomorrow.

– Goodbye, Anna… Mum, Elias replied. We will.

– What did she mean, see you tomorrow? Lovisa asked when Elias came back after seeing Anna to the door.

– Well, it might get a bit chaotic here tomorrow, I'm afraid. Your parents are coming down. It's Saturday, after all. And I've invited Mum and Dad to dinner... I suppose, along with a few other people.

– **You** have invited guests? Which other people?

– Not that many: your baby brother Oscar and his girlfriend, and cousin Teddy, plus Adam and Axel from work. Oh, Jessica and Anders from Social Care are actually coming too. Victor and Viola said no, so we won't see Sebastian.

– Gosh, the whole house will be packed! How are you going to cope, Elias darling?

– Ask me again tomorrow evening. But, wait, doesn't something smell a bit off here? Sonja, my angel, have you filled your nappy again? Come on, Daddy'll sort it out!

Elias headed off with Sonja to the bathroom to clean her up and change her nappy. When he came back, Lovisa had fallen asleep on the sofa. He sat with Sonja in his arms for a while, holding her still and talking quietly, until it was time to feed her and put her down again. With some effort he then carried Lovisa through to the bedroom and fell asleep beside her.



The following evening the house was in full swing. Lovisa tried to help, but Elias gently guided her to the sofa so she could rest. She noticed how both Anna and Karin, as well as

Elias himself, spent most of the time in the kitchen. The others stood round her and asked how she was feeling.

Lovisa chatted and laughed as she always did. Two weeks in a coma and a month in hospital hadn't made her slow down. She was in her element, smiled easily, and enjoyed every moment. She was quite certain this was precisely why Elias had invited so many people.

When the food was on the table, everyone moved towards the kitchen and sat round the table. It was a little tight, but the conversations and laughter filled the room. Lovisa recognised her mother's pot roast, the cauliflower gratin that Anna usually made, and the rice that was entirely according to Elias's recipe with onion and ginger. She was fascinated to find that Elias hadn't merely accepted other people cooking. They had actually collaborated in the kitchen, quite unlike him, who usually operated as a one-man army.

Elias was unexpectedly talkative during the meal, almost as talkative as Lovisa. After they had eaten, Teddy and Adam began to clear the table. Lovisa waited for protests from Elias, but none came. He simply said calmly:

– Just load everything into the dishwasher, and I'll put it on afterwards. Let me get some containers for the leftovers.

Teddy, Adam, and several others began loading everything into the dishwasher, though in entirely the "wrong" way by Elias's usual standards. Lovisa thought he would soon complain or start rearranging things, but he only glanced in, moved one plate that was sitting at an angle, and switched the machine on.

After the meal, everyone gathered in the living room again. Elias realised there weren't enough seats for everyone and dashed off to fetch chairs from other rooms. By this point Sonja had woken up, and he laid her on a thick blanket in the middle of the floor. She passed between the hands of those who wanted to hold her. Some of the guests sat round the blanket joking and laughing with Sonja, while the rest stood or sat a little further away and watched.

Lovisa looked at Elias, curious whether he would grow anxious, but he seemed mostly proud. In the midst of all the chaos, he kept the conversation going. Lovisa couldn't help smiling. It felt strange, in the best possible way, to see Elias hold his own like this.

His mind must be in complete chaos right now, she thought. *The noise level alone is very high, and he's sensitive to that.* But she said nothing, because Elias didn't seem the least bit troubled. He had everything under control: tea, coffee, cake, biscuits. He managed Sonja, fed her, joked with the guests. And in the middle of it all, he didn't forget Lovisa.

Suddenly Elias stood up and called for silence:

– Hello, everyone. I'd like to say something…

The room fell silent, and everyone looked at Elias. He appeared calm, to Lovisa's surprise. She had expected him to be uncomfortable with all those eyes on him.

– I want to thank you all for coming here to celebrate that my beloved Lovisa is finally home again. This feels a little unfamiliar, but… well, in all honesty I'd normally expect to feel as though I'm surrounded by strangers and just long for

you all to go home. But I don't see a room full of strangers any more. I see a room full of my support network. You've all supported me in one way or another, and that makes me want to give something back. I hope you understand that it works both ways. If any of you ever need help, even just someone to babysit or anything at all, you have my number. Just shout, and I'll be there.

He sat back down, and Lovisa kissed him passionately, to everyone's delight. Even that didn't seem to bother him.

After a couple of lively hours, the guests began to leave. Elias helped Karin clear up in the kitchen, while Lovisa stayed in the living room, leaning back on the sofa and chatting quietly with Kenneth, fairly tired after all the activity.

– Isn't it incredible how brilliantly Elias has handled today, Dad? she said.

– It really is. I've watched him grow, and come into himself. I've seen glimpses of it before, when we visited: he took great care of both your mother and me. And the same when Anna and Peter came. He was unbothered in a way I hadn't seen before, as though he had finally found his footing.

– He's like a different man. A wonderful man who isn't just remarkable with children, but genuinely sociable.

– As I said at the hospital: he has grown through this crisis in a way that has moved me deeply. The Lord does not send us trials without purpose, does he?

– So true, Dad.

Elias and Karin rejoined them shortly afterwards, and they had a pleasant conversation for a while. Lovisa sat beside them with a small smile, listening to them laugh. She joined in from time to time, but still couldn't manage much. The dinner with all the guests had been lively and absolutely wonderful, just the way she loved it, but now she could feel the tiredness creeping over her. She took short breaks to gather her strength, while at the same time enjoying watching Elias.

She couldn't help smiling inwardly when she saw him continue to be the one who fed and changed Sonja. On that front, he wasn't letting anyone else in just yet. Lovisa had never felt so at ease. Seeing her beloved Elias care for their baby with such tenderness filled her with warmth and a sense of security.

She couldn't resist commenting on it all.

– Do you remember the very first thing I ever said to you, Elias darling?

– You mean the part about getting married and starting a family?

– Exactly. And what is it that we have here today?

– A family, just as you wanted. Are you surprised? You always get your way in the end, don't you?

– Oh, come on. You wanted it just as much.

– I probably wanted it more than you, though I couldn't believe in it back then. But I'm not going to argue with you

about that, Elias smiled. I suppose we both wanted it, and now we've both got it.

Elias moved closer to Lovisa and kissed her. Her parents smiled at the scene. What a remarkable couple they have become!

Soon Lovisa's parents went into what had come to feel very much like a guest room by now. They said goodnight and went to bed. Elias made sure Sonja had everything she needed, and when all was done he and Lovisa lay down in bed, tired but content after a day full of impressions and easy conversation.

– You've been absolutely incredible today, completely calm and helpful amid what you must have experienced as utter chaos. What's really happened, and what have you done with the Elias I used to know?

– I've already answered that, darling. But you never answered what you think of New Elias.

– He's the husband I always dreamt of... I never thought I'd actually get him! I am so incredibly, endlessly, madly happy right now, Elias the Second!

– What happened to "Elias darling"?

– You're so wonderful, Elias darling. The same person, but so much more than I ever dreamt of. You've made me so happy today.

– Ditto, Elias replied drily. You're the one who's made me able to cope with, and even enjoy, all of this: a house full of people, full-on chaos, the whole lot.

– No, you've done that entirely on your own, Elias darling.

– I am **not** going to argue with you about something so trivial. Can't we just agree that we've both contributed to the fact that I feel completely at ease? You've pushed me and helped me become more sociable, and I've let you do it.

– Yes, that's true. And at the same time I've calmed down and become a bit more organised, thanks to you. You've taught me not to be so chaotic and to keep things tidy round me, so I can actually find my belongings now. My friends say I'm easier to spend time with. You're clearly the reason for that.

– It was nothing. That's just how I function.

– I've calmed down and become more structured, while you've become more spontaneous and sociable. We've adapted to each other. That's why we fit so well together.

– Mm, so true, Elias agreed. Lucky for us, because this is where the real chaos begins.

– What chaos do you mean? Haven't we had enough chaos for your taste?

– We have a baby to look after, and I can't even ask Social Care for help. A baby who'll grow up and become a defiant teenager. Wow... so much chaos ahead. And I... I'm actually looking forward to it.

– I love both the fact that you say that and everything else. But I'm tired now, so goodnight, Elias darling.

– Goodnight to you too, my beloved Lovisa. It's so wonderful to have you here now.

Lovisa fell asleep, and Elias lay for a long time looking at her. Then he looked across at the cot where Sonja lay making small funny noises. His heart pounded like a pile driver in his chest with happiness.

Lovisa rolled over and kicked him on the leg. *Ow, that hurt,* he thought, but smiled broadly all the same. This, at any rate, was one thing that hadn't changed. It was exactly as it had always been. As the new normal.

His last thought before he fell asleep was a single, uncharacteristic, but deeply heartfelt expletive:

Fuck you, ASD.
I bloody well won.



