FOSTER HOME

Odd Friendship







by Ola Montán

Preface

This book is a totally independent follow-up to my previous book, “Ashley”, but the linkage to previous books is very loose. You don’t have to read any of my previous books to understand the action in this book.

This book is about some young persons who faces problem in their life and is taken into protective child care. I have no knowledge or experience of foster homes or young persons with problems, so the entire book is merely a result of my imagination. All possible similarities with real events or people are a pure coincident.

Sensitive readers are warned that one of the persons in the book has an bad language with many swearwords. I considered to self-censor her, and write things like “f*ck”, but ultimately decided to write the words out as I feel the book otherwise would be difficult to read. I apologize if any reader will be offended.

I hope the book can be entertaining and imaginative.

Finally, I would like to thank my daughter Sarah, who has created the book cover from images with licenses CC0 Creative Commons.

The Writer

CHAPTER 1

Therese

Therese was relaxing while sitting down on a bicycle rack downtown. The gang she hung up with was sitting around her drinking beer. Therese also had a beer can in her hand, even though she was only thirteen years old. She looked older because her whole face was covered with different types of piercing and tattoos. The clothes were worn, torn up and dirty, and her hair was tangled, well her whole appearance was a mess. The gang accepted her, despite the fact that everyone else was older, because she looked so tough and talked equally tough.

– Hey, we have to do something soon for fuck sake, or I'll fucking get out of here, she said. Aren't there some fat action somewhere so we can get wild? This shit sucks big time!

– I agree with you, Sparkie said.

Sparkie was just a couple of years older than Therese and he was the one who had introduced her to the gang.

– What do you say, Tank? Shall we go somewhere else?

Tank was the oldest in the gang and the unofficial leader. It was he who used to buy beer and liquor because he was old enough.

– Why don't we go down to the park and see if we can get some smoke? Anyone got some bucks for a couple of joints?

Therese shook her head but some others dug into their pockets. Then the gang headed down to the park where they used to find the drug dealers. It wasn't long until Tank found an ugly but familiar face who he knew was selling. He got a cou-

ple of hash cigarettes from him for the money they collected. Soon the whole gang was sitting on a few benches at a playground while circulating the cigarettes among the gang. It was not the first time that Therese smoked weed, so she didn't hesitate to inhale the smoke in deep drags. Svempa looked at Therese and said:

– What does your mother say about you sitting here in the middle of the night smoking pot like this?

Svempa was not normally with Tank's gang but was hanging with them this day.

– Hell, that wino don't give a shit about what I'm doing. She's for sure at home pouring booze down her throat, unless she's out getting drunk with her fucking drunkard friends. Hell, she's always so damn wasted that she doesn't even notice where I'm fucking are. Fuck her!

– But school then? You seem to be young, Tess. Aren't you still going to school?

– Fucking school. No one cares about me there either. My grades are like shit, the teachers calls me a disappointment and everyone in the class thinks I'm crap. Fuck them all. They can all go to hell, because that's where I'll end up anyhow. Hey, for fuck sake, I sometimes think I'm already in Hell.

Several others nodded. They all had bad lives behind them, with booze, drugs, petty thefts and vandalization. None of them had any experience with parents who really cared about them, just like Therese. Instead, they stuck together here and were just messing around. Luckily the playground that they sat at was abandoned at this time of the day. Not because someone in the gang was into fighting, but they looked really tough and bad would probably had scared the children who usually plays here.

Therese saw two young boys swaying down the path. She thought they was quite good looking so she whistled at them. They looked at her and then they came up to her and sat down beside her to talk. Therese was actually kind of good looking under all piercing, and because her blouse was broken, she probably showed a little too much skin. She didn't care about her clothes. In fact, she used

to tear them apart and make then dirty to look tough. Suddenly one of the boys put his hand between her legs. She flew up and shouted.

– What the fuck are you doing, your damn creep? Who the hell do you think I am, for fucks sake?

– There is no doubt that you're a bitch, the way you look, he replied.

She pushed the guy in his chest so he tumbled backwards of the bench. Even though she didn't hit very hard, he fell down flat on his back, partly because he was taken with surprise, but mostly because he was drunk. He became furious when his mate and several from the gang laughed at him, so he got up and punched Therese in her face with his fist. She caught it on her chin and fell down backwards onto the hard ground.

– What the fuck! Leave my friend alone, Sparkie screamed.

He approached the guy who hit Therese. The rest of the gang also got up and everyone started punching on both guys, because his fiend came to his mate's defense. Therese chose to remain on the ground so as not to be caught in the fight. She was short and kind a skinny so fighting was definitely not her thing. Soon there were a full blown fight when some other guys came jumping in to help their friends.

It didn't take long until a police car came driving and a big, tough police man stepped out of the car and shouted to them to stop fighting. As from a signal, everyone stopped fighting, and looked at the policeman. He was well-known by both gangs, and was respected by most of them, both for his brute strength and toughness, but mostly because he preferred to talk than to use violence. He always seemed to have some kind words for everyone.

– What's happening here? he asked.

– Well, Adam. It's just a small disagreement, said the guy who punched Therese. Nothing serious. Right, guys?

– Sure, just a little friendly discussion. It's nothing the police need to interfere in, Tank said.

Adam stretched out his hand to Therese who was still sitting on the ground. Here, Tess. Take my hand and I'll help you up .

– I don't need any fucking help to get up. Do I look like I'm disabled?

– No, but it looks like someone has punched you. Don't say you've been involved in the fight, because that's not how I know you?

– That piece of shit grabbed my crotch and then we started pushing each other around bit and I lost my balance. Take it easy, Adam. None of us wants to mess with the cops, you already know that.

– It looks more like someone hit you in your face. Do you want to make a formal complaint about abuse?

The guy who hit Therese began to look worried.

– No, it's cool. I can take more than that.

The guy was relieved and felt a bit guilty while Therese got up to her feet. She was a bit dizzy from the combination of the alcohol, the hashes and the blow to her head, so she staggered a little and grabbed Tank to regain her balance. However, she quickly straightened her back and recovered her tough face.

– Thank you guys, by the way, for defending me. He caught me of guard, that bastard. What a fucking asshole!

– Well, Tess. You're a real bad ass, we already know that. And we also know that you can't fight, and you shouldn't need it either. You're a girl, for fuck's sake, and not a strong one either.

Adam carefully studied her and realized that she was affected by one thing or another. Unfortunately, it was not the first time he had seen her like this.

– You look like you're drunk again, Tess, he said. Haven't I explained to you before that you're too young to keep up with this? Come here, I'll take you home so you don't get into more trouble tonight.

Therese looked a bit angry at the police officer, but didn't want to mess with him. Adam had always treated her nice. So she raised her hand to greet the gang

and sat herself into the police car. Adam was used to this, so he already knew where she lived. It was not that far because she and her mother lived in an apartment near the city. Soon he let her off outside the house and she staggered up the stairs and walked in. Her mother was knocked out on the couch as usual, so she went into her room to sleep. After all, it was school the next day. She didn't like the school that much, but was still rarely cutting class anyhow. Soon she was deeply asleep from the liquor.

~ ~ ~

The next day she took the school bus to school. On her way to her locker, a bunch of girls stared at her as she passed. She just ignored their eyes and went to her locker to fetch her school books for the next lesson. On her way back, she heard a comment from one of the girls in the gang.

– Look, the freak show is in town!

Therese reacted immediately and approached the person who spoke and went up to closely to her.

– What were you saying?

– You heard me. Or are you deaf too?

Therese picked up a match from her pants and lit it on with her nail. Then she held it against the girl's face and said calmly:

– Imagine how easy an accident can happen. You just turn your back for a few seconds and then, ops!

She dropped the burning match so that it landed in the girl's open backpack. The girl shouted out of fear and threw herself down to the floor and turned her backpack upside down on to extinguish the fire. But the match went out on the way to the floor to her relief, so nothing actually happened. Therese grabbed her hair as the girl was kneeling and pulled her head back. Then she placed her face a couple if inches above hers and hissed:

– Did I hear you call me freak, or was I mistaken?

The horror shone in the eyes of the girl from almost having her backpack burnt up. She saw for her inner eye how all her books, computers, phones and other gadgets went up in smoke the next time she turned her back.

– Nothing. I said nothing. Please Therese, I won't say anything in the future. I promise.

– That's best for you. And the same goes for the rest of you.

Therese released her hair and left. Everyone in the gang kept silent until she was out of sight.

– Shit, that was close. That's someone you don't want to have as your enemy!

– Definitely. I'll stay as far away from her as possible, for sure.

– No chance that I want to have anything at all to do with her.

Therese had become accustomed in being alone at school, especially since she got all the piercing. She had only one friend at school, and he was Sparkie who went in the senior year. When Therese came to school full of piercing last year, he became interested in her. He had never been her boyfriend, althoughTherese was interested in him. But her feelings were not answered, so they were just friends. She caught sight of him on the lunch break and went to him.

– Is there any action going on this weekend? I'm starting to get bored of the same crap every time we meet the gang.

Sparkie had full respect for Therese and her toughness, and had become her link to the thuggery life downtown. He was as tough as she was, and was feared by everyone else at school, because there was a reputation that he had spent some time in prison.

– Well, on Saturday I thought I'd hang out with a dude close to the cemetery who throws a party. It's often a lot a action on his parties, booze, pot, acid and damn high mood. I'll try to get to in if you think you are tough enough.

– You know I'm tough as hell. LSD, huh? Sounds interesting. Never tested anything stronger than brass, so what the fuck. I hang on.

So on Saturday, she and Sparkie skipped the gang and went to the apartment where his friend lived instead. They were allowed inside and Sparkie disappeared into the apartment and soon returned with a couple tablets in his hand.

– Here you have some acid. Try it out for fuck's sake!

He swallowed one tablet and Therese swallowed the other one. Then she followed him into the apartment. The cannabis smoke was hanging heavy over the room and most persons was laying on blankets on the floor, smoking or tripping from LSD. After about a quarter, she began to feel nauseous and her entire body began to tremble. She looked around and felt that everyone in the room had turned into monsters. The panic rose in her brain and she felt certain that everyone in the room tried to rape her, even though no one even came close to her.

Completely paranoid, she rushed into a bedroom, but when she saw the bed she became convinced that some guy would come in from the other room to take her on the bed. In panic she crept into the closet and closed the door behind her. She trembled and felt as if the heart would blow up when the pulse went up while she was shivering from cold even though she was sweating too. Every sound from the other rooms made her want to scream, but was not able to make any sound at all. It felt like her throat was constricted and she got difficult to breathe.

Suddenly she heard a loud noise and someone who shouted "police" followed by banging, swearing and loud, upset voices. Therese became even more panicked and nestled on the floor in the wardrobe. Then the wardrobe door was opened and she saw several huge, massive men who looked dangerous. She shouted for her life as they pulled her out of the wardrobe and fought to be free. But the men pressed her down to her stomach and locked her hands behind her back with handcuffs.

To her horror she was forced out to a car and taken down to the police station. She shouted incoherently and it was obvious to the detectives who were responsible for the operation that she was high like a house. They placed her in a cell to sober up overnight. She laid down on a bunk and couldn't understand what was happening around her. Everything felt completely unreal and terrifying. She was absolutely convinced she wouldn't survive the night and that some creepy men

would come into her cell any second to kill her. It felt like the nightmare would never end.

But finally, the night ended, and her bad trip began to slowly pass, and she returned to her normal senses. In the morning she was fetched by the detectives from the day before and placed at a table in a hearing room.

– Where did you buy the drug you used?

– Go to hell, bastard!

– Don't try to play tough. It will only get worse then.

– Fucking asshole. Don't try to threaten me, for fuck's sake!

– Come on. You were in an apartment full of drugs. You got to know something about where all the goods came from.

– Do you really think I would tell anything to a pig like you, then you're even more stupid then you look. Go home and fuck your mother instead!

– Watch your words! You're already in deep problems. If you don't tell me what you know, you might end up in prison. So start talking now, your brat!

– Prison, like hell. I'm just thirteen, pig. Fuck off, cocksucker!

– You may be charged as an adult, so be careful.

– Don't think that I'm afraid of you, your dickhead. I'm fucking tougher than you and your gay friend together, so just shut the fuck up.

The detectives were increasingly upset by her bad attitude and ugly language. Their questions became increasingly aggressive and Therese was triggered to become even more rude to them. She gave them no answers at all, only swearing and throwing them insults. Suddenly the door opened and a police sergeant stood in the door and interrupted them.

– Craig and Sanders. Come out here.

– Wait a minute, sarge. We're interrogating one of the criminals from yesterday's bust.

– You two. Out here. Now.

The detectives saw the sergeant's face, so they left the room and shut the door behind them. The sergeant had seemed quite angry, so Therese turned curious and sneaked up close to the door too listened through it by placing her ear onto the door.

– What are you two doing? Have you even checked this girl's age?

– She's old enough to be with drug addicts at least.

– She's thirteen years old, god damn it. She said it herself, and a simple check in the files confirms it. Her name is Therese Fergusson and we have dealt with her before.

– Then it's no problem, right? She's a heavy criminal.

– Criminal, not even close. Some drunkenness and child protection care is all we have on her. And she is a minor and may not be questioned without the parents or a social secretary being present, you know that very well.

– It can't be that important...

– Important! Of course it's important! If she had told you anything, it wouldn't have been useful in court anyway, so what the hell do you think you're doing? Not to mention that you had her in custody all night long. Thirteen years old! Together with serious criminals! Completely unacceptable. You are disconnected from everything that concerns this girl from here and now.

– But, sarge! It was us two who led the whole operation...

– You can be grateful if I won't make you lead the traffic instead. I take care of Therese from now on, and you stand far away from her. Understood?

Therese realized that the police sergeant was on his way back into the room and hurried back to the table and re-arranged her face when he entered.

– Miss Fergusson. I apologize for the treatment of my subordinates. They have behaved in an unacceptable way when they interrogated you and even placed you in a cell overnight. There will be consequences of this.

– Throw those fuckers into the same damn cell that I had to sleep in and throw away the key.

– We'll see about that. I will call the CPS because you are only thirteen years old, so they can decide what's going to happen. Until they come here you can rest in this room by yourself.

– Fuck, are you going to call that damn Maggy too? The damn whore has never done anything right, for fuck's sake. But if that's all your damn, tiny brain can come up with, then to hell with it. Do it if you're clever enough to figure out how a fucking phone works.

The police sergeant exert himself to not explode. He realized that the department could get into trouble if the Child Protected Service were to report them, so he kept his mouth shut and left the room without saying anything more. Therese sat alone waiting. After a long hour, her social secretary Margaret came into the room.

– Come with me, Therese. We are leaving now.

Therese didn't like her at all, but despite her tough attitude, she had became really afraid from being questioned at the police station for the first time, so she was almost glad to see her, though she would never show it to Margaret. Therefore she unexpectedly calmly followed her out from the room. As they passed through the office, Sanders protested when they were heading out the door.

– Wait there for a moment. That girl is suspected of serious crimes. She can't just walk out of here. Some colleagues to me will hold an interrogation with her, and you'll can sit in when they do it.

– We're leaving from here now. You should be grateful if we don't sue the police for your totally unacceptable behavior. If you want to talk to her, you can do it at the social service office.

– We can't accept...

– It's okay. You can leave now. Detective Sanders is no longer responsible. We will contact you when we want to hold a hearing with Miss Fergusson.

Margaret nodded to the police sergeant and she and Therese left the police station. Margaret turned to Therese's with a serious face.

– Therese, I hope you realize that this is the worst thing you've done up to now. You have very serious charges against you, and can actually end up in jail if you get prosecuted.

– Those fuck ups have got all the crap backwards. But why the hell do I tell that to you? You don't give a damn where I'm going anyhow, so just go fuck yourself.

– I really care about you even if you don't believe it. You will make sure that you gets a lawyer who can help you. But surely you can't live with your mom right now, she seems to be drunk again when I called her. You are temporarily taken into protective care and placed in an acute foster home, at least until this matter is settled, and we know if it will be a trial or not.

– Foster home, not again. For fuck's sake. Can't you find a new way to fuck with me? You're so damn single-tracked.

Margaret sighed and let Therese take place in her car. When the police sergeant had called, she had first tried to get hold on Therese's mother, but she seemed to be drunk. After that, she had been looking for somewhere where Therese could live and had found a foster home that had hesitantly accepted. They didn't like what they heard about Therese's problems, but had been persuaded to accept her for a short period of time.

Margret drove to the home with Therese. She had a bad feeling that this would be worse than previous foster homes.



CHAPTER 2

Diana

Diana held the stick in her hand inside a school toilet. She impatiently looked at it and shook it a little, as if it would give faster results. "Please don't let it be two lines", she thought. She waited and waited with trembling hands. After a few minutes, one lines started to appear in the display and she began to hope. But then the second line showed up too and she became ice cold inside despite that she was sweating.

– Noo, she screamed loudly.

She desperately read the paper that came with the package. "If two lines appear in the test window, the test result is positive. The test has found hCG in the urine, which means you are very likely to be pregnant." She left the toilet with robot-like movements. There she met a classmate named Leonard, that normally was addressed as Lenny.

Diana was quite ordinary looking, with her loose brown hair and simple dress, and was so insecure and shy that she almost seemed invisible. But for Lenny, she was anything but invisible, because he thought Diana was the most beautiful he had seen, and had a crush for her for a long time. So when he heard her desperate scream, he became worried about her. He braced himself and addressed her for the first time ever.

– What's happening, Diana? You seems to be upset.

She quickly hid the stick in a pocket in her dress and looked at him with a blank face. He had been interested in her for more than half a year but she didn't know about it because he hadn't dared to approach her before. His face expressed

both compassion and sadness. When she realized that he really cared about how she felt she couldn't control her feelings any longer. She folded her arms around him and began to cry uncontrollably. He was both surprised and happy but at the same time very uncertain about what he should do. Eventually he gently put his arms around her waist and hugged her back.

– Diana, I don't know what's your problem, but I want you to know I'm ready to help you. It doesn't matter what it's.

– There's nothing you can do, Lenny. Can't you just hold me for a while, because I really need some comfort right now?

Diana hugged him hard and he became increasingly astonished at her sudden outbursts of emotion. His heart was beating faster and he felt a mix of happiness because he finally was hugging his secret love and worry over why she was so sad. He gently stroked her hair and became relieved that she didn't push him away. When the bell rang for the days's last lesson, he was almost disappointed because the break was over, and thus this pleasant hug ended.

– I guess we have to go to class now, Lenny. It's only a few weeks left of the term, so we need to stay focused.

– I suppose so. Does it feel a bit better now, Diana?

– Maybe a little bit. Thank you for lending me your shoulder for crying.

– Anytime.

They walked together down the corridor to the classroom. Both of them had difficulty concentrating during the class. Leonard was still excited that he had hugged his secret love for the first time, Diana pondered how she could tell her father that she was pregnant although she was just fourteen years old. Actually, it shouldn't come as a surprise to him, because it was he who had made her pregnant when the condom bursted.

When she thought of all the years since her mother had died, and he had forced herself on her, her tears returned. It was so terrible that he demanded that she would have sex with him just because her mother was dead. And she could not

tell Leonard or anyone else, because her dad had threatened her not to say anything about it. Ironically, really. A dad should protect his children from "ugly men" and not become one himself.

Leonard looked at her for the rest of the class and saw the tears rolling and was thinking on that he had to find some way to make her feel better. He had always been insecure and shy, but now he felt it was necessary for him to try and become strong for her sake. The worries got his heart to pound harder in his chest again. Or was it love that made the beats so heavy? When the lesson ended, he hurried up to her. To his delight, she throw her arms around him again.

– Oh, Lenny. I wish I could tell you what's wrong, but it's impossible. Maybe some other time.

– You don't need to tell me anything if you don't want to. But when you feel ready to talk, I promise to listen. Everything is going to be alright, in one way or another, you'll see. Together we can solve whatever your problems are.

Diana was grateful for his words, although there was nothing he could do about her situation. She released him and said she had to go home, because her dad got angry if she was late from school.

– We'll see each other tomorrow, I hope, he said.

– Of course. Perhaps I feel better then. Bye, Lenny.

– So long, Diana. Try to calm down a bit. Everything will be just fine!

Diana tried to smile at him in thankfulness and went to catch the bus home. At home, she forced herself to do her routines to distract her thoughts. So she invented the fridge and then went shopping what was missing. Then she started cooking. Her father demanded that the food was on the table the moment he got home from work, otherwise he might hit her. She could hear the door slamming at the same time as she put the food on the plates on the kitchen table.

– The food is ready, Dad, she shouted.

– Coming, I will just just wash my hands first.

Soon Peter came into the kitchen and sat down at the table. He started eating without saying a word. Diana had difficulty swallowing the food and sat down and was worried over the subject she would have to bring up. But if she would try to keep it secret that she was pregnant it would only make things worse, because in time he could not avoid noticing it. Then he would become furious because she kept it a secret for several months. Anyhow, she waited until he had finished eating. He used to be in a better mood if he was full.

– Dad, that's one thing I have to say. Something that has happened.

– I'm tired, does it take a long time to tell? The football soon starts on TV.

– No, it's fast. Well, Dad, you see, I'm late.

– Late for what? Have you arrived late for school again?

– No, not that. I'm ... like ... take a look at this.

She picked up the pregnancy test stick from her pocket and gave it to him. He irritable looked at it asking:

– What does this mean? I don't have time for guessing games now!

– It's a pregnancy test. One line means that you are not pregnant.

He looked into the reading window and became ice cold when he saw that there were two lines there.

– Do you mean that you... No, that can't be correct. You can't be pregnant.

– I'm late too, Daddy. That's why I bought that stick. Two lines are positive, Dad.

– Fu-uck, he said, and became red in his face.

Diana became afraid of his facial expression.

– That's impossible, damn it. Who's made you pregnant? Do you have any boyfriend you have not told me about?

– No, Dad. No boyfriend. It's just you that ... you know ...

– But, I always use ... fu–uck. Is it that time it bursted? For gods sake, it's only once. You can that damn unlucky. How can you do this to me? You are always making trouble! I didn't even want any kids, it was your mother who was so stubborn. You are really sure? You normally don't know anything.

– I only know I'm late and then the pregnancy stick.

– Just shut up and let me think how to solve this.

Diana picked up the plates with numb movements. She was afraid of her father's facial expressions and was afraid that he would hurt her again.

– Well, there is only one solution. You must get an abortion. If it comes out that you are pregnant, it will be scandalous. Even worse if they discover that I'm the father. Everything would collapse and your whole life would be destroyed.

– But, abortion? Is not it, like, illegal to do?

– No, not in New Jersey anyway. Of course we can't do it here. We can't risk that the doctor would report it. We can go to Maryland instead. They don't ask any questions there, according to their law.

– But, Daddy. Abortion, that sounds so terrible.

– Not at all, that's what we're going to do. I'll look for an abortion clinic in Maryland to resolve the problem once and for all. That's what we'll do. Now get on with cleaning the apartment. It's filthy all over the place.

Diana fetched the vacuum cleaner and started cleaning. She was thinking about what her dad had said. Abortion? It had to mean that the child who grew in her stomach would die? The more she thought about it, the worse she felt about it. She went into her room and realized that it was time to wash the clothes, so she went down to the laundry room and booked a laundry time for the weekend. Then she said "good night" to her father who sat in front of the TV. He just grunted something so she went to bed and cried herself to sleep.

~ ~ ~

The next day she went to school like in a dream. A nightmare. Leonard was waiting for her and immediately saw that nothing had become better during the

night, maybe even it was worse. She felt so terrible, but could not tell him anything. Her father had said that her whole life would be ruined if someone else found out about the awful things that he did. Leonard was pleased when she desperately pressed herself against him to feel some kind of safety. He held her and tried to comfort her without really knowing what to say.

A few days went by while Peter tried to find an abortion clinic that was willing to help without the need to provide any names. Eventually he found a clinic and told it to his daughter.

– I've got a time now on Saturday for abortion at a Baltimore clinic that doesn't ask any questions. We go early in the morning so we arrive in good time.

– But, Daddy. I've been thinking about that. I don't really want to abort. It feels like I'm killing my own child.

– Don't be stupid. You must understand what consequences it would be if you would try to raise a child when you were only fourteen years old? Obviously, you have to abort it, and that's it.

– I can't do that, Daddy. Please, you have to understand me. I just can't. You can't force me.

Peter became completely furious and began to beat Diana with his fists. He hit her in the stomach repeatedly.

– See, do you think this is better? I can punch you until you get a miscarriage instead. It that what you want?

– No, Dad. Stop! It hurts! Please, I do as you say, but stop beating be!

Diana collapsed on the floor and Peter kicked her a couple of times before he managed to come to his senses.

– We're going up to Baltimore on Saturday, and you're making the abortion. You'll do as I say, do you hear that, child?

– Sure, Dad. I will do as you say. Excuse me for being stupid. It will not happen again, I promise.

The week went past very slowly and Diana felt increasingly bad from the idea of the abortion. Leonard desperately tried to cheer her up, but she fell deeper and deeper in her despair. On Friday night she was not able to sleep, because one thing didn't want to leave her head alone. If her unborn child were to be killed, she didn't want to be alive herself either. She got up and sneaked into the bathroom where the medical cabinet was. She had often seen the tablets her mother had taken in the end to ease her pains from the cancer. She had always warned Diana that the tablets could be dangerous and that she would leave them alone.

Diana found the can and looked into it. It was almost half full, so she thought it should be enough for committing suicide. She poured water into a glass and then she emptied the whole can into her mouth and swallowed with some water. She stood for a long time looking into the mirror and wondering how long it would take before they kicked in. The attack of dizziness came so fast that she didn't have time to react but lost her balance and tumbled into the bathtub with a loud bang.

Peter heard the noise and went up to check what it was. Was anyone trying to break in, or what? The bathroom door was open so he walked in and immediately saw his daughter. She laid unconscious, half outside and half inside the bathtub. He rushed in to her and checked for signs of life. Her heart was still beating but it felt so weak. Then he saw the empty medicine can and got panicked. Had Diana tried to kill herself?

He realized that he didn't have much time if he wanted to save her, so he carried her out to his car and drove to the hospital at full speed. There he showed the empty can to the doctor who realized the seriousness and ordered Diana to be taken in immediately. Peter was forced to sit in the waiting room squirming. Lord, if she would die, what would people think then? Would they make an autopsy and find out she was pregnant? Should the police get involved? He was cold sweating from the thought that everything could explode in his face. After what felt like an eternity, the doctor came back out again.

– I'm happy to tell you we've been able to save the life of your daughter by pumping out her stomach. It was really lucky you came in with her so fast. Unfortunately, she seems to have bigger problems.

– What are those problems, he asked in anxiously, thinking about the pregnancy.

– Most of the evidence suggests that she tried to commit suicide, and that most likely means that she is depressed. And unless her depression is treated, there is a high risk that she will try again. You must seek help for her from a psychologist.

– That will not be necessary, he said relieved. She probably just was making a mistake with the can, you see.

- Highly unlikely, unfortunately. Partly because of the time of day and partly because of the number of tablets she has taken. Even if you obviously have not seen any signs, there may be several reasons why a teenager gets depressed, it's more common than many know. But even if she's not depressed, it wouldn't hurt to let her talk to a psychologist anyway, right?

– Certainly, but I still feel that it seems totally unnecessary. But thanks for the tip, I'll think about it.

– You should do more than just think about it. If you don't contact a psychologist, I feel compelled to contact the CPS to report her. Then it may be other consequences which you certainly understand. You shouldn't be worried to take her to a psychologist. After all, a psychologist has complete confidentiality.

– Confidentiality, you say?

– That's right. So independent what your daughter says, no one else will find out, not even you. All teens have some kind of problem, so it may be nice for her to get to consign with someone in confidence. Better a psychologist than that a social secretary will make a complete investigation into her situation, right?

– You're probably right. Confidentiality. Well, that sounds good. I'll contact a psychologist so she can talk. You don't have to worry about it, or call CPS. I can handle this myself.

– Excellent, please do that. But you have to ask the psychologist to contact me as soon as you have booked a time, so I know I can let go of this matter.

– I will do that. Thank you very much for all your help, doctor.

The next day, he could take Diana home again. She had not said one single word since she woke up. Peter explained that he would let her talk to a psychologist. Diana looked anxiously at her dad and asked quietly:

– And what about the abortion?

– We'll wait with it until you've talked to the psychologist. It's not that urgent, and now you have to feel better first. When you talk to the psychologist, make sure that you are talking a lot so that she can give you a clearance of health fast. Psychologists have confidentiality, so there is no risk that they will speak next to their mouth anyway.

On Monday, he called a psychologist named Ashley. She had an available time one month later, but Peter asked Ashley to call the doctor sooner to confirm that Diana had an appointment. Ashley did that, and the doctor was satisfied. Now Peter felt sure the crisis was over for this time being. The fetus might have even got such damage from the medicine so it would be a miscarriage. Otherwise there was time to fix the abortion later as well. Peter was satisfied that he managed to get everything under control again.

He was unaware that the confidentiality obligation for psychologists had certain limitations.



CHAPTER 3

Mia

Mia woke up and stretched. The sun was already shining outside the window so she assumed it was morning and time to go up. As usual, her mother hadn't woken her up. She got out of bed and was looking for clean clothes in the closet, but it was empty again. She shrugged her shoulders because she was used to it. "I just wear the same underwear one more day" she thought.

She walked into the bedroom where her mother laid asleep. She shook her to wake her up, but there was no reaction. As usual, then. "I'll have to make breakfast by myself", she thought, going into the kitchen. She got the milk from the fridge and sat down at the table where the Cap'n Crunch cereal box was standing since yesterday. There were no clean plates so she rinsed one in the sink. The milk smelled a little strange so she tried to read the date, but didn't understand anything. It was not that weird because she was only three years old.

When she had finished eating, she went back to her room and played a little with her worn teddy bear. She had a bad taste in the mouth from the sour milk. The day went slowly by as she waited for her mom to wake up. Suddenly she heard a knock on the door. She knew that she shouldn't open, and tried to wake her mother again without success. It continued to knock, so she thought she at lest had to check who it was, so she put on the safety chain and then she opened the door a bit.

– Hi, my name is Adrian and I'm from the Child Protected Service. Are you Mia?

Mia just nodded through the crack in the door.

– Could you let us in, Mia. We'll just want to take a look at how you live.

– Mom said that I shouldn't open the door to strangers.

– In principle, she's correct, but it's perfectly safe this time. Look, I have a police officer with me so you don't have to worry. Open the door, please.

Mia just shook her head and tried to close the door again. But Adrian had already placed his foot on the doorstep so she couldn't close the door. He said something to the police who took a bolt clipper and cut off the chain. Then the police opened the door, despite the fact that Mia was fighting it. Mia fell backwards when they forced the door. They both came in and Mia was terrified and tried to escape. But the police were quick to grab her and hold her while Adrian began to look around in the apartment.

– Take it easy, little girl, the police said. We don't want to harm you.

Mia was struggling to get loose, but the policeman held her so hard that it was actually hurting her. Adrian went from room to room and examined and took notes. He found the sour milk and the cereal box that stood open on the table, like all the dirty dishes. The rest of the apartment was also a mess, there was ingrowth of dirt everywhere, dirty laundry and even syringes completely in the open. Mias mom, Angela, was still unconscious, but Adrian sprinkled some cold water in her face and managed to wake her up after a while.

– Mrs Bolton! Do you hear me? My name is Adrian West from the Child Protected Service. Can you come into the hallway for a second?

– What is it about?

– It's about your daughter.

Angela suddenly became totally awakened.

– Mia? Has something happened to Mia?

She hurried out to the hallway but stopped when she saw the police holding her daughter with a steady grip. Mia cried desperately and tried to get loose and go to her mother, but without success.

– Let her go! Do you hear that, release my daughter!

– I'll have to ask you calm down, Mrs Bolton. We will take your daughter away from here for now, because you can't take care of her.

– What do you mean? I love her more than anything else. She's just fine and you're not gonna take her anywhere.

– Your daughter is now under protective custody. I have looked around the apartment, and this is no healthy environment for a three year old child.

– I'm her mother! I'm the one that will decide that!

Angela grabbed Mia and tried to pull her away from the police. He released Mia and instead grabbed Angela to prevent her from taking Mia. Angela began to defend herself from the police and released Mia. Then Adrian caught Mia firmly and began to pull her out from the apartment while the police pinned Angela down to the floor.

– Mom, don't let them take me! Mom, help me!!

Angela was furious and tried to get loose while Mia screamed her heart out in the stairwell all the way down to the street. Soon the police was able to join and with common efforts they got her into the police car and drove away from there. Angela had tried to follow them downstairs but her legs was too unstable so she tripped in the stairs and could only helplessly watch how they drove away with her daughter. She fell into the gutter and began to cry. Eventually, she went back up to read the paper that Adrian had left to figure out what she had to do in order to get Mia back.

Meanwhile, Mia sat crying in a sofa at the CPS office. A guard stood over her and looked firmly at her and warned her to try to escape. Adrian was standing in the corridor discussing with his boss what had happened and what they should do now.

– It's obvious that her mother was upset and unable to accept the protective custody. There is an obvious risk that she will try to kidnap her daughter back from wherever we place her.

– Then it's impossible to place her in an orphanage here in town. We have to make sure to place her further away, and keep it a secret where she is.

– I've heard of a orphanage in the next city. They have a good reputation that children don't escape from there, the security is said to be high there.

– It sounds good, contact them and tell us that we have a child who needs urgent care and ask if they have a spot available.

Soon Mia sat in another car, headed to different city. This time Adrian drove himself while the guard sat with Mia in the back seat and held her so tight that it hurt. She had not stopped crying yet, but sat and squealed and shouted after her mother throughout the slow, painful journey that lasted more than an hour.

Behind a high wall stood the white, large house that housed the orphanage. Mia was shown into a room where there were five beds and was led to the bed in which she was going to sleep. Only then the guard finally released her arm and she rubbed herself on the arm that hurt from the hard treatment. She stood still sobbing, but at the same time as the guard turned his back to leave, she ran out of the door. The guard made an attempt to run after her but was stopped by a caretaker named Fred.

– Let her run away. She can't get anywhere, because the front door is locked, so you need a key to get out, and then the gate in the wall around the home is locked as well. There is nowhere to hide, so we'll find her soon.

– Then I leave the child in your care, Adrian said. You've got all the information about the escape risk and everything about her drug addicted mom, so you know what to do.

– You can calmly leave her here, Fred said. Right now she seems sad, but she will get used to it soon. We have done this before.

– I'm convinced of that. We keep in touch, there is a great risk that the mother will appeal to the custody. You will hear from us if that happens.

Adrian left the orphanage while Fred went from room to room to find Mia. It took almost an hour before he found her under a table in the kitchen, and by that

time he had really gotten irritated. He grabbed Mia hard and dragged her to her bed. There he sat down on the bed and laid her over his knees and began to spank her bottom. Mia shouted more and more and tried to get free.

– Stop screaming and stop struggling! It doesn't help you, and I will continue to spank you until you calm down.

Mia screamed and squirmed while the punishment was getting worse. Finally she realized what he had said and she stopped to resist. She got a few more hard strokes and then he released her. Mia tumbled down onto the floor, but got up after a few seconds and rubbed herself at her bottom while the tears quietly ran down her cheeks.

– Now you stay here in your bed until we call for food. And you make sure to follow all the rules and do as you are told all the time, otherwise you will get spanked again. Have you understood, child?

Mia cried but nodded. She sat down on the bed but it hurt so she laid down on her side instead. "Mom, where are you?" she thought desperately. When it was time for food, she was taken to a dining room full of children of all ages. The noise level was scary high, and Mia didn't dare to enter. Fred then pulled her in by her arm and forced her down on a chair. It hurt to sit, but she didn't dare to protest about it.

– Now you sit here and eat, otherwise you know what's waiting for you!

Mia thought the food looked disgusting, and she had no appetite either, so she just sat there poking the food. Suddenly a woman stood behind her, grabbing her spoon forcing the food into her mouth. She felt almost nauseated from getting the food almost pushed down her throat, but didn't dared not to swallow it. After the meal she was forced into a bathroom to shower. A female caretaker scrubbed her from head to toe so hard that it hurt.

– It is terrible how filthy you are! Do you never wash yourself? Have your worthless mom never given you a real bath?

Mia started to sob again. The brush was really painful, and in addition she loved her mother and didn't like hearing her being called "worthless".

– Quiet with you, child. I've had enough with your fuss for now!

After the woman rubbed her dry with an not at all soft towel, Fred came in and gave her a toothbrush and told her to brush herself. She didn't know how to do it, but fiddled around with the brush in her mouth until he seemed satisfied. Then she was led to the dormitory again, where the other beds were already occupied.

– Good night to all of you, Fred said.

– Good night, sir, the other kids said in chorus.

The lamp was turned off and Mia became scared. She was used to always sleep with the light on. She reached for her Teddy and blanket but could not find them. Then she realized that nobody had taken them from the apartment, and she became terrified. How could she sleep without her Teddy and her blanket? It felt like the whole room began to close in around her, so she left her bed and ran to the door, but it was locked so she couldn't even get out to the hallway. She started crying loudly again, something that caused the other children to complain.

– Can't you keep quiet!

– I want to sleep!

– Stop crying, girl, it doesn't help anyway!

Suddenly the door opened and the light streamed in. Mia was delighted with the light where she sat next to the door. The other children became scared and pretended to sleep when Fred came in.

– Well. well, are you the one that makes all the noice? I will teach you to sleep!

He put her over her knee again and spanked her. The other children became even more quiet when they heard the smacking of his hand. They knew too well how it felt. Mia shouted at first, but then remember what had happened before, so she closed her eyes hard and became silent again.

– Now then, have you learned your lesson now? Go to sleep now.

She laid down in bed and pulled the blanket over her head. Fred walked out again and closed the door behind him. Mia lay awake all night without being able

to sleep, terrified for the darkness and caretakers and the other children, without any Teddy who could give her some kind of comfort.

The next day she was so tired that she only wanted to stay in bed. But then she was forced to have breakfast and then put in a room with all the other children. She was terrified of the other children, and even more afraid of the adults. She learned that almost whatever she did, she was punished. She was used to be alone and take care of herself. She missed her mother to terrible.

After a few days she was told to come with them. She dared not to protest when they put her in a car and drove off. After a long drive she was led into a large room with several tables and chairs full of people. Suddenly she saw her mom and began to rush towards her.

–Mom, Mom, she shouted. At last you are here!

Angela turned around and started walking towards Mia, but a policeman stopped her while the caretaker who had been driving the car caught her from behind and dragged her to a table opposite from where her mother sat. Then he sat beside her, holding her firmly all the time.

– Then let's start this process, a man at the front said. The matter is that Mrs Bolton has appealed for the detention of her daughter Mia. Does the Child Protected Service want to describe the circumstances for the case first?

– I'll do that, Adrian said, sitting at the same table as Mia. We made an unannounced inspection after receiving an report of concern. The apartment was in a terrible state, it was dirty and messy everywhere, on the verge of unhealthy. The child was also extremely dirty, and there were not even any clean clothes for her. The only food that the child seemed to live was cereal and milk, but the milk was old and had become sour.

– I've always made sure to have food at home, Angela protested.

– Mrs. Bolton, you will have the opportunity to talk in a while, but until then it's best for your case if you keep quiet.

Angela became silent and Adrian continued.

– As if it had not been enough, there were syringes in the bathroom, completely open. It was directly life treating for a three-year-old to stay in the apartment. Not even any child protection on the stove or knives was present. The child's mother was completely unconscious in the bedroom and completely unable to supervise her daughter. We can continue to describe all the things in which this environment is extremely unsuitable for a small child to live in, even directly a threat to her life. However, let me just summarize by saying that it's in the best interests of the child to be taken into custody by the government for the time being.

The judge thanked Adrian and the he let Angela speak. She talked for a long time, but quite discontinuously about how she loved her daughter and took care of her well. It was hard to understand her when she mumble or lost words.

– Mia must live with her mother. Just look at her! She longs for me as much as I long for her.

– The problem is not that, mrs Bolton. The question is if you are capable enough to take care of her safely.

– Clearly, I'm caba ... capl ... I can take care of her. Trust me!

– Are you affected by any drug right now, mrs. Bolton?

– Of course not. I don't take drugs.

– Are you prepared to prove it with a blood test?

– Ah, maybe I'll take a little, sometimes. But I can still take care of Mia!

– It's clear to everyone in the hall that you are affected by some sort of substance right now. Your movement and pupils reveal you. Is the child's father still alive so he can take care of her instead?

– Well, I don't really know who it is. There are some possible persons, but I don't know who. Often, I don't get the name of my customers and so, hrm ...

– Do you mean that you work as a prostitute?

– I mean I do what I need to support Mia.

– Given that there was both lack of food and clothing for your daughter, it sounds as you are primarily using the money you earn for drugs. Unfortunately there is no doubt that your daughter has no secure living situation with you, and the court decides that she will still be taken into protective custody.

– But she needs me! I have to get her back! What do I have to do to get her back?

– If you can show that you are drug-free, have a permanent job and have a clean and well-maintained apartment, you are welcome to return to this family court to request reversion of this decision. But until then you are considered unsuitable as a parent of Mia.

– Unsuitable! What the heck! You can't mean that!

– The Court has made its decision.

– Wait, wait. I have her Teddy and blanket here. She can't sleep without them. Let me at least give them to her!

– You can give the items to the officer so he can hand them over them to your daughter.

Angela handed over Teddy and a blanket to him and he gave them to Mia. She grabbed them eagerly and hugged them hard. Then she saw how her mother with heavy steps left the room without her.

– Mom, don't leave me. That place is awful! Mom!

Angela turned around and looked at her daughter with tears in her eyes before she was taken out of the room by the policeman.

– Mom!!!



CHAPTER 4

The Trial

Therese sat in her room at the foster home looking more angry than usual. She had just received a briefing from Mark about the rules they had at this foster home. It was unusually strict rules and he had presented them with very little respect. Probably it was because she had a prosecution for possession of drugs hanging over her. Mark had been very clear that she could not leave the house, unless she went to school. In practice, she was grounded, and that's why she was so angry at the moment. "I'll show him, for fuck sake", she thought.

So already the first evening she sneaked out trough the front door when no one saw her to go downtown to hang around. When she got home, somewhat unsteady on her feet, she got a huge scolding from Mark. She just shouted back at him and called him ugly names and went out again the following evening, even though the gang didn't gather that night. It was only to defy Mark that she left the house.

The third night when she tried to leave the house in the same way, she discovered that Mark had locked the door to her room, so she sneaked out through the window instead. This lasted a few days until Mark discovered it and screamed at her again.

– Have not you understood anything, your brat? You must stay indoors, especially in evenings and nights! And that's it!

– Go to hell! I'm laughing at your damn rules, bastard!

– Don't call me that! You are to use my name or "sir" when you talk to me.

– I call you what the hell I want, bastard.

– It will only get worse for you, young lady, if you're keep on doing this.

– Do you think for a single damn second that you can scare me, you motherfucker, then you're even more stupid than you look!

– In any case, you running out in the night stops now!

Mark stepped out of her room with angry steps. His blood boiled and he decided not to let her win, so he took a hammer and big nails and walked around and nailed her window shut so that it was impossible to open it. Therese noticed it and became even more angry, but stayed indoor that night.

The next day she didn't have to go to school, as the police had demanded to interrogate her down at the CPS office. Mark drove an extremely irritated Therese down there already one hour in advance, to make it possible for her to talk to her lawyer who had arrived early too.

– Good day, Miss Fergusson. My name is Michael Kardell and I'm hired by your social secretary to help you with your prosecution.

– Go fuck yourself. And fuck your fancy costume.

– There is no reason for you to be aggressive against Michael, Margaret said. He's here to help you.

– Just like you fucking whore, huh? You can both fuck of! Or why don't you fuck each other instead of tracking me? None of you care a shit about me anyhow, don't you think I've got that?

Michael swore inside because he needed to defend such an rude person, but his professionalism made him feel he had to do his best after all.

– In order for me to help you, and you really need help right now, I need to hear your side of this unfortunate incident.

– I can take care of myself, bastard. Fuck of!

– It's not certain that you will do that. I've read the charges against you. You are accused of holding large amounts of drugs and also trying to sell the drugs. If you are sentenced you may spend many years in prison.

– Go to hell, do you think I'm stupid? They're not trowing someone that's just thirteen years old in prison, you know that for fuck's sake.

– They can theoretically charge you as an adult because you are over twelve. And then it will not be fun for you.

– As if I'd be afraid of the can!

– Please give me something I can use to defend you. Did you have drugs in your pockets when you were arrested by the police?

– Don't you get it, bastard? I'm tired of your damn rubbish, so just shut up!

Michael was boiling by anger on the inside. How could he defend someone who just showed bad attitude? Did he even want defend this slut? He sighed and gave up asking questions and they only waited for the police and prosecutor to appear. After a long, painful waiting with annoying silence, they was escorded into the room by Margaret and the interrogation could begin.

– Before we begin, I have to inform you about a few things, the police said politely. You are hereby accused of drug possession with intention to sell. You have the right to remain silent. What you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to legal representative and to have this present at the hearing. If you can't afford a legal representative, one will be appointed to you free of charge.

– You got to be blind too, cop, not just stupid. Otherwise, you already saw that I already have a lawyer boy here.

– There is no reason to be rude. I need to inform you of your rights before we can hear you. Have you understood your rights?

– I have understood that I have the right to ask you to go to hell so why don't you do that, huh?

Both the police and the prosecutor became just as annoyed as the lawyer. They asked their questions with only insults as answers. After half an hour they realized it was a waste of time, so the prosecutor finished.

– Because of your refusal to cooperate, I will prosecute you for the most serious drug possession with intend to sell it. You will also be prosecuted as an adult, so you can look forward to spending a long time in jail. We'll see how sharp you are after twenty years in jail.

– I'm not afraid of you or anything you can threaten with, your damn ass. Fuck off and leave me alone now.

Mark brought Therese home to the foster home again. The only light he saw in this misery was that it seems as if she would end up in prison soon, and then he didn't have to deal with her anymore. And until the trial he would keep her locked in her room.

But Therese had other plans. The same evening, she was so furious at all words about jail while she was already locked up indoors, so she threw the chair through the window and then jumped out through the broken glass. Before Mark had time to react, she had already disappeared. This time she stayed away for several days. It was summer, so she slept behind some bushes in the park. But she had trouble getting food, and didn't want to beg for food from her friends all the time, so in the end she decided to return after all.

Before she went back, she went to the CPS and demanded to talk to Margaret. She described how she had been locked in the room, saying that she thought it was dangerous if it would start burning, implying that she should make a fire herself. Margaret disapproved with her attitude but had to agree with the facts, so she brought her back to the foster home and explained to Mark that he could not lock her in for safety reasons.

Mark tried to convince Margaret why he had to keep the window closed, but that was pointless. He had already replaced the window class and now he removed all the nails from it. He realized that it was impossible to keep her locked in. So, in an attempt to be smart instead, so he gave a cell phone to Therese.

– Here, this phone is yours now. You can surf with it and it has free phone calls and text messages.

– Why in hell do you give me a phone, bastard?

– Every teenager today has a smartphone, so I thought you also wanted one. I just thought you and I started on the wrong side with each other, so I just want to try to be nice instead. You can see this phone as a peace gift from me to you.

– Fuck you and your so-called kindness. Don't think you can buy me with a ridiculous shitty phone!

But she still put the phone in a pocket of her pants. This was the first time she had a cell phone, so she was a little happy anyway. However, not happy enough to change her attitude, to Mark's disappointment. That same evening she sneaked out through the window again, now that Mark could not nail it shut anymore. He decided to find where she had gone and enabled the tracking function that he had downloaded to the phone he gave to her. To his surprise Therese seemed to sit still in front of the house. He went outside but could not see her. Finally, he looked into the mailbox and there was the phone together with a note. "Did you think you could trace me, bastard?" Mark swore heavily. Fooled! She continued to go out at night, and Mark became increasingly annoyed in her attitude and behavior.

Finally one day, he got enough and he shouted at her:

– You shouldn't believe you can do whatever you want around here, your slut! From now on you will not get any food until you do as I say and stay indoors in the evenings and nights. Have you understood? Not a single bit of food, if you go out all the time!

– Fuck off, bastard! Don't think you can break me, but I'm hell to strong for you. You can just give up!

Therese continued to go out and Mark implemented his threat and she didn't get any food more. However, there was no chance that she would start obeying, so she went to her mother every day to eat. She was mostly knocked out, and there was a sadly emptiness in the fridge, but Therese had started to become an expert on cooking with almost nothing. She could take old dry bread and cook in a frying pan with eggs and vegetables. With imaginative spices it tasted really good.

Mark became increasingly annoyed. Not only that Therese disappeared in the evenings, now she didn't even come home from school until after one or a couple

of hours. She didn't seem to be the least hungry either when she got home. God what he longed for the trial when he finally could get rid of this annoying girl!

~ ~ ~

Finally the day for the trial arrived. They should be in court at one o'clock in the afternoon, so Therese went to school this morning. Then they would pick her up at lunch. She had feared this day, but was to proud to show it. But, in fact, she felt terrified about the risk of being sentenced to prison, so she left the school during the morning break. So when Mark came to pick her up, she had disappeared. He and the curator searched wherever they could imagine, but in the end he was forced to go to court where all the people from the apartment were to be sentenced at the same time. He was forced to admit that Therese had departed and that he didn't know where she was.

– Your Honor, Margaret began. I'm guessing she was just mistaken on the day. This is not the first time she is cutting class, but I am convinced that she has not deliberately deviated from this trial.

– I'm not convinced at all. But considering her age, I'm prepared to look through my fingers for this time. She will receive a new call at a later date.

– Thank you very much, Your Honor. I'm sure Therese appreciates it.

The trial then proceeded without her, and most of them were sentenced to very long prison sentences, including Sparkie. Mark discussed with Margret outside the hall.

– This girl is completely out of control. She never does what I tell her to. I'm convinced she knew she would come here because I was talking about it this morning before school.

– I also think she deliberately kept herself away. But I have a plan how to do next time. There is a policeman who knows her a little bit and who usually knows how to handle her. I'll ask him to help next time.

Therese received a new trial time a week later, this time in the morning. When she woke up on that day and left her room, she met a huge police who was waiting for her.

– What the hell are you doing here, Adam? she asked.

– Hi, Tess. It's nice to meet you too. I will help you go to court today.

– But for fuck's sake. I don't need a cop babysitter.

– I'm not a babysitter. You are not a baby either? But even if you are strong, it doesn't hurt to have someone who supports you?

– Well, what the heck, you can tag along.

Adam smiled at her. He always used to show respect and to be patient even with the worst villains. It used to yield results, especially with young people like Therese who were not really bad, but just got lost in the world. Soon Therese, Mark and Adam arrived at the court and Adam held up the door of the court-room for her.

– Good luck, Tess. You'll see that this will be fine.

– It's cool, Adam. I'm used to being at the center.

She held her head high displaying a tough face, even though she was really terrified. As she sat down next to Michael, she picked up a beer can she got from Tank the night before. To the attorney's irritation, she opened the can and began to drink to calm her nerves. He whispered:

– Put that beer can away! Are you crazy, or something?

– No, just thirsty. Cheers for fuck's sake!

She tapped the can on Michael's water glass that stood on the table and continued to drink.

– Stand up! a guard proclaimed when the judge came in.

Everyone stood up except for Therese who remained sitting down. The lawyer whispered to her to stand up, but she only raised her beer can and drank a sip.

– Attorney, have you not informed your client about the trial procedures?

– I have done that Your Honor. Unfortunately she chooses to ignore them.

– Is that beer that she drinks? She's even a minor. Officer, take that beer away from her immediately!

A guard came towards her, trying to take the beer can from the table, but Therese snapped it first and managed to empty it before the guard got it. The judge looked annoyed at her and urged her to shape up. Then the prosecutor was allowed to go through the charges and attorney Michael just said that his client declared herself as innocent of everything and that she had declined the right to have a jury.

Detective Sanders was then called to the stand as a witness of the prosecutor, and he described how it had looked in the apartment, with drugs all over the place and senseless people throughout the apartment. According to his description, it was obvious that everyone in the apartment was hardened criminals, including Therese. He also reminded the judge that all the others who were present had already been sentenced to a high number of prison years. He deviated several times from the subject and the referee looked at Michael and expected protests but he sat quietly.

When it was time for him to cross-examine him, he didn't even bother to stand up, but asked his questions from his chair.

– How much drugs was found on the accused or in her bag?

– Nothing, but she was affected by drugs.

– Which is not illegal. She was thus found in a wardrobe. How much drugs was found in the wardrobe where she sat?

– Nothing but we didn't look ...

– How much drugs was found in the room where she was?

– Nothing but ...

– No more questions.

– The witness can step down now, the judge said.

The prosecutor then called several more witnesses who just described the way the apartment looked, and that the defendant had made violent resistance with the arrest. The lawyer sat silently, despite the judge's challenging glances at him and asking if he would cross-examine. However, he just said "no questions". Finally, it was time for final words, and the prosecutor painted a picture of a deep criminal drug addict who was a big enemy of the society. He pointed to her and made the judge aware of her appearance and attitude.

– There is no other conceivable conviction possible, Your Honor. You yourself have witnessed the total disrespect defendant has against law and order.

Finally, it was time for the final words from the defense. At last, Michael stood up and went to the center of the room.

– Your Honor, I know that my client lacks respect, which is unfortunate, but not a crime. It's so obvious that my client is innocent. The closest drug in the apartment was many feet from where she was. She can hardly be considered to be a responsible of things that's in other person's pockets or in other rooms than then she is in. The prosecutor should know that collective punishment can't be imposed for everyone in an apartment where crime is committed. So she have not been in possession of any drugs, so it's also impossible for her to try to sell something. Finally, there are no other charges against her, so her resistance to arrest is not a matter for this court. In addition, it's obvious that the resistance, if any, was only caused by her affected state and the police's excessive violence. The only possible outcome is that my client is innocent to all charges.

The judge drummed a little with his fingers while he gathered his thoughts. Although he definitely didn't approve with Therese's attitude and behavior, he must remain objective in his judgment. It was obvious to him that the prosecutor had probably wanted to statute an example against Therese, perhaps because of himself being provoked.

– The prosecutor should be ashamed to spoil the precious time of the court system with such nonsense. Even though the accused seems to have attitude and behavior problems, there is not a shred of evidence or testimony that provokes any

guilt. This charge shouldn't have been pursued at all. I will personally request a review with the prosecutor office if there are personal reasons behind the prosecutor's choice to proceed with this nonsense.

He now turned to Therese and Michael but chose not to ask them to stand up as usual because he didn't expect her to do it anyhow.

– You have been found innocent of all charges and are free to go. This trial is now complete.

Therese didn't make any facial expression but inside she was deeply relieved. It was like a whole ton of bricks had fallen from her chest. She turned to the prosecutor, showed him her middle finger and then proudly walked out through the door where Adam was waiting for her.

– Congratulations, Tess. You can't imagine how happy I am that you got cleared from this!

– Thank you, Adam. For being a cop, you are actually kind of dead good.

Meanwhile, Mark had caught Margaret to talk to her. They had both been allowed in the audience, despite the fact that the trial had been held behind closed doors. He was almost disappointed when he heard the judgment and realized that he would probably be stuck with Therese now.

– Margaret, I have something to say if you have time. I have already said that this girl is completely out of control. She don't care about anything I say and goes out every night. It doesn't matter what I'm threatening or punishing her, nothing helps.

– I know she can be a handful, the poor girl.

– The poor girl? A thug is what I would call her. Well, I want to announce that I refuse to take responsibility for her anymore. There is no chance I'm prepared to take on the guilt if something happens to her. You have to find somewhere else for her to stay!

– She has not had it easy, but I understand your point. I saw that her mother also joined the trial. She seemed to be sober for once. I guess I can let Therese fol-

low her mother home instead, without checking too much if she can keep herself sober.

Therese had heard the whole conversation and sighed. She began to get used to the fact that nobody wanted her and felt like crying inside. But on the outside she was as tough as usual.

– Therese, can you come here? Now that you have been cleared from all charges, you can let your mother bring you home. Don't you like that?

– Go to hell with you. You don't know what the fuck I like and you don't care, just as I don't care about your fucking opinions.

Then Therese followed her mother home. When she entered the apartment, she swore at her because the apartment was upside down again. Eventually, she realized that she had to resign and try to clean it up herself, otherwise she would have to live in a pig's place. She sighed and picked up a garbage bag and began to pick up all the empty bottles that laid around the entire apartment.

In the evening she went out to meet her gang again. As usual she wanted to mooch some strong beer as usual, so she could forget her sad life again.



CHAPTER 5

The Psychologist

Diana was anxiously sitting in the waiting room with her dad. It was her first visit to the psychologist. It felt like the floor was moving under her. Nothing felt safe anymore. She was still pregnant. What would happen to the child? Should her father still demand an abortion? How would she react then? How should she explain to this psychologist why she tried to kill herself? In what way would it help to talk about it? Had her fetus been damaged by sleeping pills? If she kept the child, what would everyone say at school? What would happen to Dad if the truth came out? What would happen to herself?

The more she was thinking, the more questions she got. But no answers. She felt that she really needed Leonard now. But he knew nothing yet. She didn't meet him right now because it was summer break. What would happen if he knew she was pregnant? What would happen if he knew why she was pregnant? No, please no more questions! She had difficulty keeping the tears away and wanted to grab something, anything stable to hold. Daddy? No, he gave no security anymore. Lenny? No, he didn't know anything.

– Diana!

She flinched when she heard her name and looked around in confusion. There was nobody nearby who looked like a psychologist.

– Diana, please follow me!

The one who had called was a young woman sitting in a wheelchair. Wheelchair? Did this psychologist sit in a wheelchair?

– Hi, you must be Diana, the woman in the wheelchair said. It's me that is Ashley and you've presumably booked a time with me.

– We ... sure. That's me, she answered uncertainly.

She got up and took Ashley's outstretched hand to greet her. Peter also got up and made an attempt to follow them.

– You must be her dad, right? It's you who booked the time.

– That's right, Peter Davis. Hi.

He stretched out his hand toward Ashley who took it and greeted him.

– I'll have to ask you to wait for your daughter here in the waiting room for confidentially reasons, I hope that you understand?

– But, she's underage. Certainly, a custodian must be present?

– Not when it comes to therapy. The confidentially is absolute, and it also applies to children. In addition, research has shown that children of all ages have easier to open up if the parents are not present, and of course it's absolutely necessary for the patient to open up for therapy to have any effect.

Peter could only anxiously watch Diana disappear down the corridor with Ashley, who was surprisingly agile in her wheelchair. She showed Diana to the treatment room and asked her to lay down on the sofa. Then she rolled next to her and smiled.

– Well, Diana. Your dad has told you you're not feeling well. I hope you understand that you can talk to me about everything, and what you say is staying between you and me.

– Well, yes. Dad said you have confidentiality.

– Exactly. And that's what I said out there to your dad. So if there's something that bothers you that you don't want your dad to know out, then it's no problem. He will not find it out from me.

– Well, that's fine, I guess.

Diana became silent. It was difficult to talk about what happened. She didn't really know what she should tell and not because she had kept it a secret for so many years. Ashley waited patiently and then tried to encourage her a little.

– He told you that you took a lot of tablets as if you were trying to kill yourself. Is it true?

– Well, yes, maybe.

– Can you tell me why you did it?

– I, well, it's so hard. Hard to talk about it.

– It's by nature that it's hard to talk about it, so you don't have to be ashamed of that. If it were easy to talk, then you would talk about it instead and then maybe getting other, nicer thoughts. Believe me, I know how it feels.

– You do?

– Well, of course, I don't know what your problem is. But I know how it feels to believe that suicide is the only solution. Feel my wrist here.

– What is that? It feels like some sort of scars, right?

– Your method was tablets, my method was to cut my wrists.

– Do you mean that ... no, you can't mean that ...

– Well, I tried to kill myself several times. I thought that I had no future when I got paralyzed in my legs and ended up in this wheelchair.

Ashley began to talk about her problems instead, about how she had been depressed when she was sixteen years old because she became bound to a wheelchair. She told in depth about how she felt then and what made her finally decide to give Life a chance. Diana listened to everything she said and started to relax a little. It was just Ashley's special method of exploiting her own problems to reach to her patients. She herself had such deep problems before, and decided to become a psychologist as a method of finding a reason for all her problems, namely, utilizing her experiences to help others who had it difficult.

When the time for the session was finished, Diana still had not said anything significant, but it was Ashley who had done the most of the talking. But Ashley nevertheless knew that it had helped a lot to talk, so she booked a new session one month later.

The second session went somewhat better because Ashley chose not to immediately start talking about the suicide attempt, but went back in time. Diana began to talk about how hard it was to her when her mother had experienced cancer three years earlier and quickly got so bad that she had died. She also described how she had to take care of the whole household because her father was tired when he came home. Ashley listened but had not yet heard anything that could be so hard that it could trigger a suicide. She understood that there must be something more serious, but that Diana had not yet been able to talk about it, so she booked another meeting less then a month later.

Peter began to wonder what happened at the meetings and asked Diana about it. What he found out gave him no cause for concern. Therefore, he began to work with her to make the abortion, but she just became silent when he addressed the subject. He didn't really understand the connection between the abortion and the suicide attempt, but thought that there were other problems he didn't even know.

On the third visit, Diana was unusually upset. She had become good at concealing her real feelings, but Ashley was trained to discover such things.

– Diana, I notice that you are more sad than usual today. Is there something special that has happened since the last time?

– Well, not really. Or maybe something. Dad has begun to nag again.

– Hm. What is he talking about then?

– Well, the abortion and such.

Ashley almost jumped into the air. Abortion? Now she may begin to approach the core of the problem.

– Did you say abortion? Does that mean you are pregnant right now?

– Oh, I shouldn't have ...

– Take it easy, I won't tell, I've already said that. You have a boyfriend, I suppose? Who is it?

– It's Lenny. Or, well, I don't know if he's my boyfriend and so. But he seems interested in me, kind of.

– Hm. I'm not that amazed. You are a neat girl, good looking too. No wonder boys are getting interested. Does your dad know about it?

– No he doesn't. I haven't dare to tell.

– So, your dad doesn't know that Lenny made you pregnant, I suppose?

– Well, it's not that way. We have not done ... well ... that. It's just hugs and so.

– Hm. You are fourteen years old, right? I'm convinced you know you're not getting pregnant from hugs. There's nothing wrong with having sex with a boyfriend of your own age, though most people try to pretend it's not. I don't judge you in any way, but I just want to help.

– I know how children is made, Diana answered with an unusually loud voice. But it's not Lenny.

– No problem. You don't have to be upset. I also have been fourteen so I know how it's when the hormones begin to rage and you start looking at boys of your age with other eyes.

– But, I have not had sex with any boys, I said!

– Still you are pregnant?

– Yes, I am actually.

– You can tell me who you think is the daddy. I will not tell anyone, not even your own dad.

– He knows very well who made me pregnant.

– So, he already knows? What does he say about it then?

– He wants me to abort, I said. Otherwise it comes out that ...

Diana suddenly stopped talking and began to cry. Ashley saw how the tears started to flow from her eyes. She handed over a paper towel and waited for her to calm down.

– Diana, listen to me now. Don't be afraid to tell the truth. You will feel better if you get it out of the system. And I'm sure that your Dad will also understand eventually.

– It's so difficult. Dad, he ... it's he who's ... no ...

Suddenly Ashley began to guess what had happened, but still could not believe that it was true. She decided to go straight ahead with it to gain some clarity.

– I understand it's hard. Are you trying to say that it's your own dad who made you pregnant?

Diana could not answer but nodded. Ashley felt like something cold began grabbing her heart. This was terrible information, worse than she ever heard before. Her voice started to tremble when she continued.

– How ... How long has your father sexually abused you?

– Since mom died. He said he had some needs. And when Mom was dead, I was the only one there. So...

Ashley made an effort to not react. A rage started bubbling up inside her, but she braced herself to not show it. Her hands shook and she realized she would not be able to go on for much longer.

– Is that why you tried to commit suicide?

Diana suddenly started bubbling. Now that she had said the terrible stuff, it was as if everything ran out of her.

– I can't live this life anymore. Daddy's demanding to do it all the time, and I hate it. Then he made me pregnant, but nobody can find out, he says. So he says I have to do abortion. But I then will kill my own child, and I can't do that. So maybe it's better if I'm also dead, I thought. It's sounds stupid, maybe, but it hurts so much, and I can't cope anymore.

– It may be the wrong thing to do, but I understand how it feels. When you are in that situation, suicide feels like the right thing to do. I know, I thought so myself. But I promise you that, in my own experience, I know that is not correct.

Ashley started to feel really sick to her stomach. She checked the clock and saw that it was half time only, but she had difficulty continuing because of her own memories. Then she came up with an idea that might work for both of them.

– Diana, I can see that this is very hard for you. What do you say if we pause this session until tomorrow? You just come back here at ten o'clock tomorrow to finish it. Do you think that sounds like a good idea?

To her relief, Diana agreed wholeheartedly. Ashley felt as if she wanted to throw up and Diana in turn was relieved that she didn't have to talk more about it at that time. Ashley rolled out and explained the decision to Peter, who was a little surprised but accepted her unexpected request.

When Diana had left, Ashley slowly rolled back to her office. Her boss approached from the other end and was shocked when he saw her.

– Ashley, you're pale as a ghost! What happened?

– It's the patient I just had. Her story throw me of balance.

– Come into my office and tell me. Sometimes also we psychologists needs a little therapy, it's in the nature of our work.

Inside the office, Ashley told him.

– I just found out that her dad sexually abused her since she was twelve years old, and now she also made her pregnant. It landed a bit too close to myself, because my mother got pregnant with me at about the same age. Oh my God! Her own father...

– It's certainly terrible. You know you have to report it to the police, right? If we finds out of such serious crime, we are obliged to report it, despite the confidentiality obligation.

– Yes, I know. I have some plans for tomorrow.

The next day, Diana came with her dad as usual. Ashley asked her to come into the room as usual, and then closed the door behind her. Diana was surprised when she saw that there were two other women in the room already.

– Diana, I'm sorry about this, but I didn't want to tell you anything. I didn't want to take the risk that your dad would find out what's going on and do something desperate. This is Carissa from the Child Protected Service and Olivia from the Police. I have told them about your father's abuse, and they both want to talk a little with you.

Diana was shocked and staggered. Ashley gently pushed a chair behind her and she sat down.

– But, but ... the rule of confidentiality ...

– In this case, it doesn't apply, Olivia said. If a psychologist or doctor gets information about a serious crime, one that can renounce a long-term prison sentence, he or she must report it to the police. In this case, it's not just the matter of many years of abuse, but it also about pure rape. And it can give a very long prison sentence if one gets convicted for it.

– Rape? Well, I might not have resisted ... I don't know if ...

– It's rape nevertheless. First of all, you are dependent on him and it makes it rape. Secondly, you are minor and he is many years older, that is called statutory rape regardless of whether there would be a consent or not. So, no matter how you regard it, your dad can look forward to a long time in prison.

– But please. What about me? What will happen to me? Dad warned me! I will end up homeless on the street, as he said!

– That's why I'm here, Carissa said. I will make sure you will be taken care of, I promise. Nothing bad will happen to you and nothing of this is your fault.

– No, definitely not, Ashley said. Just as I'm not responsible that someone stuck a knife in my back putting me into this wheelchair, just as you are not responsible for what your daddy has done to you. I'll help you through every step of this. You

will see that everything will work themselves out when everything has landed in the end.

Diana looked from one to the other. Ashley continued to talk and sounded so convincing that she felt that she could do this. Olivia requested to ask some questions, and Diana found it increasingly easier to answer the questions. Also Carissa had some questions. Ashley supported her all the time and she almost thought it felt good to finally tell them everything.

When Olivia and Carissa had got enough information, Olivia asked if Ashley could fetch Peter. She rolled out to the waiting room and asked him to come inside to "get some tips" as she said. He was deeply shocked when he was presented to those who were in the room. Olivia took over immediately.

– Mr. Davis. You are accused of rape in the first degree of your daughter and abuse of minor under your responsibility. Everything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to legal representative and to have this present at the hearing. If you can't afford a legal representative, one will be appointed to you free of charge. Have you understood your rights?

– Diana, what have you done? How can you do this to me?

– I have ju .. just done what you said. Talked to Ashley.

– Your, your traitor! he said pointing at Ashley. You have not only ruined my life, you've destroyed my daughter's life as well. Don't think you'll get away with this!

– That's definitely classified as unlawful threats and abuse of judicial procedure, which are hereby added to other charges. Please come with me.

Olivia put handcuffs on him and brought him out of the room to take him to the police station. He continued to shout smear word over Olivia, Ashley and Diana. When he had disappeared, Carissa took charge.

– Diana, my friend. Don't worry about what he says. It's just he who's going to get into trouble. I have found a home where you can live awaiting what the CPS will decide. That decision will be made at the earliest after the eventual trial

against your dad. Don't worry, even if he is not convicted you will not have to live with him anymore.

– He said I have to live in the street ...

– Not at all. He just said it so that you wouldn't dare to say anything. I have already got a new, temporary home for you. There are a couple called Ronald and Ruth Clayton. They live in a house just outside of town in this city. We usually use them as an emergency placement of children who have been taken into protective custody. Because that's exactly what happened to you, is now *in loco parentis*, which means your dad can no longer decide over you.

– Do you really mean that?

– You can trust me. Ronald and Ruth are not only competent in this kind of situations, but also very friendly. They always have space in their hearts for children with problems. I am prepared to guarantee that they will be just fine with you.

– What ... What will happen to my child then? Do I have to ... abort?

– That decision is yours to take, and nobody else, Carissa replied.

– I can help you make that decision, said Ashley. I can also help you with whatever you choose to do. But the decision is yours.

Diana sighed deeply from relieve and looked at Ashley with grateful eyes. Somehow, she felt that with Ashley's help everything would be solved now.

✯ ✯ ✯

CHAPTER 6

Shelter Home

Ruth knocked on the door to Diana's room. She just put the last of her things into the closet and the drawers. Carissa had suggested that they pass home before they came here, so Diana could pick up all her clothes and other things. Carissa claimed that it was absolutely safe for Diana to go home this time because her dad was interrogated at the police station. The room here in the shelter home felt comfortable with a bed, table and other furniture. She looked around and thought it would definitely be possible to get used to living here. The bed had been nice to lay down in when she had slept there for a couple of hours, exhausted by all that had happened during the day. She was still trying to melt all the impressions.

Now it knocked on the door a second time and she woke up from her daydream and opened the door and let Ruth into the room.

– Why didn't you just come in? she asked.

– This is your own room, and I want you to feel this is your private sphere where no one can disturb you.

– Oh, that's strange but it actually feels nice. Dad always just walks in, without even caring if I'm dressed or not.

– That will not happen here, I promise. I hope you feel welcome and understands that me and Ronald will do everything we can do to make you feel comfortable here.

– I really feel welcome here, mrs Clayton. I'm so thankful.

– Just call me Ruth. The reason I knocked on the door is that Olivia from the police just called me. She told me they were done with the interrogation of your dad, and that he made bail and thus is home again or on his way home. She feels that your situation should be treated as a high risk.

– What does that mean? Do you think Dad is angry with me?

– Not at all unthinkable. It's impossible to predict how a person in his situation reacts. He can become violent and try to get to you. Either as a pure revenge, or unfortunately even to eliminate the evidence of his crime.

– Eliminate? Do you mean he will try to kill me!?!

– We can't exclude it, even if it's not very likely. You may have difficulty believing that he may be violent, but with one's back against the wall it's not impossible that someone becomes desperate.

– He has hurt me before, many times. If he doesn't get the way he wants, he will go crazy.

– So, therefore, we must be careful. Another possible risk is that he kidnaps you to escape to another state and then continue as before. As I said, I don't think the risk of doing any of this is particularly great, but Olivia wants us to be prepared for the worst.

– What are we going to do then?

– In practice you are grounded. Not because you have done anything wrong, not at all, but for your safety. If you need to leave the house then me or Ronald must be with you. The school has just started again after the summer break, right? So one of us will drive you to and from school every day, luckily it's quite near our house. While you are in school you will also stay indoors.

– They usually say we should go out during the breaks.

– That's why I will talk to the principle tomorrow after dropping you of at school. He must also ensure that you are never left alone, but always have some staff with you until I or Ronald pick you up.

– All of this is scaring me.

– Don't be scared. The risk is minimal that something bad will happen to you, we just want to be careful.

So the next day, Diana was driven to the school by Ruth, who then spoke with the principle about the risks. He had already received a call from Olivia, so he was already aware of the problem.

– I will let the student assistant go with her on the breaks, and after school she can wait in the teacher's room until you or your husband picks her up. You can trust us, mrs Clayton. We will not let anything happen to you daughter. Can I ask what her problem is?

– It's not my daughter. She is taken into protective custody from her father, and that's all you need to know. There is confidentiality around her case, you see. Diana lives with me and my husband until further notice but it's the Child Protected Service that is responsible for her.

The principle realized that he wouldn't get his curiosity satisfied, so he had to settle without it. He repeated that Diana would be safe at school. Ruth thanked him and drove back home again. Meanwhile, Leonard sat watching Diana during the class. Did she look a bit happier? Or, maybe still not. At the break he asked her how she was feeling, and why she had not been to school for a few days.

– Please, Lenny. Don't ask anything. I feel so bad right now. can't you just do as you usually do to make me think of other things?

She put her arms around him, and he was too willing to hug her back. She felt so safe in his arms.

– For sure, Diana. You can trust me, you know.

– I know, Lenny. You are always so kind and understanding. This will probably be over soon, at least I'm beginning to believe that now. Then I will tell you everything, but right now I just don't want to think about it.

– To speak of something else, have you seen that the student assistant seems to follow us all the time? I wonder if he thinks we're going to do something inappropriate with each other?

– I think I know why he is watching us, but I can't tell anyone about that either. But it has nothing to do with you anyway.

– You're so mysterious. In a way, I like that you are mysterious. It makes you so exciting! Every boy's dream in other words.

Diana laughed at his words. Leonard was the only one who could make her laugh right now, and it was so liberating. The school day ended and Leonard gave her one last hug for the day. He thought it was completely unreal that he was now allowed to hug the girl he had been in love for a long time as often as he wanted. It was a wonderful feeling that he wished would never end. At the same time, he was worried what it was that made her so sad all the time.

He went to the bus to go home while Diana stepped into the teacher's room to wait for Ruth. When she arrived, the student assistant followed them out to tell her that the day had been calm. When they came outside the schoolyard, a man came out of a car and quickly walked towards the threesome.

– Diana, wait!

Diana gasped when she saw that it was her father that was shouting. Ruth, who had seen pictures of him, immediately placed herself between Diana and him.

– Sir, I hope you remember that you have a restraining order on your daughter.

– I just want to talk with her a little. Move aside!

The student assistant realized who it was and picked up his phone and called the number he had received earlier in the day. Then he came forward and grabbed Peter, who tried to push Ruth aside. Soon several teachers also came out and the mood quickly became threatful and loud when everyone screamed at Peter who shouted back. After just five minutes, a car arrived at full speed with sirens on. Olivia stepped out from the car and firmly walked towards the group.

– Mr. Davis! You shouldn't be here, and you know it. Calm down!

– The only thing I want is to talk to my daughter! Talk, nothing else.

– I'll have ask you to leave this area immediately!

– Wait a second, Diana said quietly. It's okay, let him talk.

Olivia frowned her eyebrows but nodded.

– Please watch your words, Mr. Davis. And be sure to keep a distance from your daughter, otherwise you will coming downtown with me.

Peter nodded and turned to Diana who was still hiding behind Ruth.

– Diana, honey. I just want to know why you're doing this to me. Everything is collapsing now, don't you understand?

– It was you who said I should tell everything to Ashley. I didn't know that she had to tell the police. I did just as you said.

– You have to explain to them that you and I are good together, honey. We love each other and nothing is wrong with what we have done. Just tell the police here that you wanted it yourself.

– But you told me I shouldn't lie.

Peter was put off by what she said. Olivia took over.

– By law, it doesn't matter if your daughter did it voluntarily or not. It's still rape and you will have to pay for it.

Ruth pushed Olivia and hissed.

– Hey, Olivia, look around. It's crowded with people around, and now you've suddenly reviled one of the most embarrassing things you can say about Diana. In addition, it's confidential, as you very well know.

Olivia looked around and bite her tongue. There were a lot of teachers standing around them, and several of them had a shocked expression of what they had just heard.

– I apologize for that. That was not really my meaning. In any case, you have had enough time now, Mr. Davis. I'm ordering you to leave now.

Peter realized that it was not worth standing there scolding, so he sat back into his car and drove away from them. Olivia turned to the teachers who stood around them.

– May I ask you all to keep what you've just heard to yourself? What Diana has been exposed to is traumatic, and I'm convinced you don't want to worsen her situation.

Diana looked down into the ground with tears on her cheeks. Ruth put her arm around her shoulders and walked with her to the car. She looked worried at Diana while she sat in the car.

– Maybe it's almost good they got to know Diana. If I understood correctly, you are going to give birth to your child, so everyone will see that you're pregnant.

Diana looked out the window and didn't answer. She was grateful that Ruth did her best to comfort her, but it was not enough by a long-shoot. The whole mess with her dad in front of the school had only worsened her mood. And now it would soon be a trial against him, and she would have to tell everything again. Whilst she longed for the trial to put an end to the whole thing, she was terrified of it. She didn't know how she would cope with it and everything else around it. She sighed deeply and Ruth felt so helpless about not being able to help Diana properly.

~ ~ ~

Finally the day of the trial arrived. Diana sat next to Ruth and Ronald on the same side as the prosecutor when her dad was brought in by a guard. Diana focused her eyes on a small twig in the table in front of her and dared not meet anyone's eyes. Soon enough, however, it became her turn to testify and she stood up uncertainly and began to go to the testimony boot.

– Be strong, Ruth whispered.

After she had sworded the oath, she finally lifted her eyes and looked at the prosecutor. He smiled kindly to her.

– Miss Davis. I understand that this is very difficult for you to talk about, but can you tell me how the mother died and what happened next.

Diana sighed deeply, closed her eyes and thought about that Ruth had said to her to be strong. Finally, she began to speak with a weak voice.

– My mother got sick with cancer when I was eleven years old. It took less time than a year before she died. Then I and Dad were alone, because I'm their only child.

– So your mother died tragically. I guess that must have been hard for you. How did you and your dad manage that?

– It was really hard, I wasn't able to go to school for several weeks. At the funeral we both cried. Or, at least I did.

– After the funeral, how was the relationship with your father?

– He sat down with me when we got home from the funeral and said that now that I was the only woman in the house, I have to do all the things that my mother used to do. Cook food, make the dishes, clean the apartment, wash clothes and so. When I said I didn't had enough time to do everything because I had homework too, he became angry and hit me. He said he was too tired after the job to do all that, so I had to do it and that it was more important than school work.

– Was housework the only thing you had to did?

– No. There was another thing too ...

The voice gave up on her and she no longer managed to look at him, and looked down at the table instead. The prosecutor waited a moment and then asked her to continue.

– Well. He said he had some needs as a man. And ... And that I, as the only woman, must help him with them.

– I know it's hard to talk about this. But I still have to ask you to be precise. What kind of needs were you supposed to satisfy?

– It was about sex...

– Did he ask you to have sexual intercourse with you?

– Yes.

– How old were you the first time?

– Twelve.

– How did you react at first?

– It was so much pain and I asked him to stop.

– And did he stop then?

– No, he just continued. Then afterwards he punched me because I had complained.

– You mean he hit you if you didn't agree to have sexual intercourse with him?

– Yes.

– And how often did he ask?

– Two to three times a week. If I didn't have my period.

– This started when you were only twelve years old?

– Yes.

– For how long did this continue?

– Until the police took him.

– That's less than a month ago. You are now fourteen years old?

– Yes.

– Then is your testimony that the accused has raped you between two and three times a week for about two years?

– Yes.

– It would be around two to three hundred times in total?

– Something like that, yes.

– Why didn't you contact anyone about this? Police, curator or so?

– Dad said that if I did, he would punch me. And then he would throw me out on the street so that I would starve to death.

– And you believed him?

– I had no reason to distrust him.

– What happened to make this known to the police?

– I got pregnant.

– You're pregnant right now?

– Yes.

– And who is the father to your child?

– My father ... eh ... the accused.

– I would like to present this paper as evidence. It's a paternity test that has been made on the fetus showing that the accused is the father of the fetus.

He handed over a paper to the judge.

– It doesn't show on you yet, Diana. Who was it that found out that you are currently pregnant?

– Nobody. Dad said I had to make an abortion, so I tried to kill myself.

– Why?

– Everything was so terrible that I couldn't cope with it. I don't want to kill my child, and if I have to do that, I want to die myself too.

– Since you obviously are alive, I suppose you got help?

– Dad drove me to a doctor who saved my life.

– What else did the doctor do?

– He demanded that I talk to a psychologist about my suicidal feelings.

– And as we all know, the psychologist contacted the police and your father was arrested. Where do you live now?

– Shelter home.

– Thank you very much Diana. I have no more questions for the moment.

The lawyer started to interview Diana but was not able to make her change her story, especially as it was already clear that she was pregnant with her own dad.

He tried to discredit her and make it look as it had been her idea everything, but it seemed very shallow.

– Do you have a boyfriend?

– Well, I think so.

– Think! You must know if you have a boyfriend or not.

– There is a boy in the class that I like.

– Have you had sex with this boy?

– Oh, well...

- Remember, you're under oath. Please answer the question!

– Alright, I guess that have done it, kind of. But only once.

– And you don't want to call it for rape?

– Well. It was kind of me who suggested it.

– Same as your father. You want to have sex, and when you don't get it at school you can do it at home, right?

– It's not the same...

– What is the difference? You are apparently sexually active. So when you seduced your dad, it became difficult for him to resist. Isn't it like that?

Diana began to cry and tried to protest, but the lawyer continued to insinuate that she was as guilty as her father. Ronald was on the verge of protesting, but realized that it would irritate the judge. Finally, the lawyer was satisfied. Diana returned to the table with Ruth and Ronald, and broke out in uncontrollable cry. Ruth hugged her and whispered:

– You did good, Diana. Everything will be fine now.

The prosecutor called several witnesses, including Ashley and Olivia. The lawyer did his best to discredit the witnesses with failed gravely. When the trial, including the final pledges, was completed, the jury retired to discuss. They came

back quite soon with a verdict of "guilty" on all changes and the judge asked Peter to stand up.

– Peter Davis, you have been found guilty of rape in the first degree, sexual abuse of children, abuse of judicial procedure and unlawful threats. I would rather sentence you with sequential punishment for every rape you committed to five hundred years of imprisonment, but federal laws don't allow it. Instead, I sentence you for the strictest punishment of the law. You are hereby sentenced to life imprisonment without the possibility of parol until earliest after thirty years.

Peter collapsed when he heard the verdict and shouted curse words to prosecutor and Diana while he was removed from the court. Diana was also shocked by the hard punishment and realized that she might never meet her father again in freedom. In a way, it felt good anyway, because for the first time she realized how seriously the things that her daddy did to her actually had been. All tears she had cried, all despairing she had felt, all guilt she had because she was not grateful to her father just vanished. What he had done was by no means okey. At the same time, she felt complete fear of what would happen to her now when, in practice, she was an orphan and at the same time pregnant. Ruth put her arms around Diana who had started crying. Ronald also stood close to her and tried to comfort her.

– Diana, my child. Now this is over and you can put it behind you and start a new, better life. Me and Ruth will do everything we can to help you with that.

– How can I have a life? And what will happen to my child?

– You've already decided that, Ruth replied. You are going to give birth to your child and take care of it, right? You don't want to abort, you said.

– No, I just can't.

– You also don't want to give it away for adoption?

– I can't leave my child to strangers.

– Then you will give life to your child and then take care of it and raise it. That's a fantastic experience, which I will never experience myself. I can't get chil-

dren myself, you see. That's why me and Ronald decided become a home for children, because then we will have the opportunity to have children anyway.

– What will happen with me now? How will I be able to make it?

– You are formally still just temporarily placed with us. But we have already talked with your social secretary Carissa that we want to be your foster parents instead. So you will stay with us. Me and Ronald have already talked about it. We have also decided that when you grow up and are no longer a foster child, you can still stay with us if you want to. We will treat you like our own child.

– But why? Why am I so different? You have had so many different children.

– Yes, we have, but no one who has been pregnant. Don't you understand? Your child is yours and nobody's else. But I will take care of it while you are at school. It will be wonderful for me to take care of a baby and see it grow up. Almost like I've got my own baby.

– Do you mean it? You will help me take care of the child?

– I truly mean just that. The responsibility is yours, but with your permission, I will be your permanent babysitter.

– But I'm so scared. I know nothing about how to take care of a baby.

– Like all primigravida, Ronald said. Nobody knows how to take care of a baby until you have one. But it has been working for thousands of years and it will work for you as well.

– That's true, I guess.

– Of course, we should now make appointments with a gynecologist for regular examinations as pregnant women usually gets. We can also book parenting courses for you, where you will learn how to do together with other prospective moms. Everything will be just fine, and I and Ruth will help you through all the problems.

Diana throw her arms around him and hugged him to his amazement. It was the first time she had wanted to touch him, not to talk about hugging him. Then Ruth got one of her own and she was equally moved.

– Thanks, Ronald. Thanks, Ruth. It probably feels a bit better now. I'm not so scared now, because if I get your help it just have to work.

– I have a question for you, Diana. First, I would say that I felt really bad when the lawyer started questioning you. And Ronald looked like he was close to explode. But you said something that I wonder about. You obviously have a boyfriend from school. Who is it, or don't you want to talk about it?

– His name is Lenny and goes in my class. Or actually he's name is Leonard. I don't think I would have gotten through this without him, because he has comforted and hugged me every day. It feels like he's strong for both of us.

– What does he say about all of this that happened to you?

– Well, I have not dared to tell him. I'm afraid he will abandon me if he found out the truth.

– Maybe he knows, because Olivia was talking beside her mouth. In any case, you should tell him. I am convinced that if he really likes you, he will be happy to know the truth.

– And if he can't accept it, he's nothing to have anyway, Ronald said. I agree that you should tell him.

– Why don't you invite him to lunch on Sunday, and we can help you to tell him everything?

Diana was doubtful, but in any case, let her be persuaded. So she invited Leonard but didn't say that it was a foster home or anything else. Leonard became a little nervous about being presented to those whom he thought were her parents. But he didn't dare to turn her down, because he was really in love with her.

So when the Sunday came, he went up to the front door just before twelve dressed in his best clothes. Diana opened the door and gave him a hug. It felt like this could be her last hug from him, so she was unexpectedly intense to his delight. Ruth also came to the door and smiled when she saw the tenderness. Then she showed them into the kitchen and they ate the food that she already had put on the table. The conversation fled easier and easier, mostly because they consciously

didn’t address any deeper questions. After the meal, they all sat down in the living room.

– Well, Lenny, Ruth began. You and Diana have been a couple for some months now, right?

– Well, I don’t know if we’re a couple, but I’ve been interested in her for almost a year. Though maybe three months ago, we started talking on a regular basis.

– That’s true, Ruth. You know I don’t want to hide things for you or Ronald, but as you know, I haven't been feeling so good.

Leonard looked a little surprised. He wondered why she called her parents by first name and not as “Mom” and “Dad”. However, he didn’t say anything about it when he continued.

– Nor did I want Diana to have secrets for her parents, but I didn’t want to push her to talk about something that’s hard for her.

– Now, Lenny, I have to explain one thing first. Ruth and Ronald are not my parents, they are my foster parents. I’m taken into protective custody because my mom is dead and my dad didn’t take care of me.

– Oh, that explains why you address them with their first names.

– That’s right, but they are very nice to me, so I’m very happy.

– We don’t mind Diana having a boyfriend, on the contrary. I really hope you are a couple, given that you have already been intimate with each other. Yes we know, but it’s not Diana who has gossiped to me, we found it out anyway. Now she have a lot to tell you, and that’s why I invited you. Diana, why don’t you start telling you how you got pregnant?

Leonard sat straight up and looked panicked. Ruth immediately regretted telling about Diana’s pregnancy because it was obvious that Leonard didn’t know about it.

– Pregnant? Do you mean that I ... no! I used a... what!

– Take it easy, Lenny. You're not gonna be a daddy. Diana, you have to tell him everything now.

Diana sighed but slowly still steadily, she managed to explain everything about her father, the abuse, the pregnancy and the trial. She didn't dare to look Leonard in his eyes when she was explaining, worried about how he would react. He said nothing for a long while and finally Diana lifted her eyes and met his.

– Wow, that's terrible, he said, shocked.

– Can you forgive me, Lenny?

– Forgive you? For what!?!

He moved closer to her on the couch and folded his arms around her. She hugged him back with relief.

– You have nothing to ask for forgiveness about, Diana. None of what you told me is your fault. I'm just so shocked that your own dad can do something that awful. No wonder that you've always been so sad.

– Do you remember that first day you came and comforted me?

– How can I forget that day? It's somehow the happiest day of my life but at the same time it was the hardest day. I got to hug you, but at the same time you were so sad.

– I had just done a pregnancy test in the toilet and found out that I was pregnant. That's why I was so desperate.

– I can really understand that.

– If it had not been for you, I wouldn't have survived this. Even when I took those sleeping pills, I thought of you, and subconsciously made it discoverable. Well, it's my psychologist Ashley who came to it, and that's might be true.

– Psychologist? Sleeping pills? Hey, have you tried to commit suicide? Not that I'm actually surprised, because you've really been so down.

– Dad asked me to make an abortion, but I don't want to kill my child. That's why I gave up and tried to kill myself together with my child.

Leonard and Diana hugged for a long time and if felt like a whole brick of stones fell down from Diana's chest. Leonard assured her that nothing had changed, more than possibly for the better. After a long, comforting silence, it was Ruth who eventually broke the silence.

– Well, Lenny. Now I have a couple of questions for you. You really seem to be interested in Diana, and not like some guys just want one thing.

Leonard looked a little surprised until he understood what she meant.

– I have honest intentions, I promise. Well, we've already had sex once, and I'm still here. I wouldn't be it if that was my goal, right?

– No, probably not. The most important question I have for you, Lenny, is if you are prepared to become a daddy?

– But, it's not my child, you said!

– No, it's not, but it's Diana's child. And she has made the decision to take responsibility for it and raise it. I support her decision to one hundred percent. So if she is going to take care of a child, and you continue to hang out with her, then you will be involved in the child's life whether you try it or not. So, are you prepared for it? To take care of a child together with Diana?

Leonard was worried. Of course, Ruth was right. The child wouldn't care if his genes were in it or not, it would still consider him to be dad.

– I'd think I'm as ready as Diana, he ultimately answered with an insecure voice.

– That means not ready at all. No one in your age is ready for such a thing. Well, you both have about half a year to get ready. I have promised Diana to help her, and goes with you. If I would decide, you should attend her visit to gynecologist and parenting meetings. What do you say about that?

– I assure you that I will not abandon Diana now. All this has just made me even more convinced that I want to be your boyfriend, Diana. You would make me the proudest person in school if you want to be my girlfriend.

– Of course, Lenny.

She pecked a bit with her lips and got her first kiss to both her and Leonard's joy.

– But, Lenny, please. Don't tell anything to anyone else yet. I don't think I can cope with it right now. Eventually, I may be able to talk to others about what Dad did, but at the moment it feels too hard.

– Of course, Diana. Your secret is safe with me.

Diana felt really happy for the first time in many years. Leonard continued to be with her and it became more and more pleasant as Diana became happier. The stomach began to grow, and it became clear to everyone at school that she was pregnant. Because she was so fond of Leonard, most people thought that it was he who had made her pregnant. Both of them got eyes and hurtful words from others at school, but they were both so happy together that they did't care about them.

– Let them talk, Leonard said. We know the truth, but they have nothing to do with it.

Diana agreed and closed her ears for everyone who tried to tease her.



CHAPTER 7

Running Away

Mia sat in her usual corner in the playroom at the orphanage playing with her Teddy. It was almost half a year since she arrived at the orphanage now, but she had not yet felt safe here even once. Instead, she had become more even more shy and refused to play with the other children. The staff felt she had to learn how to spend time with them to get more social, so Fred came to her.

– Mia, are you sitting here in a corner again? Go to the other kids and play instead!

– But, I'm afraid of them.

– Stupidities. Come here now!

Fred fiercely pulled her up from the floor and half dragged her over to a group of somewhat older children that was playing with bricks. Fred pointed at a tower of bricks that another child had built up, and Mia eventually took a brick herself and placed it on top of the tower. Fred nodded satisfied and went away.

– You are stupid, one of the other children said.

Mia didn't answer but instead tried to add another brick to the tower so that Fred wouldn't be angry with her again. She missed and the whole tower went down.

– You're stupid and clumsy, see what you've done!

The other child took one of the bricks and threw at Mia hitting the middle of her forehead. She screamed loudly, after which Fred came back and looked strictly at her.

– What are you screaming for, child? he asked.

Mia dared not to answer but the other child said:

– She is stupid and she tore down my tower on purpose!

– Why are you always making trouble, Mia? Now you have to rebuild Carls tower at once!

Fred turned his back while Mia tried to build, but her hands shook with fear, so she just tore down the tower all the time. Carl got angry at her and threw several other bricks on her. She got angry and threw back one brick just as Fred turned around. Then he came back and started hitting Mia again.

– Didn't you understand that you shouldn't make trouble with the other children, you're going to play like a nice girl. But you're always deplorable and make everyone else sad.

Mia cried out loud while Carl spit-fully looked when Mia's got spanked for something he had done.

– Now, go to your room and don't come out again until you can behave!

Mia leaped into her dorm again. This was the only chance she had to be alone. That is, to first get into trouble, get spanked and then as "punishment" go to bed and stay alone for a while. She laid down on her stomach in her bed and played with her Teddy as she used to do. Unfortunately, these moments were too short as she was retrieved quite soon.

Back in the playroom, she sat in her corner again and tried to get as invisible as possible. It worked for a while, until someone reacted and wanted her to play with the others, and the story repeated itself, as every day. Sometimes she became so angry with the whole thing that she desperately kicked and fought for not have to hang out with the others, but instead she was beaten because she didn't want to

obey. Then she used to run into her room, just to be picked up again, sometimes with violence.

All meals were also a struggle. She hated the breakfast, and sometimes threw the plate with Corn Flakes on the floor and shouted she wanted Cap'n Crunch. The only result was that she got spanked again, and then was forced to sit on her hurting buttock eating Corn Flakes.

Every night she cried herself to sleep, but she had been forced to learn to cry silently so she wouldn't be punished. Her Teddy and blanket had become increasingly wetter from her tears, because they was her only comfort. She seldom slept all night thru without waking up, full of horror over the darkness, the sounds of the other children in the room and because she felt so terribly abandoned by everyone.

Mia became increasingly desperate, thinking constantly that she had to escape to look for her mother again. Admittedly, she had not always had food with her mother, but in any case she had never been spanked there or forced to do things she didn't want. One day the front door was open so she sneaked through it when nobody watched. Outside there was a yard where the big kids could play soccer or basketball. But around the entire yard was a high wall. She sneak up to the gate in the wall, but it was locked. She looked up to see if it was possible to climb it.

–MIA! What are you doing out here! Have we not told you to stay inside the house if you don't have anyone with you!

Mia became terrified when she realized she had been discovered. She knew so well what was waiting for her now. She tried to run away, but she failed so soon she was lying on her stomach again with a aching buttock. This time, the manager had used a wooden brush, so it hurt even more. She cried relentlessly and decided that she *have* to get out from here. Everyone was so evil to her just as her mother had warned her. "Where are you, Mom", she silently cried.

The weeks went by and she did everything she could to keep herself from even more trouble. Mostly, trying to make herself as invisible as possible. One day she had managed to hide in the dormitory for a few hours when she heard a noise in the hallway. She looked out worried and saw a boy who was much older than she

was fighting with the staff. Of the high voices she understood that the boy just got there, but that he refused to do as anyone said. There were a lot of pushing and dragging and Mia were really scared when she saw it.

Then she looked down the hallway and her heart began to beat a little faster. The front door was wide open and she could see that the gate in the wall was also open. Apparently, they had not closed either of them when they had taken the new boy in. Mia quickly took her Teddy and blanket and slipped out the door and then out through the gate. As soon as she got out onto the street she started running as fast as she could. She ran and ran until she could not run anymore. Then she looked around to see if anyone chased her. It was completely empty behind her. In fact, no one had discovered that she had left yet because of the mess.

She nevertheless started running again to be on the safe side. Finally she was so exhausted by the running that she couldn't take another step. Then she crept in behind a bush and sat down on her still painful bottom. After she had rested a little, she started to walk trying to find something she recognized. They had driven quite a long way when she came to the orphanage, in fact the orphanage was in a completely different town, several miles from her hometown. After a while her feet began to hurt so much from all the walking, so when a car stopped next to her and a man asked if she wanted a ride, she accepted. When she sat next to the man, she told him where she was heading.

– That's exactly where I'm on my way too. I'll help you get there in no time, said the man who actually seemed nice.

Mia began to feel tired so she slept a little. When she suddenly woke up, she felt a hand touching her private parts. She shouted and the hand disappeared. As she looked around, she saw that the car had stopped and the man sat looking at her with a strange facial expression. Her skirt was pulled up to her waist and her panties were gone. She shouted again, opened the car door and jumped out. Her Teddy fell down to the ground at the same time so she picked him up together with her blanket and started running away from the car and the horrible man as fast as she could.

– Mom was right, all other adults are dangerous, she said out loud to herself.

Fortunately, the man actually had driven to the correct city, so she was much closer to home now. But she didn't recognize anything so she started going downtown. It had become quite late so she started getting really tired. Finally she was to tired to continue, so she walked into a park, crept in behind some bushes and fell asleep under her blanket, totally exhausted.

Mia woke up the next morning when the sun began to shine through the bushes. She felt quite cold and stiff from the cold air. She started walking again to try to warm up. The stomach really hurt from hunger and she began to despair more and more. After many hours, she finally approached the center of the city. She knew that there were many cars around where she lived, so it must be at the center. She walked the streets up and down to find something that she recognized. At the same time, she avoided contact with other people, for fear that they would be as bad as the man who drove her. In addition, the evil persons from the orphanage were surely looking for her and that they would send her back there when they found her.

In the afternoon, she was too tired to do anything. She sat down on a bench in a park and wondered how she could fill her empty stomach. She had found water, but nothing to eat. Suddenly she got a wonderful scent in her nostrils. She was looking around until she found out from where the smell came. It was a plate of freshly baked buns that someone sat out on a balcony to cool down. "One should not steal, but I'm very hungry," she thought, and started climbing up to the balcony. There was a woman inside the balcony door, so Mia hid on the outside and stretched her hand over the railing to take some buns. She grabbed a few, but when she tried to put them into her pocket, she lost her grip and fell down. It really hurt when she landed so she screamed loudly. The woman came out on the balcony and saw Mia.

– Hello there! Why are you screaming? Have you hurt yourself?

Mia quickly got up on to her feet, grabbed the buns that had fallen down to the ground and ran away. They had become dirty, but she didn't care about it. The buns were the best she tasted ever, most likely because she was so hungry. Her

forehead was hurting from the fall, and she put her hand to her forehead and discovered that there was blood on her hands. She began to cry again of despair.

– Mom, where are you? I'm bleeding and I'm still hungry!

She immediately realized that people who lived here would wonder so she hurried away. After a few blocks she saw some women walking back and forth. None of them had a lot of clothes on them, even though it was quite cold in the air. Her heart ponded a little faster. It was that way her mom used to dress when she went out to work. Wait a minute! Mia caught sight of a woman who was waking the other direction who looked like her mother.

– Mom, Mom! Wait for me! It's me, Mia! Wait...

The woman heard her and turned around. Then Mia realized that it was not her mother, just a woman with similar clothes and hair. The hooker, because that was of course what she was but Mia didn't understand what that is, bent down and responded.

– Well, but hello, little friend. Have you lost your mother?

– Don't touch me, Mia said horrified. I thought you were Mom because you dress like her.

– I will not touch you, keep calm. What is your mom's name? Maybe I know her and can help you.

– Her name is Angela, but sometimes she calls herself for The Angel.

– The Angel, hm. I think that I heard of her, actually. My name is Crystal. Come here, take my hand and we'll look for her.

– Never. You will only take me to the orphanage again.

Mia turned around and ran away. But Crystal actually knew another prostitute called The Angel, and decided to look for her. After half an hour's search, she found the one she was looking for and asked:

– Hi, your'e The Angel, right?

– Yes it's me. Why do you ask?

Do you have a daughter named Mia? Around four to five years maybe, shoulder blond hair and blue eyes?

– Yes, I actually I have. But she was taken away from me and is in a orphanage.

– Are you sure, because I met such a little girl for less than an hour ago down at the square? She called herself Mia and said she was looking for her mother, called The Angel.

– Hello, it actually sounds like my daughter. Crystal, do you have a phone I can borrow? It's important!

Crystal didn't hesitate for a long time, but gave her phone to Angela, who called the social secretary Adrian.

– Hello, this Angela Bolton. I wonder how it's going with my daughter, Mia.

– I'm on my way home from work right now. Your daughter is fine at the orphanage. Significantly better and safer than when she lived with you.

– So why is she walking alone on the streets downtown here then? How safe is it for her?

– That's impossible. She is in safety at the orphanage!

– Check it out. Check it out now! Call back to this number when you have received a response from them.

Angela closed the call and was then waiting nervously. After ten minutes the phone rang. It was Adrian who called back.

– I called the orphanage and unfortunately received very bad news. Apparently, your daughter Mia run away yesterday afternoon and right now they don't know where she is. Of course, it will be a complete investigation of how it can happen. In addition, I personally reported it all to the police, so they will go out with an Amber Alert. I assure you that we will find her again.

Angela swore at him and was close to throwing the phone to the ground but was stopped by Crystal.

– I have to start looking for Mia. Where was it you saw her?

Crystal told her exactly where she met Mia and what she had said. Angela hurried there and began to look all the streets after Mia. After an hour, the withdrawal symptoms began to kick in hard. She could not afford to buy her heroin, and that's why she was out on the street to make money for her next fix. She was thinking about going back to try to find a customer somewhere so she could get a fix, but then she thought of Mia who was crying around lonely somewhere so she braced herself and kept on looking.

Mia had become tired again of walking for several days with only a few buns in her stomach, so she was sitting behind a bin in a alley to rest her legs. Suddenly she heard a familiar voice that shouted "Mia! Mia! "She looked out behind the bin. Angela's heart jumped over a couple of strokes when she saw her and ran to her. Mia threw herself around her mother's neck and began to cry for joy.

– Mom, mom. I've been looking for you everywhere. That orphanage is terrible, because everyone is evil to me. Please don't send me back!

– Of course not, my little Angel. Hey, look at you! You are dirty and you have blood throughout your face. Poor clild, you must have had a hard time, but you're safe now. Come on, let's go home!

Angela was feeling so terrible because she didn't get her drug yet, but at the same time she was so lucky she found her beloved daughter. When they got home, she washed her wounds on the forehead, gave food to Mia, and then put her in her bed. Mia still had her Teddy and blanket.

The next morning, Mia woke up and was initially confused about where she was. Then she realized she was home. She rushed up and into the kitchen. Mom was not there, but Mia had not expected that, she used to always be tired in the mornings. Mia opened the fridge and was immediately disappointed, because there was no milk there. Then she heard the door opening and was scared and hid under the table. But it was only her mother who came into the kitchen, so she came back and hugged her hard.

– Here, Mia. I have bought milk and Cap'n Crunch for you. You still eat that for breakfast?

– I have not got Cap'n Crunch once in that terrible place. And when I don't eat what I get, they spank me. Oh, mom, if you knew how bad it was there. But now I'm home again. You will never make me to go back there, right?

– Well, my little Angel. They are looking for you and want to take you back there. You must be very careful, and always hide if anyone comes here. Hide under the bed as soon as you hear someone at the door, and don't get out until I say you can come out again.

– I promise, Mom. I will never open the door for anyone anymore.

Mia finally got her favorite cereal and ate double up from pure joy. Then it suddenly knocked on the door. Mia jumped and ran quickly but quietly into her room while Angela put away the milk and the cereal. Then she opened the door. There was a policemen stying outside.

– Mrs. Bolton, I suppose? Can I come in?

– I'm not so fond of cops, so I prefer not.

– Unfortunately, I have to insist. If you refuse, I will return with a search warrant.

– Well okey. Come in then, Angela said and let the policeman inside.

– First, I just want to make sure that you have been informed that your daughter Mia has escaped from the orphanage where she is located. We have a Amber Alert out for her, but have not found her yet.

– I know that. It's terrible not to know where she is. The poor girl has to be terrified out on the streets somewhere.

– We have had indications that your daughter Mia has come home here and lives with you here. And given that you don't seem particularly keen on finding her, it definitely seems like you know where she is.

– Well, I'm high for the most part. I know that the cops are already looking, there's not much I can do to find her. I promise you I don't have a clue about where she is.

– I suppose you don't mind me looking around here in the apartment to verify that your daughter is not here.

Angela hesitated but realized that it would seem suspicious if she said no, so she agreed after all. The police looked carefully around the entire apartment. Angela's heart almost stopped when he bent down to look under Mias's bed. But in the end he was satisfied not to have found Mia, so he apologized and left. Angela hurried into Mia's room and silently called her name. Then she came out from under the bed with her blanket.

– Jeezes, that was close my little Angel. I thought he would find you when he looked under the bed.

– I wrapped myself in my blanket to hide.

– Great, honey. Now the danger is over for this time in any case.

Mia laid down on the bed and started playing with his Teddy while Angela went into the bedroom. She picked up the heroine that she managed to get hold of while she was out shopping by persuading a drug addicted friend to borrow her some. Her hands shook, but she eventually managed to get the syringe in order. With an effort, she got her hands stable enough to drive the syringe into the armrest. She lay down on the bed and shut her eyes and felt how the drug started to work and a calm fell over her.

Soon she was passed out as usual, and Mia was playing alone in her room.



CHAPTER 8

Viola

Diana felt extremely clumsy when she was getting dressed to go to school. Suddenly she folded herself double. Now that sudden pain came again! It had plagued her all night. Could it already be time, although it was several weeks too early? She finally got her dress on and began to go to the kitchen to have breakfast. But something was strange, because her dress and legs were very wet. At first she didn't understand why, but wondered how the dress had become wet in the wardrobe. Suddenly, she understood what was going on.

– Ruth, Ruth, hurry up!

– What is it, Diana? Ruth asked coming down the corridor from the kitchen.

– I think the water just broke.

– The water, you mean there is a problem in the bathroom. The water? Wait! Do you mean it's time already?

– Maybe, I've had pain all night. But it's well over three weeks left, isn't it?

– Sometimes it's sooner than planned. How far is it between the contractions?

– I don't really know. Have not taken the time. Ouch, there is another one.

– When did you get the last one?

– Maybe ten minutes, oh, oh, it hurts!

– Let's go to the birthing center. It feels like it's time, you've packed your bag?

– Wait, oh ... it ... stands ... there ...

Ruth took the overnight bag from Diana's room and helped her out of the house into the car. This was the first time she would experience a childbirth and she was quite nervous, but was careful not to show it to Diana. The poor little girl looked terrified sitting in the car.

– Ruth, you have to call Lenny. I need him at birth. Please, his mobile number is in my phone.

Leonard had just arrived at school when the phone rang. He entered through the door into the school building when he saw that it was Diana who called.

– Hello honey, where are you?

Ruth seemed unexpectedly stressed and breathless.

– Lenny, it's time for Diana to give birth now. I'll just got into the car to drive her to the hospital. She wants you to be there, so it would be best if you could come. Well, we have planned for this so you know what to do. Do you want me to pick you up at school?

– Of course I'll come, Ruth. You don't have to pass me, drive straight to the hospital. I'll take the bus there as fast as possible, I just have to inform the school that I have to go to the hospital. Hopefully they will not ask too many questions.

– I'm going to call the school from the car about Diana. Then I can also tell them at the same time that you are with me so that it doesn't becomes illegal absence.

Leonard had started cold sweating. The day he had feared for many months had apparently come. He braised himself and began to go back to the bus stop. While he was riding the bus, Ruth and Diana arrived at the front desk at the childbirth department at the hospital. Diana was on the verge of being hysterical, so Ruth was the one talking to the receptionist.

– If I have understood it correctly, the receptionist said after listening to Ruth's coherent statement. Diana here is about to give birth. What's your name then?

– My name is Ruth Clayton.

The receptionist noted it in the computer when she enrolled Diana. Then she looked on Ruth with a demanding facial expression.

– You can hardly be the father of the child, so you can't take part in the childbirth. But you may come in for a while to support your daughter. Do you know if the child's father is on his way?

Ruth didn't want to describe the whole story of who she was and who Leonard was, so she just said:

– Diana's boyfriend, Leonard Langley, is on his way. I assume he can be in attendance because Diana needs his support.

– Of course he can. I will show him into Diana's room as soon as he arrives. You can be with her there until Leonard arrives.

Soon Diana had got a room to lay down in, but she was still very scared and somewhat confused by everything new.

– Can't you stay here, or what was she saying? she asked with troubled voice.

– She thought I'm your mother, but I apparently still can't be here. But I talked to Lenny, and he's on his way. They probably think he's the father, so he's allowed to be here during the delivery. Will you be satisfied if Lenny is here, or should I require to stay here because you are a minor?

– If just Lenny is here, I'll be able to cope. I appreciate everything you've done for me, but it's him who helped me when I had it the hardest.

Ruth smiled and stroked her forehead and spoke calmly with her. But because she herself was nervous, it didn't help so much. Soon, Leonard came into the hospital, presented himself and was shown into the room where Diana and Ruth were. He carefully folded his arms around Diana and kissed her very gently.

– Hello Darling. So now it's time, finally. We both know what's going to happen now, because we've attended the parental education together.

– Thank goodness, you're here, Lenny. I already feel a little calmer.

– Are you nervous?

– Nervous, you're joking! I'm terrified! But now that you're here, it feels much better. You are strong enough for both of us.

Leonard didn't feel at all strong. He was probably as terrified as Diana, but he understood better than showing it to her.

– Everything will be okay. Certainly, this is new to you, but women all over the world have done the same thing at many times, right?

Diana smiled and felt a bit better. The nurse that had showed Leonard in looked at Ruth who understood what she meant.

– Diana, dear, I have to go out now. I will sit in the waiting room and bite my nails. Believe me when I say this is going to be just fine, and before you know it, you are a mom and it will feel wonderful.

– Thank you for everything, Ruth. I'll ask Lenny to mess you as soon as something has happened. Then we will see you later today?

– We do, Diana. Lenny, take good care of your beloved girlfriend!

– Of course, Ruth, Leonard answered.

Diana's aches came more often and became worse, but Leonard sat beside her all the time and held her hand so it felt safe. He constantly reminded her of the breathing exercises she had learnt and massaged her to make her feel better. The nurse looked at them more often than usually because the two were so young. She was impressed that they seemed to deal with the situation so mature, even though they was so nervous.

Ruth was much more worried while sitting in the waiting room. She thought Diana was so young and tiny, and that must be terribly hard for her. At lunchtime Ronald came into the waiting room to keep her company. He brought two boxes of Chinese food that he had bought on the way. Ruth was grateful for the food and soon they both sat and ate right out of the boxes.

– It feels so awful to be forced to sit outside and have no idea how things it's going for her, Ruth said.

– I think it's more difficult here than inside. You know Diana has all the support she needs. Not only from Lenny, but also nurses, midwives and doctors.

– I just hope everything is going well. She is so small and fragile.

– She's probably stronger than you think that, you'll see. Wasn't that your phone vibrating? Maybe there is some news?

Ruth picked up her phone and saw that she received a message. She opened the message and screamed out loud from the message. Ronald became curious and watched the phone over her shoulder. The message was from Leonard and it contained no text, just a picture of a newborn girl.

– Check that little cutie! Diana has become a mother, and we have become a foster grandmother and grandfather.

– Everything seems to have been going well. Considering how it long time it takes sometimes, it's kind of fast too. It has to feel nice for Diana that it's over now.

– Over? This is when it actually starts. She will get to know what it's like to be a mother, both the fun and the difficult parts. In some way, I am almost jealous of her, because I can't get children myself.

– But now you have a little baby to take care of. At least while Diana is at school. So you will be able to test how it is to be mother to a toddler before you know it. Unfortunately, I can't stay longer, but I have to return to work. I will be back immediately after work, and I hope we both meet the baby then.

Ronald kissed his wife and hurried back to work. After what felt an endless time, a nurse came out and announced the news.

– Your daughter has just received a well-built baby girl. Everything has gone well, though the new mom is naturally very tired. They will soon all three move to an open department where you will be able to meet them all, including your new born grandchild.

– Thank you very much, I'm looking forward to it, Ruth said without correcting her false facts.

Meanwhile, the department doctor had asked to talk to Leonard. He didn't understand what it was about, but followed him into his office.

– Young man. I have asked to talk a little bit with you because all the paper was not fully filled up when your girlfriend came in this morning. Certainly it is your girlfriend?

– That's right, Diana is my girlfriend.

– Well. We start with the mother's full name. Her name is Diana Clayton, right?

– No, it's not. Her name is Diana Davis.

– But isn't her mother's name Ruth Clayton? It was she who came in with Diana this morning?

Ruth is Diana's foster mom. Her real mom is dead, and her real father is Peter Davis.

– Alright, then we got that cleared. Diana Davis, then. And your name is?

– My name is Leonard Langley. Why are you wondering?

– You are the father of the child, right?

– No, I'm just Diana's boyfriend. When we got together she was already pregnant.

– What! And yet you was allowed to attend her birth? That was not so good. Well, alright, there's nothing we can do about that now. So what's the girl's dad, then?

– His name is Peter Davis.

– Okay, I'll write that. Wait a minute! Peter Davis, that's Diana's father, right? I mean, of course, the newborn girl's father, not Diana's dad. What's the name of baby's daddy?

– Viola's father is Peter Davis.

– Viola, that's the name of the newborn girl I suppose? But that's impossible. He cannot be dad to both of them? Are there two Peter Davis?

– Unfortunately not. Peter is both Viola's grandfather and father at the same time.

– But that's impossible. Unless...

The doctor got a disturbed facial expression when he realized what it should mean.

– Lord, if this is correct then it's criminal. Abuse of her own daughter, statutory rape because she is a minor and I don't know what else!

– That's why he's in prison instead of being here, I suppose.

– Apparently, it's an extremely tragic story behind Viola's advent. It also explains why Diana is placed in foster home.

– Exactly.

– Well, all of that is probably nothing that I need to involved in, especially as it has apparently already been handled by the law and CPS. In any case, I have received the information I needed. Not the one I wanted, unfortunately. But considering the circumstances, you can now return to Diana. I have heard that you were a wonderful support for her during the childbirth.

Leonard returned to Diana who had been rolled out in the corridor while waiting for a attendant to roll her bed to the open department. He gave her a kiss and looked tenderly at Viola lying on her arm. Soon, the attendant came and Diana was rolled up to the department, and Leonard picked up Ruth who was eager to meet the new arrival.

–Wow, look at this sweetie! How does it feel, Diana?

– I'm very tired but at the same time happy. Viola is finally here and I've become a mother.

– You're not worried about being a mommy anymore?

– Of course, I'm worried. But it feels like I can handle it with your and Lenny's support. Viola is so helpless! How can I not love her and want to give her everything?

– Lenny has been, and will be a great support for you, I'm sure about that. How does it feel for you, Lenny?

– I feel like a wrinkled cloth right now. The entire birth was a pain. But now it's over and above all, it will certainly work out. It feels like this all made me feel stronger than before.

– I agree with that, said Diana. You've been strong for both of us.

Leonard watched his clock and realized he had to leave to go home. He had not yet dared to tell his parents that he had a girlfriend, not to mention that she was also pregnant.

– I have to go home now. Just hope my parents are not angry because I have not been at school all day long. You'll probably stay here overnight. You can rest now, so we'll see you tomorrow. It's Saturday then, so I can come already in the morning.

– Do that, Lenny darling. You have been fantastic today. I'm actually tired now and will try to sleep. Ruth is here now, so I'm fine. See you!

Leonard kissed her and then hurried home. To his horror, his parents stood waiting for him and looked serious. Gilbert was careful not to accuse his son directly, but just ask a straight question.

– Leonard, where have you been today? According to school you were not there.

– It was a classmate who was forced to go to the hospital. It's my best friend, so I thought I should be there for support.

– Is it the same one that you are always spending time with in your spare time? Sylvia wondered.

– That's right, Mom.

– Well, I don't think it's so good to just cut class like that, Gilbert said. But it's okay for this time, because it was a good thing. But next time you better call and ask for permission first!

– I promise, Daddy.

He drew a sigh of relief and went to his room. His parents were not entirely satisfied, it felt like Leonard was hiding something for them.

– I'm wondering if that really was the whole truth.

– You can't believe the worst, Gilbert. It's not your style. Leonard is reliable as few others, you know that.

– Well, I guess we'll be content with this. Unbelievable just that he suddenly decides to go to the hospital to be with a friend. Well, well, it's probably true.

Due to the fact that the birth, despite Diana's low age, had been so straightforward, and she also had such good support at home in the form of Ruth, she and Viola went home already the following day. Leonard nervously helped to bring Viola from the car into Diana's room, where they had already placed a crib. Viola slept all the time and Leonard had never seen anything that amazing before.

He spent almost the whole weekend with Diana and Viola and helped to take care of her, including changing diapers. Diana was so happy with Viola and could sometimes just sit down watching her while her heart was beating in a way it never had done before. When she saw how eager Leonard was to take care of Viola, she became even more in love with him. Ruth could not help but smile at how they were so satisfied with each other and to cuddle with little Viola.

Diana thought life had become wonderful. Admittedly, she had problems with sleeping at night because of Viola, but it was not that difficult that it was not weighed up by her love for her daughter. She was soon back in school and got into her role as both schoolmate and mother. Since she still was the only foster child at the time, Ruth had plenty of time to devote to Viola. Over the next few months, Diana and Leonard were getting used to being responsible of a helpless baby.

Little did they think that this would soon change and life at the foster home would be messy to say the least.



CHAPTER 9

Dead Drunk

Therese pulled off the bed sheets from her bed and put in new ones. She looked around in the apartment and felt quite satisfied from what she saw. She had been cleaning most of the week and new bed sheets was the last touch of the cleaning. Now she would just wash all the sheets during the weekend. It was mostly she who had to do the housekeeping because Kathleen was drunk most of the time. Actually, she was supposed to live in a foster home now, but because her last foster parents had refused to take responsibility over her after the trial, Margaret, her social secretary, had given up and let her move home despite her mother's dubious state.

– Mom, I'm leaving now.

– Sure, Kathleen replied with a absent voice.

Kathleen was distracted, so she responded automatically. She hadn't been drinking anything since the day before, so she felt desperate. So when Therese had left, she called a couple of friends and asked if they could buy liquor for her and come over.

Meanwhile Therese went downtown to hang with the gang as usual. She got a couple of cans with strong beer like always. They sat around talking, but after a few hours they began to drop off to watch football on television, so Therese decided to go home instead because she didn't like football. She was a little intoxicated after the three cans she had emptied and needed a couple of tries before she found the keyhole to open the door.

Already in the doorway she got bad feelings. There was a horrible stench from the apartment from beer, spew and burnt food. She walked in and saw that already the hall was a mess with dirty footsteps that went into the rest room. In the living room it was total chaos. The table was filled with beer cans, liquor and empty glasses. It cracked under her feet and she realized there had to be broken glass from either bottles or glasses. The stench was indescribable and she shuddered when she saw someone had vomited on the couch she cleaned a few days ago. Her mother was completely knocked out beside the sofa and she had also puked on herself.

Therese became nauseous and went to the bathroom to drink some water. There she found one woman who was kneeling over the toilet puking into in while another one was poring water in the sink trying to wash the blood from her feet by standing in the sink, which had already begun to crack. Instead, Therese went to the kitchen to find some fresh water there, but it looked even worse in there. Someone had tried to cook the fine meat she had planned that she and her mother would eat in the weekend. The meat laid in a frying pan that someone forgot on the stove, so it was burned beyond recognition. The same was true for the vegetables that was in a pot where all water already had boiled off. She turned off the stove and looked around the kitchen. Someone apparently had tried to cook, because flour was spread all over the bench and on the floor. The margarine laid next to the plates on the stove and had melted and ran down into the slots. The whole kitchen was full with smoke so it was difficult to get an overview of the disaster. She started cleaning up in the kitchen, but dropped a bowl because is had become slippery from the melted margarine. The bowl broke into pieces as it landed on the floor.

– Fucking hell! she yelled.

She gave up and decided to just go to bed instead. When she got into her room, she got the next chock. On her bed a naked couple laid down making out. When she saw that her dearest property, a guitar, was broken on the floor because someone had stepped on it, she totally lost it. She picked up the broken guitar and swung the remnants towards the couple lying on the bed.

– Get the hell out of here! Just scram and take your shit with you. Leave my apartment before i fucking beats the shit out of you. Don't you get it? I'll fucking knock you senseless, you piece of shit.

The couple became terrified when they saw how furious Therese looked, especially as she really looked tough with all her piercing and tattoos throughout her whole face. They scratched their clothes and rushed naked towards the door. When they got into the hall they met their friends from the toilet. Therese continued to shout to them too, so soon all four of them was on their way to the front door. The couple from the bed desperately tried to get clothed by trying to jump into their trousers while exiting through the door. Therese couldn't care less that they were anything but decent. She slammed the front door behind them and then stood with her back to the door breathing heavily.

She walked into the living room again and poked on her mother with a foot, but she just murmured something unclear and kept on sleeping. Therese begun to pick up the things but started to feel nauseas again from the smell, so she gave up and felt that she just wanted out of there. The only thing she had in her head was to get so drunk that she could forget how the apartment looked. So she left the apartment and was looking for a bar in one of the shady parts of the city. She realized it would be difficult to buy beer herself even though she had money because she had wasn't even fourteen yet. That's why she checked out the bar counter and found a middle aged man who looked lonely. She sat down on the chair next to him, and "accidentally" rubbed her leg against his.

– Hi stranger, she said. Are you alone?

– Obviously i just got company, young lady, he answered.

– Can't you buy a beer for a thirsty girl?

– Are you not too young to drink beer?

– Not at all, check here how old I am.

She grabbed his hand and placed it under her t-skirt. He was surprised, but squeezed a little on what he found there. Therese never used a bra, so there was nothing that prevented him from feeling what was located under the blouse. Then

he took out his hand with something watery in his eyes and waved to the bartender with his hand instead.

– Can I have a large beer, please?

– Make it two large instead, Therese said.

The bartender put two large glasses in front of them and Therese immediately took one and swept down the entire contents in a few gulps. She put down the empty glass and grabbed the other and began to drink it too, a little calmer. The man looked at her and licked his lips. It felt like it was just a matter of time before this young girl got so drunk that she would agree to anything, he thought.

Therese emptied the second glass and asked for a third. When the bartender filled it up and she started drinking from it, the man thought he would be able to go one step further. So he put his hand between her legs outside her jeans. But Therese was not in agreement at all, but brushed his hand off and continued to drink. He tried again when the glass began to be empty, but with no success.

– Keep your damn hands to yourself, creep. Do you think I'm a fucking whore or what?

– You have already got three beers, and you have to pay one way or another.

– You got to feel my tits, for fucks sake. That's all you'll get!

The man realized that he wouldn't be allowed to go any further, despite the fact that Therese had swept three pints with strong beer. He swore at her and went to a table where two women sat drinking wine to try with them instead. Therese was still not satisfied, so she waved at the bartender that she wanted a refill and put money at the bar. He took the money and filled her glass.

When also this glass was empty, she felt she had to go to the bathroom. So she walked over to the ladies room and relieved the pressure. Then she went back to the same chair at the bar counter again and waved at the bartender one more time. This time there was another man who came up to her. He had studied her as she crossed the floor and realized that she by this time was very unstable on her feet and couldn't walk strait.

– I think you've had enough young lady, he said kindly.

– Hell, no. Here's money, just give me a fucking beer you damn booze handler and don't try to play a clever dick, your little crap!

The man's smile went out and he looked closer at her.

– How old are you really? You actually seem to be too young to drink alcohol. Do you have any id you can show?

– I'm old enough to drink beer, for fucks sake. Just look, here are the glasses I already drank. You can see for yourself that I can drink.

– If you can't show any valid id, then you are done drinking here for now, you can be certain of that.

– Damn it, who the hell are you trying to decide over me?

– I happen to own this bar, so I decide who I want to serve. And you have drunk your last drink here, so you might as well leave.

– Fucking shit. Just fill this damn glass, your bastard!

She threw one of her empty glasses towards him, but missed and the glass passed him and landed in the big mirror behind the bar. The mirror glass went in a thousand pieces and the owner became furious and demanded that she'd pay for the mirror.

– I don't pay anything for fuck sake. You should have caught the glass instead your clumsy idiot.

Therese, however, had became a bit worried about the mirror and started to go towards the exit but the owner protested and waved at the doorman. It was a big heavy wrestling type of guy and he was instructed to stop Therese from leaving the bar. She began to defend herself violently when he grabbed her so eventually he broke her down to the floor and sat down on her back. She laid flat on her stomach with the doorman's entire bodyweight on her and found it difficult to breathe. In sheer desperation she began to struggle to get loose but he was too heavy.

Meanwhile, the bar owner had called for the police and soon the door opened and a big policeman came in through the door. He immediately recognized the girl lying down on the floor and approached them.

– Release that girl immediately, he ordered the doorman.

– But then she can escape, the doorman protested.

– You do as I say, unless you want to be arrested for assault.

At last the pressure on her back disappeared and Therese was able to get air again. The policeman stretched his hand toward her.

– Come here, Tess. I'll help you up to your feet.

– Oh, is it you Adam, your damn cop.

She took his hand and got up on her feet again. It felt like the whole room was spinning around both of the treatment just now and from all the alcohol. Adam held her arm so she should not fall down again.

– Release my arm, you fucking pig.

Adam was familiar with her attitude, but still released her arm despair to the bar owners worry. Then he asked what had happened.

– I want to report this girl for vandalism. She shattered the mirror with her beer glass, and I demand that she pay for it.

– Who's beer glass did she throw, you said? "Her beer glass". Do you seriously mean that you served beer to a thirteen year old child?

Suddenly the bar owner looked worried.

– Well, I meant "one" beer glass. I don't know who's it was.

– So you want to file a complaint. Then we will of course do a careful examination of the circumstances.

Adam took out a notebook and a pencil.

– Who's the glass that she threw? I want to talk to him. Of course, we must also figure out how she has become this drunk, because it's obvious that she is very intoxicated at the moment.

– I don't know where she has been drinking.

– So you mean, that she was already under the influence when she arrived here, and you of course have witnesses who can certify it?

– Hey, I've changed my mind. There will be no complaint if you just remove that maniac from my bar now, for she will for sure not be served any alcohol here.

– Understood, Adam said, and put the note pad back into his pocket. Come here, Tess, I'll take you home.

To the bar owner's surprise, Therese followed Adam with no complaints to the door. She was very unstable on her feet, and just before the door, she felled down. Adam helped her on her feet again and she continued to sway through the door. When she got out in the fresh air, it was too much of a shock to her stomach, and she folded herself double in the gutter and puked. Adam waited patiently until she finished, then helped her into the police car.

When they arrived at the apartment, Therese picked up her key and tried to find the keyhole again. After several failed attempts, Adam asked if she wanted help. He got the key, unlocked and opened the door. He almost flinched from the stench from the apartment.

– Tess, is it ok for you if I go in and look around a bit?

– It's okey, Adam. Just come into my shitty apartment. I don't give a damn about it. You've always been decent with me, so I don't want to fuck with you.

Adam walked in after Therese and looked around on the mess. He made a quick check of Kathleen and also found that she was alive but completely out cold. He went to the door to Therese's room where she was tearing off the bed sheet. She had realized that, to say the least, they was not clean anymore. They was stained with some white goo, that she very well knew what it was.

– Tess, can you wait a bit and listen. I can't leave you in this apartment, my sweet friend. This is not healthy for you, but really insanitary. You've been through this before, but this one's worse then ever.

– Fuck of, Adam. I can handle myself. Just get the hell out and let me handle my shit by myself.

– Sorry, Tess. I can't let you do that. It's just too much. You can't mean you want to stay in this filthiness, you know very well who will have to clean up all this disaster tomorrow, right?

Therese looked at him and realized what he meant. She had not received enough beer to forget it all. She swore and sat down on the bedside edge and nodded. Adam first contacted the precinct central and requested that they call someone in to the CPS office that could take care of Therese. Then he found some big plastic bags and packed most of her clothes and other belongings in it. Therese sat like a haystack on the bedside and seemed barely aware of what he was doing.

Adam sighed and looked compassionate at her. "This girl doesn't have it easy," he thought. He was such a person who could see through an ragged exterior to see the person behind it, and he realized that Therese really felt bad, even though she always had a tough facade.

When he finished packing, he drove her down to the CPS office where they met Philip who looked a bit irritated at the two of them because he had been forced out of bed. He listened drowsy to Adam's story and wrote down everything on the computer. Then he started calling around to different homes to find somewhere he could place Therese. The clock began to approach two AM, so there was almost no one responding. And when he got a response, it was just a sour comment that they didn't want to help. Finally, however, he got lucky. There were a couple who showed pity at her and agreed to take care of her.

– Well, Adam. Now I have finally found a place where she can sleep for the night. It's with a couple living in a house a bit outside the city.

– Excellent, I can drive her there myself, if you want.

– I would be grateful for that. I'm coming with you, of course, but I really don't think that I want her in my car. She looks like she will vomit again anytime.

So Adam helped Therese back into his car and they drove her to the foster home. All the beer had taken its toll, so Therese was sitting in the car half asleep. When they rang on door, they were unexpectedly friendly greeted by Ronald and Ruth.

– Welcome to our house, young girl, Ronald said. It's nice to make your acquaintance.

– Come in and let me show you where to sleep. You seem totally exhausted, you poor girl, Ruth said.

Philip barely believed his ears. Didn't the couple see that this was a completely spoiled teenager who also was totally drunk? He followed them in and gave a couple of papers to Ronald. They disappeared into the kitchen to handle the papers while Ruth showed Therese into a bedroom with a comfortable bed, desk, chair and wardrobe.

– You can put your clothes in the wardrobe tomorrow, as I suppose you want to go to bed now. You seem very tired and it's already quite late.

Therese didn't say a word, but just walked like a robot to the bed and collapsed over it. She mumbled some protests when Ruth helped her off with her boots, jeans and jacket, and then carefully put a blanket over her. Adam also entered the room and put the bags with her things on the floor.

– Thank you very much, officer. We can take care of her from now.

– I really hope so. She has not had it easy in life. I have met her before, and know that she has more problems then anyone should have, especially at her age.

Soon Adam and Philip left the house and the couple returned to their bedroom to go back to sleep. Ruth looked at Ronald and said sleepily.

– Poor little girl. She really seems to need some compassion.

– She seems to have a lot of problems, just look what she have made with her face. We will probably have to work hard to win her trust. I skimmed through her papers. Her upbringing has obviously been tough.

– Tomorrow we can let her sleep until noon. She seems to be totally intoxicated.

The day after was Saturday, but Ronald was forced to go downtown to work for a few hours. So when Therese came out from the room just before lunch, it was only Ruth and Diana who were home, except Viola of course. Therese went into the bathroom and put her whole head down in the sink and flushed ice cold water over it for a long time. Then she slowly went into the kitchen with the water dripping from her hair as she sat down at the table.

– Good morning, Therese. Nice to see you up. You have missed the breakfast, as we serve it at seven, but I assumed you were tired since yesterday, so I allowed you to sleep.

– It was a damn luck that you didn't wake me up, bitch.

Ruth ignored the insult and continued.

– Considering what you did last night, I suppose you have a headache. Do you want any headache tablets so you feel a bit better?

– I don't need your damn pills, bitch. It's not the first damn time I feel crappy, so I'll handle it myself, for fucks sake.

Ruth was still not provoked by her swearing or insults, but instead she kindly told her.

– I have already understood that you are strong, but it may still be equally hard to have a headache. So here you are, if you change your mind.

She put two tablets in front of Therese and then gave her a glass of milk. Therese just looked angry at her without touching the tablets.

– You're welcome to wait here, food is almost ready.

– I'm not too hungry either, bitch. Just fuck off!

– Of course, I understand you don't have an appetite. But you can still taste something. Maybe you change your mind when you feel the smell of the food.

Therese went silent. It seemed as though her insults just ran off this woman. And if she were honest, the food smelled so good that she felt hungry. But she would never admit it! However she stayed at the table leaning her head inside her hands.

Soon, the food was ready and Ruth called Diana and Viola. She had already explained to Diana that Therese had arrived during the night, and Diana was eager to get to know an girl of the same age. When she saw Therese's face, she became worried. Not only because she looked so rude and tough, but also because she looked angry and almost crazy. Ruth put some food on a plate and placed it in front of Therese.

– Just go to hell, bitch. Do you think I'm a damn baby like that bastard there?

She pointed to Viola who became a little afraid over her tone. Diana looked down at the table and was too afraid to protest, despite it was bubbling within her to defend her daughter.

– Excuse me, I didn't want to insult you. Of course I understand that you can take the food yourself.

Therese looked angry at her but didn't answer anything. The excuse had thrown her off balance. She grunted something, took the tablets as got before and swallowed them with a sip of milk. Then she began to eat. Also the others started eating and Therese didn't say anymore for the rest of the meal and Diana didn't dare to say anything, so the only one who spoke was Ruth who tried to ease the atmosphere a little without result.

After dinner, Therese went into her room without saying a word while Diana helped her to put the plates away. She trembled a bit when she put the dishes into the sink.

– Take it easy, Diana. I'm quite convinced she barks more than she bites. Her attitude is anything but desirable, but she has had a difficult childhood, which I can't tell you anything about. The confidentiality rules stops me.

– I can understand that. But I'm so sad when she calls Viola ugly names like that. And as she swears all the time too!

– You have every reason to be both sad and angry. However, I don't think it will help to protest, because then she may become even more provocative. The best for the rest of us is probably to try to show patience with her, and hope that our patience and kindness will eventually make her calm down.

– Well, I will not provoke her anyway. But if she gets mean to Viola, then I don't know if I can sit quiet anymore.

– Let us all just arm ourselves with a great deal of patience, and hopefully everything will handle itself.

Diana decided to leave Therese alone. Ruth, on the other hand, knocked on her door and went in to her with a jug of juice and a glass.

– Here Therese. I have read that hangover illness mostly is due to fluid loss, so I mixed some cold lemonade for you to drink.

– Can't you for fucks sake leave me alone, bitch? I told you that I don't want any damn sympathy from any stupid asshole.

Ruth just smiled at her, put the jar and glass down, left the room and closed the door. When Ronald came home from work, Ruth told him about Therese's attitude and bad language. That's why he was prepared when he knocked on her door asking to talk to her.

– Hello, Therese. Could I be able to borrow you a bit in the living room? I have some things I would like to discuss with you.

– I'm a fucking tired, old fart, so fuck off.

– Excuse me for coming here and disturbing you. But at the same time I have to insist. I will try not to too long.

Therese murmured something inaudibly, but still followed him to the living room, overwhelmed by his kindness and apology. She threw herself down on the sofa and looked angry at him.

– First of all, I want you to feel welcome here. We will do everything we can to make you feel comfortable, whether it be a long or short stay.

– The damn shorter the better, got it, old fart?

– Well, the Social Secretary who left you here said they should begin their investigation of your living situation on Monday, so until then you will stay here at least. Then we'll see how quickly they get ready with their investigation, and what kind of conclusion they come to.

– Don't fucking think that I'm staying here a damn second longer than I have to do, old fart. This fucking place stinks big time!

She waited for a response, as Ronald seemed to be quite strict. He would surely start complaining of her attitude any second, or at least defend himself. But to her surprise, he did neither.

– I understand that you think that way, and fully respect your opinion, even though I don't agree with it. But while you're here, there are some rules that you have to follow, like everyone else who lives here. You may have seen this paper that usually hangs on the notice board in the kitchen? To make your stay here pleasant for you and for us, it's necessary that you understand these rules.

Therese tried to stare him down while he began to read the rules and explain them. But he seemed completely immune to her angry eyes and bad comments, he just continued to read and explain. After what she thought was forever, he was ready wondering if she had any questions.

– Do you think I'm stupid, old fart? I get what you're nagging about and can't care less about you and your damn rules.

– I hope you understand that the rules are not for my sake, but they are present for your sake. It's just kind of a manual on how you and everyone else can enjoy each other together.

– Are you done now, old fart? Because I have booked a fucking meeting with a damn bed and are tired listening to your damn shit.

Ronald thanked her for listening and allowed her to return to her room. While talking with Ronald, Ruth had gone into her room and seen that Therese after all finished all the lemonade, so she filled it up. Ruth was astonished that Therese had already put all her clothes out of the bags and nicely folded them into the closet. Maybe this girl was more orderly then she looked.

Therese saw that there was new lemonade in the room, and in was surprised that Ruth seemed completely immune to her bad attitude. After the supper, Therese felt tired. Nothing unexpected there, but she went to bed early without complaining to everyone's surprise.

On Sunday morning, she woke up early, but refused to get out of bed when Ruth called her for breakfast. Ruth didn't want to cause conflicts directly, so she let her be. Therese stayed in her room all day and examined her guitar that Adam had brought together with her clothes. Someone had stepped on it and the damage had become worse when she used is a club. She swore intensify and decided to try to fix it. It was the only property of her that actually meant something for her.

In the evening after everyone went to bed, she sneaked out through the window in her room and took the bus downtown. First, she bought some glue and then she went to hang out with the gang as usual. She got some beer again and they rumbled around making themselves heard as they always did. When the clock began to approach midnight, everyone began to drop off. Some had work the day after, others had school. Therese walked all the way to the foster home because bus drivers often used to complain when she tried to ride a bus when she was drunk. It was quite a long way to go, so it was very late when she came to the foster home.

At the house she went around to the back to crawl through the window again. She discovered that someone had closed it. At first she thought of throwing a stone to break the window, as she did before. But she felt that she didn't have been treated so badly that she wanted start destroying things already. In addition, it was not so hot outside, so it would get cold in the room without a window glass. Instead she went to the front door. "I can wake those idiots up instead," she thought.

When she checked the door, she realized that it was unlocked so she just walked in. She met Ruth and Ronald who had obviously stayed up waiting for her. With a

stubborn face she stood and waited for the reprieve that would certainly come. First, she first looked at Ruth, then on Ronald. To her surprise, none of them was particularly angry, it was more like they were worried.

– Therese, thank God you're home now, Ruth began. I've been so worried about you. A young girl like you, being out this late. You can get into so much trouble out there. Is everything good with you?

– Damn it, who do you think I am bitch? I can take care of myself, for fucks sake.

– We understand you're used to be independent, Ronald continued. But it's quite dangerous and much that can happen downtown this late. Especially as you seem to have been drinking again. Many girls has been abused or worse just because they are drunk.

– For fuck sake, chill down, old fart. I can't listen to a cursed preaching. Just let me get into the bed so I can bunk down.

– It sounds like an excellent idea, Ronald said. You and I can talk about this tomorrow after school instead.

– Don't think that I want to talk to you about anything, old fart!

Therese swept past both of them and went into her room. They looked at each other with a sad look and then went to bed themselves. She consciously caused a lot of noise when she got ready to go to bed.

The next day, Ruth woke her up already half past six. She came into the kitchen just after seven with an unhappy face to eat breakfast. She felt unaccustomed to just come to a ready made table, but it was quite enjoyable anyway. Ruth tried to converse with her at the table, but she only got insulting answers as usual. But to her relief, she let herself be driven to school without protests. While Therese went to the classroom, Ruth contacted the principle to inform that their student was now living in a foster home. The principle just sighed and made a note in the computer and thanked her. It was obvious that he was used to it.

After school, Ronald knocked on the door to her room.

– Damn you, it's open! Come in for fucks sake!

– Thank you for letting me come in, Therese. I hope you have been informed that neither of us is allowed to enter here without your permission.

– Damn idiot, it's your house.

– Sure, but it's your privacy, and I wouldn't dream of violating it. What I would like to discuss with you is what you did last night. As I understood, you went out late to hang out with some friends and drank beer with them.

– Why the hell is that any of your business, old fart?

– No at all, really. It's not at all my business or concern on what you choose to do, you're old enough to decide that yourself.

Therese didn't find anything to answer. What the heck what he standing there saying to her?

– The only one that is affected is yourself. As I understood, your mother is an alcoholic and is not very good at taking care of you.

– She's a pice of shit and don't give an damn about me!

– The problem I see is that if you continue on your path, you will get the same problem as your mother. When you will be old enough to have your own children, then your child will also have an alcoholic mother. Is it that how want your future to be? Exposing your own child for the same thing as you are exposed to now?

– Hrmm, she replied, lacking any response.

– How your life becomes, it's up to you. But don't think that the decisions you make today won't decide how your life will be in the future, because they do.

– Hrmm, she replied again.

– I hope you understand that the only reason I wanted this little conversation with you is out of caring about you. Regardless of what you may think, I do care how your situation are. The same applies to Ruth.

– Hrmm.

– All we want is that you'll have it nice and that you becomes successful in your life, whatever you decides to do. If there's anything we can do to help you, then we're ready to help. All you have to do is ask.

Therese could not say anything so she kept silent while Ronald thanked her for listening and then left the room. This conversation had not become what she had thought it would be. She felt really bad when she thought about how her future was about to become. Imagine if she herself would become as bad mother as her own mother! For the rest of the day, she was unusually silent while she was trying to fix her guitar to her best effort. Finally she went to bed at the time it was stated in the rules on the notice board that she should.

She laid and turned back and forth in bed. Even though she was tired she could not sleep. The memory of what Ronald had said became all the more intrusive. The mere thought that one day she would destroy someone's life in the same way as her own life was ruined made her feel bad.

Eventually she got up and took her guitar and started improvising a song she had written. It burred suspiciously from the stable, and the sound was quite terrible, but she continued playing because it was the only thing that could distract her mind. After half an hour she heard how it knocked on the door again. She wondered who it could be in the middle of the night, but assumed it was Ronald or Ruth who would tell her to be quieter, so she said annoyed:

– Come in, for fucks sake. Don't stand there knocking on that damn door again!

Diana anxiously came into the room and looked at Therese with a scared face. She had Viola on her arms, who was crying and as soon as she saw Therese, she hide her face in Diana'a neck.

– Shit, is it you Diana? What the hell do you want this late? Has not that old fart Ronald decided that you should sleep now?

– Well, it's a bit difficult because Viola can't sleep. I'm just wondering, Therese. What wrong has Viola done to you? It's my responsibility to raise her so I have to know what it is so I can teach her to behave.

– Are you stupid in any way? Why the hell do you think your baby has been doing something wrong to me, for fucks sake?

– She's so scared of you, and can't sleep at night. Our rooms are wall to wall and this is the second night you keep her awake. So she must have done something bad to you that you are punishing her for.

Therese felt that Diana was driving a knife into her. What kind of person had she become who was scaring toddlers? How low had she fallen? She stretched her hand gently towards Viola and stroke her softly over her cheek with a finger while she said with a much softer voice:

– Little friend, don't be afraid of me. I may look dangerous, but please baby, I'm the most harmless one. Especially for such a cute little thing like you, but I've never hurt anyone else either. I promise you, little Viola!

Viola turned her face towards Therese and seemed mostly curious now. To her shock, Diana lifted Viola over to her and she received her surprisedly. The girl was lighter than she had expected. Therese smiled at Viola and said:

– Cute little Viola. I hope you understand that I can never can get angry with a sweet thing like you. You can trust that I'll never ever hurt you!

Therese spoke with her softest voice and rubbed her nose on Viola's nose, who started laughing instead. Then she started to slap her mouth and hit her piercings. Therese flinch a little because it was painful.

– No, no, Viola. You shouldn't hit Therese. It hurts, you see.

– Well, if I'd start crying when a little girl slaps me like this, I'm not the tough guy I claim. Here Viola, hit me here on my nose instead.

Viola hit her nose and laughed at a bit when Therese said "ouch" on pretend. When Viola began to hit her cheeks, Therese smiled at her and could not resist giving her a kiss. Then she lifted her back to Diana.

– Diana, hope you realize I'm not actually mean for real. I'll try to keep it down so you can sleep. For fucks sake, such an innocent little creature should not have to cry because of me, you can be damn sure about that.

– Thank you, Therese, I really appreciate it. Eh ... that's one other thing too...

– What the fuck is it?

– Well, Viola is too young to start talking yet, but she listens to everything you say and learn. I would prefer her first word would be "mom" instead of "fuck" so if you could swear a little less around her, I'll be grateful.

Therese looked surprised at Diana. Then she looked at Viola again and was completely perplexed that Viola seemed to smile at her.

– I understand what you mean, Diana. You seem to be a good mom, not like my crappy one. You can be proud of your baby. I promise I will try not to sabotage for you. From now on, I skip all the swearing when Viola is nearby.

– Thank you again, Therese. I have understood that you have had a lot of trouble in your life, just as I had problems in my life. Otherwise, we wouldn't be here. If you feel like talking sometime, just come in. It might feel good to tell someone else about it.

– I don't think so, but thank you for the offer, Therese said almost insecure.

– My door is open to you at any time. If you want to listen to my story, you are welcome too. Anytime you feel for it.

Diana went back to her room with Viola and Therese lay down on the bed instead. She pondered for a long time what Diana had said. For the first time, Therese began to realize that what she did could affect other innocent people. She had always thought she could do whatever she wanted, because the only one that was affected was herself. But now she lived in the same house as a little baby, who didn't hurt anyone. No way she could continue with her bad behavior if little Viola was feeling bad from it!

It took a long time before she could finally settle down and sleep.



CHAPTER 10

Captured

Mia began to feel hungry. She had eaten her usual breakfast for as it felt for ages ago, so she went to her mom to ask if she would start cooking soon. Angela had just injected heroin, so she was completely gone and hardly understood that it was Mia who shook her. Mia sighed and went out into the kitchen and looked in the fridge to find something to eat. It was unusually empty there, so she continued to look around. She found some bread that seemed eatable, just a little mold on the edges. She climbed up on the bench to get the can with jam. But the can was slippery so it slipped through her finger down to the floor and it broke into pieces. She jumped down on the floor trying to pick up the remains of the can, but cut her finger on one of the shards.

– Ouch, she shouted. Mom, I'm bleeding!

Mia sat on the floor and began to cry loudly. The blood ran from the finger and left a blood stain on the floor. She was terrified of seeing the blood flow. But her mother was still out of it so after a few minutes she realized she wouldn't get any help, so she walked into the bathroom where she know the band aid was. She wrapped her finger in a towel so the blood would stop dripping while she was looking. Then she finally managed to find a patch and put it on her finger.

Calmed down because it stopped bleeding, she went back to the kitchen to look at the broken jam jar. She sighed and left it there so she wouldn't cut herself again. She kept looking to find something else to eat but could not find anything so she returned to her room again. But after a while, she couldn't take it anymore, so she went into her mother again. After failing to contact her again, she decided to go

shopping for bread and jam. Armed with the mother's purse, she went to the store a couple of blocks away. She found the jam and bread and went to the checkout counter to pay.

– Well, hello little friend. Are you out shopping? Where is your mother?

– Over there, Mia whispered and pointed diffusively.

– Are you sure? You seem to be a little too young to be shopping on your own. What's your mother's name?

Mia was scared and backed up with the groceries in her arms. The cashier came around the counter and approached her. Then she turned around and started running towards the door. A guard standing at the door had seen it all and caught her before she ran out.

– Stop there, my young lady. You need to pay for that!

– Good that you caught her. I think she's completely alone here. We should probably contact the police or something.

– Do you really want to call the police for such a young girl? It feels quite excessive.

– Wait, I remember her now. I saw her on TV the other day. Apparently she has run away from a orphanage or something.

– Let me be, Mia screamed. I want Mom!

– I recognize her, another customer said. That's Mia, daughter of Angela who lives close by. Poor girl, her mother is a drug addict and can't take care of her.

Nobody wanted to listen to Mia's protests, but they held her until the police came and took her to the Child Protected Service. It wasn't long until she sat in Adrian's room with an angry and scared face while Adrian looked at her and tried to talk to her.

– Mia, sure you remember me? My name is Adrian. I have been looking for you for so long, where on earth have you been hiding?

Mia pressed herself into a corner on the couch as far away from Adrian as possible. She was terrified and didn't say anything.

Meanwhile, the customer that had recognized Mia was ringing the bell at Angela's door. By this time she had woken up and started looking for Mia. She rushed from room to room and searched under the beds, in the closet and was completely desperate. When she saw the crushed jam jar, the blood in the kitchen and the bloody towel in the bathroom she became terrified. The panic shone in her eyes when the doorbell rang and she ran to the door hoping it was Mia. The disappointment was big when she saw that it was the neighbor outside the door.

– Hello Angela. Do you know where your daughter Mia is?

– No, I don't know. She was here recently... Or wait, she should be in a orphanage. I don't really know. I don't feel so well right now...

– I saw her at the store downstairs. A guard had apparently stopped her when she tried to leave the shop without paying.

– Are you sure it was her? My daughter Mia?

– You know I've seen Mia many times. But you say she is in a orphanage, so I must be mistaken.

– What happened to her? Please, it is Mia, and I have to find her again!

– As I understood, they would call CPS because she is too young.

She became completely heartbroken from finding out what had happened. She first rushed into the apartment and excavated Mias blanket and Teddy and then hurried down to the CPS office. It was obvious to everyone that she was high as a house and they felt as if she was really labile and potentially dangerous when she started screaming loudly.

– Where is Mia? My daughter? I have to meet her. She's here, I know!

A man who used to act as a security officer in tense situations hurried to the entrance when he heard the loud voices.

– Take it easy, ma'm, he said. You can't just burst in here and make a scene. If you tell me your name, I'll see what I can do.

– I'm Angela Bolton and my daughter is Mia. Is she here? She must be here? Move out of my way so I can find her!

Angela tried to push the man aside, but he quickly recovered the balance and tried to prevent her from passing him. Mia heard her mother and tried to leave the room she was in.

– Mom! I'm here! Mom, come and save me!

Several of the staff came running to help with stopping Angela from entering, and at the same time stopping Mia from leaving the room. Angela was screaming wanderings that Mia was her daughter while Mia was crying her heart out when someone grabbed her and tried to push her back into the room. Two of the staff had dared to grab the arms of Angela although she was intoxicated, as she didn't seem so strong.

Adrian stepped between them and held up both his hands and tried to calm down the situation. He wanted at all costs avoid make a big scene in front of Mia, in order not to lose all chances of gaining her trust.

– It's okay, he said. Let her go to her mother, but don't let any of them leave the office.

When the staff released Mia, she rushed through the corridor to Angela and threw herself into Angela's arms and cried.

– Mom, I'm sorry I let them catch me. I'm just so hungry. I went to the store to get something to eat. Please don't let them send me send me back to that terrible place!

– You heard her, I can't agree that she will be sent back there, unless it's over my dead body. And don't think that I care more about my own life that I care about my daughter! Just try!

Adrian asked Angela to come into his room and bring Mia. Inside the room, he tried to calm down Angela in every way. It was not easy because she was very up-

set and also obviously affected by something. The whole time, Mia was clinging hard on to her, and Adrian didn't want to force Mia away from her mom right now.

– Miss Bolton. I hope you realize that the situation has become much more complicated now. Mia is still in protective custody with us, and because she apparently lived with you, you may be accused of kidnapping. If you get prosecuted for that, it could mean a long prison sentence.

– I don't care about myself, but you don't let Mia to stay at that orphanage for a single day more, if that's the last thing I do in my life. You'll have to kill me first, because I don't let Mia go back there.

– In my opinion, this orphanage has disqualified themselves from taking care of Mia, so we agree on that part.

Adrian was deliberate a bit on how to find a solution to the problem that didn't contain violence. He would at all costs avoid Mia being forced to look on when her mother was injured when she just wanted to protect her daughter. At the same time, it was obvious that Angela was so heavily influenced that she was capable of anything.

– What do you say about this, Miss Bolton? Let me try to find a foster home for your daughter instead. Not a orphanage, but a family that can take care of your daughter as her own. You will be subject to a police investigation if we make a notice to them, and it will not benefit neither you nor your daughter the least. I'd rather not do that, so let me ask around here if someone knows a family that would fit.

Angela was pleased with it, so Adrian left the room and asked a colleague to make sure they both stayed inside the room. Soon he found Brigitte, another social secretary whom he knew had contact with many foster homes. He asked her if she had any idea, and she actually did. She had a foster home that, as far as she knew, had room for Mia, so she picked up her phone and dialed a number.

– Hello, this is Ruth Clayton, said the voice in the other end.

– Hello Ruth, this is Brigitte from the CPS. We have a four year old girl here, who urgently needs somewhere to live. You only have two girls right now, so you should have room for one more, right? You have already said that you prefer foster children than acute children, and this may be your second foster child.

– Yes, that will probably be possible. Perhaps not perfect because of our latest child, but if it's urgent, we'll do our best to take care of the little girl.

– Thank you, I will come over with her in a while.

Brigitte and Adrian went back to Mia and her mother and told them about this family that Mia could live with. Brigitte explained the situation to Angela who sat hugging Mia desperately.

– There are a couple named Ruth and Ronald, whom she will live with. They currently have a foster child named Diana and her daughter Viola who is just a couple of months old. Mia will surely be happy there, you'll see.

None of them knew that Therese lived there too, so Brigitte had talked about Diana and Viola while Ruth had thought they were talking about Diana and Therese. Adrian continued.

– You certainly understand, Miss Bolton, that it's not possible for us to let your daughter come home with you right now.

– She's still in protective custody, and you're obviously intoxicated right now. You can't believe that it's good for your daughter to stay with you currently, right? Her safety must be your greatest priority, and she is far from safe when she lives with you, you must realize that.

Angela hesitated but also realized that she had no options, especially as she remembered the bloody towel. In any case, this seemed better than the orphanage. However, she demanded to come with them when they delivered Mia there. Adrian was extremely doubtful about letting Angela know where Mia was going to live, but anyhow asked Brigitte what she thought. Brigitte also didn't like it, but she still called Ruth again to ask her.

– Excuse me, Ruth. But, you see, the girl's mother insists on getting along when we drop Mia off. She's an addict, so I'm not happy that she's doing it, but the situation here is quite a bit tense right now, and we don't want it to go out of hands, mostly for Mia's sake.

– Well, let her come here. If she can see that her daughter will become happy here, she may even help with getting the poor girl to become more willing about staying here.

Brigitte explained what Ruth had said to Angela, and soon they all sat in a car and drove out to the foster home. It was Ruth who opened the door.

– Hello, welcome. Come in everybody!

She kneeled in front of Mia and spoke softly and kindly to her. Mia was scared and hid behind her mother's leg. Ruth stretched out her hand to her, careful not to get so close that she would be more afraid.

– Look at you, little friend. You're so cute. I promise you will like it here. Right now, Viola is the only one home, the rest is at school or at work, but you can meet them later today. Come here, I'll show you your room!

She tried to take Mia's hand, but she just pushed herself closer to her mother. Instead, it was Angela who took her hand and led Mia into the room that Ruth showed. Both Adrian and Brigitte came into the room too. Angela looked around and liked what she saw. The room was nice, child adapted and above all just one bed so Mia could sleep in peace.

– I promise you, Mrs. Bolton, that we will take good care of your daughter, Ruth said. It will probably take a few days for her to get used to us, but then she will be happy here.

– It's Miss Bolton. But call me Angela.

– Of course, Angela. I understand it must be terribly hard for anyone to have to leave her own child but believe me when I say that I will do everything I can to make your daughter flourish here as much as possible. We have had many children here already, and know how to make them feel happy.

– If you are so good with children, why don't you have any children of your own?

– Miss Bolton, watch what you are saying!

– It's no problem, Brigitte. I don't mind answering the question. You understand, Angela, that I can't get children myself because of problems with my uterus, that's why I chose to be a foster mother instead. I really love children, so I will treat you daughter as my own child. I promise you that she is safe here, she will get everything she needs because we are never happy just giving the kids a place to stay, food and clothes. For us, it's equally important, if not more important, that they also get caring and love to make them happy.

– I really hope so, Angela said.

She looked at Ruth with contemplation. Somehow, she instinctively felt that this woman was trustable. Ruth wanted to win her trust, so she pushed out the social workers from the room with a firm voice despite their wild protests.

– Now let Angela say "good buy" to her daughter. We can look at the paperwork instead, because I guess you have papers that describes the situation.

Ruth closed the door behind herself and Angela sat down on the floor with Mia. She gave Teddy and the blanket to her and tried to explain.

– Mia, my little Angel. You know I'm sick all the time, and I'm not able to take care of you right now. Just look at your bloody finger. I don't even know what you've done, and that's terribly bad of me. You're not safe with me, so now you have to be a nice girl and stay with this family until everything is solved.

– Do you come back for me when you are well again, Mom, Mia sobbed.

– As soon as I'm healthy, I will come here and take you home again. But it can take a long time, you see.

– You can't leave me Mom. I love you!

– Please Mia, I love you too and I don't want to leave you, but I have to. Not because these people force me, but because it's best for you. I love you so much and don't want you to get hurt more, or go hungry again. Here you are safe, and

will get food when you are hungry. You just said that you went to the store yourself because you were hungry. It's my fault that you became so desperate. I feel so bad right now that I can't take care of you.

Mia cried rampantly, and Angela felt so bad from having to leave her, but at the same time she felt the craving for drugs inside and realized that this family was better than if Mia lived with her. In addition, she could come here and visit her now when she knew where she was. She hugged Mia one last time and promised:

– Now, be brave my little Angel. Everything will be fine.

With tears in her eyes, Angela left the room and accompanied Brigitte and Adrian out of the house. Mia came rushing but stopped in the corridor because Ruth was in the way. Not that Ruth tried to stop her, but Mia didn't dare to pass her anyhow.

– Mom! Don't leave me!! Mom!!!

Angela turned around and looked at Ruth, which she couldn't see her clearly through her tears. Ruth had kneeled down and stretched out her arms towards Mia again, who didn't even notice it. Mia continued shouting after her mother with the tears was running down her cheeks. Angela said quietly:

– Take care of my daughter!

– I promise to do that! She will have it good here. You can trust me.

Brigitte closed the front door behind them, and Mia ran into her room again. Ruth decided to leave her alone. She would probably calm down eventually, especially if she was left alone. Nothing would be better if she forced herself upon the little girl too early as she seemed to be afraid of her.

Ruth sat down to read Mia's paper. It was not a pleasant reading.

☆ ☆ ☆

CHAPTER 11

Odd Friends

Diana and Therese came home from school and was immediately approached by Ruth.

– Hi, girls. I have something to tell the two of you, something that has happened today. We have got a new young girl who moved in. Her name is Mia and she is just four years old. What I want you both to understand is that we all have to be very careful with her. She has been treated badly and is afraid of everything and everyone. I don't expect you to help, because it's my responsibility to take care of Mia, but you both need to be nice to her so she doesn't get more scared than she already is.

Ruth spoke to both of them, but looked mostly at Therese.

– What's up with you, bitch? Do you think I'm custom to scaring up a small brat for fucks sake?

– No, Therese, I don't think that. What I'm trying to say is that Mia doesn't seem to have had it easy until now. She has no father and her mother has similar problems like yours, but with narcotics instead. We must all be very carefully how we behave towards her, especially I. As you may remember, Ronald is on a business trip, and will not come home until tomorrow, Saturday, so I'll have to take care of all four of you by myself.

– You can count on us, Ruth, Diana replied.

– Well, for fucks sake, I'll not fuck with some brat, for sure.

– That sounds great, Therese and Diana. Now I'm going to cook and see if it can attract Mia. The poor girl has crept under her bed and been laying there all day without daring to come out.

Ruth entered the kitchen to cook supper. When the food was ready, Mia still refused to come out from under the bed, so Ruth made an exception and put a plate with food in Mia's room. Later in the evening she slipped into the room again. Now Mia had moved onto bed with her Teddy and blanket. She was heavy at sleep, exhausted of all that happened during the day. The plate was completely cleansed, so Ruth took it out to the kitchen, pleased that Mia had eaten anyhow.

The following day, the story repeated itself. Mia crept in under the bed and didn't want to come out for breakfast. It was Saturday, so Diana and Therese wouldn't go to school. Diana was doing some school work and Therese was just in her room and became increasingly annoyed by the noise from the room next door. She heard how Ruth talked to Mia and tried to calm her down. Therese couldn't understand how Ruth could have so much patience.

Therese checked the clock. A quarter to one! Why hadn't Ruth started cooking any food yet? She used to be so extremely punctual. She normally called them exactly twelve o'clock to come to eat. Therese had become accustomed to getting food at regular times, and began to feel hungry. She left her room and walked to the kitchen. When she passed Mia's room, she understood what the problem was. Mia was still under the bed squealing, and Ruth was sitting with legs crossed on the floor, trying to persuade her to come out.

– Please Mia. You know I'm not dangerous. Come on, let's play a little with your teddy bear instead.

Therese realized that it could take a long time, so she shouted at Diana.

– Diana your fuck! Come here!

Diana didn't dare not to come out of her room and accompanied Therese into the kitchen.

– Well, the Ruth bitch is busy with the brat, so we have to fix the damn chop ourself. I fix the meat shit while you take care of the healthy stuff.

– Do we really dare to cook without asking Ruth for permission first?

– Cut the crap. The bitch is busy. I can't cope with waiting. Go to hell if you don't want to help, but I'll fix the chop.

– What... What should I do then, Diana answered a bit scared.

– Check for some damn vegetables in the fridge and start chopping them.

Diana found carrots, broccoli and cauliflower in the fridge and began to divide them into pieces while Therese picked up the biggest knife and began to cut a piece of the meat that she found in thin slices. At the same time she began to cook bacon in a frying pan. Diana looked surprised at how fast her hands moved when she chopped, fried and seasoned at the same time. When Diana was done chopped the vegetables, she took out a saucepan and began to put butter in it.

– What the hell are you doing? Are you going to fry the vegetables? Are you stupid or something?

– They must be cooked in some way. I always used to cook vegetables like this when I made food for Dad.

– But, they'll get damn greasy from the butter. Steam-heat the shit instead!

– How is that done?

– Hell, don't you know anything, kid? Pour a cup of water into that damn pan, then put the vegetable shit in that darn metal strainer and hang it over the pot and put a lid on. The green stuff tastes a hell much better and are more nutritious too.

Diana looked surprised at Therese who was cutting the fried bacon, mixing it with parsley, spices and some ketchup, then rolling it into the meat slices and started frying them into the frying pan.

– What should we eat with it actually? Potato?

– What the hell, look at the saucepan there. The fucking potato are probably cooked soon. Have more stupid questions?

Diana became silent. She had not even seen Therese working with the potato. She already knew that it was not worth getting annoyed on how Therese was talk-

ing, she just had to accept it. As Therese seemed to have everything on the stove under control, Diana put plates, cutlery and glasses on the table. She was taking out the milk from the refrigerator when Ruth came into the kitchen with a stressed face.

– What on earth is this? she exclaimed.

– These are beef roulade with bacon stuffing, vegetable shit and boiled potatoes. What the hell does it look like, bitch?

– Who's idea was it that you two should cook?

– That's Therese's idea, Diana replied reluctantly.

– Do you mind it, bitch?

– No not at all. It's a fantastic initiative by you, Therese. Really well done. I was busy with Mia, you understand, and forgot about the time. I apologize so much for that. It's so great to be able to just sit down at the ready made meal like this!

Therese felt some kind of heat spread inside her body as she put the food on the table. She was not used to be praised and really liked the pleasure of that feeling. Additionally an excuse! Ruth put a portion of food on a plate and put it in Mia's room again. Then she began to eat the food herself and could not help to burst out:

– Wow, this tastes amazing, Therese! Really delicious everything. What on earth have you done with the vegetables? They taste so abundant.

– It's Diana who steam-heated the shit.

– But it was Therese who told me how to do it, Diana replied.

– Fantastic idea, Therese. It must also be more nutritious in this way. And the beef roulade just melts in my mouth, absolutely amazing. You really have a big talent in cooking!

Therese said nothing but felt that warm feeling inside again. "This feeling I want to experience again," she thought. The rest of the day went on the same way. Therese kept calm, Diana was spending time with school work and Viola

while Ruth did her best to try to reach Mia without result. Ruth was still worried that Therese's attitude problem would spill over to Mia. What would happen if Ruth finally managed to get Mia out of her room? Should Therese scare her back again with her rough language and her tough look? If that happens then it might be impossible to make Mia feel safe again.

Therese didn't give any thought about Mia until it was time to sleep. Ruth had not been able to make Mia brush her teeth, but she laid down in bed at least, and Ruth went to bed herself. Therese had begun to get used to going to bed earlier and was also sleeping early. But soon she was awakened by Mia who was living in the room next door. She was expecting Ruth to react, but she didn't seem to hear anything. Probably it was because the master bedroom was at the end of the corridor next to Diana's room while Mia's room was at the beginning of the corridor next to Therese's room. Finally Therese managed to fall asleep, even though it was hard for her to sleep when Mia apparently felt so bad only a few decimeters from where she was sleeping.

The Sunday was calm. Ronald had come home from his trip late in the evening the day before and also tried to reach Mia but it was even harder for him. As soon as he entered Mia's room she screamed and crept under the bed. It was obvious to him that Mia had to have very difficult relationships with adults during her short life. Ronald and Ruth discussed what they should do and agreed that all they could do was keep patience.

– What I'm most afraid of is that Therese will make the situation worse when I finally get Mia out of her room, and she and Therese meet, Ruth said.

– Unfortunately, there is a risk. At the same time, I think Therese has improved a lot since she came here last weekend. Admittedly, her attitude when talking is still aggressive, but she nevertheless follows most of my rules without protesting.

– You're actually right about that, I didn't think about that myself. She barks almost the whole time but doesn't bite. We'll just hope that it will work out. Therese has expressed her irritation because Mia cries at night. They have their beds on each side on the same wall, so she hears everything Mia does at night.

– I'll try to talk to Therese. Then we simply keep trying to make Mia feel safe here. We have succeeded in doing this with other children, it will certainly work this time too, if we don't give up.

– Yes, we have, even if this has never been this hard before. One problem we have to solve is that she has never brushed her teeth or washed herself since she came here. She eats and seems to take care of her toileting by herself, but that's all. I don't even think she has ever changed her clothes.

– It's not very good, but we will be able to take care of all that when we managed to win her trust.

– Just hope it will happen soon, because the poor girl is sad all the time.

However, in the evening, they could just note that nothing had changed. Ronald had talked with Therese to calm down with Mia but had no constructive dialogue, so he began to be worried about what would happen when Mia eventually would leave her room. Mia, however, was still in her room playing with her Teddy and didn't even dare to go out into the hallway, even less to the kitchen. Ruth continued to put the food in her room so she wouldn't be hungry anyway.

When the night came and it became dark, Therese once again could hear how Mia lay and cried in bed. She shouted "Mom! Where are you Mom?" Therese could not fall asleep when she heard it. "Damn brat" she thought. "I'm tired and have to sleep, it's school tomorrow". Finally, she got fed up and left her bed and rushed to Mia's door. She inhaled deeply a few times to calm down. She realized that nothing would be better if she rushed in and started screaming at this girl, it would only worsen the situation and make it even more impossible to sleep in peace and quiet. After a minute, she opened the door.

– Hi, Mia. My name is Tess. I sleep in the room next door. Why are you sad?

Mia flinch when she saw Therese and pressed herself against the wall. She thought that Therese looked so scary with all her piercing and tattooing on her face. Therese noticed how Mia reacted.

– Are you scared of me, Mia?

Mia nodded anxiously.

– Well, you don't have to be scared. I may look like a monster, but I'm the kindest of everyone. Especially towards little angels like you!

Mia looked surprised at her. How did she know that her mother called her "little Angel"? Therese sat down on the bedside and Mia retracted back into the corner of the bed.

– We're the same, actually. None of us has a dad and our mothers are, well, sick. They may love us but none of them are able to take care of us. I feel so broken on the inside because I don't have anyone that takes care of me and cares about me because Mom always are kind of sleeping. You have like the same problem as me with your mom and nobody else who cares about you. Right?

Mia nodded eagerly but still sat curled up in the corner.

– So now we both live in this house, but none of us want it, and it's nothing that any of us can do about it all. I'm felling bad, you're felling bad and we're lying in our beds with just a wall between us and feeling sad. You see, I feel so terribly bad really. You're always crying because you're feeling bad, while I'm messing up my face like this because I'm feeling bad. But we actually have the same problem, you and me. The only difference is that I'm not afraid of you or anyone else. But you don't have to be afraid either, because I can be your friend and protect you, if you want to. What do you think, Mia?

– Mom, she cried with the first word she spoke in the house since her mother left her.

– I guess you don't think I'm your mother. You simply miss your mother and want to go home to her again, right? Do you know what, Mia? I'm just thinking the same thing. All I want is to come home to my mom again, instead of staying here in this house.

Mia became all eyes and looked straight at Therese for the first time.

– But then I remember how it's at home with Mom. I don't get any food, but have to fix it myself. No one cares about me and looks out for me, but I have to handle myself all the time. Isn't it the same for you, Mia?

Therese had just tried to make Mia a little calmer, but suddenly realized that it was true what she had said about her own mom. Mia nodded a little bit uncertain, but still was not moving, though she seemed a little less scared. She looked curiously on Therese's face.

– Come on, Mia. Grab some of the rings in my face and pull really hard.

Mia could no longer control her curiosity. She moved a little closer and grabbed the ring in her nose and pulled it.

– Ah, ouch, ouch, Therese said with a smile. Now try this ring in my lip here instead.

Mia pulled the ring she pointed to. It actually hurt for real.

– Ouch, that hurts, Therese said. Do you know what, Mia? If anybody else but you had done that, and hurt me like that, then I'd been really angry and started screaming and yelling. But you can be calm, I can't be angry with a little angel like you. Do you want to keep pulling my piercing?

Mia shook her head but remained next to Therese.

– Why are you so sad all the time, Mia? You can tell me, because I will not tell anyone about what you said.

– Scared, Mia said.

– What are you scared of? You are not scared of me anymore, right? I'm actually very nice.

Mia shook her head.

– Maybe you think there are monsters under the bed? Wait, I'll check.

Therese crept in under the bed and rumbled around while she made fun sounds like it was very hard. Mia thought she looked funny and could not help giggling a bit.

– Nope, no monster there, Therese said when she came out. If there were any monsters they were afraid when they saw me. And that Ruth aunt who is chasing you all the time, you also don't have to be afraid of. I'm absolutely sure she's really nice. And if she were to be mean to you, I'll beat her yellow and blue, you see, because I don't care what she'll do to me.

Mia made big eyes again, and seemed to relax a bit, so Therese continued.

– You have to understand, Mia, nobody are allowed to be mean to you, and no monsters dare to come out while I'm nearby. I'm just laying on the other side of the wall here, so you can be completely safe. Do you think you can sleep now?

Mia nodded and laid down again. Therese took her blanket and tucked her in and got a pale smile from her before Therese returned to her own room. But, it didn't take long until she heard Mia cry again. She sighed and went into Mia's room again.

– Why are you sad this time? she asked.

– Dark, said Mia.

– Maybe your are scared to lie down alone in the dark. Wait, I'll give you some company.

Therese took a drawing paper and crayons that was lying on the table. Ruth had put them to Mia, but she had not touched them. Therese drew a happy character and showed it to Mia.

– Look here, Mia. This happy guy will keep you company tonight. It will be fine, huh? Mia actually giggled a bit.

– Ugly, she said.

– Yes, it's a very ugly guy, you're right. I'm not very good at drawing. Really bad, actually. But I'm also ugly, but at the same time very nice. This ugly guy is nice too. Look here, I let this lamp shine on him, so it's not so dark in the room. Are you okay now, Mia?

Mia nodded and let Therese tuck her in again. It didn't take long until Therese was awakened by crying again. "Damn", she thought. "What the heck should I do to be able to sleep?" She went back to Mia and asked why she was still sad.

– Lonely, Mia said now.

– So I thought you were used to sleep alone. I have always slept alone. But what the heck. Do you want to sleep with me in my bed instead?

To her astonishment and horror, Mia nodded frenetically. But now she had to fulfill her promise, so she took Mia's pillow, while Mia took her blanket and Teddy and went into Therese's room.

– You can sleep on the inside so you don't fall out of the bed.

Mia laid herself down closest to the wall, Therese tucked her in for the third time and laid down next to her. Mia turned around and folded her arm around Therese so she put her arm around Mia as well. It was really uncomfortable to sleep with a child clinging onto her, but Therese still fell asleep quickly. Mia also fell asleep and then slept all night without waking up anymore.

In the morning, Ruth entered Mia's room to wake her up. To her horror, Mia was not there. She looked under the bed, in the closet and everywhere she could hide out but couldn't find her. She rushed into Diana who was breastfeeding Viola.

– Diana, have you seen Mia now in the morning? She is not in her room.

– No I have not. I thought I heard someone walking in the hallway late night, but that must have been you checking on Mia?

– I have slept all through the night. Hey, do you think Therese has run away with Mia or frightened her so much that Mia run away alone?

Ruth hurried into the room of Therese but halted in the doorway. She whispered to Diana to come. When Diana came carrying Viola, who was still eating, she saw Therese and Mia lying side by side in bed. Mia was still hugging the arm of Therese and slept so sweetly. Ruth smiled at the eyesight but realized that, unfortunately, she had to wake them up, as it was a school day again.

– Therese, wake up. You have to get ready to go to school.

Both girls woke up and looked up at her. Therese looked at Mia and then at Ruth. She first looked a little guilty, but she didn't say anything. Instead she quickly put on her tough face again.

– Take it easy, bitch! I'm awake now.

Ruth just smiled and went out to the kitchen with Diana to make breakfast. Therese explained to Mia that she had to go to school, but that she would come back soon. Mia got sad and went into her room to play with her Teddy again while Therese went out to the kitchen to have breakfast. While they ate, Ronald looked at her without saying anything.

– Do you have anything on your mind, old fart? Therese finally asked.

– I'm just wondering what happened between you and Mia tonight. Ruth was really worried when she could not find Mia in her room.

– Well, I will not sit here and take a scolding from you, feel damn sure sure about that.

– I don't intend to scold at you, totally the opposite. You obviously discovered a problem, and then you solved the problem single-handed. An alternative had been to wake me and Ruth up and ask first, but it wouldn't have been so fun for us either. Instead, you took your own initiative, helped Mia and made her feel safer. It's was absolutely amazingly done by you, Therese. I'm full of admiration over you right now.

Therese was surprised that Ronald had something good to say about her. She felt that heat spread inside her body again. Wow, and that was Ronald who had caused it this time! She was shocked, but at the same time very pleased.

Ruth kept trying to get closer to Mia during the day, but still had no success. The only improvement was that Mia was no longer was hiding under the bed. Ruth was careful never to get too close to Mia so she would not scare her more. It had become painfully clear that Mia was used to play all alone with her Teddy. She talked to it and fantasized all sorts of games with it. Ruth left her alone in her

room most of the time, partly because she had to watch Viola while Diana was in school, and partly to slowly make Mia feel safe. Ruth had realized that Mia would never be safe if she was constantly disturbed by Ruth.

In the afternoon, Ruth started preparing dinner when she heard the front door opening. She walked into the hallway and saw that Therese had come home from school.

– Hi, Therese. How was school? Some homework you need help with?

– Go and hell, bitch. Don't give a shit about my damn school.

Therese went to her room. As she passed Mia's room, Mia emerged and threw herself around Therese's legs and hugged her. Therese lifted her up with some effort and said:

– Hey, but hello to you, little angle. How has your day been?

Therese carried Mia to her room while Ruth watched. It didn't fell safe at all to see Therese and Mia together. She was afraid that Therese would make Mia even more wild. But she nevertheless went with her gut feeling as so often before, and returned to the stove to finish the dinner. Soon it was time to eat and she called the others.

Diana was the first to come together with Viola, closely followed by Ronald. Last of them all, Therese came into the kitchen, with Mia hand in hand. Mia had a scared facial expression as she pressed herself against Therese's leg and looked worried at Ruth and Ronald, who wisely didn't say anything even though they were surprised, yes, almost shocked to see Mia enter the kitchen. Therese moved a chair so that it stood next to the chair she used to sit on without saying a word. Then she helped Mia up on the chair and got a new plate, glass and cutlery before sitting down beside Mia. Therese served herself food first and then helped Mia by putting food on her plate as well. The others sat speechless, watching them without saying anything. Mia picked up a piece of meat with her fingers and moved it towards her mouth to bite off a piece to eat.

– Mia, you have to use knife and fork like us, Therese said to Ruth's surprise. It will become so messy otherwise.

– I can't, Mia said.

– Should I cut the meat for you? Therese asked.

Mia nodded and Therese cut her meat in small pieces, same with vegetables and potatoes. Then she took Mia's napkin and wiped her fingers.

– Ouch, ouch, Mia said when Therese touched her wound on her finger.

– What have you done here? Therese asked.

She carefully took off the band aid and saw a lot of blood that had accumulated around the wound, which also appeared to be inflamed. Therese said nothing but brought Mia to the sink and gently washed her finger and put on a new patch on it. Then she kissed her finger to everyone's surprise.

– Feeling better now, Mia?

Mia nodded, sat down and took the fork and started eating with it. Ruth and Ronald had quietly observed everything Therese had done, too surprised to say anything.

– What the he... ck are you looking at? Therese wondered.

– Nothing special, Ruth replied. We're just surprised to see Mia here at the dinner table. But at the same time we are very happy.

– By the way, you have to buy Cap'n Crunch until tomorrow, for Mia wants it for breakfast. Be sure to fix it!

– Of course, Therese, I will do that. Mia, if that's what you wants, I promise to buy it. Mia, little friend. It's important that you feel comfortable here, you know that I told you that already.

Mia kept on looking down into the table, but it seemed as if she nodded a little. Therese was surprised that Ruth so easily went along with what she had said. After dinner, Mia followed Therese into her room again. Diana put Viola in her stroller and went out on her daily walk with her while Ruth took care of the dishes. When she was done, she heard how Therese and Mia went into the living room, so Ruth sharpened her ears to hear if everything seemed good between the two of them.

Therese turned on the TV and then they sat down on the couch. Mia crept up in the arms of Therese.

– What's the channel you wanted to watch, Mia? she asked.

– Second button.

Therese pressed the second channel button, but it was the wrong channel. She continued to change the channel until Mia found her program. "Shit", Therese was thinking. "Do I have to sit here and watch cartoons too?" But at the same time, she could not help laughing too when Tom and Jerry was fighting with each other. Ruth stayed in the kitchen, amazed to hear both of them laughing in front of the TV. Mias few words at the dining table had been the first time she heard Mia say anything, and she had never heard Mia laugh either before. And when she thought about it, she haven't heard Therese laugh either. Soon Diana came home from her walk with Viola, and then all three of them was sitting in the living room like the best siblings watching the cartoons. Ruth could barely believe what had happened.

In the evening, Mia wanted to sleep in the same bed as Therese again. She was a little doubtful but didn't have the heart to say no.

– Mia, you should actually learn to sleep in your own room. But for tonight you can sleep with me again. But you have to fall asleep alone, because I'll go to bed an hour later than you. Then you have to brush your teeth before you lie down.

– I can't.

Therese took Mias' hand and went with her to the bathroom. She found a new toothbrush and started brushing her teeth. Soon they were ready and both went into Therese's room and Mia laid down in her bed.

– Bed time story?

Therese began to wonder what was happening. But she still fetched a storybook from Mia's room and read a story for her. Ruth and Ronald had listened to the whole procedure from the living room and looked at each other with surprised eyes. Ronald quietly said to Ruth:

– Wow, now she's reading a story for Mia, and just before that she brushed her teeth. What's really going on?

– Yes, it's unbelievable that she managed to get Mia out of her room, watch TV and even help her brush her teeth. Not to mention that Mia have new clothes on from yesterday. Have you noticed that Therese doesn't swear while she is talking to Mia?

– I've noticed it. We can just be grateful! Who could have thought Therese could be the solution to the problem we have with Mia?

– Totally unexpected. By the way, who knows, maybe Mia can be a solution to the problem we have with Therese?

When the story was finished, Therese tucked her in. After some hesitation, she then gave Mia a kiss on her forehead. Mia smiled happily and Therese left the room and went to Diana instead and threw herself down in the chair. Diana laid in bed reading a history book and looked up at her with an inquiring expression. Viola was sleeping in his stroller on the veranda, which Therese knew about already.

– Now, Diana. Start talking!

– Well, alright, she answered anxiously. What do you want me to talk about?

– Talk about your problem, for fucks sake. Why are you here and why in hell do you have a baby, though you're just a teen brat? As if I didn't understand that crap already. Don't forget to describe how Lenny fucked you and knocked you up! Details, you see.

Diana had understood that it was not worth it to be irritated on her ugly language and attitude, and that Therese didn't mean anything bad with it after all.

– My mother got sick and died when I was twelve. Dad then demanded that I took care of all her duties at home.

– So you got to clean, cook and such shit then? It's not that damn hard! I've also had to do it.

– Yes, but Dad demanded too much. Everything must be shiny clean, all clothes must be washed, folded and placed in the cabinets and the food must taste well and be on the table at the exact time. But that was not the most difficult parts, it was that he requested that I would take care of him personally too.

– What then, scrub that bastard on his back and so, or what? Fix his nails?

–No, not that. It was rather ... you know ... sex.

– What the hell! Do you mean he fucked you? You can't be serious for fucks sake! You are his own damn kid!

– Well, it's true, unfortunately. He said that because Mom was dead, and he had needs as a man, I had to ... help him with his needs. It was really painful at first, but he hit me if I didn't accept it. So Viola is actually not Lenny's daughter, but his.

Now Therese became really upset and raised her voice.

– What the fuck! Such a damn bastard! How the hell can he do something like that against his own damn daughter! He should get a real bashing! Fucking scumbag! I want to beat the senses out of him and cut his dick off!

Now Ruth heard Therese almost screamed and became worried that she had an outbreak. She hurried into Diana's room and asked:

– Is everything good here?

– Everything is fine, Diana said with a trembling voice.

– Are you sure? I could hear Therese screaming all the way out into the living room.

– Everything's just cool, bitch. I'm just pissed off on Diana's damn daddy. How the fuck can he treat his own daughter like that? I want to crush his balls, for fucks sake.

– I agree with you in principle, Therese, but violence doesn't solve any problems. Diana's dad is in prison for what he did, and that's where he belongs.

– Let the damn shit rot in the slammer. But chill down, bitch. Me and Diana are cool with each other. Right, girl?

Diana just nodded and Ruth returned to the couch after some hesitation.

– Well, Diana. Hope you don't think I'm a kind of violent bastard. Just getting so pissed off when I hear shit like that. It's not like I'm walking around and messing up people and so, I'll hope you get the grip.

– No, I know you're actually nice. You just sound mean, right?

– Well, for fuck sake. Nice, I don't know. I'm probably pretty damn tough, you'll know.

– How many persons have you battered up, then?

– None at all. What the hell, I said I don't fight!

– How many children have you scared?

– You know I don't want to scare anyone.

– How many people have you robbed, then?

– Hell, I'm not dealing with that. Do you think I'm a damn jailbird?

– No not at all. So you're actually nice. The only one you seem to be mean to is yourself, Therese. Because you seems to have made some stupid choices that make it hard for yourself, right?

Therese felt like Diana had hit her in the head with a hammer. "Shit", she thought, "it's true for fucks sake". But she said:

– You're right in that, girl. Fuck, how right you are! But please call me Tess.

Diana studied Therese who got something thoughtful over her face. After some hesitation, Diana could not resist the temptation to ask.

– Your own story then, Tess? How is that?

Therese sat quietly and initially didn't say anything. Diana was also quiet and waited for her to open up. Finally, Therese started to talk with an exceptionally subdued tone.

– Well, it's so damn pathetic if you compare with your story. Shit, it's just a drinking mom who cares more about the liquor than her daughter. I didn't stand it with her crap, so I went downtown and started to drink myself.

– Are you also an alcoholic, than?

– No, fuck no. I only drink beer, and not too damn much. Some weed too occasionally, but never more than a few puffs. Like, it was more that I messed around downtown, broke some windows and put some trash baskets onto fire and such crap. Then I've been sent from foster home to foster home since I was a little pussy. Nobody wants me, so sometimes my mother takes care of me, but she also don't give a shit about me, so I've taken care of myself the best fuck I could. Just a bunch of minor things, kind of.

– You always seem to be angry. What are you really angry about?

– My life is so damn fucked up! I'm angry with the entire damn system!

– Which system?

– The system! Everything around! Foster home, CPS, drunkiness. The system!

– Are you mad at me?

– No, damn it. You're cool.

– But I'm a foster child. Then I'm part of the system, right?

– No, what the fuck? You are a victim of the system.

– Ruth, then? She's a part of the system?

– Clearly, she's a part of the damn system.

– Are you angry at her? What have she done for bad things to you that made you angry with her?

Therese couldn't come up with an answer. She just looked at Diana while thinking about how Ruth had treated her. Diana continued.

– The question is whether she is part of the problem, or if she is part of the solution to the problem.

– What the hell do you mean?

– Well, my problem is my dad and what he did to me. Ruth and Ronald are the solution to that problem for me. Can't they be your solution too?

Therese sat silent and couldn't find an answer again. This Diana was something special. So weak, insecure and feeble, but when she opened her mouth, all sorts of wisdoms popped out. Eventually, Therese said unusually quietly:

– Well, it doesn't fucking matter what she is. If I had a chance, I've lost it anyway. You've heard how I'm talking to her? It's too late to change anything, because she's probably pissed on me. And that's noting to say about that.

– Have you thought about how she answers you? Does she sound angry with you when she responds?

– Maybe not, but what the heck, I can't go to her now, after all I said, and ask for some sort of forgiveness. Not after all, I have thrown to her and her old man.

– Do you seriously mean you don't dare to try? I thought you were tough and fearless. Are you afraid of her? What can go wrong if you try?

– Fuck, Diana. What the hell are you doing? Every time you open your mouth, you throw out a lot of wise words. I'll have a think about this. Damn it. Yes, for fucks sake. Think really damn deep. Thank you for telling me your story and listening to mine. It even feels a little bit better now, in a strange way.

Therese went back to her room and laid down next to Mia. Diana had really got her her to think. "So terrible it must have been for her to be molested like that. Yet she is so quiet and humble. And what a about me? Hell! A pathetic damn wimp, that's what I am! "



CHAPTER 12

Shaping Up

Therese sat in the school bench and could not help thinking about what Diana had said the night before. "How dare Diana question if I'm tough?" She thought. But at the same time she knew that Diana was right. What could get worse if she would talk to Ruth? She was nervous about the idea of doing it, but tried to convince herself that she was still tough enough not to be afraid. So after the dinner that day, she went back to the kitchen after following Mia to her room. Ruth was cleaning up after the dinner and doing the dishes.

– Hi, Ruth. Have time to talk a bit?

– Sure, Therese. Is there something quick that you want to talk about?

– Actually, probably not. It can be kind of heavy, like.

Ruth had been pleasantly surprised that Therese for the first time used her name instead of "bitch". She laid down the dish brush she used, wiped her hands and took off the apron. Then she sat down at the kitchen table and Therese sat down in front of here, a little surprised that Ruth just interrupted what she was doing for her sake.

– So, what is it you want to talk about, Therese?

– Well heck, it's kind of difficult. I know I'm rotten and so, but like, I want to start over with you, kind of.

Ruth's heart started to beat a bit faster. Was it possible that Therese wanted to improve her attitude?

– Do you mean that you want to change your attitude and turn the turn a new page in your life?

– Yes kind of.

Ruth fetched a piece of paper from a drawer and put it on the table.

– I got this paper from CPS when you came here. Here is everything that has happened to you and much about what you have done. For example, there is a text from a former foster father, in which he is claims that you are "out of control", that you "do what you want" and is "completely impossible". Then he writes that he refuses to take responsibility for you, and asks the CPS to take you back. Then there's a lot of other stupid things you've done on this paper. Do you really mean you want me to just shred this paper and forget everything you've done?

– Damn, this is fucking meaningless. I knew it! If someone has done this much crap like I have, everything is fucked up. To hell with everything!

Therese stood up, but before she had time to leave, Ruth took up the paper and tore it into small pieces, stood up and threw the pieces into the trash bin under the sink. Then she took a blank paper from the drawer and sat down again. Finally she wrote at the top of the paper: "Therese Fergusson". Then on a new line she wrote current date and "Therese came to Ruth and nicely asked to discuss." Then she underlined the word "nicely" and looked at Therese who had became astonished to see the whole procedure and sat herself down into the chair again.

– Well, Therese. Here is a blank paper. Now it's up to you to fill it with something. What is it you want to fill it with?

– Shit, that was heavy! Do you really mean you're prepared to forget all the crap that I've thrown onto you, just that fucking easy?

– What are you talking about for things? I don't remember any bad things you've said or done to me.

– But for fucks sake. I have said so much damn...

Therese stopped. Suddenly, she understood what Ruth meant when she saw her pesky smile.

– Wow, that's fucking cool. You really mean that I can start over.

– I think everyone is entitled to a new chance. It doesn't matter what you've done in the past. The only thing that matters is what you do today and what you will do in the future. That's what Jesus said that even the reddest sin can be forgiven if you regret it and make amends.

– Shit, that's really super. Though I don't believe in Jesus and that stuff. If there were any God, he don't give a crap about me.

– I don't agree with you, but I will not force my opinion upon you.

– It sounds OK, for fucks sake. So what should I do now then?

– It's all about respect. I suppose you want to be respected. You want that your opinion is respected and that you feel that also you is important. Right?

– Yes, for fucks sake. For sure I want to be respected.

– Respect, however, is not automatically granted. That's something you have to earn first. And to deserve it one need to show respect to others.

Therese pondered upon what Ruth had said. It took a while before she really understood what she meant. Then she thought, "Damn, this is just the same shit as usual. She means that I have to obey everything she says to show that I 'respect' her. Same damn crap as everyone else says, just in other words". She hardly had finished thinking it, when Ruth continued.

– Of course, this is with respect is double edged. So the same goes for me. So in order for *me* to earn *your* respect, I must first show respect to you, right?

It suddenly felt like someone hit Therese in the head with a hammer. Everything was spinning while she was processing what Ruth just said. After processing what she just heard, she responded.

– So you mean you're entitled to treat me like crap, because I treated you like crap all the time?

– No, not at all. The reverse doesn't apply. You must treat others with respect regardless of how he or she treats you. I really hope that you feel that I have treat-

ed you with respect all the time. Because if you don't agree with that I have failed, and if so, I apologize.

– No, for fucks sake. You have always been nice to me. So fucking nice, even though I has been, well, disrespectful to you.

– But that will be different now, I hope?

– Yes, for fucks sake. As long as you're nice with me, I'll be nice to you.

– So you agree with this about showing mutual respect to each other?

– So damn right. I'm in to one hundred percent. Respect is important as hell.

– Another thing that matters is listening. You have two ears and one mouth, which means you should listen twice as much as you talk. So if, for example, I give you a suggestion about something that is important, it's necessary that you really listen to it.

Therese wrinkled her eyebrows a little, so Ruth quickly continued.

– I don't mean you have to follow the suggestion, but you must make sure that you first understand what it means. If you think that it's good then you'll follow it. Otherwise, you oppose to the suggestion and come up with counter arguments. It may be that I don't understand your situation and that the suggestion is not so good and then we will throw it away. But maybe you have not understood why I give it, and maybe the underlying cause is good, but the method I suggest is bad. What I mean is that we simply calmly and objectively discuss the suggestion until we agree. How do you think that sounds?

– Sure, that makes sense. Especially that all suggestion can be discussed. At the same time, does that mean you have to listen to me if I come up with some damn suggestions?

– Of course, this also applies in both directions. I am always open to all suggestions, good as bad.

– So if I would say that that damn paper with all the rules on the wall is fucking disrespectful to me, would you listen?

Ruth fetched the paper with rules that Ronald had placed on the notice board and put it on the table in front of both of them.

– Is it this paper you talk about? In what way is it disrespectful?

– Well, I'm rotten, but I'm not an idiot. I don't need a lot of shitty rules that tells me what to do. Don't you think I know what's good and what's fucked up?

– Let's us then do it like this, Therese.

Ruth wrote at the top of the paper "Rule 1: show respect for everyone in the house". Then she wrote on the next line "Rule 2: listen to suggestions and discuss bad suggestions".

– You know that this rules don't only apply to you, but to everyone. Can you accept these two roles to one hundred percent?

– Yes, for fucks sake. We have already talked about that. Those are two damn good rules.

Then Ruth crossed over the word "Rules" which was heading for the rest of the paper and instead wrote "Suggestions". Therese didn't believe her eyes and wondered what it meant.

– So, now the only rules that still applies are the two that we agree on.

– You seriously mean that all other damn rules now are just suggestions?

– That's what I mean. Applicable from now on.

Therese looked at her with surprise. Then she realized what it meant in practice.

– Hell, you're sneaky. This means, according to rule two, that I have to think through the entire damn paper and discuss what I don't dig.

– Exactly like that. Do you have any problems with it?

– Maybe not. Wait.

Therese got a thoughtful facial expression while reading the paper thoroughly for the first time.

– Take this damn rule that I have to be home here already at seven in the evening. How the hell will that work if I for example want to go see a movie with a friend? Do I have to watch children's movies at early afternoon, or what the heck? Can't I get some slack?

– A very good point of view. It's more about why you comes home late and what you are doing. I'm adding "or by agreement" on the line. So if you want to go to a movie just say it in advance, then you will be allowed to come home late that day.

– Kick ass. Then it's this rule that I can't leave the house without an adult company. What the fuck, can't I even go shopping without a damn babysitter? And Diana goes out every day with her little brat.

– You're correct again, Therese. This rule is meaningful mostly for smaller children. For you and Diana, it's all about what you do outside, and who you are with. I mean, you already go to school by yourself. We write the same comment there.

– Wow, it fucking works to discuss with you. So if I want to go out with Diana when she walks her baby, that's okey?

– As long as Diana doesn't mind it, I don't mind that, Therese.

– Another suggestion, Ruth. Stop calling me Therese, for fucks sake. I hate that damn name, because my mother calls me that. Call me Tess instead.

– Of course, Tess. I will do that. Sorry I didn't know about it before. I want to treat all my children with respect, and then it's important to be called what you want and nothing else. It sounded nice when you called me "Ruth" instead of "bitch" so I would love if you keep on doing that.

– Alright, Ruth, deal. Though you have to stop referring to me as a "child", because I'm no damn brat anymore.

– I don't use the word "child" disrespectfully, just as opposite to "adult". What do you think I' should say instead?

– If you call me "youth" it will be fucking great.

– Sounds good. You and Diana are youngsters, me and Ronald are adults and Viola and Mia are children. Talking about Mia, she has been standing outside the kitchen door for a while, waiting for you.

– Oops, for fu... fun. Her children's program starts now. Real heavy that we could talk a bit.

– One last thing before you go, Tess. I want to be clear that I have no problems at all with how expresses yourself, but others might perceive it as disrespectful. You have already shown that you can talk decent when Mia is around. It's in your own interest to talk and look nice also in other occasions, like at school or in shops for example. This will give you more respect from the ones you meet.

Tess didn't answer, pondering on what Ruth had said. She took Mia's extended hand and went into the living room to watch Mia's cartoon show. After a while, Diana came home from her walk at the same time as Ronald came home from working overtime again. Ruth talked to Ronald about what she and Therese had discussed earlier while he ate a late dinner. Ronald waited until the Mia's program ended and then went into the living room.

– Tess, I would be happy if you and I can have a small conversation.

– I have to help Mia to go to bed first, read the story for her and say good night. You have to wait.

Ronald said it was no problem, and sat in the living room reading a magazine while he waited. Therese first helped Mia to brush her teeth and then to take on her nightgown. After some persuasion, she agreed that Mia slept in the same bed as Therese this night too. She read a bed time story for her and kissed her good night again. Eventually Therese was ready with the whole bedding procedure and came in to him and looked at him firmly. He had listened to the whole procedure with Mia and was amazed at how Therese had gained Mia's trust and even more how Therese took care of Mia as if she were her daughter.

– Well, what's so important?

– I'm not sure that it's that important, but I'm grateful that you came in here to have a little discussion. Ruth has explained to me what you discussed before and

that it was on your initiative. It's great that you took that initiative, it shows a great inner strength from your side, Tess.

Therese didn't answer but felt that heat in her body again.

– I've also seen the paper with rules that Ruth has scrabbled on. I want you to know that there are several children and youths, mostly youths actually, who have tried to create divisiveness between Ruth and me to get benefits for themselves. But since a long time ago we both have agreed that we will always support each other's decision, no matter if we agree or not. In this case, I don't agree with the changes she has made, but they still apply because she has decided it.

– What's wrong with the changes then? She and I agree on them.

– To explain that, I first must first tell you that we have an agreement with CPS. We have asked to have temporary children, or even better foster children, who really are children. Preferably in pre school age. And for a child around Mia's age, "show respect" doesn't mean much. That's why I've written all the rules. For a youth of your age, it's enough to show respect, because you understand that it means, among other things, all the rules that I wrote on the paper. Therefore, only one rule is actually necessary you and Diana.

– There are actually two rules, that one about listening to suggestions as well.

– Actually, that rule is also unnecessary. If you show respect, you also listen to the one that is talking, right?

– Maybe so. But that paper is still stupid.

– Why so?

– Well, it's intended for like four year olds. But a four year old child can't read. So it's stupid to have a paper that only applies to those who can't read it.

Ronald looked at her for a couple of seconds. Then he laughed joyfully.

– Do you know what, Tess? You are completely right. The paper is and has always been stupid. Imagine that I need you to understand it. But do you know what I've noticed, Tess?

– No, I don't know that. But I've noticed that you calls me "Tess" now and not "Therese". I'm digging it, that's respect.

– You have explained to Ruth that you want to be called "Tess", so it's important to respect it. What I noticed is that despite the fact that you have complained about the rules since you came here, you have followed them for the most part after all. I want you to know that I've appreciated it and think it's very mature and nice of you.

Therese felt the heat again. Even more praise! She smiled and replied:

– That's simple. You have not been fucking with me, so I don't want to fuck with you. Others have been brawling and behaved like idiots, and then I reacted by don't giving a shit about what they say.

– That comment takes me to the important reason I want to talk to you about your attitude. What I going to tell you is for your own sake, not for my sake.

– Here it comes, Therese thought out loud.

– I have understood that you have a strong personality, you have a strong will and are independent. You don't want to listen to others but do what you want. Diana is completely the opposite, compliant, obedient with a cautious image.

Therese wrinkled a little with her eyebrows. "Now he will say I should be more like Diana", she thought. "Never ever". But Ronald shocked her instead by saying the opposite.

– My advise to you is to absolutely not change who you are, but continue to show attitude. For the world belong the strong, not to the weak. I'm absolutely convinced that you can go as far you want, if you put your mind to it. Yes, much longer than Diana can come. She can also succeed, but you have better chances.

Therese draw her breath. What on earth was his sitting there saying?

– At the same time, Tess, it's important to keep in mind that if you are strong you must also be kind. What you should do is to use your strength primarily to help others, not to get advantages for your self.

– Why on earth ...

– I'll give an example. Suppose there is an odd girl in school that is bullied and you use your strength to help her so she's not bullied anymore. Then maybe ten years later, you've found your dream job, but the problem is that the boss doesn't like your background. Then you discover that this girl is working there and she talks nice about you to the boss. Suddenly you've got the job! Then you are grateful that you were kind to her when she was bullied at school.

– Hrmm.

– So, even if you're strong enough to pull yourself forward, you're never as strong as when you get if five other people help you pulling. So be nice to others, so they will be nice to you later when you need them.

– Hrmm.

– May I ask a curious question? I have repeatedly noticed that you sometimes answer "hrmm". Do you mean that you agree or not? If you don't mind the question, that is.

– Well, yes. I guess I just mean I can't find a good answer. What you said may be right, but I don't want to admit it.

– Alright, that sounds reasonable. One last thing I would like to discuss with you is Mia. What's your relationship with her, actually?

– Well, I don't know what has happened there. I just let her sleep in my bed one night to make her stop crying, and now she kinds of cling to me. I don't really understand what's up with her.

– What has happened is Mia has become safe with you. However, the situation is considerably more serious than that she seems to be fond of you. She is a very disturbed child. She seems to have serious issues in the relationship with, above all, adults. She's feeling as bad as a four year old child can ever do, and feels completely lost in the world and as insecure as it's possible to feel.

– I realize she's also fucked up. But I don't want her bad, it's just that she doesn't want to leave me alone. Not because I really mind it myself. It's kind of cool to hang out with her and I actually dig taking care of her.

– It's nice to hear you don't mind taking care of her. What you've done with Mia is almost a miracle. You have managed to get her out of her room and even made her laugh some times and to feel safe with you, and even accept Ruth to some extent. I can't express how amazingly fantastic it is what you are doing with Mia, and I am extremely proud of you. Just keep doing what you do, and both me and Ruth will become endlessly grateful to you. You've really shown a side of yourself that's amazing.

Therese looked surprised at him and felt that heat spread in her body again. Wow, he really went into excess this time! She thanked him and went to her room to ponder on what he had said.

Ronald watched her go. He felt convinced that she would improve from now. She had already stopped swearing almost entirely. Therese went to bed with a big smile on her face. For the first time she could remember, she felt happy. She looked at Mia who was sleeping beside her and felt an unfamiliar sense of tenderness to this little girl.

≈ ≈ ≈

The following day Therese walked around in the school as in a haze, unused to the feeling to being respected at home. At the dinner table, Ruth asked her how it was in school. This time she gladly responded and soon they all sat and chatted with each other. It was so strange to sit at the dinner table just mingling, but at the same time it felt so good. "What's actually happening to me?" Therese thought. After dinner, Diana prepared to go out with Viola as usual, but was stopped by Therese.

– Diana, wait a bit. What do you say if I tag on? I'm suffocating in here!

Diana stopped and looked at Therese with uncertain face.

– Are you sure that Ruth allows it?

– Sure, I checked yesterday.

Mia had heard how they talked and came running.

– Auntie Tess! Can I also come along? Please Auntie Tess! Please! Please!

– Sure, I guess. We just have to ask Ruth first. Come here, Mia, we'll ask!

Diana looked after them in amaze when Therese went to Ruth. Had Therese begun asking Ruth about permission now? And what was this with "Auntie Tess"? What had happened?

– It was okey, Therese said when she came back after a few seconds. You have to take on some more clothes though, Mia, it's still cold outside. Come on, let's go and find something to use.

When Mia and Therese came back, Ruth was standing together with Diana at the front door, waiting.

– Have fun now, girls! Tess, you'll keep an eye on Mia, I guess?

Soon the four girls went down the sidewalk. Diana pushed the stroller with Viola, and Mia walked beside Therese holding her hand firmly.

– If it doesn't matter to you, Diana, could we go to some playground with Mia?

– I often go to the park, and there is a playground. Let's go there.

When they reached the playground, Mia didn't dare to leave Therese, so she followed her into the playground. Diana watched them when thy both went down the slide and when they was swinging on the swings. She could not decide which of them who enjoyed it the most. Therese really lived up and seemed to have become a child again. It was obvious that none of them had played very often in playgrounds. When Diana saw that Therese was almost overprotecting Mia, she took the stroller and walked around the whole park. They were both still playing when she came back.

– Have you finished playing soon, Tess? I want to go home now.

– Same here. I'm getting tired.

– Just a little more, Auntie Tess. Please?

– You can go one more time down the slide, then we go home. Otherwise, you will miss your program on TV. We can come here again tomorrow, if you want to.

– Yes, yes, I want to.

Mia ran away and sled a last time while Therese again stand under it to protect her if she was to fall. Diana was impressed by both her care and that she was both firmly and kindly got Mia to obey. After a few minutes they went home again.

– Diana, now you can go to Ruth and report while I'm helping Mia out of her clothes.

– Report what? she asked.

– I'm not stupid, you know. Don't you think I understand that Ruth asked you to keep an eye on me if I watched Mia properly?

– Well, yes, she actually said something like that.

Ruth got her report and was pleased that she again followed her gut feeling instead of listening to her brain. So the following days the routine was repeated when they went to the park right after the dinner and then they sat in front of the TV to watch Mia's children's program together. The only difference was that Therese managed to make Mia feel safe in her own room, so now they were sleeping in their own beds. However it was still Therese who read the bed time story and then tucked her in, and it was Therese who woke Mia up every morning and made sure she was wearing clean clothes.

On Saturday, Ruth asked Diana and Therese to come into the kitchen. When they came in, Diana got some dollar bills in her hand.

– Here, Diana, is your monthly allowance. You wanted buy a new dress, right? And here you have the same amount, Tess. Even though you are not a foster child, but only temporarily here. Strange, by the way, that CPS didn't get back about you yet. In any case, it feels unfair if you don't receive monthly allowance as well. So, here you are.

Therese also received a small amount of money. She looked at them as if she had never seen money before. This was the first time she got a allowance so she had to look a bit confused.

– I know Diana was going to take the bus downtown today to buy her dress. Why don't you go with her, Tess, and try to find some new clothes for your self, or

whatever you want to buy? I can babysit for Viola and Mia meanwhile, so you don't have to think about them.

On the bus downtown, Therese was thinking over what she should do with her money. When she caught sight of a street corner through the bus window, she realized what she wanted.

– Diana, we're getting off here, she called.

– But there are two stops remaining to the shopping street.

– I have a errand here. Come on now.

Diana didn't dare to protest. She became increasingly worried when Tess entered a narrow, dark alley that Diana never been in. It looked dangerous here, but Tess just went on and she followed her. Then she tried to protest without success when Tess went into a tattoo and piercing salon that looked really shady.

– Hi there, Pierre! It has been a while!

– It really has, Tess! What can I do for you today? You don't have much space left for more piercing unless you want it somewhere else on your body.

– No, it the opposite, Pierre. I wonder if you can remove all my piercing? You are then one who put everything in.

Pierre was used to all kind of requests so he didn't ask any questions. Therese sat down in a chair and he carefully pulled out the piercings one by one with a pliers. When he finished, Therese paid what he requested. She made a face when she saw that most of her money was required.

– Well, Diana, now I'm ready. Take me to your shop!

– It's down that street. Unexpected that you removed all your piercing, but nice. Tess, I'm just wondering one thing.

– What is it?

– Now that you have removed your piercing, why don't you fix your hair too? It looks like it could need some washing and cutting.

– Maybe, but my money is not enough for that too.

– We can go to my favorite beauty salon. Maybe they can give us a better price, and I can help if the money is not enough.

Tess was thinking while they was walking. The idea was not bad at all, so she went with her to the salon and was presented by Diana.

– Now, Tess. How do you want your hair? the hairdresser asked.

– Surprise me, she replied.

– Are you sure, Tess? Diana wondered. Doesn't it matter what they do?

– I trust you are do something nice and that you know better what's looking good on me. Just go for it, I'll promise not to get mad if I'm not happy. Worst case is that I'll have to let it grow out again.

Therese was first asked to sit down beside a basin where the hairdresser began to wash her hair. The tattoo in her face began to flow away she realized it was not real. She carefully washed her face clean too. Then she brushed her hair and started cutting and styling it. Meanwhile, Diana had left to buy her dress while the stylist was working on Therese.

– Do you want me fix your face? another hairdresser asked.

– What do you mean by "fix"?

– Well, your tattoo is gone, but you seem to have had a piercing all around your face. I could put on some makeup to hide the tracks.

– I'm not sure. I'm not the one that kind of pays for this all.

– Don't worry about it. It's free, I just take some of my private makeup.

– But why are you doing that?

– It looks like you want some sort of new start, with new hairstyle, no piercing, no tattoo and so on. I just thing that it would be fun to help a bit.

– Oh, go for it then, Therese replied with equal amounts of surprise and joy.

When Diana came back, she couldn't see Therese that was sitting on a chair waiting. It was not until she got up and went to Diana that she recognized her.

– Wow, Tess. What a difference. You have become really beautiful. Come here and check out yourself!

Diana pushed Therese i front of a big mirror. Therese had not looked so closely before, so this was the first time she saw herself in full figure. Earlier she only had seen her head but not the rest of her body. She suddenly got an impulse.

– Diana, I'd like to ask you something. Could I borrow your dress, just on our way home?

– Oh, well. I've just bought it and so. Preferably not, but ...

– It's okay, Diana. I will not force you to lend me your new dress. But what do you say if I borrow the one you have on now and you take on the new one?

Diana agreed on that so they walked to a toilet and change clothes. Therese jammed down her dirty, broken jeans and t-shirt in a trash bin and then they took the bus home again. Diana said on the road home that Ruth had messed her a lot of times to ask why it took so long. She seemed worried that something had gone wrong.

She was actually worried that Therese had done something inappropriate, like contacting her old gang again. Ruth understood that Diana would not be able to control Therese if she decided to do some stupidities. At the same time, she really didn't believe that, but she was not sure.

When they entered the house, Ruth was standing there waiting. Diana entered first and Ruth commended her for the new dress. Then Diana stepped aside and Ruth got to see how Therese looked like now. Her chin felled down and she cried out from joy.

– Wow, Tess. You look amazing! I could never have dreamed of experiencing something like this. Really, I'm impressed and so happy for your sake. Ronald, come here! Check out this incredible sight.

Ronald came out from the workroom and froze when he recognized Therese. To her embarrassment, he examined her from top to toe and exclaimed.

– That's just incredible. It's like a whole new person, don't you agree Ruth?

– I totally agree, Roland. Tess looks amazing now.

– Well, Tess. I have not said anything about your piercing or the rest of how you look. So this amazing change is completely your own idea. You really made me happy today, Tess.

– So shut up ... quiet both of you. I've just fixed myself a bit because I wanted to do that. That's not a big deal.

– Don't say that it's not a big deal, Ronald said. It's important for one's self esteem how you look, being satisfied with yourself and seeing that others like what they see.

Mia came running when she heard the voice of Therese. She suddenly stopped and looked confused for a few seconds. Then Therese stretched out her arms towards her and she got it. Mia screamed joyfully and threw herself around her neck. Therese lifted her up and asked:

– Well, Mia. How do you think Auntie Tess now looks like now?

– You look very nice, Auntie Tess. Now nobody will be afraid of you anymore.

– No, that's true, Therese laughed.

The mood had never been better at the foster home. Therese felt better than she could remember that she had ever done. Somehow, she felt like she had come home now, more at home than with her own mother. Mia had started laughing now and Diana and she was good friends, even though they were so totally different personalities. And Ruth and Ronald? Strangely, she began to feel as if she were her real parents. That night she slept better is ever.

~ ~ ~

A little over a week later, she had her birthday. When she woke up, she laid in bed for a few minutes wondering if someone else would remember it. Probably not, she thought, because in practice she had never been celebrated. On a few occasions, her mother had been sober enough to give her a gift, but for the most part she had been too drunk to even remember her day. Then she heard how someone knocked on the door.

– I'm already awake, Ruth. Coming soon.

– Can I come in? Ronald asked.

Therese smiled a little. It felt real good that Ronald always was careful to ask permission to enter the room, even though it was their house. She jumped into the dress that Diana had given to her after she borrowed it.

– Sure, just come in. I'm dressed.

The door opened and Ronald and all the others entered the room, singing. Ruth held a cake with fourteen candles and everybody had their package in their hand. Therese didn't believe her eyes and got tears in them to her own great embarrassment.

– What in the earth are you doing? she exclaimed when they had finished singing.

– But it's your bithday, Auntie Tess, Mia said.

– Congratulations on your fourteenth day, Ronald said and handed over a new guitar. I was too lazy to wrap this, and given the shape of the package, you would have guessed what it was anyhow.

– A guitar! Wow, it's a fantastic gift. I couldn't imagine ...

– I've seen that you tried to play on your guitar, even though it's broken.

It was obvious to everyone that she was moved to tears. She hugged Ronald warmly and thanked him.

– Here's my gift, Ruth said, handing over a big, soft package.

She opened the package and got a whole bunch of clothes. It was both nice blouses and nice long pants.

– You have borrowed clothes from Diana the past week, so I thought you would like some nice clothes of your own.

– It's way too much...

– You shouldn't feel that way. I have to admit that I've bought everything at second hand stores, so it has not been that expensive. Well, it's the thought that counts, right?

– Here you have my gift, Tess.

Diana handed over her package. Therese opened it and found a makeup kit with a variety of makeup accessories.

– It's not because I think you're ugly or so, but I like to make myself a little bit up before I go to school.

– Thank you very much Diana. I really appreciate it.

Mia had to Therese's great surprise dared to follow the others without Therese's company. Now she was shyly handed over her gift, in a ugly looking wrapping. Therese opened the package and took out a crayon drawing that Mia had done that showed her and Therese hand in hand framed by a big heart.

– Thanks, Mia. This is actually the best of all the presents, even though I love all the presents. I love you too, Mia! And that's goes for all of you!

She first hugged Mia, then all the others.

– You are all amazing. This is my best birthday ever. I didn't expect anyone to remember it and definitely didn't think I'd get any presents. Wow, and I thought I could not feel better!

– Now, you all have to make yourself ready for school, Ronald said. The breakfast is ready and we all have to hurry a little. I'll drive you to school today, so you win some time.

Therese floated on clouds all day at school. It almost felt like she was high, even though she hadn't used neither drugs nor alcohol for a whole month.



CHAPTER 13

Complications

Leonard was happier than ever. His relationship with Diana had grown even stronger. In addition, he had found out that his fear that Viola would come between him and Diana had fallen ashamed. Instead Viola had made them come even closer, and he also had learnt that it was both exciting and fun to take care of a newborn baby.

This day, however, it wasn't very fun for him when he came home from having visiting Diana and Viola. His parents looked so firm at him that he immediately realized that he must have done something wrong. No matter how much he thought, he couldn't figure out what it was. His dad started with an angry voice.

– Leonard, can you explain where you have been after school today?

– I've already said that. I just been home with a classmate.

– Could this classmate be a girl? And could it be that she is your girlfriend too?

– Well, yes, eh. Perhaps...

– Tell us the truth now, his mother said firmly. I talked to the mother to one of your classmates, and she told me that you're always together with a girl. Have you secretly had a girlfriend that you are going with every day?

– Well, I guess so.

– What is her name and how long have you been together?

– Her name is Diana and we have been together for almost a year now.

– A whole year! And you haven't said word about it! We don't mind that you have a girlfriend, but we don't like that you are keeping it secret to us. This classmate also claims that everyone knows that you and Diana are even intimate with each other. But that's not right, or?

– Oh, I don't know if I can deny that, kind of.

– What are you saying? It's unacceptable that you go to bed with a girl at your age. And we don't even know about her. I want to meet this girl now. You have to call her and ask her to come here.

– When ... when should I ask her to come? This weekend?

– No, now. Now, tonight. We need to take care of this immediately!

Leonard called Diana on his cellphone and explained that he was in trouble and that his father demanded that she come over straight away. Before she had time to answer, his dad took the phone.

– Hi, Diana. This is Gilbert, Leonard's father. I want you to come here tonight so we can straighten this thing out. You don't have to worry, we are not angry with you. We just want to understand what has happened, because Leonard has not said a word about you until today. It's him that we are a little angry with.

Diana began to feel very worried. At the same time, she definitely didn't want Leonard to suffer because of her after all he had done so she replied:

– I'll just check with Ruth if it's okay to come.

It was no problem, and Ruth also drove here over there in the car together with Viola. Diana insisted she had to bring her daughter. Soon she rang on the door bell and Leonard opened immediately as he was waiting inside the door. Leonard took Viola over to himself while Diana took off her jacket. To his parents surprise, he gave Viola a kiss and she giggled a bit of delight and didn't seem to want to return to her mother but was remarkably pleased to sit on Leonard's arm.

– Hello honey, Leonard said, giving Diana a kiss too.

Leonard's parents stood in the living room door looking increasingly astonished. Soon they all sat down in the living room. Leonard held Viola in his knee.

Viola hugged Leonard and was obviously comfortable sitting in his knee. Gilbert looked furious, but controlled his voice with some effort.

– Calm down, darling, Sylvia said. We don't know what's happened yet. You know what you always say about preconceptions?

– I know, but I suppose you two understand how this looks like. According to Leonard, you have been together for a year already, you have been sleeping with each other and now we find out that you have a baby that is obviously attached to Leonard. Have you become a dad, on top of everything else, Leonard? The truth now, Leonard!

– Well, would it be so bad if I really was a daddy, Daddy?

Gilbert opened his mouth and looked like he was ready to explode. Diana's hands shook with anxiety, but she nevertheless felt that she had to help Leonard, now that was obviously he that needed help from her.

– Well, I pro- promise you, Mr. Langley, that my daughter Viola is not Lenny's biological daughter.

– I'm not so sure if that comforts me. How many boyfriends have you really had?

– It's just Lenny, she answered quietly.

– Dad, I assure you that Diana is a good girl in every way. I don't like that you insinuate that she would be a slut.

– I don't insinuate anything, but you just have to understand that it looks strange when your fifteen year old girlfriend shows up here with a baby that is obviously her own but that also seems very attached to you.

– Honey, you have to let them know. Should I do it, so you don't have to?

Diana sighed and got tears in her eyes. She wiped them with a handkerchief that Leonard swiftly sent over.

– No, Lenny. I'll tell them. It's probably time for me to learn to talk about it all. Ashley always says I have to talk about it to get over it.

– Who is Ashley? Sylvia asked. Another classmate?

– No, Ashley is the psychologist that I started going to after my unsuccessful suicide attempt.

Now Diana got both parents' full attention. Oh my God, "psychologist" and "suicide attempt"? It was obvious that there was some difficult history behind this. Slowly and painfully, Diana told them everything about her father, the abuse and how she got pregnant. She also explained why she tried to kill herself and that she now lived in a foster home while her father was in jail for what he had done to her.

– Jesus, little girl, Sylvia exclaimed. What a terrible experience!

– This is what I've always have tried to teach you, Gilbert said. Still, I was an inch from doing it myself. One should never have preconceptions, but you must first find out the facts before judging someone. I was extremely close to judging you, Diana, and I apologize for that.

– I understand it looks strange. Many in school gossip about us behind our backs. They have seen me when I was pregnant when they made their own conclusions because they know that I and Lenny are together. I apologize for that.

– Oh no, you have nothing to apologize for. We are not the least angry with you, or the fact that you have a relationship with Leonard. Instead we are happy for you, and it's great that Leonard has a girlfriend. The only thing we're annoyed is that he kept it secret for so long. No shadow falls on you, you understand. It's Leonard who didn't behave like he should.

– That's probably partly my fault. When I discovered that I was pregnant, I completely broke down. That's when Lenny came and supported me. And when it felt as though my whole world fell apart around me and as if everything around was spinning, it was just Lenny that I could cling to. He was like a rock, and without him I would never be sitting here today. And when I was at the rock bottom, then I asked him not to tell you anything, because I just was not able to talk about it. Eventually, when I started feeling better, I forgot that you didn't know anything.

– I understand you. It could not have been easy, your poor girl, Gilbert said. Leonard, the only thing I'm still a bit disappointed about what you have done is

that you didn't trust us. You could have told us everything, and we would have dealt with it in a good way. Diana didn't have to know that we know, and then we could have supported you.

– Maybe. I didn't think that far.

– Well, at your age, you shouldn't have to make such decisions yourself. Unbelievable that you managed to be Diana's support all alone, you're not that strong really.

– Diana made me strong. When she needed me most, I braced myself for her sake. I've actually been in love with her for years, but didn't dare say it until she started crying in school.

– Well, now we have straighten everything up I suppose? Gilbert said.

– Just one more thing, Sylvia said. You stressed before that Viola is not Leonard's *biological* daughter. It sounds like he's more than just your boyfriend.

– He is also a great *practical* father to Viola.

– I love Viola almost as if she were my daughter. She doesn't understand that I'm not her real dad, so in practice I'm her daddy. Sorry, mom and dad. But I don't want to let go of neither Diana nor Viola.

– You are both too young to be parents, Gilbert replied. However there are many others who have children together at your age, and it can work well. Even this will surely go well. It's just a little sudden for us this whole thing. We were not prepared to be grandmother and grandfather just yet.

– You know what. I actually think Leonard should take more responsibility as a father. What do you say, Diana, about letting Viola stay here sometimes? Perhaps every other weekend? Just so that Leonard can learn how to really be responsible for a child so he can become a real dad.

Leonard looked surprised at his parents and then on Diana.

– I'm terrified of being responsible of Viola over a weekend, but I was terrified of the mere idea of becoming dad while you were pregnant. But that feels really good now. If you agree, should we try it?

– In a way, I don't want to. Viola is my responsibility, and only mine. At the same time, I really like it when you show interest in her too. Let's talk about it tomorrow, then I'll have some time to think about the idea.

– One more thing, Leonard. As we said, we don't mind that you have Diana as your girlfriend and that you are spending almost all of your time with her and Viola. But I require one thing from you. Your grades at school may not change due to your relationship with them. Can I trust that?

– I promise, Daddy!

– Then I think we're done. I apologize for the fact that we forced you to come here tonight. But I hope you also think it's good that we cleaned the air now. Everything is good now, and I wish you both – well actually all three – good luck. Come here, I'll drive you home so you don't have to bother about that.

Soon all five sat in the car and Gilbert drove them home to the foster home. Leonard's parents presented themselves to Ruth and Ronald and they talked a few minutes before driving home. While they were talking Leonard had put Viola to bed and made her fall asleep. Then they went home again and Diana felt a great relief that their relationship had been approved also by them.

~ ~ ~

On Monday, the phone rang and Ruth answered. It was Brigitte from the CPS. Ruth thought they would finally receive some answers about Therese, but soon realized that it was more complicated than that.

– Hello, Ruth, it's Brigitte. Hope all is well with you all?

– Sure, it's a bit up and down as usual. Mostly up right now, actually.

– It sounds good. I am calling because we have a six year old boy who needs a foster home. You already have Diana and Mia as foster children, and said about year ago that you'd rather be foster parents than an emergency home. As you currently have a room available it wouldn't be a problem with this boy? Or do you think that it would be too many children then?

– We don't have any available rooms. Tess stays in the room in the middle.

– Who is Tess? There is nothing on file here that you have anyone besides Diana and Mia. Well, not counting Diana's daughter, of course.

– But Tess has been living here for almost five weeks. That must be something that you know about, right?

– I don't see anything about someone named Tess who should live with you.

– Her name is Therese Fergusson and she came here for around five weeks ago.

– Wait, I'll check. Therese Fergusson, yes, her is her file. But she is currently living with her mother, it says. The last note is one and a half months old, I'll read it.

Brigitte read the note that Philip had written. It was quite long, and ended with the information that Therese had been dropped of at Ruth and Ronald.

– Hey, here it's. In the note. But Philip must have forgotten to change the status of her location, so it has not been flagged in the system. It may be explained by the time of the night when he wrote it. However, it's not acceptable. I'll go to the bottom with this. But first I'll have to find another foster home for this boy. We will get back to you during the day.

Brigitte went to Margaret, whom she had read wasTherese's Social Secretary to discuss the problem. When Margaret realized that Therese had stayed with Ruth and Ronald for such a long time, she was really upset.

– Hey, do you mean that the harum-scarum Therese has lived with your foster family? And they also have an infant to take care of. And a little girl on top of that. There must be complete chaos there! I will immediately find a foster home for the menace. Ask them to come here with her tomorrow at eight o'clock, I'll have it fixed until then.

The next day, Ruth and Ronald arranged a babysitter for Mia and Viola and took Therese to the CPS office. None of them knew exactly why they were called. Meanwhile, Brigitte read through the information on file about Therese to be prepared. Margaret had already vividly described Therese, and the that combined with the information from the file made Brigitte even more convinced that she would meet a foster couple in total dismay. Most worrying were the pictures of

Therese in the file, with all piercing, tattoos, torn up clothes and a hair like a troll. She flinched when it knocked on the door.

– Come in, she called.

Entering the door was Ruth and Ronald and a neat teenage girl that she had never seen before. Margaret had heard the steps and also entered the door just after the trio. She however recognized the teenager, and got her biggest surprise of the year.

– Therese! Hey. Wow, what a difference. I have never seen you like this before.

Therese just stared at her. She had never liked Margaret, and now she was also annoyed because she had a feeling that today's meeting would be bad for her. Margaret was used to it, so she continued untouched.

– First of all, I apologize, on behalf of the entire CPS, especially to you, Mr and Mrs Clayton. Apparently, the documentation has been incorrectly executed, so Therese has been stuck with you much longer than she should. Well, we'll take care of that today. I have a foster family who will take over Therese from today. Unfortunately, they have declared that they only want her for a week, but at least it gives me more time to find something more permanent.

– As said, we regret that this mistake has been made by us, Brigitte said. I really hope that it has not become too hard for the two of you.

– Your excuse is accepted, Ronald replied. Human mistakes are sometimes made. In addition, the situation has not been worse than we couldn't handle it.

– I wonder if I could ask one thing, Therese said.

– I guess so, Margaret said, a bit surprised by her soft voice.

– Well, you see. I know I'm rotten and so, but I would love to ...

– Rotten may be a bit overstated, Margaret interrupted. Difficult, yes, but not rotten.

– But I know I've been disrespectful before, and you that don't want to do anything for me. But still I wonder ...

– Don't believe that I always have wanted what's best for you. I have tried so much to ...

Now Therese was the one that interrupted, clearly annoyed.

– Can't I at least get that much respect not to be interrupted?

– I agree with Tess to one hundred percent, Ronald said. In my opinion, you are disrespectful to Tess, and she hasn't done anything today to earn it.

Margaret became red in her face of the correction, especially the one she received from Ronald. Eventually, she stuttered:

– Su ... sure, sorry. Please, Therese. I'll listen now.

– Thank you very much, Margaret. What I was trying to say was that I know I've been difficult to handle, and I know that I've been a problem to all the foster families you've placed me at and that I've misbehaved there. I have also been disrespectful to you, and apologize for that. But now I feel welcome with Ruth and Ronald, and have chosen to improve my attitude as well as my appearance. I follow all Ronald's rules and do what Ruth asks me to do. All this because I feel respected and appreciated by them. What I ask from you, Margaret, no, I beg you not to take me away from them. Especially not to a foster family who has already declared that they can only stand out with me for a week. I want to stay with Ruth and Ronald, as a foster child. Please help me just this time, Margaret. I have never asked for anything before, so please consider supporting me this one time and I will be forever thankful to you and promise that I will never again give you a headache.

Margaret looked at her, shocked all the way to her spinal cord. Not only was this the first time Therese had talked so much continuously. She had also spoke both respectfully and neatly. What was most surprising was that she asked for a foster care placement instead of being sent home to her mother. Margaret had not even recovered from her new appearance, and now this eloquence together with her totally opposite attitude.

– Wow, that was unexpected on so many different levels! First, I want to tell you one thing, Therese, and I say this respectfully. My job is to help children who have

a problem, and I'm only satisfied when I manage to help someone. Unfortunately, I have never managed that with you, which makes me feel bad and I usually have hard time to sleep the night after I handled your case. All I want is that you will become happy and have a chance for a good future. As I see it, the problems I had with you it totally my failure, and it's not your fault.

– Thank you very much, Margaret. So can I stay with them, then?

– First, I would like to ask you some questions in private, Therese, Brigitte filled in. If that's not a problem for you.

– Then I also want to ask a few questions to Ronald and Ruth, preferably in private too, Margaret continued.

– Alright, then we go out in the waiting room for a while when you are talking with Tess.

Ronald and Ruth left the room and Margaret closely studied Therese as if she had never seen her before. She calmly returned her eyes without regaining her angry look that Margaret was so used to. But it was Brigitte who started.

– Well, Therese. I hope you understand that I don't know you at all, except through the documentation about you. Unfortunately, that's not painting a pleasant picture. According to it, you have apparently been opposing all authorities and refused to comply with the rules on all the foster homes you were placed on and constantly ended up on collision course with the houseparents. On the other side, I know Ronald and Ruth very well, I have worked with them and placed children there for decades. I know that Ronald is very strict and rigorous with his rules. He even wrote down a list of rules on a paper that he put on the bulletin board.

– Yes, I know. He has gone through all the rules with me.

– I just don't see how your refusal to comply with rules go along his strict requirements to comply with rules. Can you explain why you and Ronald don't collide head to head?

– That's true all you say. At the same time, it's possible to discuss the rules with him. He has a way to discussing calmly and respectfully instead of just screaming.

And if you don't like a rule, ha can change it if we can agree on a good reason. Now he has actually taken down that paper. He has really shown to me that he actually cares about me. Also Ruth has clearly shown that she cares about me. No one else has done that before. And I mean *no one*.

Therese looked at Margaret.

– Ouch, that hurts, said Margaret but with a smile.

– Are there any tensions between you and the other children who live there?

– No, it's fine. Diana is a sissy in every way, but she's straight. Viola is wonderfully cute and Mia has almost become my daughter.

– What do you mean by that? Daughter?

– Well, I'm helping her with her clothes, toothbrushing and so on. We to to playgrounds together plays games with her. It's even me who read the bed time story and kisses her goodnight.

– Why on all earth, are you doing all that and not Ruth?

– She was as afraid of Ruth at the beginning, but I felt as lost as she so I suppose we kind of bonded.

– So you have no conflicts with anyone in the house, do you mean? Nothing at all, ever?

– Well at the beginning I was as disrespectful as always. But Ruth was always kind and respectful to me. She has an incredible patience and was like gnawing and gnawing until she broke through my defense shield with her kindness. When Mia appeared and started clinging onto me, that was all I needed to start over. The only thing I ever wanted is someone who cares for me for real and likes me. In addition, I have someone who needs me so no longer I feel worthless.

– Alright, I am satisfied. If you are satisfied Margaret, I think we ask the other two to come in again.

Margaret said that she was satisfied, so Therese volunteered to retrieve them when she went to the waiting room. Both Margaret and Brigitte were amazed at

how polite and helpful she had become. Soon the couple sat in front of them instead.

– I really wonder only one thing, Margaret said. That's if you're both ready to accept Therese as a foster child. You've probably read her papers, and know you're her twelfth foster home. She really has a bad history in her past, especially at other foster homes.

– We actually discussed this in the waiting room, Ronald replied. First of all, as you already know, we have already decided that we want to stop taking emergency children and instead just have foster children, so having Tess as foster child feels quite right. In addition, we think that Tess is a great girl, now that she has stopped being so outrageous. She is warm and helpful really, and we have no problems at all with her anymore.

– But you have also said that you want significantly younger children.

– That's true, Ruth replied. But now we have come to know Tess and even started to love her. Not to mention her wonderful relationship with Mia. We really want to keep her.

– Well, then I think we'll ask her to come back.

Ruth fetched Therese and soon she sat anxiously looking at Margaret waiting for her response.

– This is the situation. I think Therese has been too much problems for so many years that I don't want to do any favor to her. Therese has not deserved that I am kind to her and is not worthy of my help at all.

– What the heck..., Therese began.

– However, Margaret interrupted. This girl Tess sitting in front of me here seems to be a wonderful person, well worth helping. So, my decision is that you, Tess, will be fostered at Ruth and Ronald's home.

– Shit, you fooled me there, Margaret. Thank, thanks. Really, thank you so much for this. I promise you not will not regret it.

– No, I really hope so. Now I will definitely sleep well tonight.

– You're welcome to do that. I'll at least will sleep wonderfully tonight.

– Let me just give you a little tip. To succeed with a new start like this, it's important to break totally with your past. I mainly think about the gang you're hanging out with. Of course, it's hard to leave people who you consider your friends, but sometimes you have to realize that one's friends are sometimes your worst enemy as well. Please don't be mad for my proposal.

– Ronald has taught me to listen to suggestions so I won't get angry. When it concerns with my gang, I have already stopped hanging out with them. Even though they were my only real friends, but I have gotten new friends now. Diana and I are really good friends, even though we are so different. I'm also convinced that she has a major part in my improved behavior, because she rubbed herself off to me.

– That sounds good, Tess. Then I wish you the very best with your new family.

They went home and Therese felt all the tensions that she had felt since she started enjoying the foster home just went away. When they came in, she was running into Mia's room to hug her for a long time. She had been terrified that she would had been torn apart from Mia, and she had really begun to love this little girl. Mia became overjoyed when Therese told her that she would stay there.

~ ~ ~

Therese now began to focus entirely on her school work. The school year was soon over and she really wanted to get some better grades. She had worked hard the past weeks and actually seen some results. On all the recent tests, she had received C and even a B in contrast to before swaying between E and F. During the lessons, she often raised her hand, but never got a chance to show that she know the answer to the homework.

Eventually it was time for school year ending and both Diana and Therese would get their grades. Because their schools were far from each other, Ruth was forced to choose whose ceremony she would attend. She planned to choose Therese's, but was persuaded to go to Diana's instead.

– You deserve to attend a ceremony where you can feel proud. I'll manage by myself, I've always done that.

Diana really made her proud, Ruth felt when the two came home after the day. She got an A in all subjects except two where she had B. Diana had decided to get a full scholarship so that she could afford to go to university, and that's why she always studied. Soon Therese came home with the bus and Ruth met her in the hallway. She looked like a thunder storm.

– Well, Tess, how did it go? I don't expect any top marks, but I'm sure it has improved, as hard as you have worked lately.

– Here are my grades, she said.

She rolled the paper into a ball and threw it against Ruth. Then she ran past her and into her room. Ruth unwrinkled the grade paper and read it. She had been approved in all subjects, but that was the only positive thing. There was not one single subject where she something more then E. Ruth knocked on her open door and gently walked in when Therese answered with an irritated voice.

– I understand you are disappointed. Perhaps it was too little time to see any difference in your grades. Your efforts will surely produce results next year.

– No, it's totally meaningless, she said. I'm not mad at you, Ruth, excuse me for throwing the paper on you. It's the school I'm pissed on. After the ceremony, I went to talk to the teacher about my grades. I really made my best effort to be respectful, calm and kind. The only thing I wanted to ask was what I needed to do to improve my grades and why my latest test results weren't noticed. But he was just plain rude to me and called me "trash" and that I would never get better grades because of what I have done in the past.

– You mean that you showed him respect and were faced with disrespect?

– Exactly. I almost whispered and spoke as softly and politely as I possibly could, but still he just screamed back. He made it clear to me that it didn't matter what I did because they would never give me a chance because I was a " bad apple".

Diana had heard her upset voice and stood in the door listening. She had her own grade in her hand.

– Diana, honey, not now, Ruth said silently when she saw her.

– Well, come in for heck sake. I need to be cheered up. How did your grades become, Diana?

She entered the door and handed over the paper. Therese took a few deep breaths and then looked at the paper.

– Congratulations, Diana. You really deserved this. I'm actually happy for your sake. Don't worry about me, I'm angry right now, but I'll get over it.

– Also, the principal gave me a paper. Apparently, I have to talk to him on Monday for some reason. I'm really worried about it.

– I'm sure it's no problem, Diana. Just take it easy.

– Let's leave Tess for a while now. Believe me, Tess, one way or another it will work out for you too. Maybe Ronald and me can talk to the principal at your school or something.

They left the room and Mia sneaked in when no one saw it. Therese didn't want to show her bad mood in front of her so she tried to smile at her. Soon they sat drawing together and Therese already felt a bit better.

At the same time, Leonard's parents had returned home and they immediately asked to see his grades. He held the paper close to his body and looked a little guilty.

– I have to apologize for the grades. You said that they were not to be affected by my relation to Diana and Viola. Unfortunately, they have probably been affected a lot anyway.

– That doesn't sound good at all. Show me the grades now!

Leonard gave the paper to Gilbert, who read it with wrinkled eyebrows. Sylvia read it at the same time over his shoulder.

– But what on earth is the problem? These are amazing grades! I even think that you raised yourself in all subjects, sometimes even two steps.

– Well, but I promised unchanged grades, and it's not.

– You funny boy. Come here, you'll give you a hug. You really tricked me there.

Leonard laughed at the joke and hugged his parents. Then he told them the bad news that he was also called to the principle after the weekend.

So next Monday, Ruth and Ronald went with Diana to her school to meet the principle. Outside the expedition, they met Leonard and his parents as well. Apparently, they had received a call at the same time. The principle came out and asked them all to come in.

– First of all, I would like to thank you for all of you coming here today. Before moving on, I have to ask you a question. What I want to discuss is your grades, and I wonder if you want to do it individually or if you prefer doing it together.

– Diana has seen my grades and I've seen her, so it doesn't matter, I guess.

– I'd prefer Lenny to stay.

– Before we start, I would like to say something, Gilbert said. I have some suspicions about why we are called and expect one thing from you, namely that you definitely have no preconceptions in any direction. Instead, you must listen to the facts before you think you know what happened.

– Well, that sounds good, the principle said insecurely.

He looked at Gilbert with a hesitant face.

– The reason I called for this meeting is because we have a kind of automatic alarm that warns if any student's grades changes unusually much. This is a good system, because you can for example catch students who got problems at home because then the grades often falls. In this case, both of your grades have improved exceptionally much and that's hard to understand. There may be different reasons, and the school just wants to make sure there is no underlaying problem.

– What you mean, but not saying, is that you suspect my son and his girlfriend are cheating because of the fact that they are together, right?

– It's a possible scenario. But don't let me have any preconceptions like you said, but listen if there is any natural explanation. Who of you wants to start?

– It's better if you start, Diana, Leonard said.

– Whew, sure. Well my grades are not very much better than when I was twelve years old. My mother was always reminding me of my homework and had a total control when I had any exams and always helped me when I asked her. Already then, I really liked the school, and worked hard with it. Dad, however, didn't care about my grades at all, so when Mom died, nobody pushed me or helped me anymore. Nor did I get any help with my school work.

– I understand that it becomes difficult to concentrate when a close relative dies, and that it may affect the grades temporarily. But for three whole years ...

– But Dad didn't even give me time to do my homework. Additionally ... you must have heard this ... he sexually molested me.

– I have not heard that, but it explains why you needed protection from him about a year ago. I'm really sorry that you had to experience something so hard.

– Exactly, Ruth replied. It's a normal response for molestation victims to lose interest for everything and stops to live and instead goes on like on autopilot.

– And it was not discovered that my grades dropped heavily then because I moved to another school at the same time. But now I'm fond of studying again, and got back my high grades and actually made them a bit better. I also work so hard with school studies because I want to go to the university later, and Ruth and Ronald can't afford the admission fee so I really need a full scholarship.

– Look there, now I have received an explanation from you which I am completely satisfied with. However, I am not satisfied at all that the school failed to understand that you felt so bad, but I hope all that is behind you. Otherwise, you can get help from us, for example from the school psychologist.

– I'm already talking to a psychologist.

– Good, that can certainly help. Then we come to you, young man. How come that your grades has improved so drastic?

– It's very simple. I love Diana and am always with her. Because she is always doing school work, it was only natural that I also do it with her.

– A short but credible explanation. Then I'm happy and sorry for asking you to come here. I hope you understand that it was out of care that I did it.

– I wonder one thing... Diana said uncertainly and then silenced.

– Diana, please. Say what you have on your heart.

– Well, okey, I have a friend who goes to another school. She doesn't like it there and I wonder if there is a chance she can start here instead.

– How old is she?

– She's a little more then one year younger than me, fourteen years old.

– I'm pretty sure there are vacancies in freshman year. You can ask her parents to book a time me with me as soon as possible, so I can meet them to discuss it.

– We could book a time here and now, Ruth said. Because I guess you're thinking about Tess?

The principle looked a bit surprised, but soon they had agreed on a time to meet later in the week. Ruth told Therese when they came home. She was surprised, especially because it was Diana who had taken the courage to ask. She thanked Diana warmly and said she liked the idea to change school to her school. So, a few days later, Therese and Ruth were sitting in front of the principle who started.

– Now, Tess. Your sister declared that you want to change school, and start at this school. Can you explain to me why you want it?

– I will do that. Diana is by by the way my foster sister, we both live in this foster home that Ruth and Ronald are heading. The reason why I want to start here is partly because it's easier for Ruth if we both go to the same school. Then for example she will not have the same problem as last Friday, where she could not at-

tend my school because she was here. In addition, at this school there is a cooking orientation that I'm interested in, as I am thinking of becoming a cook.

– Mm. Okay. And what is your real reason?

– What do you mean?

– First of all, it sounds like the fact that you want to change school, with all complications that it means to you, just because of logistics is unlikely. In addition, there is no cooking orientation here, but there are various elective courses in that direction, but the same goes at your old school. Finally, I can see in your face that you normally have a lot of piercing. So, please stop talking bullshit now, and tell me the truth!

Therese flinched and looked at him with amazement. Would she dare to tell him everything? Well, he seemed very straight so it might work out. If honesty wouldn't work, everything was still meaningless.

– Alright then. I was a badass before, with piercing, tattoo, torn up clothes and a dirty mouth. But I've left all that behind me now and try to straighten up and stop doing stupid things. The problem is that my old school doesn't seem to want to give me a chance, instead they have decided that I'm rotten and not worth anything. Even though I wrote C and B on the exams, I still got E in all subjects. The only thing that I want is to start over somewhere else where I'm judged from who I am, not who I've been before.

– There was the truth. So you have a bad reputation in your old school. It shouldn't have to affect your grades. Maybe a conversation with the principle would help?

– Maybe that, but at the same time, I would be best if I completely change my environment now that I want to start over, so a change of school would probably be better.

– I have to agree. To be able to start over, you should ideally leave everything behind. Well, I have already investigated that there are vacancies here. What I can do for you is to let you start here without letting teachers be informed about your

background, including about your old grades. But if you fall back to your old, bad habits then I'll strike down on you like a hawk. Does this sound good?

– That's just what I want, to get a chance to show what I can do. Thank you very much for giving me this opportunity.

– I guess you have various problems in learning and don't really know how to study in the best way. What do you say about getting help from a special pedagog one hour a week, who can help you and teach you different ways to improve your studying technique?

– Wow, that's more than I expected. You really want to help me, it seems. Of course I will accept all the help I can get.

– Then it's decided. You will receive a letter of invitation to the school at the end of the summer vacation, and then we will see you when the autumn semester begins. Welcome to school, and good luck with your studies.

Therese took his outstretched hand, almost moved to tears. It was absolutely amazing how many good things were happening in her life now.

Unfortunately, her problems wasn't over, which she would soon discover.



CHAPTER 14

The Newbie

Angela knocked on the door to the foster home. Ruth was alone at home with Mia and Viola and got a little worried when she saw who it was through the window. But her gut feeling made her open the door anyhow. It was obvious that Angela was affected by something, but she didn't seem aggressive or hostile.

– Hello, Angela. What do you want?

– I just want to meet Mia, to see if she's doing well.

– Formally speaking, you are not allowed to do that, but I'm prepared to make an exception if you promise to keep calm. I can't accept that you make a scene in front of your daughter and make her upset, or to try to take her away from here.

– I promise. The last thing I want is to risk that CPS forbids me to meet her. I almost went down for kidnapping her, but they saved me from being prosecuted, so I really don't want to challenge my fate now. But I have to see if Mia is doing well now, otherwise I can't live with myself.

Mia had heard her mother's voice, and was standing just outside her room. But to Angelas surprise she didn't run to her as she expected. Angela went to her daughter and hugged her before they entered Mia's room together.

– Do I have to go home with you now, Mom?

– Don't you want that, my little Angel?

– Not really. Everyone here is nice to me, Mom. I get Cap'n Crunch for breakfast and Auntie Tess is playing with me and reading a bed time story for me every night.

– What is it you are saying? Do you really like it here after all?

– Yes, I actually do. I get everything I want and everyone is nice to me. Not like at that terrible other place.

– You're not afraid anymore?

– If I'm afraid at night, I'm sleeping with Auntie Tess. She kisses me goodnight every night and I love her so much.

Angela felt a sting of jealousy on this "Auntie Tess", whoever it was.

– So you really feel that you don't want to come home anymore? Don't you love me anymore as before?

– Yes, Mom. I love you very much, but you always sleep and don't play with me as Auntie Tess does. The food is great here, not sour like at home. And I don't have to fix it myself. Do I have to go home with you again, Mom?

– No, my little Angel. You don't have to do that . I'll feel so happy if you're happy. Even though I miss you a lot, it's even more important to me that you're feeling good because I love you so.

– I'm fine here, Mom. I promise!

Angela spent almost an hour talking to her daughter about what she was doing. Mia eagerly told her about all the fun she did with "Auntie Tess" and how well she slept without being afraid anymore. Angela finally became convinced that Mia was really happy here, well taken care of and above all, safe. She gave her daughter a final, big hug.

– Goodbye, my little Angel. I'm leaving now, but I'll always love you and miss you. But I don't feel well as you know, so it's best that you stay here.

– Yes, Mom. It's best so.

Ruth approached Angela when she left Mia's room and followed her to the door. Angela took her hand and pressed it warmly.

– Thank you very much, Mrs Clayton. My daughter said that you treat her very well and you have made her feel comfortable here. She looks so much more healthy now than when she lived with me, and seems completely safe. You can't imagine how happy I am that you are taking care of her so well. Mia is my everything, and now at last I feel she's doing well.

– The pleasure is entirely on our side. You have a wonderful daughter, and we all love her very much. I will take care of her as if she were my own daughter so you don't have to worry about her. You are also welcome to visit her here whenever you want.

– Thank you, Mrs Clayton. You have my deepest gratitude.

Angela had tears in her eyes when she left the house. She had become so happy when she heard that she got to visit whenever she wanted to, but began to plan for other things, much darker. Ruth went to Mia to see how she felt, and found her crying too.

– Mia, honey. Don't be sad, your mom can come and visit again when she wants, I already promised her that.

To Ruth's great surprise and even more joy, Mia folded her arms around her for the first time and hugged her hard.

– I want to stay here, Auntie Ruth, but I love Mom anyway. Is that bad?

– No, Mia, it's not bad at all. You have understood that your mother is unable to take care of you because she is kind of sick. But a mother is always a mother and you love her. And mothers always love their children so you can trust that she loves you and that she left you here because it's the best for you.

– That's what she said already.

– I love you too, Mia, but in another way. All I want is for you to be happy, and I will do all I can to make it happen.

– But, I'm happy here, Auntie Ruth. Word of honor!

Mia released Ruth, wiped her eyes and smiled at her. Ruth kissed her on the forehead and felt extremely relieved because it seemed as if Mia had stopped being so scared, and in fact, also wanted to stay here. It felt like a ton of bricks had fallen from her heart.

~ ~ ~

A few days later, a letter that looked formal, addressed to Ruth and Ronald, came. When they opened the letter, it contained adoption papers from Angela that they should adopt Mia. They were taken totally by surprise, but still contacted the adoption agency who booked a meeting with them and Angela. Mia insisted that Therese also should join them, so she came along, as well as Adrian from CPS.

When they came to the meeting, Angela and Adrian were already waiting there. Ruth had a feeling that she this time wasn't intoxicated. She carefully studied her pupils to try and make sure.

– No, Mrs Clayton. I have not used anything for several days. I feel the craving tearing in my body, but I want to be clear in my head while taking care of this.

Ruth nodded pleased and then they all went into the case worker's office. Mia chose to sit in the same chair as Therese and hugged her hard while she watched the man who was sitting behind a big table. Angela looked surprised at her. Strange that she preferred this teenage girl in favor of both herself and Ruth! She must be the "Auntie Tess" that Mia told her about. At the same time, she only felt even more convinced that this was the right thing to do. It was obvious that Mia had warm feelings for Therese and that they were answered. Before the case worker had time to say anything, Adrian began.

– Before we begin, we have to straight one thing out. Mrs. Bolton here is, of course, Mia's biological mother, but it's nevertheless the Child Protective Service that has exclusive ruling over Mia because she is currently being taken into protective custody. Our job is to make sure Mia gets the best possible childhood.

– Does that mean that you have objections to this adoption, that Mrs Bolton has initiated?

– On the contrary. We believe that Clayton's will be excellent adoptive parents to Mia. There is no reason for you to investigate their qualifications, because CPS has already done that, and we have had regular inspections of Mia's situation. She has her own room, all the toys and clothes she needs, security and all other needs satisfied.

– Well, then there is no need to make a thorough investigation of Mr. and Mrs. Clayton's ability as parents. We have already done a quick investigation and since you are already are the foster parents of Mia, we find no reason to object to this adoption. So if you're all sign these papers, then it's finalized.

Angela sighed the paper first followed by Adrian and then Ruth and Ronald. Finally, the case worker witnessed the signatures, and gave them one copy each.

– Congratulations, Mia. You now officially have new parents.

Angela stretched both arms towards Mia who released Therese and ran to her mother and folded her arms around her instead.

– Mia, my little Angel! I love you so much. I hope that you understand that I give you away you because I love you, not because I don't want to have you. You are the most important thing to me, and I just want you have a good life. It's more important to me then even my own life.

– I like it with Auntie Ruth and Auntie Tess, Mom.

– That's why I let them become your parents instead of me. You must now learn to call Ronald for "Dad" now, because you finally got a daddy. And you must start calling Ruth for "Mom" instead. She's your mom from now on.

– But you're my mother too! You will still come and visit me sometimes, Mommy?

– I don't believe that, my little Angel. My condition is getting worse, and I can't take care of you anymore. Goodbye, I want you to be happy now.

Angela kissed Mia before she released her and began to go towards the exit. Suddenly she turned around and rushed up to Mia again and hugged her like never before.

– Mom, you are almost hurting me.

– I'll never hurt you again. You've had such a hard time because of me, but it's over for ever now. Go to your new mom and dad and be happy. I love you, my little Angel, whatever happens! Never forget that!

Angela released Mia and run out through the door loudly sobbing. The others looked surprised after her.

– It seems she believes she will never meet Mia again, Ronald said. But she still gets to visit whenever she wants to. I hope she understood it.

– I've told her that already, so I guess she knows.

The quartet went home and both Mia and Therese were happy. Now nothing could come between them, they thought. That night, Mia for the first time asked Ruth to tuck her in and kiss her good night, as to show that she liked her too.

The next day, Therese instinctively felt that something was wrong as soon as she got home after playing with Mia in the playground in the afternoon. It was summer holidays and wonderful weather, so Mia and Therese used to spend almost all the days outdoors. Both enjoyed having fun together, each other's company and the nice weather. But when Therese saw Ruth's face, she got worried.

– Tess, can you take Mia to her room and then come over to me in the kitchen, please?

She left Mia in the room with crayons and paper and then went into the kitchen and closed the door behind her. Ruth's face was more serious than she could ever remember that she had seen before.

– What's happened, Ruth? Have I done something wrong?

– No, Tess, you have not done anything. It's Mia, or rather her mother. I want you to hear this before I tell Mia.

– Has something happened to Angela?

– The police and CPS were here while you were at the playground with Mia. They told me that Angela had taken an overdose last night, probably on purpose.

– What! You mean she's dead, or what?

– That unfortunately true. She even left this suicide letter, addressed to Mia. It's quite scattered and partly difficult to understand, but it's still clear what she means. I'm going to Mia now to tell her the bad news. She have to know, and I want you to be there when I tell her.

– I'll tell her! It has to be me!

– But I can't ask that from you, it's a very hard thing to do. It's my responsibility to do it.

– No, it's me she's most safe with. I'll do it. It's not a suggestion.

Ruth had bad feelings about it when she accompanied Therese in to Mia. She asked Diana to come in too.

– Ops, are you all coming into my room, Mia laughed.

– Mia, it's something we have to tell you, Therese said. You will be sad, but don't forget that we are all here to make you happy again. It's about your mom. As you know, she has been sick for a long time, right?

– She has always been sick!

– Last night, she couldn't cope with her illness anymore so she finished her life. Mia, your mom is gone, but we're still there for you.

– But she can't be gone, she cried. I saw her yesterday!

– Your mother is dead, Mia. I'm sorry for that. But do you know what? Her name is "Angel," so she has probably become a real angel now, sitting on a cloud and looking down at you and wishing you to be happy. That's what she said yesterday all the time, that all she wants is to see you laugh.

– But I love her. All I want is to cry!

– It's okey to cry, Mia, Therese said, holding her. That's what to do when someone you loves dies. I cried when my dad died, I still remember that today. But then you wipe your tears and start laughing again. Because you know what, Mia. Your mother is not really gone!

– What do you mean, Auntie Tess? She's dead, you said.

– Yes, she is. But she lives on inside your heart. As long as you remember her, she lives inside you. Not true?

Mia nodded as she cried against Therese's shoulder. Ruth stroked her hair and comforted her too.

– Mia, my darling. Right now it feels difficult, but it get over it. Your mother made sure you have it good before she passed away because she loves you. You already know she wants you to move on. Cry a bit for her, and then wipe your tears.

Diana also had tears in her eyes. She remembered her own mom. For a long time all four sat hugging each other. Then Therese remembered one thing.

– Mia, your mother left a letter to you. Should I read it for you?

Mia nodded and let her go. Then Therese sat on the bed with Mia in her knee and wiped the tears from Mias face before she took the letter. Then she nodded to Ruth and Diana that they could go now. She read what Angela had written to her best ability. Soon Mia calmed down and Therese started playing with her to make her think of something else. Later in the evening, after she got Mia to sleep, Ruth came to Therese.

– Is Mia asleep now?

– Yes she is. It was a bit more difficult than usual today, but now she sleeps deeply. But she wanted to sleep in my bed again, so I let her do that.

– It was absolutely amazing, the way you handled Mia with the bad news today. I am so proud of you.

Therese felt that heat again.

– Asch, that was not very much. She loves me so she believes in me.

– What you said about her mother being an angel was amazing. I know you don't believe in angels yourself, yet you comforted Mia with it.

– I don't believe in Santa Claus either, but if any child feels better because she believes in the myth, then let her believe. When Mia gets bigger, she will understand.

Ruth left Therese and felt that this decision to accept her as a foster child had been the best decision she has made.

~ ~ ~

Summer went by and soon it was time to start school again. Therese was happy to get to a new school. She talked to the special pedagogue and started to feel even more welcome at school. Certainly, there were some older students who looked at her i a bad way, but she ignored them. It was probably just because she was a newbie at school. One day, when Therese and Diana were coming to school together, a group of three girls was staring at them where they passed.

– Check that out, the slut has found a friend.

– Double up with slutiness. So pathetic!

– That way then can fuck twice as many other sluts!

Therese turned around and looked angry at the threesome, who was staring back.

– Let it be, Tess. That's just Nathalie, Lorrie and Vanessa. They are usually teasing me, but I'm don't care about it anymore.

– But I care!

To Diana's horror, Therese went up to Nathalie, who appeared to be the leader, with firm steps.

– May I suggest that you and your friends cut it of with your comments? You have no idea what Diana has gone through so just leave her alone!

– And who are you, Scarface?

– My name is Tess and will be your worst nightmare if you don't back off here and now!

– Do you really think you're stronger than the three of us?

– I don't think it, I know it. You're just a pitiful little girl that's so weak that you don't dare to do anything without being backed by two other cowards. But even the three of you still have a chance against me, so just give up unless you want to get into trouble!

She jammed her stiff finger hard onto Nathalie both breasts in turn. Nathalie made a grimace both because it hurt and because it was so degrading.

– So don't think your silicone clumps here gives you any benefits, because they're just pathetic, just like yourself!

Therese nonchalantly turned her back to the group and left with Diana. Nathalie stood steaming by anger when she saw several other students whisper to each other. She guessed what they whispered about, but they should all see! This newbie would regret that she defied Nathalie!

The next day Therese entered the dining room, filled a tray with her food and began looking for a table. Suddenly she stumbled, fell and dropped the food tray. She turned around and saw Nathalie with an outstretched leg, laughing with her friends. Therese picked her tray up and collected the scattered food. She even scraped up food that had landed on the floor and put it on the tray.

– Eat your food now, Scarface! It's just what you're worth, to eat food from the floor like the pig you are.

Nathalie's friends also laughed mockingly while Therese looked very calm when she approached them. Then without warning, she poured out the contents of the tray into Nathalie's lap. Then she pushed the now empty tray against her face and pushed it so she fell backwards of the chair she was sitting on.

– Here you get my food too. You seem to love food, just look how thick you are! Just dig in, It's on me!

Therese then went back and took a new tray of food and sat down as if nothing had happened. Nathalie had gotten up and raged when she saw how dirty her dress had become. She stepped over to Therese and pointed a finger at her.

– Do you really think that you'll get away with this?

– Hi, Nathalie. Nice to see you too. If you want more food on your dress, then I can help you. I have plenty of food.

Nathalie murmured, spun around and left for the toilet to clean herself. This thug would regret this, she was thinking.

When Therese was on her way out of school and the end of the day, she saw Lorrie standing outside watching the door. Therese became suspicious and was prepared for everything. Lorrie glanced to the right so when Nathalie came from the right, Therese was ready and took a few steps back. Nathalie could not stop herself but ended up kneeling in the fountain she planned to push Therese into.

– Ops, Nathalie. What bad luck for you, she scorned her. Here, take my hand and I'll help you out of the water.

Nathalie saw the chance so she took her extended hand and pulled it hard to try to pull Therese into the water too. But she had anticipated that so she just released her hand so that Nathalie fell backwards into the water instead, and became soaking wet from top to toe instead.

– Do you know what, Nathalie? You fit there in the fountain, like the platypussy that you are!

Nathalie was beside herself, especially from the opprobrium. Once again she was humiliated by this thug! She walked home with water dripping from her dress while she was ruminated over what she could find out to get revenge at Therese. The only thing she knew was that it must be particularly great, and therefore well planned.

In the next few days Nathalie remained unexpectedly calm. She was still planning what she would do. Therese often walked past her with her head held high and scornful grin on her face when she hung out with her gang. The mockery was obvious and Nathalie realized that she had to come back with something big to regain her prestige.

Therese was just going to open her locker. She noticed that Nathalie and her gang was watching her but ignored them. Suddenly a bucket fell down from the top of the lockers and landed upside down over her head. The bucket contained

green slime and she became drenched in it from top to toe. She spun around and saw how Nathalie was loosing it by laughter together with some of the others around her. She also saw how Lorrie had her phone in her hand, probably filming the whole thing. But Therese was not the one who started crying. Instead she walked over to Nathalie with a big smile and stretched out her hand.

– Thank you, Nathalie. How could you know I just love slime? It's so nice of you to give me a whole bucket of it.

Nathalie became confused and took her hand. Then Therese pulled her closer and put both her arms around her hugging her hard, transferring a lot of slime to her.

– Just feel how nice it feels, Therese said.

She caught some slime that dripped from her hair and rubbed it into Nathalie's face so she got slime both in her nostrils and in her mouth. Nathalie snorted and became furious and pushed herself free.

– What in Gods sake are you doing, your lunatic? Look, you have ruined my dress with your disgusting slime!

– Hey, I just give you back what belongs to you, nothing else.

– Maybe I'm the one that bought it, but that doesn't give you the right to mess up my clothes, your skinny bitch!

– Maybe not. But you have as little right to trash my clothes, right? Or are you such an coward that you deny that all this was your plan?

– Of course it was my plan. But be aware! Next time it will not only be your clothes that becomes destroyed, just watch your back!

– Oh, I'm terrified by your threats. What can you do next? Believe me, regardless of what it might me, I will just return it to you, so take it real easy!

Nathalie mumbled something inaudibly, turned around and disappeared down the corridor. Therese quietly returned to her closet to put in her books. A teacher that had witnessed the end of the incident caught Lorrie and forced her to the principal's office. There the principal demanded that she handed over the video

that she had recorded, and asked a lot of questions about what had happened. Lorrie was as frightened from being in trouble with the principal, as she was of what Therese would do with her. Later that day the principal called both Nathalie and Therese to his office. Soon both of them sat in front of his desk. They both had tried to wash themselves off but both of them was still looking pretty smudgy.

– It was she who did it, Nathalie exclaimed before the principal had time to ask anything. Look what she has done to me! My whole dress is destroyed. You have to punish her, sir!

– Well, Tess seems to be dirty too, how is that possible?

– That's her fault too! She hugged me after she poured slime all over me. I am innocent! Everything is her. She has been messing with me, harassing me, throwing food on me in the dining room, sabotaged my dress and I don't know what else. She has only been trouble since she came to school. You have to expel her from school, she doesn't fit into this nice school, isn't that obvious?

– Don't you have anything to say, Tess?

– Actually, I don't need to say anything at all, you're clever enough to figure out who's messing with whom. Have you heard of a newcomer who starts messing with not just a person, but a whole gang?

–No, I really haven't. Quite the opposite, newcomers sometimes gets it hard at first and suffers from bullying.

– Exactly. The only problem is that I'm too tough for her.

– I already know that. And considering that you have slime all over you while she just have a little on her front, it's obvious what happened. In addition, there is a video that clearly shows what has happened, and I have already looked at it. I'm sure that you are aware of that video, Nathalie, because it's you who asked Lorrie to record it.

– It's not at all as it seems. It's Vanessa who pulled the rope that tipped the bucket. She's the guilty one!

– So now you blame Vanessa instead of Tess? Have you forgotten that you on the video acknowledge that it's your idea? Now it's enough, Nathalie. I have not only talked to Lorrie but also several more of your so called friends. Everyone points towards you, and all evidence points at you as well. It's better if you just confess, to make it easier for you.

– No, it's not me. Everybody else lies. My parents come from a rich family, everyone knows that. Tess comes from some drunkards, don't you know that?

– Where you come from doesn't excuse what you do. I've been watching Tess closely since she got to school. She is tough and doesn't back down when she gets harassed, but she has never crossed the border. You, on the other hand, has done that several times, and this time is one time too much. You are hereby suspended from school for one week starting tomorrow.

– Noo, you can't seriously do that, she shouted in panic. I can't be suspended, my parents will contact the school board if you suspend me.

– Of course, your classy parents and the school board will receive a letter explaining in detail why you were suspended.

– But, they will punish me! Please don't do this. You can't suspend me, my whole life will be ruined.

– You should have thought about that before you attacked Tess and everyone else you've been bullying here at school.

Nathalie burst into tears, but the principal showed no remorse. Therese thought a little bit about what Ronald had said earlier that if you are strong you have to be nice and to be kind to others for your own sake.

– Excuse me, sir, she said. Perhaps it's enough with a warning this time? It's not that I've suffered too much from her pranks. I have obviously provoked her too, and challenged her authority in front of her friends. She has been exposed to group pressure and nobody knows better than I do, how hard it can be to go against the group.

– What do you mean? Should Nathalie get away with just a warning? Despite the seriousness of what she has been exposed you to?

– Everyone is entitled to a second chance, don't you agree?

The principal looked surprised at Therese. He understood exactly what she meant so he weakened a bit.

– Well, because Tess so earnestly asks for it, and actually she is your last victim, I agree. You get a sharp warning instead, Nathalie. But expect this to be held against you if you ever comes back to my office. Then you will get double punishment instead. You can both leave now, and bury the hatchet, both of you.

Both girls left the principal's office. Nathalie didn't dare to look at Therese at first. She was ashamed of everything she had done, and was shocked that despite her being so mean she had been rescued by her enemy. Therese just stood there looking firmly at Nathalie waiting until she finally began to talk.

– Tess, I don't understand why you defended me in there after all the evil I did to you. But I'm indebted to you now, so I can't continue to be mean. So what do you say about ceasefire?

Nathalie stretched out her hand towards Therese who grabbed it.

– Ceasefire sounds so temporarily. What about peace instead?

– Peace sounds good. I promise to stop messing with you from now-on. But don't think this means you're welcome to join my gang!

– I don't want to join yours or any other gang. I'm fed up with gangs. From now on, I promise to stop challenging your leadership, so you can keep playing tough in your gang.

– You're probably at least as tough as me.

– Just as tough as you? Forget it. You're not even play in the same league. You don't even know what's the meaning of tough. But let's ignore that now and start ignoring each other.

– Ignore sounds good. Thanks again, and bye.

– Just get out of here now. And you leave Diana alone too, do you understand? Otherwise, there will be war again, and you already know who will win it.

Nathalie didn't have any answer so she just left, determined to never mess with neither Therese nor Diana again. Therese was really pleased, not because she defeated Nathalie, but because she did as Ronald suggested, to acquire a friend instead of an enemy. "Now, nothing can go wrong anymore?" she thought.

She was mistaken about that.



CHAPTER 15

Family Court

Therese sat in her room playing on her new guitar when the phone rang. Ruth answered and then called for Therese.

– Tess! Phone for you. You can take it in the kitchen.

Therese was surprised as no one had called her before. As she still didn't have a cell phone, calling at home was the only chance to get hold of her. She went into the kitchen and took the cordless phone from Ruth who discreetly left the kitchen.

– Hi, it's Tess.

– Hello, my name is Micael, your contact person from the CPS. Is it Therese Fergusson that I'm talking to?

– That's correct. What happened to Margaret?

– You are certainly talking about your former contact person. Margaret has re-signed from here so I've taken over her children. The reason I call you is that I have good news for you.

– Alright, what is it?

– Your mother, Kathleen, has completed her rehabilitation and has regained custody over you today. So now you can finally move home again, isn't that nice?

– WHAT!?! Has the drunkard sobered up? Again? But I feel so happy now and have been rooted here at this foster home. Can't I stay here? She will soon start hitting the booze again, I know her.

– She has worked hard to sober up and we are convinced that she will be able to remain sober. As she now has the custody over you and asked to get you back, there is no possibility for you to stay in a foster home. It costs us money if you live in a foster home, so it that's not possible if your parents can take care of you, really you must understand that?

– But I have started a new life now, and put all my bad, old habits behind me. You have to understand that everything will be ruined if I have to return to my old life? My mom will never stop boozing. I beg you, don't do this. Please, let me stay with Ruth and Ronald. I'm willing to do anything if you let me stay.

– You are no longer in our custody, so you have to move home, and we have judged that it is the best for you. You can't abolish that decision. It's we that decide what will happen to you.

– Fucking damn crap! You motherfucker piece of shit!

Therese shout straight out and threw the phone on the bench. She continued to swear and Ruth came running to see what had happened. Also Mia and Diana came into the kitchen, Diana with Viola on her arm.

– Is there any problem, Tess?

– I have to move home to that cursed drunkard again! Fucking hell! They don't give a shit about in me and forces me to move home.

Ruth picked up the phone and looked at it. The casing was broken, but it was still working. She held the pieces and talked shortly to Micael before she managed to hang up, even though the button was broken too.

– Apparently you have to come with me to CPS office tomorrow where your mother meets up, and then you will go home with her. It already seems to be decided, and the way it sounds, nothing can be done about it.

– What's happening with Auntie Tess? Can't she stay with me?

– No, Mia. Those cursed assholes say you and I can't be together anymore. Fucking shit!

Therese rushed out of the kitchen and drove her fist into the wall on the way out. She hit it so hard that she made a hole in the wall. Diana became terrified of her outbreak and first thought that Therese would hit her too, so she started crying. Mia broke down completely and rushed into her room weeping uncontrollably and threw herself onto the bed. Viola was also frightened by the tone of the voices and began to scream her lungs out while Diana also returned to her room, with tears shooting from her eyes.

Ruth was shocked and didn't know where she would go first. She hurried into Therese first, but she just screamed that she wanted to be left alone. Her hand was bleeding but she just shouted and swore when Ruth touched it. She instead rushed to Mia, but she just screamed that she wanted "Auntie Tess" so she continued to Diana who was totally despaired both from that Viola was just screaming and also still afraid of what had happened in the other rooms. Ruth took up her cell phone and called to Ronald.

– Sweetheart, you have to come home now! Just drop everything and come home right away! It's totally chaos at home.

– What happened?

– All the girls have broken down and are lying down and crying their hearts out.

– I assume you mean Diana and Mia. Can't Tess help you with Mia while you take care of Diana?

– Tess is the worst of all of them. CPS called her and told her she have to move home to her mother again. It made her totally insane and Mia is totally heartbroken. Diana is terrified and Viola is hysterical. I'm running from room to room but nothing that I do helps. Come home, I can't handle this myself!

– I'll be there as fast as I can.

When he eventually came home, Ruth had managed to limit the chaos somewhat. She had at least succeeded to calm Diana down, and when Diana was calm she had been able to get Viola to stop crying so that room at least was calm. Ronald told Ruth to focus on Mia while he went in to talk with Therese.

– Hi, Tess. I was told the bad news from Ruth.

– It's fucked up that I can't stay, she cried.

– I fully agree with you. It feels like neither CPS nor your mother has understood your situation.

– And it seems like it's nothing we can do about it!

– Tess, listen to me now. I've talked to a lawyer whom I got contact with via a colleague. We had a short discussion while I was driving home. He said that it's not possible to overturn such a decision if the biological mother is free from drugs. On the other hand, one can question her ability to take care of her child.

Therese turned her face toward him and looked at him. He was shocked when she saw her face. The tears was falling and her eyes were all red. All her toughness was like blown away and she was just in despair.

– What do you mean?

– You see, if someone, like me and Ruth, would go to the family court and request to get custody of you because your mom is not capable of meeting your needs then maybe you will be able stay here.

– Is it really possible?

– He said that it's not a big chance for someone without a family relationship to get custody, but it's possible, at least considering your and her background.

– But are you really prepared to do that?

– Without a second's hesitation. I have said that I always will try to help you. Another thing I'll do is to talk with your mom, and suggest she lets you stay here even if she has custody. You know I don't want to lie, so I can't promise not I'll succeed, but I do promise you that I will do everything I can to make it possible for you to stay here, if that's what you want. Anything!

– Thanks, Ronald. It's warming that you seem to care about me.

– You know that I do that. Let's go to CPS tomorrow and talk to your mom and try to get some sort of an agreement.

– But I refuse to go there. I'm sorry if I put you and Ruth into trouble again, but I just won't. If my mother wants me to go home, she'll have to ask the police to drag me out of here by force, because I won't leave this house voluntarily.

– You don't have to apologize for anything. We both understand how difficult this is for you, and in one way it's a compliment to us that you want to stay here. We just go there without you and explains the situation to them and to your mother. Let me take a look at your hand now. It bleeds quite badly.

– Sorry for the wall and the phone. I'll pay it as soon as I can.

– Don't worry about worldly things now. Do you know what, I think you need a doctor. I take you there so you get your hand examined.

Ruth hadn't succeeded to comfort Mia but when Ronald and Therese returned home from the doctor, Therese went to her room and then they sat and cried together a little bit calmer. Finally Ruth and Ronald got a chance to sit and talk about what they would do. Ruth agreed with him that they would try to either convince Therese's mother that her daughter could stay here or that they would otherwise request custody. Ronald tried to find out Kathleen's phone number but failed because she didn't have any phone. He realized that the best thing he could do was take it up with her personally the next day.

The following day, they went alone to the CPS office. Kathleen was already waiting in Micael's office.

– Where in hell is Therese, she asked?

– Your daughter, Tess, refused to come here. She opposes moving home to you, Mrs Fergusson.

– You have no right to keep her? Isn't that true, Micael?

– That's correct.

– I'm not keeping her. As I said she doesn't want to come. She is really feeling bad and has not eaten or gone to school since yesterday. Can you please listen for a minute on a proposal? The best thing for all parties is if you can come home

with us where we three plus your daughter can sit down to discuss unprejudiced what is best for her.

– I already know what's best. It's my my own damn daughter, so I'm the one that knows her best. Just go and get her and I'll take her home.

– It's not obvious what's best at the moment. I just want to have a calm discussion about what different possibilities we have and then find the best solution.

– If you don't gets her down here in this moment, I'll report you to the police for kidnapping. Now get your ass out of your face!

– Isn't it good if we can discuss ...

– Damn it. There is fucking nothing to discuss. I have the right to my daughter and that's it.

– Unfortunately, you don't give me a choice but to give this document to the Child Protective Service. We hereby make an formal notification that we don't consider you to be a safe custodian. Here you have the paper, Micael. We are therefore challenging you on the custody of Tess in family court.

– Forget it. You don't stand a chance!

– I really don't want to do this, but I prefer to find a solution that we all can agree on. You understand, my offer to unprejudiced discuss what is best for Tess remains independent of all circumstances, and the offer has no time limit either.

– Go to hell. See you in court. But until then Therese stays with me.

– Unfortunately, we can't agree on that, Micael said. If there is an formal notification of concern, we must act. Therese remains placed under foster care until the family court has made a final decision. In addition, we consider it most appropriate that she will still be placed where she currently is, to gain some continuity.

Kathleen was furious and left the office cursing all of them. It became apparent to Ruth and Ronald from where Therese had learned her bad language.

Both Ronald and Ruth visited her several times the next few days to try and make her change her mind and discuss with them but unfortunately, Kathleen

didn't reconsider the refusal to talk with them. She just screamed at them and called them bad names. The only thing that remained was to discredit her in family court, something Ronald really hated to be forced to do.

~ ~ ~

The day when they went to the family court was the first time they managed to get Therese to leave the house after the visit to the doctor. She had even refused to go to school, but had stayed in her room all the time and been completely in despair. Mia had begun crying every day again, and no one could comfort her anymore, because Therese herself was so totally miserable.

Ronald had taken a day off from his job this day. He was already in the court room with Ruth and Therese when Kathleen came in. She looked for Therese but could not see her because she was sitting behind Ruth. The judge started the hearing by giving the floor to Ronald who stood up and explained.

– I have, together with my wife Ruth, applied for custody of Therese Fergusson from her biological mother because we believe she is being neglected under her responsibility. We have presented reports from, most of all, the Child Protective Service as proof of this. They clearly shows that Therese, or Tess, as she prefers to be called, has become increasingly bewildered for each year. I want to emphasize that the cause of that was not only lack of direction and rules, but equally due to lack of emotional presence. Tess is not bad per se, but instead just felt belittled and abandoned, and therefore been acting out in an extreme way. There is nothing at present that's indicating that anything will really change if she returns to her mother, vut the only possible conclusion is that Tess will return to her destructive behavior if Kathleen Fergusson regains her custody over her. However, me and my wife Ruth have already shown that we can make Tess follow rules, improve her attitude and work hard at school. We can give her the direction and the love that she desperately needs. Together with us she can get stability and security. Therefore, the only acceptable decision of this family court is to give us the custody over her.

– Thank you, Mr Clayton. Now Mrs Fergusson will give her opinion on the matter and you will then be able to comment on her statement. Please, Mrs Fergusson.

Kathleen remained in her chair while she was talking.

– It's so simple. Therese is my daughter. My own daughter, nobody else's. I admit that I have looked too deep into the bottle before, but now I have finished my rehab and don't drink anymore. Who knows better what Therese needs than her own mother? Those two have no idea, they have known her for half a year, I have known her for a lifetime and she has always wanted to live with me. Obviously, I should have custody of Therese, everything else is just wrong.

– Thank you very much, Mrs Fergusson. Unless Mr Clayton has anything to add then we will retire to discuss before we make our decision.

– In fact, I have something to add, Your Honor. The main character in this trial is after all Tess herself, and she has not yet said anything. Furthermore she is already fourteen years old and fully capable of speaking for herself. Isn't it obvious that her opinion in this situation must also has to of highest importance?

– Of course she should also be allowed to speak. I guess it's Miss Fergusson, you talk about. So, if you want to say something, this is the time for it. Please stand up so that everyone in the hall can see you while you speak.

– Thank you very much, Your Honor, Therese said, standing up as he had asked her. First of all, I would like to apologize in advance for that what I want to say may take a while to say, because I have a lot on my heart that I humbly ask for your permission to express.

Kathleen flinched from the shock. She had not until now understood that the nice looking young lady in a neat dress next to Ruth was actually her daughter. Neither did she expect Therese to speak so well and polite.

– It's totally in order for you to use the time you need. If necessary, we can continue after lunch. We are prepared to listen to what you have to say. You will not be interrupted.

– I really appreciate that, Your Honor.

Therese looked at the judge while she was talking.

– It's true that I have lived with my mother for long periods between all placements in a total of twelve different foster homes. My mother, at her very best moments, has been totally worthless as mom. My dad on the other hand was good, but he died when I was only six. Driving under the influence, you see. Drove straight off the road into a tree. But my mother has always been complete, consistently worthless as a mother. None of the things a mom is expected to do, she has done. A mother should discipline her child, right? That means that if I do something bad, she should punish me and if I do something good, reward or at least praise me. She has not done neither. In fact, she has never ever bothered about what I've done, regardless of what it has been.

Kathleen frowned on her eyebrows and became angry at what she heard, but kept silent after a glance from the judge.

– I felt so terribly abandoned and belittled, as if nobody cared about me. So when I was eleven years, I took money that she had given to me and got me a nose piercing just to make her to react. I knew she hates piercing, so I expected a reprimand when I got home. She looked at me, but she didn't say anything. Why couldn't she understand that my disobedience was really a cry for help? So a few days later I took the rest of my money and got two big rings in my lip. Now I was sure she would react, but still she didn't say a word. It felt like I was screaming for help, but she didn't care about me.

Kathleen began to feel bad when she recalled that day. The only thing she could remember was that she had just drunk two bottles of wine.

– So one day, I took all the money from her purse, every single dollar. I went to the same person as before and he put piercing all over my face. In addition, I bought a tattoo of henna over most of my face. When I got home I looked something like this.

Therese held up a big picture that Ruth had taken one of the first days she had been with them. The judge could not help inhaling heavily. It was not just the face, it was the whole image with dirty, torn up clothes and messy hair that was a shocking sight.

– Then I came home and met her when she stood with her purse in her hand and apparently had found out that the money she would use for food the rest of the month was missing. It was quite clear to her where the money has went when she saw me. I stood there and my whole body shouted it's heart out for help. It was as if I shouted "Look at me! Do something! Punish me! Scream at me! DO SOMETHING. **SEE ME!!**".

Therese shouted so it echoed in the big hall. The judge almost fell backwards, because she was shouting so loudly. Then she suddenly became silent instead.

– Nothing. My mom said nothing. It was as I was didn't exist. As if I was not her daughter. As if I was nothing. Nothing at all. It felt like I was screaming and screaming until I had no voice left.

She talked more and more quietly almost whispering at the end. It had been totally quiet in the room so when she continued with her usual voice after a long pause, she felt almost as she was screaming again.

– When I came to the school with my piercing, everyone there turned their back to me as well. All my classmates, teachers and all other staff. One single person saw me. He was a couple of years older and thought I looked tough, so he asked if I wanted to go out with him. I thought he wanted a date, but his interest in me was not on that level. We have never been more than good friends. He introduced me to the gang that he used to hang out with. There I learned to drink strong beer and smoke hay. I came home being drunk or intoxicated several times a week, but she didn't care about that either.

Kathleen felt more and more bad about the story. This was her own daughter who just kept on attacking her own mother. Worst of all, she could hardly remember anything from this time.

– Now the CPS was informed about me, took me into custody and started shipping me from foster home to foster home, which just made it worse. No one cared about me there either, but they just yelled at me when I didn't want to obey. So I went head to head against everyone and everything. I stopped caring about any rules at all. Everyone disliked me, because I was just swearing and being disrespectful to all. But in fact, I felt as bad as a teenager can feel. I would like to, with

the permission from the court, explain how I felt by using the vocabulary that I used back then. Is that OK?

– Please, Miss Fergusson. You have our full attention, to express it mildly.

– I apologize in advance for the language I will use. This is just so you understand how I felt then.

Therese paused, inhaled and continued.

– I felt my life was so fucked up, and I didn't give a shit for what all the assholes told me to do. I lived in a hell-hole and was such a fucked up disturbed brat and didn't give a fuck of my damn life. All of me was fucked up and I was to rotten that no one wanted to even touch me with a fucking pliers, and I just wanted to lay down and die from the hell I was living in.

She suddenly silenced and shivered. The judge had gotten something shocked over his face like most others in the room.

– Today I really feel sick to my stomach to talk like that. Let me just say that I felt abandoned, acted out, and made bad decisions. But my mom was there all the time and saw what happened to me and she *let* it happen. She was simply completely worthless as a mom. Totally deplorable. Everything she cared about was the bottle and her drinking companions. My myself wasn't not even worth water for her. Not because she ever drank water. I had given up and didn't care about anything anymore, because not even she cared for me anymore.

Kathleen felt as if she needed to throw up.

– One day I flipped out completely when her friends had trashed the entire apartment, including the only thing I loved, namely my guitar. I went out to a bar and became dead drunk and started do give trouble smashing things. The police came and took me to CPS late at night, which then placed me at Ruth and Ronald. So, I came to them two o'clock at night, dead drunk, filthy and totally out of control.

She pointed at Ruth and Roland and continued:

– The only reaction I received from them was compassion and kindness. Everyone else used to despise me, but Ruth treated me kindly from day one. She gave me headache pills and lemonade for the hangover and met all my insults with kindness and care. The more I swore to her and called her ugly names, the kinder she became. She fret and fret on the armor I had enclosed myself inside. With endless patience she continued to fret by returning every rudeness with kindness and compassion. She didn't give up until she finally broke through to the miserable girl that was inside the wreck as you see in the picture here.

Ruth could not help smiling at her parable of armor. It was just the way it had been.

– It took me two days before I began to follow Ronald's rules. It was the second day when I went out with my gang again and didn't get home until one o'clock at night. Ruth didn't get angry on me but instead was just worried about my safety. Ronald also seemed worried about me so he gave me a reprimand. I have never been reprimanded like that before, and it felt worse than anything I experienced before. It was like the worst punch in my face. Not because he screamed at me and listed all my mistakes, because that's what I'm used to. No, he talked quietly and calmly. The more hot-headed I answered, the calmer he became. Instead of scolding, he explained why what I did was wrong and why the only one harmed by it was myself. It was so painful because he made me realize that all he said was true and that I was well on my way to destroy myself and destroying all my chances for a good future. The truth made me feel so bad that I began to follow his rules.

Ronald nodded when he first understood what had actually happened that day.

– That same night, Diana, who lives with them, came to me with her daughter Viola and asked why I was so evil to Viola. This was another punch in my face, that the weak and scared Diana dared to stand up against me to protect her daughter. I had never understood until then that what I did could hurt others too. And that a little baby, just a couple of months old, was afraid of me really did hurt. I promised to calm down from that day.

Everyone in the room listened intensively to her every word.

– Then I only took a little more than a week before I asked for forgiveness, and begged to be allowed to start all over from the beginning. Ruth didn't need any persuasion, she was immediately ready to forget all I had done and said and to give me an second chance. The same was true for Ronald. It was like another punch in my face that both of them listened to me and respected my opinion. They even changed their rules for my sake.

– After just a few days, Ruth gave me some money to buy something for myself. I chose instead to remove all the piercing and tattooing and to fix my hair and nails. Diana lent her dress to me and we went home again. When Ruth and Ronald saw me, it looked like they had won a million dollar on Lotto, they was that happy. Ruth praised me for what I did, and because I did it without anyone asking me for it. This is probably the worst punch in my face of them all. Ruth really cares about me. For real!

Therese held up the picture on herself again.

– So I had gone from this to what I look like today in less than three weeks. Not because Ruth or Ronald demanded it or even suggested it, but because I *wanted* to do it. They have never *forced* me to do good things, they have made me *want* to do good things. When I did bad things, I was criticized and if I did good things I was praised. The result that I found myself making everything to make them happy, because I liked to get praised. That's what is called disciplining your child! Getting it to do good things by it's own will. Just like a mom and dad should do. They cared for me all the time. That's why they are here today to fight for me. Because they care. Not like my mom that just ignores me.

– Excuse me, I have to interrupt, Kathleen said. I'm also here because I care about you. Otherwise, I would just let you stay...

She stopped when the judge looked harsh at her. Therese turned to Kathleen for the first time to answer her.

– Ronald has repeatedly told you that he wants us all to meet to have an *unprejudiced* discussion what is *best for me*. He just wants my best, and doesn't care how. That's the meaning of unprejudiced. He is prepared to accept any arrangement

that makes me feel good. You didn't even want to listen to him because you don't care about me.

Kathleen wanted nothing more than to protest, but didn't say anything. She was not ever sure what the word *unprejudiced* meant. Therese turned her back against her and continued.

– I feel so happy with Ruth and Ronald, because they show every day that they love me, even though I'm not their real daughter. They really care about me and treat me with respect while they educate me. I really enjoy it and all good things that has happened to me is thanks to them. Even though Mom lets me do what I want, I really want to be with Ruth and Ronald more than anything else in life. I *want* to make Ruth happy and I *want* to follow Ronald's rules. That's what's best for me, independent of what my mom thinks. She doesn't understand what's best for me, because she doesn't care to listen.

Kathleen began to protest again but was interrupted by the judge.

– Mrs. Fergusson, I have said no one can interrupt her. Were you ready, miss?

– I know I've been talking for a long time, and I apologize for that. But I feel I have to talk about Mia also before I'm done.

– Of course, you still have the word. Who is Mia?

– When I had been at the foster home for a week, before talking to Ruth, Mia arrived. She is a four year old girl who had worse problems than any of us others. Her mother was a drug whore, literally. I mean that she was a heavy addict who financed her addiction by prostitution. Mia's dad is actually one of her customers, but she doesn't even know his name, because there are so many to choose from. Mia was so wrecked as a child can be, she was insecure and terrified of everything and everyone. But in a strange way she trusted me. Maybe because I was as ruined as she, and she felt that. She wanted to sleep in my bed, and I let her do it. It was the worst punch in my face that I ever got, to feel that another person actually needed me.

Therese made a pause.

– Can you understand that? Someone *needed* me. Me! I was as shattered as anyone could become, but I was *needed* by a small innocent child. Ruth and Ronald had nothing against it, on the contrary. So I started taking care of Mia and made sure she felt good. I take her to playgrounds, helps her getting dressed and cuts her food. In the evening I read a bed time story and tucks her in. I even kisses her goodnight, like she's my daughter. She calls me "Auntie Tess" and I don't really like being called "auntie" with I love it when she says it. We have no formal relationship, but I love her as if she were my own daughter, and she loves me back as if I were her mother. Her own mother committed suicide and Ruth is now her adoptive mother, but it's me Mia wants when she is sad. I promised Mia that I will never abandon her, and she trusts me.

– So everything is perfect in my life, I have a mother in Ruth who loves me as her own and always looks for my best. I have a father who loves me in his own way and who always is ready to help me if I need it. I have a big sister who is my complete opposite, but still loves me as a sister. I even have a daughter who is my everything, even if she's not my biological daughter. I obey all rules, I'm well-behaved and focus on my future and have decided to become a chef. I have turned my back to everything and everyone from my old life, trying in every way to do what's good. On my fourteenth birthday I got presents, a cake and everyone sang to me. It was my best birthday ever, and I have never felt as happy as i did on that day in my whole life. It felt as if my future is amazing.

Everyone in the room really felt that Therese was happy. She smiled with her whole face and her entire body showed she was lucky. Then her smile suddenly disappeared and she pointed at Micael.

– Then he called. Micael from CPS. He told me I have to return to my worthless biological mother. Back to the hell again. Back to all that's bad in my life. Don't misunderstand me, Micael, I don't accuse you, you've just let my rotten mom fool you. But I got so crazy that I crushed the phone and drove my fist right through the wall.

She stroked her right hand with had a big bandage.

– Broke two of the bones in my hand, but it didn't even hurt. It was hurting so much inside my heart that I didn't even noticed that I broke my hand. I collapsed and have not been able to sleep or eat or go to school since then, just lying in my bed, crying. You must understand that I have never cried before, except maybe when I was a little toddler. Now I can't stop, and Mia lies and cries in the room next to me, and nobody can comfort any of us.

Tears started to pour from her eyes. Ruth sighed deeply and felt so helpless again, as she had done all week. Kathleen was completely shocked. She could not remember that she had ever seen her daughter cry before.

– So I beg you not to destroy my life! Don't rip me away from my new family and don't force me to betray my promise to Mia that I will never abandon her. It's not just my life that gets ruined if I have to return, Mia's life will also be destroyed, and it's more important to me than my own. All I want is to get a chance for a future. I can only appeal to you empathy to do the best for me. Please! Let me stay with Ruth, Ronald and Mia.

Therese's voice broke down and she continued to cry silently while the tears ran down her cheeks. The silence in the room was deafening. Kathleen really felt dreadful to see her daughter cry. And the words she had heard had also been really hurtful, especially as Therese seemed to mean it and that much of it unfortunately was the truth. After a long time of silence, the judge spoke.

– Do you feel that you have finished now, Miss Fergusson?

– Yes, she sobbed. Thanks for listening!

– I thank you so much for your statement. It was ... intensive, indeed. I first would like to ask you some supplementary questions, if it's fine with you. If you want a break to collect yourself first, you can get it.

Therese made a big effort to control her feelings. She dried her eyes with a handkerchief and wiped her nose.

– It's okay, I can handle it. What do you want to ask, Your Honor?

– Obviously, you have had a particularly difficult life, which I am the first to feel sorry for. At the same time it's also obvious that you ended up in a place where you feel comfortable. You have already explained that you love Mia. What about your foster mother, Mrs Clayton? Do you love her too?

– Yes, definitely. I love Ruth as if she were my own mom.

– Is it that you also love Mr. Clayton, even though he is so strict?

– Without the least hesitation. As I already said, I still remember my own dad, and only have happy memories from him. Still, I love Ronald as if he were my own dad. Since my dad died, I've wanted someone that demands that I do the right things, and I got that now.

– Is that the same for your foster sister, Diana?

– I love her as my sister. We are completely different as persons, yet we can hang out without fussing. If it's not love, I don't know what love is.

– What about Mrs Fergusson, your biological mother? Do you love her too?

– Well, oh ...

Therese hesitated and seemed to think about the question.

– Your silence speaks volume. It feels like I got my answer already.

The chairman turned to Kathleen instead.

– Mrs. Fergusson. I assume you want to respond to what your daughter has said. So go ahead, you will also not be interrupted. Feel free to ask any questions you want to her or to anyone else in the room. Do you have anything you want to say?

Kathleen sat silent and had not yet recovered from the shock. Her eyes wandered from the judge to Therese who firmly met her eyes and then back again. Finally she answered with a staggering voice.

– You're damn true about that. But fuck, I'm so confused. Wow, I didn't expect this. I have to think. Can't I... Oh, heck. Please can I have a moment to collect myself? Just fifteen minutes or so?

– The clock has already reached a quarter to twelve, and it doesn't feel like we will be done before lunch, especially if you want a break. I suggest we take an early lunch. No objections? Well, then we break for lunch. Reassembly here 12.30, please be on time!

Therese went to Ruth, who stood up. Therese folded her arms around Ruth and hugged her hard while Kathleen kept sitting on her chair watching while her heart was really hurt when she realized that her own daughter preferred this woman to herself.

– We have to hurry a bit to be able to eat in less than one hour, Ronald said. It's probably soon full at all restaurants. I saw a nice place across the street that we could walk to.

The three of them quickly started to walk towards the exit hastened by Ronald.

– Therese. THERESE! Please wait a bit. I need to talk a little.

The trio stopped and Ronald wrinkled a little with his eyebrows.

– We have a tight schedule if we want to get any food inside of us.

– I only need a few minutes. It's important.

– Can't we let Tess's mom make us company while we eat? Ruth wondered. If that's okay with you, Tess. Your mom can say what she wants to say while we wait for the food. In that way, we hit two flies with one bang.

– Sure why not? Therese answered and shrugged her shoulders.

– I'm so grateful if I can sit with you, even though we are enemies. You don't have to pay for me, of course. In addition, I will pay for Therese because she is my daughter.

– We are not enemies at all, Ronald protested. We may be counterparts in this trial, but I am convinced that we really have the same goal, namely, that Tess will be happy. We just don't agree on how to do it. In addition, I stand by what I said before that my offer for an unprejudiced discussion has no time limit or any other limitation either.

Kathleen looked insecure at him but didn't answer anything. Soon they sat at the restaurant Ronald had suggested and studied the menu. Kathleen became quite concerned when she read the prices. Soon a waitress came to take up order.

– I have no appetite, but you can eat if you want to, Therese said.

– Silliness, of course you should eat something, Ronald said. You will surely become hungry when you smell the food. Choose something from the menu now!

– Sure, if you insist, I'll try to eat then. Give me a small burger with french fries and a coke.

Kathleen didn't believe her ears. Her own dear daughter who just gave in like that! She hesitated for a long time until she was the only one that had not ordered.

– Well, I'm sorry. I didn't expect these prices. I don't think I can afford to eat here. I just settle with an orange juice.

– That ridiculous, you can't sit here and just drink juice while the rest of us are eating, Ronald said. Surely, we can treat you with food for this time.

– No, it's not necessary at all. I can't ask anything like that from you.

– Tess, do you know if your mother likes hamburgers too?

– She loves burgers, just like me.

– Well, Miss, then we will take two hamburger plates, instead.

The waitress thanked and left. Kathleen began to feel uncomfortable. Partly because of her daughter's harsh words during the trial and partly because she had been so categorically against the same person who just offered to pay for her food. Ronald noticed that she looked uncomfortable and said.

– If you wish, me and my wife can sit on the couch over there so you can talk alone with your daughter. I can imagine that you don't feel fully comfortable talking to her in our presence.

– No, it doesn't matter. You can stay. I can't chase you away now when you pays food for me too, for fucks sake.

She turned to Therese who sat silently waiting for her mother to start. She also felt uncomfortable given what she just said during the trial.

– Now, Therese, honey. I ... what you said before ... oh for fucks sake, it hurt like hell to hear. Am I really that terrible as mom?

– Well, Mom. I apologize so much to you for saying all that. The last thing I want is to hurt you. But surely you know it was the truth I said? It felt quite bad that I was forced to embarrass you in front of the court just because I wanted them to understand how important it's for me to stay in my new life.

Kathleen was completely thrown out of balance of the excuse. She had never before experienced Therese apologizing and after all the hard words she had just heard, this humble answer was the last she had expected.

– I just didn't want you to be angry and obstinate with me, so I didn't protest when you did anything stupid. Alright, I hated all your piercings, tattoos and broken, dirty clothes. Just didn't want to complain, because I thought you'd be angry then. You're looking amazing now, really beautiful. I love how you look and how you talk. Hey, you're even talking better than myself.

– Too late for flattery now, come to the point, Therese replied snappy.

Kathleen hesitated for a while before she continued.

– Therese, honey. I am so confused. You've always felt bad when you lived in a foster home, and always wanted to come home again. How is it possible that you want to stay with them this time instead of living with me?

– If you listened in there, you would understand it already. Ruth and Ronald give me all that I longed for, both from you and from all other foster parents.

– But what are you longing for?

– Compassion. The feeling that someone cares about me and what happens to me. Praise when I do good things and corrections when I do stupidities. Just someone who is present when I need it and who gets worried when I have problems.

– But you have to know I do care about you? I'm your mother.

– How can I know that? You've never said it or even showed it. Is has always been the opposite.

– What do you mean by opposite?

– How did you protest when I got home and was drunk or high?

– I didn't want to criticize you and make you sad or angry.

– To criticize one's teenager's stupid actions is in the job description for a mother. Instead, you don't care about me at all.

– But I do. Now, you can't understand how damn hurtful it was to hear you hesitate if you love me. Still, Therese, don't you think that I really love you above everything else?

– The problem is that I don't know. It feels like you love the bottle more than me. However it's probably also in the job description for a mother to love her offspring. But you are doing a pretty bad job showing it.

– But it's true that I love you more than anything else. I know I'm addicted, and that has affected you, but I can't help it. It's still you who I think is most important in my life.

– If so, why didn't you agree to talk to Ronald about my future?

– Well, I was convinced that the only thing he wanted was to keep you so he could keep on getting money from CPS, like all other foster homes, and that you felt uncomfortable there.

– What's in the words "unprejudiced discuss what's best for me" that you don't understand? He doesn't say that you have to accept what he wants, but that I am the one that is most important to him. I've never heard you say that. To put *me* in the first place and ignore what you want. Never.

– I don't understand...

– Is your brain full of spiderweb from all the liquor? Ronald mean that he's prepared to do anything to make me feel good. Even what he hates to do, like going to family court demanding custody over me, for my sake. He is also fully aware

that if he should receive custody, he loses the money from CPS, yet he doesn't hesitate for a second. It's my best interest that important for him, and for Ruth.

The waitress came with the food so everyone started eating. Kathleen was thinking for a while as she chewed. After a while, she talked again.

– Right, you're always cocky and know what you want. Don't you agree with that, Ronald, that she always demands to get what she wants?

– Yes, she's strong, that's true. But she is at the same time both kind and wise.

– Wise enough to do as you say in front of you, at least to avoid scolding.

– Well, she's never been scolded by me. It hasn't been necessary. She doesn't do everything that I demand, but she is clever enough to ask first.

– And then she does what she wants in any case, and ignores what you said. I recognize that part!

– Oh no, she listens when I explain my side of the matter, and then she gives her side of the case. Then we discuss until we reach consensus. After that she does what we agreed. She is good at it, and good at arguing for her cause.

– Hey, I don't understand all the fine words you are using. Argue, it's the same as quarreling, right? She is good at always quarreling and piss around at me when I'm telling her what to do.

Therese looked with a increasing surprise on her mother. Quarrel? They had never been quarreling, really. What was she talking about?

– Well, argue may mean that you are quarreling, but what I mean is rather that we debate and present our respective opinions for and against, calmly and sensibly, and then objectivity turns them back and forth.

– Sure, that sounds good if she is calm and sensible. I don't know how many times she got an outbreak at home that I had difficulty coping with.

– We have a lot of experience with young people who have outbreaks, and the technique of managing them is to keep calm yourselves. If I only show patience and calm, it always results in that the one that lost there calm will cool down and

than having a bad conscience for the outbreak. It's then that you say what you think, and because the other realized that he or she behaved badly, it goes in. However I can't remind myself that your daughter has gotten any direct outbreak at our home. At least not against us.

– Maybe not herself, but the fuzzy buddies she has taken home have often behaved wrongly.

Now Therese became even more bothered. "buddies," she thought. "I have never taking any friends home yet". Then she suddenly understood what her mother was doing and smiled inside.

– Certainly it could happen. But now Tess has chosen to break with her old friends. But with other youngsters we have had it happened that their guests behaved unacceptably. Then one must always understand that it's not necessarily our youth's fault, but it's the guest that is to blame. Again you must use patience to disarm the situation, because if you come and scream and complain, you only end up that the guest going into defense mode. Then by virtue or the group pressure, nothing changes.

– Yes, but the group pressure can makes it impossible for them to calm down. They wind each other up more and more, have not you noticed that too?

– It happens sometimes. Then I usually take the toughest of them to another room and talk calmly and kindly with him or her. Because away from the group, he or she is not that tough anymore, and my arguments can be received.

– It sounds like a good tip. But how do you handle when Therese comes home drunk then? I've always had a hard time knowing what to say then? She used to never listen to me then, but just swear to me and call me ugly names.

– Of course, that only happened once, so I can't say I needed to do it often. What I did was just say that a wanted to discuss it the next day. Because while someone is drunk, you don't listen anyway. But the day after when the hangover strikes and you regret yourself to have been drinking, the arguments goes in better.

– Now, that's right. She has always listened better the day after, I have also noticed that. Often she's such a bad headache so she doesn't want to talk at all then, right? It makes her kind of nicer.

Now Therese giggled a little bit to Ruth's surprise. She even pushed her mother in her side.

– Hush, Kathleen whispered to her.

Ruth lifted her eyebrows and looked at mom and daughter who seemed to have some kind of secret between each other. Ronald, however, proceeded without notice anything.

– If you give tablets for the headache, you gain two things, he explained. First of all, the person who speaks will be grateful for the help to feel better, secondly it silences the headache, which makes him or her able to listen again.

– So the secret is to always have painkillers at home, so you can win all the fights?

– No, not directly. Fights can never be won. If it gets into a fight it's better to take a step back and try to calm down the situation first. When the other one has calm down after a few hours, one can discuss what happened better.

– Of course, that's what I always missed at home. First calm her down when she starts to fight and then objectively talk about it later when she's calm.

Now Therese started to giggle uncontrollably. She could not hold it any longer.

– Lay off now, Mom. I know exactly what you are doing.

– What do you mean? Ruth asked. I've noticed that you two seem to have something going on between you, but I don't understand what.

– Well, my mom is worthless as mom, I have already said that. But she's definitely not worthless with everything. What she is best at is to cross examine people without they noticing that they are being subjected to a third grade interrogation.

– I don't understand anything, Ronald said.

– That's exactly what I mean. She asks a lot of innocent questions, plays stupid and invents a lot of things about me that's not true to check how you handled me. Instead of a bunch of direct questions that you wouldn't answer honestly anyhow, she triggers you to just keep on talking about how you handled me.

– Is that right, Mrs Fergusson?

– Well, Therese has seen through me. I just wanted to know if she's doing well with you by finding out how to deal with her if she behaves badly, as she has often done in other foster homes.

– Wow, I've never been tampered so unperceived before. You are good!

He checked his clock and became a little bit stressed.

– Now, in any event, we must pay and return to the trial.

Ronald called the waitress, paid and soon they had returned to the courtroom and the judge started.

– Time to come to order. Before we broke for lunch, Mrs Fergusson was asked to comment on her daughter's previous statement. As I said before, it's all right if you also want to ask questions to anyone in the room. So please, the word is yours.

– Thanks for that. Well, I have talked a bit with my daughter during lunch and have one thing I would like to say to her first.

Kathleen turned to Therese.

– Therese, I know you're uncertain in your feelings to me. But I really hope you can understand that despite my addiction, I love you above all else. There's nothing I wouldn't do for you. I also want you to understand that what I will do now, I do because I love you, and for no other reason. Just because I love you more than I love myself.

She turned to the judge again.

– Your Honor. I want to apologize for wasting your precious time. But I take back my claim to receive custody of Therese, on condition that it's Ronald and Ruth who receive custody instead.

– Do you mean, Mrs Fergusson, that you no longer want to continue with this case here in family court?

– That's what I mean.

– You realize that this decision becomes difficult to regret. I mean, if you lose your custody in family court, you will always be informed about the reason for it. If you then executes what the court requires, you can later recover your custody. But if you instead do as you say now, voluntarily renouncing your custody, it will in practice be impossible to regain your custody of your own power.

– No, I didn't know that, but now I understand. It doesn't change my opinion that Ronald and Ruth are better suited to take care of Therese. I just want Therese be in as good place as possible, even if it means I have to give her up.

– What do you say, Mr and Mrs Clayton? Are you still prepared to have custody of Miss Fergusson, or is there anything in what is said today that has changed your mind? You realize that it's a completely different responsibility imposed on you from being a foster parent, and that there is no economic compensation anymore?

– Of course we are still still prepared. If something has happened, we're even more dedicated to take responsibility of her now.

– I must also ask the Child Protective Service. You have made a written recommendation that Mrs Fergusson is the one who should gain the custody. Have you changed your opinion about this?

Micael got up and cleared his throat. He deliberately had kept a low profile during the hearing because he didn't feel comfortable with the whole situation and almost feared what Therese would do considering her outbreak on the phone.

– Hum. We have not changed the perception that the biological mother is usually always best suited to raise her own child. So we still recommend that Mrs Fergusson should be given the custody.

– Should the court interpret that as if you think that Mr and Mrs Clayton are directly unsuitable as guardians?

– Of course not. As we consider that they are suitable as foster parents, they are of course also suitable as guardians. However, not as our first choice.

– Well, then I think it's clear. None of the other officials have any objections?

He turned right and left towards the other officials who all shook their heads.

– Nothing? Then the official decision of the court is that the custody of Miss Therese Fergusson is hereby transferred to Mr. Ronald and Mrs Ruth Clayton. With this, this hearing is closed.

Therese flew up and threw herself into Ruth's arms and smiled all over her face. Then she went to Ronald and all three embraced each other. Kathleen looked at them with a sting of jealousy. It was really hurtful to see her own daughter preferring someone but herself. She left the room while the trio was hugging and Therese thanked especially Ronald for fighting for her sake. When they too left the room, Kathleen was waiting for them with a worried facial expression.

– Mr. Clayton. I would like to apologize for not listening to you before. It was stupid of me.

– I don't accept your apology. It should be addressed to Tess, and not to me, because it's against her you have faulted.

– Therese, honey. I apologize so much. The only thing I wanted was that you would be happy, and I didn't listen to anyone. Can you forgive me?

– Yeah, yeah, okay. You were wrong, but you changed your mind. Now I live where I want, with Ruth and Ronald, so everything is fine now, I guess.

– Does this mean I'll never meet Therese again?, she asked to Roland.

– We will let Tess decide who she wants to meet, Ronald said.

– What do you say about Sunday, Mom? At lunchtime, maybe? You can cook for me as before.

– Of course, Kathleen exhaled. Do you still like my food?

– When you're sober, you cook better food than Ruth. No offense, Ruth!

– No offense taken. Mom's food is always the best, it's what everyone thinks.

– What food do you want me to cook, Therese?

– If you don't know which one is my favorite food, you're not my mom anymore!

– What do you mean? Wait! I know! Meatloaf, right?

– Meatloaf, Sunday, 12 o'clock. See you then!

Therese left the court building together with Ruth and Ronald and a significantly easier heart.

~ ~ ~

Kathleen stood in the kitchen cooking food while pondering over her decision in family court to leave the custody to Ronald and Ruth. She was not sure she had made a good decision to give up her own flesh and blood. At the same time, she had already realized that the longing for the bottle was too big to resist, and then Therese had been effected badly again. She sighed deeply and went round the apartment to make sure it looked clean.

Meanwhile, Therese was making herself ready to go to her mother as she promised. As she was on her way to the door, Mia came running.

– Auntie Tess, Can I come along too? Please!

Therese hesitated and looked at Ruth.

– We have to ask your new mom. What do you think, Ruth? Is it appropriate for Mia to come with me to my mother? You know her condition.

– You are probably the only one who can decide if it's appropriate. You know how she behaves in different conditions, right? Are there any risk for Mia if she would come with you?

– Well, my mother has been, kind of sick, as long as I've lived. She has been absent for the most part, but she has never ever been dangerous in any way. Alright, Mia, I guess you can tag along.

– Jippiii!

– I just want you to understand that my mother is sick, a little bit the same way your mother was sick. You know what it means.

– Yes, Auntie Tess. I understand. I promise to be kind.

So it was decided. Therese and Mia went together to Kathleen's home where Therese opened the door to the apartment with her own key and walked in while Mia was holding her hand. Kathleen came to the door and looked surprised when she saw Mia. But she immediately understood who she was so she bent down a couple a feet away from her and stretched out her hand.

– Hi there, little friend. You must be Mia. My daughter has talked a lot about you. I want you to understand that you are so welcome here!

Therese expected Mia to be as shy as usual, so she was thoroughly surprised when Mia threw herself around the neck of Kathleen and hugged her hard.

– Ops, that was unexpected! What have I done to deserve such a fantastic giant hug?

– Thank you, Auntie Kathleen. Thank you very much for not taking Auntie Tess away from me. I love her so.

– Wow, that was unbelievable. Do you know what, little Mia? I would never take Therese from you, I just didn't know about you before. Come in both of you, the food is already on the table!

Therese also gave her a hug from obligation and was not surprised to feel the smell of liquor. She had been right in that Kathleen didn't manage to stay away from the booze. However, the apartment was unexpectedly cleaned, although it was some smudge here and there. It seemed that Kathleen had made a lot of effort before the visit. On the couch she saw some bed linen, for once nicely folded.

– Why do you still sleep on the sofa, Mom? You can take over my old room where there is a real bed.

– Well, Therese. I still hope you will come home again. Although you're probably right that it will not happen now. But you still may want to sleep here sometime every now and then?

– I doubt that, but in that case I can sleep on the couch.

– I'll see what I'll do. Now I think we should sit down and eat in the kitchen.

The kitchen was also quite clean, not as Therese remembered it last time she was here, the day she ended up at the foster home. The meatloaf tasted, after all, as good as Therese remembered it, and soon the conversation also eased out a little bit. Mia first got a small piece to try. She liked it, so she immediately asked for more. Therese looked at her mother's shaky hands when she sliced the meatloaf and put it on Mias's plate.

– Mom, have you started drinking again?

– Well, not really, I never stopped. I tricked the rehab center that I was sober. You know I can't handle myself without alcohol. It doesn't matter anymore, now that I know you're doing well without me.

Mia ate the food nicely while studying Kathleen. Suddenly she asked:

– Auntie Kathleen? Will you also die now?

Kathleen almost choked on the food from the surprise.

– What earth do you mean, little girl? Why should I die?

– My mom died when she no longer needed to take care of me. Auntie Tess said that you have the same sickness as my mother, so I thought you might also die now.

Kathleen looked at Therese with lifted eyebrows.

– Sickness?

– Well, I've explained to Mia that you're sick much like her mother. She was a drug addict, you're an alcoholic. You agree that they are a kind of sickness, right?

– Ah, then I understand. Well, you're right i some way.

– It was in any case a way to explain to Mia why her mother couldn't take care of her, just as you can't take care of me, though both of you loves us. At the same time, it was my explanation to her mother's suicide.

– Ouch, that's had to be painful, Mia little friend. I don't know your mother, but I guess she was sicker than I am. There is no big risk that I will die of my illness soon anyway.

– That's good. I don't want Auntie Tess to be as sad as I was.

– Wow, I can't melt this that Mia calls you "Auntie Tess" all the time.

– I don't let anyone but Mia call me for that, Therese said. She already has two mothers, so it would be strange if she called me "Mom."

– Auntie Tess is my heart-mother.

Kathleen and Therese laughed at her made up word. Then Therese realized that some sauce from her food was spilled on Mia cheek. She automatically took her napkin and wiped off her cheek and then gave her a hug that Mia answered. Kathleen looked at and realized that Therese really had mother feelings for Mia despite her young age. Kathleen closed her eyes and saw how Therese would soon become both adult and get her own well ordered family despite what she had been exposed to. The future looked really bright for her daughter, and finally she felt that she could relax and dare to trust her.

Now it seemed the best thing to do to let Therese go and let her go on with her life on her own.



CHAPTER 16

Child Custody Issue

Diana sat in the waiting room feeling uncomfortable. "Why do I have to be here?" she was thinking when she heard the familiar voice.

– Diana, welcome in.

– Hi again, Ashley. I'm coming.

She followed Ashley into the consulting room, still as impressed that she didn't seem have any problem with the wheelchair. Soon she laid down on the sofa again and Ashley asked her:

– It's been a while since we met. How are you doing now?

– Good I guess. You have already met Viola, and I think my life feels good nowadays. Actually, I don't understand why Carissa requires that I have to keep on coming here.

– You have experienced a major trauma, and it will take many years for you to overcome it completely. She probably only looks out for your best. I hope you don't mind talking to me.

– No, it's fine. You've always been so kind to me.

– I also feel today that there is something that worries you. Do you mind sharing what's bothering you?

– Well, right. Something has happened. How can you notice it? That's no big deal, really.

– It's my job to notice such things. Well what's new?

– Nothing important. I just received a new letter from my dad in prison yesterday and it brought up some bad memories.

– What was the letter about then?

– I don't know, I threw it away without opening it.

– Do you always throw the letters from him?

– Always.

– Why do you do it?

– There is nothing he can write as I would like to read anyway.

– So, why do you think so?

– Well, after that he did to me, it's quite obvious that I don't want to have anything to do with him.

– What if he wants to apologize for what he did. Wouldn't it feel good?

– He will never do that.

– Why do you think that? You don't know what's in those letters.

– Well, I don't know ... just don't want to read the letters ...

– Wouldn't it feel good if you read the letters?

– No, it wouldn't.

– Why is it so?

– Everything with him makes me feel bad.

– That's exactly what I mean. In order for you to move on with your life and feel good, you have to confront what makes you feel bad, and take control of those feelings. Just for that reason, it might be good if you contacted him, on your terms. That way you would be able to realize that he no longer can dictate your life.

Diana didn't like what Ashley said, but still understood that she probably was right. Ashley realized that they wouldn't go much further on that subject that day, so she started talking about other things instead. But Diana could not shake off

the unpleasant thoughts when she returned home and sat with Therese and Mia in the living room.

– Are you okay, Diana? You look like you've cried at that headshrinker.

– Well, I guess that's what you are supposed to do. To get your oppressed feelings out and such.

– So what's the thing that made you sad? You can see me as your second therapist, if you like.

– Like, we talked mostly about my dad. How I don't want to read the letters from him nor to visit him. I'll never never forgive him for what he did. Although Ashley probably understands that, she still wants to talk to him to "regain control", as she calls it.

– It's make a little sense in what she says, anyway. Think about me. I don't like my mother at all, she has made me feel so terribly bad. Yes, not as bad as your dad, of course, but still. But I sometimes hang out with her anyway. She is, after all, my real mother, and without her I didn't exist. Perhaps you should visit him at least once a month or so. He's still your real dad.

– But I don't want to.

– I'm not going to force you. But if you don't want to have anything to do with him, why don't you call Ronald for "Dad" then? And say "Mom" to Ruth?

Diana laughed at the whole idea.

– Maybe I should. But shouldn't you do that too then?

– No, not at all. I spend time with my mom sometimes. But Mia. You should really say "Mom" and "Dad" to them, because they have after all adopted you so they really are your parents.

– But, Auntie Tess. I love my Mum. I can't have two mothers.

– You're kind of already two mothers. You call me "heart-mother". Then Angela is your real mom. Then you can also let Ruth be your third mom, can't you?

– But what should I call my real mom if I call Auntie Ruth for "mom" then?

– Why don't you call Angela for your "real mom", me for "heart-mother" and then call Ruth for "mom"? How does that sound?

– Well, maybe.

– Don't you think Ruth and Ronald would become very happy then? Surely you like them too, because I do it anyway. Now me and Diana are too old to get new parents, but you're still so young. Try it out and check how it feels!

– Yup, Auntie Tess. I'll think about it anyway.

– And, Diana. Think about that with your dad. You can't let him push you around for the rest of your life. Visit the guy, look him straight into his eyes and say what you think about him. Then maybe he stops bothering you.

– Yep, Auntie Tess. I'll consider it.

– Get lost, Diana.

Mia could not help giggling when Diana also called Therese for "Auntie Tess," and soon all three laughed together.

~ ~ ~

A few weeks later, a new letter arrived that was addressed to Diana. It looked official, so Ruth gave it to Diana at the dinner table and urged her to open it.

– This doesn't seem to be from your dad, so you can read it.

– Strange, I don't expect letters from anyone. Wonder who it might be that's writing to me?

– Open it and you'll see.

Diana opened the letter and read it. She couldn't believe it so she read it again from the beginning. Then she started sobbing uncontrollably. Therese got up and put her arm around her shoulders.

– What's wrong, Diana?

She just handed the letter over to Therese, who read it. Ruth had also stood up and read it over Therese's shoulder.

– Darned bastard. When the fu-r animal will he leave her alone?

– What's it about? Ronald wondered.

– It's from a lawyer, Ruth explained. Apparently, Diana's dad has requested shared custody of Viola.

– Hey, Ronald. We must go back to that damn family court again, Therese said with an irritated voice. You can't let him just bulldoze over Diana like this. Not when you were so quick to help me.

– What! Has Peter requested custody? But he's in prison. I totally agree with you, Therese. We will take this to family court, Diana. Not a chance that we will let him get custody without a fight.

– And if you lose at family court, you and me just runs off together with Viola, Therese said. We just goes to a place where he can never find us. Somehow we can manage it, trust me.

– Do you really think that, Tess?

– Definitively.

– Tess, you know it's completely wrong way to run away. Let me talk to Carissa, and then we officially oppose to this. We are all on your side, Diana, and we will solve this one way or another.

Said and done. A couple of weeks later they were in family court again. Therese had insisted on coming with them, so she sat next to Diana. They had also brought Viola, but had put headphones on her with children's music because she was worried that what would be said was not suitable for her children's ears. Diana's CPS secretary was sitting on the other side of her, and it was she who started.

– Let me explain the basics here. Viola's mother is of course Diana, and she is a minor herself. That's why I'm here to speech for her. My name is Carissa Harper from the Child Protective Service. Diana is taken into protective custody because her father is in jail and her mother is deceased. We have thoroughly investi-

gated Diana's situation and I'm hereby handing over the report from this investigation.

Carissa gave a bunch of papers to the chairman.

– Diana's father is Peter Davis, the same person who applied for the custody of her daughter, Viola.

– Wait a minute! Is Mr. Davis's father to Viola or to Diana? He can't possibly be the father of both of them.

– Unfortunately, he is. Viola is both his daughter and granddaughter. Peter Davis is convicted in court for repeatedly committing sexual abuse on his daughter Diana, and Viola is the result of one of these rapes. We see this as a strong reason why Peter Davis is disqualified as custodian of Viola. As stated in the decision you just received, he has thus lost the custody of Viola's mother. Of course, we have also carefully investigated Viola's situation. There are several warning signs that she might be in danger. Her mother is a child herself. She lives in a foster home and her mother has tried to commit suicide. We have therefore made unannounced home visits to Viola and her mother, talked with her and interviewed Diana and her foster parents. The conclusion has been that Viola is both safe in her environment, incredibly well protected and receives an excellent parenting from her mother. Here is our investigation and our conclusions.

She left a thick stack of paper with the chairman. He flipped through the bundle that was several hundreds of pages.

– You don't expect us to read through this entire report?

– The Child Protective Service expects, no, it requires that you, in the event that you decide against our recommendation, also report adequate counter arguments to each statement in the report. According to the law you are obliged to do so, and the Child Protective Service will keep you personally responsible if you fail to address the report in its entirely.

– Well, now we're not there yet. In addition, as I understand nobody has opposed to that Diana will keep her custody over Viola. What this court is to decide is if she is to have sole custody.

– Certainly, but we also oppose the strongest that Diana will have to share custody with her father. All that can be achieved from that is insecurity and inappropriate growing environment for Viola. The reasons for this are clearly apparent from the report before you.

– Let's wait whether this report needs to be studied more closely or not. Mr. Davis, can you explain your reasons why you should be given joint custody of your daughter Viola?

Peter's lawyer got up and began to say that it was in Viola's interest to have two parents. He described in depth about investigations about the importance of children having contact with both their mother and their father. Then he called several expert witnesses who described how important it was for a baby to also have a male raw model in the form of a father.

Diana became increasingly worried as it seemed almost obvious that her dad would get custody too. Therese also listened, and became increasingly annoyed. When the lawyer finally finished, she therefore stood up and asked for permission to talk.

– Who are you then?

– My name is Tess Fergusson and I'm Diana's foster sister and probably the one who knows her best. For example, I know that she is too scared to tell the truth about all this, so I humbly asks for your permission to do just that.

– The court can't see a reason to deny it. However, we require that what you say is only self perceived, and not something that's hearsay.

– I thank you for allowing me to speak, Your Honor. What I have to say my own opinion, and not something I experienced myself because everything happened before I met Diana. All I'm asking is to explain what I think about it all.

– Please, Miss. You have the full freedom to express your opinion, and we will listen, even though I don't promise it will affect our decision.

Diana looked worried at Therese. She already knew what Therese thought of her dad, and had a hunch that what she would say would not be nice.

– First, I want you to think yourself into this situation. You are all men, so you may not understand how Diana feels. Close your eyes and just try to imagine that a big, strong man forced you down, pulled your pants down and then pushed his manhood right up into your ass hole! He is twice as strong as you and there is nothing you can do about it. In addition, you know that if you protest, you will no longer have any food or have somewhere to sleep because he has complete power over you.

All the judges had been closing their eyes, but now they all began to feel bad. They were all sick to their stomach by what she had said. But Therese was not ready yet. Not by a long shoot.

– Then think this happens several times a week. You are molested by this man several times every week. Not for a short time, but for several months, and even several years. Two and a half years you are molested! More than three hundred times! How would it feel, can you feel it?

The facial expressions of all the rooms were not pleasant to look at.

– This is exactly the way Diana is just feeling now, sitting in front of that bastard who is over there and wants to take her daughter away from her.

Peter's lawyer stood up.

– I protest. All this is completely irrelevant to what is being negotiated here today. We are not discussing my client's relationship with Diana, but his right to have a relationship with Viola.

– This is not a trial where it's possible to protest. Miss Fergusson has already said that she only expresses her opinion. Quite extreme opinions, it's admitted, yet she is entitled to express them.

– Exactly, so just sit down, paragraph rider. That scumbag that you represent is a rapist. That's nothing that I invented, a court has ruled that there is no reasonable doubt about it and have sent him to prison. Well, I've read and heard a lot about rape. There is apparently not about sex for the rapist, but it's about power. Having power triggers them to do it.

Several of the court members nodded.

– So for almost three years, the scumbag had total power over Diana, and loved every second of it. Diana was his bitch. And Diana, the poor girl, shrunk more and more until there was hardly nothing left of her. But then something happened that changed everything. If anyone is interested, I'm sure that it's written in the conviction. Diana told her psychologist who told the social who told the police. Suddenly he was picket up by the police and he became Diana's bitch instead.

When Peter heard those words, he shrugged and got an angry expression on his face and seemed as he was going to say something. But his lawyer stopped him.

– He was now in Diana's possession. She determined his destiny depending how much she told them about what had happened, and she chose to tell them everything. Now it's she who has the power over him instead, and he doesn't like it one bit. That's why he invented this request for custody of Viola. If you give him some custody, then you force Diana to visit him to surrender Viola, as often as you decide. In practice, it means giving him back the power over Diana. We just realized that it's the power that triggers a rapist, so in practice you will allow the scumbag to begin to rape Diana again if he gets custody.

The chairman wrinkled his eyebrows. Diana could not decide if it was due to disregarding what Therese said, or if he realized she was right.

– So, please don't give him any custody. Diana has already tried to kill herself once because of him, so if you make that decision, you can as well take a knife and drive it into her heart. You will become her murderer, believe me. I know her, so I know.

Peter's lawyer stood up again.

– Now I have to protest. The young lady has completely lost all reality.

– Any protests from you will be rejected, the chairman said. She just expresses her opinion, and nothing else. Continue, Miss Fergusson.

– Thank you, Your Honor. Then I would like to make you think about what it means to take care of a baby. One important task is to change her diaper, right? Babies do things in the diapers, and it may sometimes be smelly. I know, because I've changed on Viola sometimes when Diana was busy. Then first you have to pull off the trousers and the diaper, then you have to take for example a moist cloth to wash the baby's private parts. You really have to get into all the small wrinkles and so, because if you leave something in there, it gets irritated and maybe even infected. It's important to look closely on the private parts and wash and dry everything.

I don't know if you have toddlers yourselves, but at least you can try to imaging how it's done. Nothing of this is strange, it the way any mother or dad handles their babies. But imagine, instead, that is was a pedophile that changed that diaper. And then think how it would be if it was your own child. A pedophile was touching on your own child's most private parts. How would it feel?

The chairman and the others tried to think the thought, and they definitely didn't like the idea of it, and their faces showed it clearly.

– Over there is this a pedophile that wants to fiddle on Viola's genitals. Do you really want to let him do that?

– No, this is enough! the lawyer exclaimed. My client is not a pedophile. This is impingement, young lady!

– He has been convinced for having sex with Diana at twelve years old, and he definitely looks adult. Isn't that the definition of a pedophile? And he should be allowed to fiddle on Viola's crotch by the law?!?

Diana looked like she would vomit and even Carissa started to feel really bad.

– In any case, you can't think that a prison, filled with pedophiles, rapists and killers, is a safe environment for a small girl, right? So whatever you do, don't give this rapist back the power over Diana, don't kill Diana and don't let a pedophile fiddle on a baby inside a prison. Thanks for listening.

Therese sat down again, and the room went silent for a long time while everyone tried to collect themselves.

– Then I suppose everyone has got their say, the chairman said, with trembling voice. I am asking everyone to leave the room while we confers.

Therese followed Carissa and Diana out. She had tears in her eyes while she cried out loud. Therese got a bad conscience when she saw it, put her arm over her shoulders and handed her a handkerchief.

– I'm really sorry for that Diana. Forgive me!

– Why? She cried. What you said is terribly and awful, but it's true. I think it went home, and then it's worth it. Thank you, Tess, for daring to say everything that we all know, but that no one else was brave enough to say.

Diana hugged Therese warmly and felt that she was a real friend, and not just one living in the same house. Then they sat there waiting and worrying. Peter sat a bit away with his lawyer and looked intensely at them. Diana tried to ignore him, but felt more and more discomfort. Eventually, Therese was fed up, stood up and raised his voice to him.

– What are you looking at, scumbag? Come over here instead, I'll kick your balls up into your ass.

Peter got an angry face, but he looked away anyhow. He almost looked scared to Diana's delight.

After what felt like eternity they was all called back into the room.

– Thank you for waiting. We have now made a decision regarding the claim on custody over Viola, as Mr Davis requested. First, I want to explain that our decision can only be based on Viola's best interest, not what may be good or bad for her mother. As a parent, you are expected to make sacrifices for your offspring. In addition, the fact that Mr. Davis is in prison is not significant either. There are rooms in prisons where families can socialize.

Diana felt like something cold was grabbing her heart. Was she about to lose the battle over Viola?

– At the same time we have seen how much Viola is loved and well taken care of not only by her mother but also by the other people in her home. In addition,

her father is still convicted of crimes linked to both Viola and her mother. It will be an extremely sad day in this family court if we were to let a rapist gain the custody of the child who is the result of his rape. Therefore, we reject Mr Davis's request for custody, and also forbids him to meet his daughter Viola.

Diana exhaled loudly. Therese hugged her and congratulated her warmly.

– Finally, the court decides that Diana Davis will have sole custody of Viola, in spite of her young age, as she has shown great maturity and is particularly well suited to be a mother. With that, this trial is terminated.

While a clearly irritated Peter was taken out of the room by the guards, Diana also thanked Carissa.

– Thank you, Carissa, because you took my side. You're also my hero together with Tess.

– I didn't actually take your party. It was Viola I wanted to protect even though she is not my responsibility, really. Now it's clear that the responsibility for her is yours and nobody's else, and I'm convinced that this is the best thing that can happen to Viola. Well, also for you of course.

– Come on, Diana. Let's go home to our horrible foster home.

– Horrible? It's amazing, I think.

– Yes, I agree. Just pulling your leg. Ruth and Ronald are the best thing that has happened to me. Without them I would be completely lost.

– Me too. And now I feel better than ever. Perhaps I'll even visit my father in prison sometime, just to annoy him. But he will never meet Viola, I'll make sure of that.

– Good, Diana. Now you show who decides! Go to that prison and mock him because he has to sit there for what he has done to you. Just gain some more confident and your life will be amazing.

Diana and Therese went home together as best sisters. That night, Diana slept better than she could ever remember that she had done before. It felt like all the

worries had disappeared and her heart was easier it has ever been since her mom died. Now nothing could stop her, or make her feel bad.

~ ~ ~

The semester was coming to it's end, and both Diana and Therese were busy with school work. Although Nathalie and her gang no longer dared to mess with any of them, Diana was still getting taunted in the corridors. She usually walked with Leonard, even though they encountered more mockery than encouragement.

– Check that out! The whore and the trick! Come on, show what you can do.

Leonard just looked down to the floor and didn't protest. The girl that had shouted laughed when she saw that Diana got red in her face and continued to mock her and Leonard. Then Diana decided that enough is enough and decided to stand up for herself instead, so she went up to the girl who had shouted.

– Stop that now! I'm so tired to listen to your ugly mouth! If you don't have anything nice to say, just keep quiet.

The girl who had been teasing her got an angry face and looked challenging at Diana. This time she met the other's eyes steadily without folding down. Suddenly she turned around and left without a word. Diana became really surprised and became even more determined not to fall back anymore. Luckily, she had not seen Therese who standing behind her pulling a finger over her throat, and that's why the girl had pulled back.

– I'm sorry, Diana, Leonard said. It should have been me who defended you instead of you having to defend yourself.

– It's cool, Lenny. I totally understand how you feel. But I've been through so much so I've become tired of being afraid. You have been a great support to me, but now I have to learn to take care of myself.

From that day on, Diana had a new self esteem, and stood up for herself. A few days later she was called "concubine" by a girl named Heather. Then she went up to her with confident steps and said with a firm voice:

– Why are you calling me for a whore? Do you think it's fun, or what?

– I'm sorry. It was not my intention, I didn't know what that word means. I've just heard others call you that. Do you know why you're called that?

– Maybe that's because I have a baby, but that doesn't mean I'm a whore. They just don't understand why I got pregnant.

–Wow, do you have a baby? What cool! Is it a boy or a girl?

– It's a girl.

– Great, what's her name and how old is she?

– Her name is Viola and is a little more than ten months.

– You lucky one that already has a little baby. Wonder ... I wonder if can meet her sometime? I love babies!

– Sure you can come and visit me sometimes.

Then they sat talking about children, boys and everything else as if they had been friends for a long time. Diana could barely grasp that it could be this easy to find a new friend. She felt that she should have become tough a long time ago.

As the weeks passed, Diana and Heather became closer friends. The best thing Heather knew was lying on a blanket on the floor cuddling with Viola when she was visiting Diana. She was not the least questioning when she found out that Diana was living in a foster home and when she was told how she was treated by her dad, she just got sad and said she was on Diana's side. It felt like Diana could talk to her about anything. Heather also revealed some of her own intimate secrets to Diana so she really began to feel safe at last.

Soon it was Christmas, and the whole foster family celebrated together. It was the happiest Christmas that Diana had since her mother died, and the first happy Christmas that Mia and Therese had ever had. Mia had never celebrated Christmas, so it was completely new to her, while Therese most often experienced her mother getting extra drunk at Christmas because she was free and spent extra time with her drunkard friends.

Both Mia and Diana felt that their lives were complete, but Therese nevertheless found that she was missing something, even though she was not really sure what it was.



CHAPTER 17

John

John caught sight of a girl at the student lockers. She was new at school, and he thought she looked quite pretty. John was both athletically built and well–dressed so he used to charm most girls, even though he had not turned sixteen years old yet. He went up to the girl with self-confident steps and began to talk to her.

– Hey, pretty girl. New at school, right?

The girl didn't seem interested to answer, but closed her locker and began to leave. John put his arm against the wall and thus effectively blocking the girl so that she couldn't get away without pushing him away. She looked around with worried face to see if anyone could help her. But John didn't care that she seemed scared and just continued while flexing his biceps.

– My name is Johnny and I'm the most popular guy in school. What about going out with me? Come on now, I can give you the time of your life!

The girl began to look scared and pressed herself back towards the lockers. John just kept on talking his smooth talk, convinced that it would make the girl interested eventually. Suddenly there was another girl who squeezed herself in between him and the pretty girl.

– You there! What do you think you're doing? Doesn't you understand that the girl is not interested in you and your macho attitude? Back off now.

The tough girl was not big, but when she pushed him, he took a few steps backwards of pure surprise. The other girl mumbled a "thank you" and managed to sneak away from them.

– Who are you that dares to defy Johnny?

– My name is Tess, and I'm not afraid of you or anyone else! You're not as tough as you think and not even half as charming, so just fuck of. And you leave that girl alone from now on, do you hear that?

John started to walk away because he didn't want to provoke Therese. But when he heard how some spectators giggled a bit, then he turned around in a desperate attempt to regain his face.

– You just watch out, girl! he said.

Therese bounced through the corridor and grabbed John's tie and pulled him down to her face.

– Or what else, tough guy? Are you going to beat a small girl up while everyone is watching, or what? I've been hit before, so don't think that it makes me scared. So, just try it!

– What could you do if I punched you, little puny girl?

– You'll find out afterwards. Perhaps I'm a expert in kung fu, or maybe I'm a expert in gossiping to the principle. Come on now and hit me to find out what it will be.

John stood gazing at Therese who had released him now. She just stared back without waving her eyes for a second. Finally, John realized that he would lose independence if he tried to stare her down or if he tried to beat her up. So he just turned around and left without a word. The girl he had harassed came to Therese and thanked her warmly.

– Thank you very much. He really scared me up.

– No problem. If he's harassing you again, just ask for Tess, I'll make sure that he catches hell, you can count on it.

John proceeded to his lesson with mixed feelings. One way he was really annoyed on this Tess girl who had the guts to stand up against him. On the other hand, he liked her toughness. He could not stop thinking about her in the following days. She didn't have the most beautiful face, but still he couldn't get her face

out of his mind. Not to mention the memory of getting body contact with her when she pressed herself in front of him at the cabinets, and he felt a warm feeling inside when he remembered it. When he asked around a bit, he learned about how she had put herself into respect with the other girls at school, and became even more interested with her.

Without being able to stop himself, he began to look for her at every break and tried to look extra charming in her presence. Therese noticed his efforts but ignored him to his great disappointment and surprise. Most girls used to be interested in him when he flexed his muscles in front of them, but this girl seemed completely immune to all his tricks. During the breaks he had become so distant that his best friend was wondering.

– Hi there, Johnny! Are you present? I just said that the girl over there has the deepest cleavage I've ever seen and you don't even look at her.

– Ah, sorry. My thoughts was elsewhere.

– Up in the sky, it seems like. What is it about?

– You know, that girl Tess has no cleavage at all, but when she pushed herself in front of me, I actually felt her breasts through her blouse.

– Wow, cool. Though it may not be that interesting, she's kind of skinny.

– Certainly, but she's still pretty good looking.

– I wouldn't call her good looking. She's quite average, I think. But sure, she's not ugly anyway.

– She has a kind of rustic style, like nothing seems to worry her. Her smile is absolutely amazing, haven't you seen it?

– Hey, Johnny. I actually think you're in love with her!

– In love? No way. She is a real pain. You got to know that she went after me? I probably deserved it, but still.

– There you see!

– What do you mean?

– You already defend her. You are in love. Admit it!

– Just drop it.

– Why don't you invite her to a date?

– Do you really think I want to go out with that angry thug?

– Yes, I think that's exactly what you want. You're literally drooling when talking about her. Invite her out, indeed. Or are you afraid of her?

The school bell called for the next lesson so they had to stop the conversation. John had become even more thoughtful. "In love? Impossible! But why do I always think about her then? ". He just could not let go of the sight of Therese's beautiful smile and self confident appearance.

The next day, when Therese came out of school on her way home, she saw John standing there seemingly waiting for her. She didn't get very worried when he stepped in front of her, just a bit curious.

– What do you want this time, your self pretend tough guy?

– Well, Tess. It would feel that it would be an honor to me if you could consider going out to eat with me this Saturday?

– What is this? Are you asking for a date?

– That is correct. I simply suggest a small rendezvous while dining at a classy restaurant where I obviously are going to take care of the bill. No request for any counter performance from your side, and I promise to behave like a gentleman all evening.

– What makes you think that I would be the least interested in you?

– There is no rational reason that you would be the slightest interested. But I'm definitely interested in you and I don't want anything higher than being allowed to get to know you. At the same time, I hope that if you eventually get to know me better then you may find that I'm not a lout all the time.

– Only sometimes, then? You admit?

– Obvious I do. I have often behaved inappropriately towards the girls here at school. There are many who are flattered by it, but far from everyone. So sure I've made a few sad, but who's perfect? In any case, with you I'm asking politely. And if you will turn my invitation down, I will accept it without being belligerent. But I really would be very happy if you to accept a first date so that we get to know each other. As I said, I assure you that I will be a gentleman throughout the whole evening and treat you like a Lady without making any assumptions.

Therese looked at him, pondering. He didn't dress like the typical bully but had nice clothes with a white shirt, jacket and tie. In addition, he spoke unexpectedly distinguished. Perhaps he was not a Neanderthal anyhow.

– Sure why not? Free food can always be good. Pick me up at six o'clock. here is my address.

She wrote her address on his arm to his badly hidden delight. The rest of the week he went as if on needles until Saturday, both excited and worried. When he finally rang on the doorbell he was dressed in his finest suit and tie. It was Ruth who opened the door for him.

– Hi, you must be Johnny, I assume. Come in and wait for a while, Tess has taken the female's privilege to be a bit late.

John followed her in and sat down waiting in the living room. After about ten minutes Therese came into the room. She wore her only dress and with Diana's help had fixed her hair and put on makeup so she didn't look that ordinary anymore. John pulled his breath of surprise and stood up immediately. At that moment he felt that she was the most beautiful girl he had ever met, and he explained it to her too. Politely he offered his arm to her and then they went out together. To her surprise, there was a cab outside waiting for them.

– I'm too young to have a driving license, so this is the best thing I could accomplish, John said when he saw her surprised face.

He opened the rear door as courtesy to her and waited until she sat down before closing the door and walking around the taxi to sit down next to her. The restaurant that John had chosen was the most luxurious one that Therese had ever

been in. The menu was short and with really high prices, but John didn't seem to care so she chose a meat dish that seemed exciting. John ordered for both of them and then sat just watching Therese, unsure how to start, which was unusual for him. Eventually it was Therese who started.

– Well, little Johnny. Now we are sitting here. Tell me a little about who you really are. You don't seem to be such a bad boy as you are trying to pretend.

– It's probably not a very interesting conversation topic to talk about me. I'm just a transcendent lout that believes himself to be God's gift to all women, though I'm not. Can't you tell me a little bit about yourself instead?

– Well, that's not a funny story, really. Dad drove himself to death under the influence when I was six, Mom is still a alcoholic and I live in a foster home because I was always drinking and smoking pot with a gang downtown. Both the police and CPS knows me too well, but now I have removed all the piercing I had and started a new life. No fun at all, you see.

John became overwhelmed by her verbiage, and over how difficult background she apparently got. It was also hard for him to understand how she could tell something so terrible with such light tone. It took a while before all the information sunk in and he responded:

– Your life seems to have had many adversities, which is extremely regrettable, I believe.

– Same, same, it's all history now.

– You mentioned the police, is it true that you have a history with them? Have you spent any time in prison, too?

– No, it's mostly a lot of drunkenness and misdemeanors. But I was actually sitting in a cell for one night, charged with possession, but that was just bullshit. The judge rejected everything on the spot. I was just a bit messy, nothing serious. What about you?

– Well, I have not had such problems with my upbringing. I guess it's a correct description that I had a happy childhood. My father is quite strict, but at the same

time both fair and kind and my mother has always treated me well. Do you have any siblings, by the way?

– Nope, always been alone. Self?

John got an indeterminate feeling that Therese might not be so tough actually. Her short, blank response also suggested that there were significantly more emotions behind it than she wanted to show openly. He decided to open himself a little more, hoping that she would do it too.

– I also feel quite alone, really. Certainly, I have two brothers, one older and one younger. In addition, a big sister. Still I've always felt a bit outside in some way. Those three were always so tight together, well, they still are. I don't really enjoy that environment, so I became a bit of a rebel.

– It's noticeable at school. Have you always been such a high-hat against others?

– Most likely there are some characteristic like that in me. I have always tried to get popular so I would not feel so alone. That was probably the main reason why I dated Nathalie.

– What!?! Have you been together with that snobby bitch?

– Yes, unfortunately. I realized after a while that she have an attitude problem and then I dropped her. I recently heard you had a conflict with her, but I promise we have not been together for over half a year. It amazing that you dared to challenge her like that! I myself feel really insecure and a bit lost, so my toughness is probably a bit of a mask.

He looked at Therese to see if she reacted on that he opened up like that, but she kept silent. For the rest of the meal, he continued to try to make her open herself more, but it didn't work at all. After a while, he changed the subject and began to talk about a little easier things, such as the school and his interests. She then melted a bit and began to talk warmly about her plans to become a chef one day, and John told her about his interest in technical matters and that his plan was to become an engineer.

The conversation went more an more easier and when he finally left her at the foster home, it felt like he had managed to get Therese a little bit interested in him so he dared to ask:

– What do you say about mingling tomorrow, Therese? We don't have to do anything especial, maybe just walk in the park.

– Well, I already have plans for tomorrow.

– It was sad to hear. What kind of plans, if you allow me to be that curious.

– I have already promised Mia that we will go to a playground for children together with Diana and Viola, and I always keep what I promise.

– Who are Mia, Diana and Viola?

– Mia and Diana are my foster sisters and Viola is Diana's daughter.

– It sound really wonderful that you want to spend time with them. Would it be possible for me to tag along too? I promise to keep myself in the background not to disturb your get-together.

Therese could not find any reason to say no, so when they took the bus to the playground the next day John was together with them to his great joy. While Diana was sitting with Viola in the baby department, Mia played around among all the climbing gear and ball sea and Therese was happy to join her. John thought that he never heard anything as beautiful as when Therese laughed, while he was trying to keep up with them in his nice clothes. John also became fascinated when he saw how Therese took care of Mia. He was also happy to see how happy Therese was. Yes, everything with Therese made him happy.

In the evening, he felt as he was flying on a cloud on his way to the student dorm where he slept in the weeks. Actually, he still lived with his parents, but they lived outside town and it was several hours bus ride, so he used to be there only during weekends.

He had already hopelessly fallen in love with Therese and almost pursued her at school. John's friends found it amusing and tried to mock him for it, but it just ran of him. Instead, he continued to invite her to nice restaurants, and she never

turned him down, mostly because she loved to immerse the environment in a nice restaurant while dreaming that it was herself that was cooking the fantastic food there.

~ ~ ~

A couple of weekends later, he had to go home again, because his mother, Philomena, had begun to wonder why he no longer came home. When he entered the parlor where his parents often were sitting, his whole face almost shone like a sun. Philomena could not help exclaiming:

– Hello dear, it's really glowing from you today! What has happened?

– I've met the most wonderful girl, and I've been dating her the past few weeks. That's why I haven't been here for a while.

– Have you been reconciled with Nathalie again?

– No, this is a completely different girl. Her name is Therese Fergusson and she is the most beautiful girl in the world. Well, for me anyway. Her laughter is absolutely amazing!

– Is she from a proper family? I can't remind any family that's called Fergusson, his father, Frederick, said.

– I really don't know. She doesn't talk so much about herself, just that she didn't have it easy growing up. But I don't care about that!

John continued to bubble about everything he did with Therese and his parents began to realize that i seemed as he was thinking about a future with her. On Sunday he went back to his student dormitory again while his parents began to discuss his relationship. They were a bit worried about the fact that she apparently had a difficult childhood, maybe even was involved with bad company. In particular, they were concerned about what she or John didn't want to talk about.

His father became increasingly worried during the week that went when John didn't keep in touch because he was busy with Therese. Finally he could not control himself any longer, but he felt he had to know more about this girl that his son was courting. John had given her a cell phone to make it easier for him to contact

her. Frederick know her number because it was he that had handed him the phone to give her.

Therese jumped when her phone rang. She was still not used to having a cell phone. She looked at the screen and didn't recognize the number but answered anyway.

– Hi, this is Tess.

– Good afternoon, Miss Fergusson. My name is Frederick DeBeaumont. You don't know me, but you know my son, John, if I'm not mistaken.

– Well, that's true, I guess. He has asked me out a few times.

– As he described it, you are his girlfriend. Now, I've been told that you're having a bit troublesome childhood and I'm wondering if I could ask you some questions about it?

– I'm not very fond of talking about that, especially not with a stranger.

– Well, that is most understandable. But although I am currently a stranger, it's a situation that will soon change if your relationship develops. My problem is that when you have a position like mine, there are always some individuals who wants to exploit us, and I want to avoid that.

– What the heck are you implying? Are you claiming that I'm planning to abuse my relationship with Johnny in some way?

– I don't claim anything, it was more general observation when I heard about your background. Just in order to eliminate any risk of misunderstanding, it's very important that we can discuss this a bit. Hence this phone call.

– I want you to understand that my background doesn't concern you at all. I don't care who you are or what kind of "position" you have.

– In some cases, one's background can be important in a relationship, especially if they comes from different social classes. Would it not possible to discuss this in a civilized way, to come to a consensus about where we stand?

– Get lost, Therese said with an angry voice and hung up.

Frederick was surprised when she just hung up in his ear and tried to call her back. First time there was no answer, then he didn't get through because Therese had switched off her phone. He was searching for her online and found an address for someone who was probably her mother. There was no phone number, but because the workday had already ended, he decided to ask his driver, Charles, to pass by her home on his way home, because he worked downtown this day. Soon he rang the doorbell in the shabby staircase. The door was opened by a woman who apparently was heavily intoxicated to his big shock.

– Good afternoon. May I ask if you have a daughter, about fifteen years old, named Therese Fergusson?

– You can count on that, Kathleen spluttered. She's the big pri- hic ... pride of mine, you schee.

– Excellent, then I've at the right place. My name is Frederick DeBeaumont and is the father of your daughter's boyfriend. Would it be possible to come in and talk a little with your daughter?

– Sure, that's okey. Therese isch not here now, but just come in. Wow, so she got a boyfriend now, damn it!

She was impressed by the exclusive costume and thought it was amazing that Therese had such a nice boyfriend. She hadn't talked to Therese since New Year, and didn't even know she had a boyfriend. Frederick went in and became increasingly worried when looking around in the apartment. It was dirty and messy with empty bottles everywhere. The floor could only be regarded as filthy, and the stench of alcohol and body odor laid heavy over the room. Kathleen opened a door with broken hinges and pointed through the door.

– This is Therese's room. Just go in and che- hick it out.

Frederick entered the room with hesitating steps. It was also in disorder, and the dust rags covered most of the floor. On the wall was an old picture of Therese, as she had looked before, and he frowned.

– Could this be a photograph of your daughter, Mrs Fergusson?

– Yes, that's right. Therese knows what she wants and don't give a fuck what others say. She's my pride you see, so you're make damn sure not to criticize her. Here, check out all her stuff.

Kathleen talked about how tough and independent Therese was and Frederick became increasingly worried about what he was told. She was routing around in the closet and the drawers and he felt more and more discomfort about the whole situation. When she opened a drawer and began to show off her daughter's old underwear, he quickly retired out of the room.

– Thank you very much, Mrs Fergusson. I think I've seen enough now. You have a ... special daughter, that I'm sure that you are proud of.

– You can be damn sure about that. She's as great as anyone can be.

– But now I will not disturb you anymore, and will let you handle your business in peace. I wish you a good evening, my lady.

Frederick hurried out and was not only feeling discomfort from what he had seen in the apartment, but also in the whole surroundings. It felt like he could be attacked and robbed at any time. He quickly got into the back seat of the car again.

– Charles, can you please drive me down to the police station? I think I want to talk to my good friend Max there.

– Of course, sir, he replied.

Frederick talked to Max and asked if he knew anything about this girl. Max was a commissioner at the police and to Frederick's shock, he had heard of Therese. He printed out her rap sheet to give to him. In included the mug shot taken when she was arrested for drug possession. While Charles drove him the long way home, he read the papers with increasing concern. When he got home he showed the papers, including the picture on Therese, for his wife. He explained that he was very concerned about John's relationship and described his visit to her mother. Philomena tried to calm him down, but was a little worried herself too.

Meanwhile, Therese, who had became really annoyed by the phone call, had approached Ruth to complain.

– You know, this guy Frederick DeBeaumont called me and began to nose into my privacy. Just because his son is dating me.

– What did you say? Is your Johnny the son of DeBeaumont's? I didn't know that. They are quite famous. Wait a minute, I'll find a magazine to show you!

Ruth searched and found a gossip magazine and showed her an article. It was about the DeBeaumont family at their mansion. On one of the smaller pictures, Therese could clearly see John with his parents. She took the magazine and read the entire article. Then she also browsed for information online about them via her cell phone and found quite a lot.

The following day was a Friday and she tried to avoid John and managed until late afternoon. When he found her, he went straight up to her.

– Hi, Tess. I've ben missing you today. What do you want to do this weekend?

– Well, Johnny, I've been thinking a bit. It's probably best if we stop meeting each other before it gets too serious. We don't really fit together.

– What on earth are you saying? In what way have I wronged you to cause it?

– You have not done anything wrong. Your dad called me last night and asked a lot of nosy questions. He more or less claimed that I was only interested in you to be able to marry rich. I didn't know you came from such a rich family, and he made me realize I don't fit in. Therefore, it's best that we break up. It has been nice to hang out with you and I hope we can continue to be friends?

Therese left him frozen to the floor. This had come as a complete shock to him. He returned to his student room and laid down on his bed in utter dismay. The whole evening passed like in a nightmare and didn't know what to do. During the night he couldn't sleep but became increasingly annoyed and angry from being dumped. But it was not at all angry on Therese.

The next day he tried to call Therese, but she didn't answer. When he rang on the door, Ruth just answered that she was not at home, but had gone out with Di-

ana and Mia. John went around looking in the parks nearby trying to find her but failed to find her somewhere because they had gone to a larger playground further away with Viola and Mia this day. He instead took the bus home to his parents. He became increasingly upset while he was in the bus and when he finally arrived, he was furious when he rushed into the parlor to confront his parents.

– What the heck have you done, Dad? You've destroyed everything for me!

Frederick looked confused at him.

– Hello, are you here? What did you say? I don't understand what you mean.

– Tess dumped me yesterday because you had called her and said she's not good enough for me. I love her and now she doesn't want to be with me anymore, and it's your fault. How can you do this to me? She's my everything and now she's gone. Why do you always have to ruin everything for me?

– It's not true that I said she's not good enough ...

– In any case, I want to be with her much more than being here. If I have to choose between you and her, then I choose her. I hate you for what you did. The only reason I came here is to pick up my things to permanently move into town. Tonight I will go to her and beg and beg that she will take me back. If I leave school, get a job and an apartment then I never need to come here again ever! When I say I never want to have anything to do with you anymore then maybe she will change her opinion and take me back. Goodbye for ever!

John rushed out of the room to go to his room. Frederick made an attempt to follow him but Philomena stopped him.

– Don't go after him, Frederick. You will only make him more upset. Let me go to him to try to calm him down.

Philomena knocked on John's open door and went inside his room. He was tearing out all his stuff from the closet and packing it in bags.

– Don't try to make me change my mind, Mom. I'm going to Tess and it doesn't matter what you say.

– Do you love this girl that much?

– Yes, Mom, I do!

– Calm down, John. Sit down a while so you and I can have a little talk about this. I sure that we can find a solution.

– There's no solution, Dad has ruined everything!

– You know he didn't do it to be mean. He may be a little insensitive sometimes, but really wants well. Apparently, Tess has a pretty hard background, and he's worried about you.

– I know everything I need to know about her background, and I don't care. She lives in a foster home because her mother didn't care about her. But she is different now, and I care about her. She is the best that has happened to me ever and I love her so much.

– John, honey. I don't know anything about Tess, but I trust you. You wouldn't talk like this if she were a bad girl. Please, can't you stop running around like a mad man and try to calm down a bit and sit down for a while. Then maybe we can find a solution in this situation. We have always been able to talk to each other, don't you agree?

John took a deep breath and sat down on the bedside. He breathed heavily and unsteady when his mother sat down beside him and took his hand.

– Alright, Mom. You have always supported me. Do you have any suggestions?

– If you give me her phone number, I'll call her and try to persuade her to come here so we can talk about this peacefully and calmly. Please, let me try. What could go wrong from trying?

He exhaled loudly and hesitated at first. Then he gave Therese's number to his mother, who then dialed it on her cell phone. Therese had heard the phone call before, but didn't want to talk to John. This time she didn't recognize the number so she answered.

– Hi, it's Tess.

– Hi, Tess. My name is Philomena and is John's mother. First of all, I'm begging you not to hang up without listening to what I have to say. You don't have to

say anything, and I will not ask you any questions. All I'm asking for is that you listen to what I have to say. Please, Tess, I beg you on my bare knees!

– Alright, I'll listen then, she said slightly irritated.

– First, I want to say is that I don't know you at all, and therefore I have no preconception of how you are as a person. All I know is that John seems to be very fond of you, and I trust his judgment. Apparently my husband has called you and been rude. I hope that you understand, I can't either defend him or apologize for him, he have to stand for himself. However, I am convinced he is sad about what he said. Regardless of that, the most important to me is that John is happy, and if you make him happy, I'll accept you whoever you are.

Therese grunted, still annoyed.

– You may not understand how important you are to him. He is completely heartbroken that you apparently broke up with him yesterday. Today he came here very upset and yelled at his father for what has happened. Right now, John is in the process of packing all his things to leave home to live with you instead. I don't know any details other that he leaves us for you. He wants to leave his comfortable life here because he hopes that he with that can repair the relationship with you. That surly has to be of some importance, don't you think? I don't want him to leave us, but somehow it warms my heart that he has found someone whom he loves so much that he is prepared to make such a great sacrifice. At the same time, I am disappointed that he feels he must choose between you and us.

Philomena paused to give Therese a chance to answer. She didn't hear anything from the phone and was worried that she had hung up.

– Are you still there, Tess?

– I'm here, she answered unusually quietly.

– Please, Tess, I just want to see John happy again, and the only way seems to be that you and he solves the problems between you. What I'm asking you is that you comes here to us tonight to talk about this. In fact, I've already sent Charles, our chauffeur, to the city to pick you up just in case you accept. He doesn't know the address where you live, so I have to call to tell him that, if you accept my

plead. Nobody will understand more than me if you refuse to come here, but I beg you to please allow me this gift to try and repair your relationship with John, if that's possible.

It was completely silent on the other end, but she still continued.

– I guarantee you that if you choose to come, I will make sure that you will be taken home the same minute that you request it, even if I have to drive you myself tonight. Of course you are also welcome to stay the night here, if you choose that. You get it anyway you want, if you just gets into the car when Charles arrives to you and comes here. So, please Tess, can't you do me this favor, just for this one time, even though you don't know me at all?

It was still completely silent in the handset. Finally Philomena asked:

– Tess, are you still listening? I don't want to hurt you, I really hope that you do understand that.

The silence was so compact that Philomena almost became convinced she was gone. But that would have been the detected by the cell phone, so she stayed on and waited.

– Well, if I choose to come then, what should we talk about, really?

– The most important thing is that you and John are talking. But I'm not going to lie to you. Obviously, my husband will want to ask you some questions as well. It will surely be discomforting, but I will not allow him go over the limit, but I will support you all the way. You don't have to feel that you don't dare to come here because of him. I will tell him that I rather leave him and accompany John to the city than to let him scare you away, and I'm going to make sure he understands it. What do you think, Tess? Please come here and talk to us! I appeal to you to accept my invitation.

Therese sat silent for a long while, to Philomena's agony. Therese was completely shocked that John apparently was prepared to leave his luxurious life for her sake, and now his mother said that she was even ready to leave her husband for the same reason. She could never have dreamed in her wildest imagination

that something this overwhelming could happen just because of her. Finally she responded to Philomena's relief.

– Sure, okay then. If it's that important then I'll come then.

Philomena sighed deeply of relief and thanked her. She got the address and put down the handset. Throughout the conversation, John had laid stomach down on his bed trying to hide the tears in his eyes, but had listened to what his mother had said to Therese on the phone.

– She's coming, John. Charles is picking her up now. Then we can talk to each other here and fix this. Wipe your eyes now.

– Nevertheless, I'll never forgive Dad for it.

– Now we should not judge anyone in advance. I don't defend Dad, but we don't know what he told her. At the same time, I will not allow him to judge Tess in advance, but now we all have put all the cards on the table so that there is no further misunderstanding between any of us. Then we'll see how far it takes us.

Philomena walked out from the room while calling Charles to give him the address. Then she returned to Frederick to inform that she invited Therese with a voice that would not accept any contradictions. Meanwhile, Therese went to talk to Ruth about what had happened. Therese wanted her opinion about her decision to go there. She supported Therese for her choice and said that she not only had permission to go home to Johnny to speak out, but also that she should do it. In addition, she thought Therese should dress nicely and make the best impression possible on his parents. So when Charles came to the door an hour later and met Therese for the first time, he was surprised by how well-groomed she looked in spite of what he had gotten described to himself. She had borrowed one of Diana's best dresses, fixed her hair and put on some of the makeup she got on her birthday.

– Enchanté, miss Fergusson. Are you ready to leave?

– Of course. But just call me Tess instead. Without "Miss". You were called Charles, right?

– That's correct, Tess. This way, please.

He walked in front of her to the car and opened and held the rear door for her. She looked surprised at him. Then she opened the front door instead and sat down on the passenger seat. Charles closed the two doors without any facial expression and sat down behind the steering wheel. On the way to the mansion she asked Charles what he thought about John's parents. He was very happy to share his opinion, and Therese began to get a nicer picture of Frederick, as Charles told her that he enjoyed working for them. They always treated him kindly and without acting condescendingly. The car journey became unexpectedly enjoyable, and she really began to like Charles who talked casually and frankly with her about his life together with DeBeaumonts. The atmosphere in the car was both pleasant and enjoyable.

Thanks to this, she was much calmer and benignant when Charles finally escorted her into the parlor where John sat and waited together with his parents. Frederick was chocked when he saw her. It was as if this girl in front of him was a totally different from the pictures he had seen, although it obviously was the same person. He invited her to sit down and then looked at her. She met his eyes firmly without the slightest uncertainty while waiting for him to start saying something. Frederick had become totally out of balance from her appearance and steady eye glance. He realized that he had to weigh his first words extremely carefully, not to raise both her and his wife's indignation, not to mention John's.

– Miss Fergusson. I am very grateful that you accepted my dear wife's invitation to come here to talk with us. First of all, I would like to apologize for what I said to you over the phone yesterday. Although I still don't understand what it was that I said that you received negatively, I realize there must have been something and that it was entirely my fault. I beg for your understanding that my apology is from my heart. In addition, I want to emphasize that it was to apologize that I tried to call you back directly, but I understand that you were not ready to accept it then, and maybe you are not even now ready to accept it.

– Well, I'm not rancorous, so for sure. I accept your apology, though I still think that my background is none of your business.

– You are completely correct about that. However, my son's future is of most concern for me. And if you will be part of his future, I hope you can understand that your future is also in my interest. And each individual's future is largely decided from that individual's background, isn't that true?

– Maybe, Therese answered a little bit hesitant. You still have no right to nose into my past. But now I'm here after all, so let's take care of this so I can go home after that.

– Thanks for that favor. I will do my best not to have any preconceived sentences. However, I you want to know, Miss Fergusson, that I went to the apartment where you live, and it was a not very nice experience. I understand that you have not had it easy in your life, and that is not your fault, but this destructive environment must have had a negative impact on you, everything else would be extremely unexpected.

– The apartment, huh? Not the villa? Did you meet my mother in the apartment as well? I suppose she was drunk as usual?

– Your mother definitely seemed to be intoxicated but I want to emphasize that she was most kind to talk to me and she showed me your room and clothes. Now I don't want you to get the impression that I was snooping around, but it was she that opened the cabinets and the drawers in spite of that I did not ask her to do it.

– Well, I don't understand why she still has my old clothes there and why she's not using that room herself. You see, Frederick, I don't live there anymore. You can ask Charles where he picked me up and who opened the door there. I live in a foster home just because my mom is unable to take care of me because she is an alcoholic. It doesn't matter if you believe me or not, Frederick, but I'm a both kind and diligent girl.

Philomena could not help smiling when Therese addressed her husband with his first name as natural as if he were an old friend to her.

– So you mean you didn't follow your mother in her footsteps, and started drinking yourself?

– I have not become a drunkard like her, if that's what you think. The only thing I have ever drunk is beer. Then I also smoked some hash sometimes. But I've stopped with all that now.

– Tell me more about it. How did you get access to beer and hashes at such young years? Did you belong to some kind of gang?

– That's right. Mom was always drunk and didn't care what I did, so I felt like being abandoned. The gang was the only one that gave me confirmation, and actually saw me. In order for them to respect me, I drank beer when they gave me and smoked hash if they extended me a cigarette.

– Is that a criminal gang we're talking about?

– Not really. Some vandalization and messing around, but nothing serious. I've left those guys now, so it doesn't matter anymore.

– As I understand, you have had many contacts with the police and the Child Protective Service. What was that all about?

– Sometimes when I got drunk, I was helped home by a police officer. They sometimes filed a report of concern to the CPS, so they became aware of my problems and took me into protective custody. I was sent from foster home to foster home and felt really bad. Sometimes Mom got me back, but it didn't get any better with her. It was not until I came to Ruth and Ronald, that I finally felt there was someone who cared about me.

– Who are Ruth and Ronald?

– My current foster parents. They have made me want to take control over my life and turn my back to my destructive past life.

– So you mean you didn't do anything criminal either?

– No I have not. If you don't call putting a wastebasket on fire as criminal.

Frederick now took a bunch of paper was lying on a side table next to the chair and put them on the table.

– I'll be completely honest with you now. Here I have a number of papers I received from a friend at the police station. It's your criminal record and this it not a pleasant reading. This picture of you was attached to the papers.

He presented the picture of Therese and she smiled a little when she saw it.

– Yeah, I got all that piercing as a demonstration against Mom because I felt neglected. But she ignored it, like all the other stupid things that I did, so I just continued to do stupid things. However I removed everything when Ruth showed me that she really cared about me.

– Today you look amazing, Miss Fergusson. Most of the records on this papers are exactly what you said, you have been drunk and helped home or placed in a foster home. But there is also one incident that I consider to be extremely grievous. In fact, that's the reason why I was and still are worried about your character.

– What incident? Wait! It's when I was charged for drug possession that you think of, I guess. Doesn't those papers say that I was cleared of all that?

– It says that you were cleared because of lack of evidence, but nothing else. The rest is confidential. Were you guilty of the charges? It's absolutely harmless to say the truth today, because you can't be charged twice for the same crime, even if you confess to the crime. It's called double jeopardy.

– No, I was not guilty. I made the mistake of accompanying a friend to an apartment where there were a lot of drug addicts. I took LSD tablet and got a really bad trip out of it. The police made a bust and I was brought to the police station and had to stay in a cell overnight.

– No, no, no. It can't be correct. You were thirteen years old then, right? The police can't put a thirteen year old in jail.

– If you takes it easy, I'll come to it. The next day they began to interrogate me but soon a sergeant came in and scolded them just because they let a minor sit in a cell and also questioned me without a legal caretaker or CPS secretary present. But I was just rude and angry with him. In fact, I was just disrespectful to them all, both policemen, prosecutors, CPS and even my own defense attorney, so I eventu-

ally was charged with drug possession with intent so sell and had to go to court on the thirteenth of June.

– Now you are mistaken again. It was the twenty-first.

– Frederick, now you really have to lay off. I'm not lying to you and if you're just quiet, you'll find it out.

Philomena could not help smiling behind her hand. It was not common to see Frederick being lectured like this. Even stranger because Therese was still a child. Frederick became red in his face to her delight, but he nevertheless turned silent.

– At the thirteenth I left school before lunch and cut class because I was terrified of the trial. I was lucky to just get a new time, the twenty-first. That day a police officer escorted me there, so I couldn't escape. Then my lawyer just explained that no one had found any drugs close to me or in my clothes, so the judge just scolded the prosecutor and let me go.

– Was that true then? You didn't possess any drugs?

– I've never had any drugs. Except for those seconds between receiving the tablet and putting it in my mouth. Or just when I inhaled on a joint before passing it on. Believe me, I'm neither a addict nor a dealer.

Therese had constantly met Frederick's eyes without showing the least hesitation. He tried to gaze her down but had to give up and lowered his eyes down to the papers in front of him. After a moment's hesitation, he pulled out a paper from the bottom of the pile.

– Well, let's leave it like that. Just one more thing. Here is a paper where you waive your privacy against me so that I can ask the police, CPS or anyone at your school questions about you, and they will be able to answer. I want you to sign this paper for me, Miss Fergusson.

– Frederick, now you are going too far, Philomena protested. Tess, don't sign that paper. He has no right to request it from you.

– It's perfectly correct that there is no obligation for you to sign it, but I still kindly ask you to do so for me.

– No, I can't accept it, Philomena continued. You can't...

– Wait a little, Philomena. I am really grateful that you are defending me, but I am fully capable of defending myself. Frederick, I agree with your wife that you went too far with this paper. You claim that I'm lying!

– No, I can't agree that I do that.

– But you are! You don't trust what I have just said and want to confirm it with others. Admit it!

Frederick realized that he could not push this girl around and also realized that she was in fact right in what she said and that the only thing he could do was to be honest.

– Well, in a way you're right. Let me say that I feel the need to confirm what you have said. You certainly have to acknowledge that I have some grounds for suspicion given that I know you mostly through this criminal record.

Therese looked at him firmly, calmly and kind of drilled her eyes into his, until he folded down his eyes again and shrugged his shoulders.

– Well, I understand that you don't want to sign and I have to accept it.

– I have never said that.

Therese grabbed a pen, signed the paper and then pushed it back to him. He thanked her surprised when he received the paper.

– Then I would like to confirm that you today are completely drug free. With your permission, I will ask a neighbor who is a nurse to come over here tonight to take blood and hairs samples and send them on analysis.

– Frederick! Stop this now!!

Therese raised her hand towards Philomena, and she went silent.

– I accept it in order to prove to you that I'm speaking the truth.

John had been silent all the time and looked from Therese to his father and then back again. He was amazed at her complete calm and how it felt as though she had the situation completely under control even though his dad was so brutal.

His heart was beating faster from her combined calm and obstinacy attitude toward his dad, who continued.

– Now, Miss Fergusson, what will these tests show?

– The blood sample will be completely free from all drugs. I have not been drinking alcohol or used drugs for many months. Not even a headache tablet. The hair test may show some trace a couple of inches from the scalp, but completely clean below that.

– Why a couple of inches?

– Hair grows about an inch in three month, and I've been living at this foster home for almost a year, and never used since I got there.

– And when I talk to the police, prosecutors, CPS and school, what will they tell me?

– You will hear about a lot of trouble and fuss up until April last year and then nothing at all. So if you're one of those that concerns more about what one have done in the past instead of what one is doing today, then I'm toast.

– In other words, I will not find anything bad about you from May and onward? You are not the slightest worried about that?

– Not at all.

Frederick locked her eyes again and got the same steady glare back. He had never seen anyone who was as confident as this girl. Suddenly, he ripped the paper that she had signed. She looked surprised at him.

– I never planned on confirming your information by asking someone. My only motive was that I wanted to be convinced you didn't hide anything. Now I know you can be trusted to one hundred percent. And that neighbor who should take the samples doesn't exist.

Therese looked at him with a surprised face and could not help smiling a bit.

– Wow, Frederick. You tricked me completely there. Johnny, I'm almost starting to like your daddy. He's sneaky like few.

– I have not become a successful businessman without being cagey. Always honest, though. I never diverge from that. Now I am satisfied. Do you have anything you're wondering, honey?

– When you say so, I have some questions as well. However, I don't care about your background, so you don't have to worry. I wonder if you really love John.

– Well, not as much as he loves me obviously. I definitely have a crush on him, and enjoy his company.

– It's not just physical attraction, then?

– Oh no. Admittedly, he's incredible handsome, but I don't care about such.

– Have you had sex with each other?

– Yep.

– Oh, that was not the answer I wished for.

– What the heck, John! How can you do something like that, despite what I have always said about intimate relations before marriage?

– Don't accuse him. It was kind of me that seduced him. He's not my first, you'll know.

– Have you had many boyfriends?

– Not really. I was in love with Sparkie, and that's why I let him introduce me to the gang. But he just saw me as a friend so it never became anything. No, I've only been with a couple of others guys because of the fun of it.

– I don't want to know more about that. John has had Nathalie as his girlfriend before, but it ended. Though I don't think they were intimate.

– Safest it not to ask him, Therese smiled.

– Probably an excellent advice, Philomena replied, answering the smile. Now, me and Frederick will leave you two in peace so that you can figure out what's the tension between you. Come Love, let's go.

When the two young people was left alone, it became a rather long, agonizing silence. John wondered how he would start, amazed over how Therese had reacted to Frederick's harsh questions.

– Go ahead now, Johnny! You are the one that wanted me to come here.

– Not really, Tess. I was going to move out from here for your sake. It was my mother who wanted you to come here and be subjected to my father's interrogation, something I'm the first one to apologize for. But I place you before them, so I'm ready to leave this house today if you want it. You are much more important to me than they are.

– Bullshit. Blood is always thicker than water.

– No I promise. I love you so much that I don't care about anything else.

– Right now, maybe. But think like this. If we comes back together and decide to marry in a couple of years, your parents will be the first one you will invite to the wedding. And if we break up instead, this is where you will run for consolation. Believe me.

– Alright, you may be right. But at the moment, it's just you I care about anyway. I love you, Tess, and I don't want to lose you.

– I like you too, Johnny. I really do. But nothing has actually changed since yesterday. You're still from a high society family and I from a crappy one. The only thing that has happened is that I now got all that confirmed. Your dad is a pain in the ass, but he is still have a point. You and I don't fit together, we have too different backgrounds.

– Don't listen on what he says. Even though he is my dad, that doesn't mean that what he says need to apply to us. In addition, there are several things that have changed after all. You are here, and have met my parents and even said you like my daddy.

– But it's not because I'm having trouble with your dad that I dumped you, or because I got angry with his questions last Thursday. I'm not going to marry him so what he thinks doesn't matter to me.

– So what's the problem then?

– We come from completely different worlds. I like you, but it will never last, so it's best to leave before it gets too serious.

– It's already too late for that. I have not slept all night and have not eaten anything since yesterday because I think of you all the time. What do you want me to do to make you stay? I do anything for your sake, but please stay with me, I can't take it if you breaks up with me!

Therese looked at him and didn't say anything when she saw the tears in his eyes. All his toughness was like blown away now. And she was not quite sure she really liked it, although it was mighty that he showed his feelings to her so openly. Suddenly, John rose up and sat down beside her on the couch and put his arms around her, even though she didn't seem to want it. She tried to fight back and remove his arms but he was stubborn and put his arm around her waist or neck again and again. Finally she gave up and put her arms around him too.

– Now you're unfair. You take advantage that I like to hug you to make me change my mind.

– I will do anything necessary to make you stay with me. Anything! Just tell me what you want me to do for you!

Therese felt how she began to melt somewhat from his hot embrace. But after a while, she pulled herself loose with mild violence. He still continued to hold her hands, and she let him do it.

– Johnny, can you stop nagging what I want? Instead, tell me what you want. You have not said very much about that since I met you. What does your dream of the future look like? Forget if it's with or without me, what do you want to do? Are you going to become a big shoot like your dad and live in this big house with a lot of servants?

– Probably not. I have two brothers and one sister as you know. Both of my brothers are studying business economics, so I'm convinced that someone of them, if not both, will go to in Dad's footsteps and move into this, or a similar mansion. But I'm studying to become an engineer as you also know. My dream is that when

I'm done with the university and got a job, I'll get a house somewhere in the suburb. Kind if like the house where you live, or maybe slightly bigger. Then I don't like to have a lot of servants either. Maybe I have someone that comes to clean and wash my cloths once a week and then someone that cooks for me, nothing more.

– So you don't want me to cook for you then?

– You cook fabulous food, so if you want to live with me in the house and cook every day, my life would be perfect. But you said I would say what I want regardless of whether I'm with you or not. And if we are together, you will probably become a master chef in some luxury restaurant, and the last thing you want is to cook at home too. I can't cook so I need someone who does. So it may be you or an employee, it doesn't matter. Then I don't want to clean and wash either. Same thing there if you want to do that.

– So what you dream about is to become a suburb man who commutes to your work downtown every day?

– Yes, something like that is what's I'm dreaming about. A large, nice house with a garden, not a giant mansion with a lot of land that needs caring. Possibly a swimming pool. So where does all this leave us?

Therese hesitated and didn't find any answer again so John pulled her closer and hugged her again. When she tried to push him away, he just moved his hands behind her neck instead trying to kiss her on her mouth, but she turned her head so he met her cheek instead. Then he stroked her over her hair while still holding her. Therese was first annoyed that he was so stubborn, but suddenly it struck her that it was just what she liked with him that he was also strong and not afraid to show it. Yet she could not accept that he tried to decide over her like this.

– Release me now, or else you can forget any relationship, she said sharply.

Finally he released her and looked seriously into her eyes. She moved away a couple of feet waiting. He just sat there and looked yearning at her without touching her. Suddenly she grabbed his neck firmly, pressed herself against him and

kissed him hard. He first became a bit surprised but then responded passionately to her kiss.

– So where are we now, then? he asked eagerly.

– You'll win I guess, as long as you understand who calling the shot's here. We're together again. I told you that I like you. But stop saying you will leave your parents, because I don't want to have that on my conscience.

– It's definitely not what I want. Thus, to win over you as if there is any kind of competition on who is strongest. You're tougher than me, and that's why I like you. At the same time, there is something soft with you that I love.

– Get lost. I'm no softie that you can pull around like the others.

– I've already understood that. Just let me keep courting you. We can take it as slowly as you want. All I ask for is a chance on you.

– You big stupid lout. I guess I didn't really understand how deep your feelings are for me. Come on, let's find out your parents and tell them that we're together again.

John sighed from relief and they went to look for Frederick and Philomena again, with their arms around each other. Philomena smiled with riddance when she saw them holding each other tenderly.

– It seems as you have solve what ever problems you had.

– Guess we're together again, Therese replied.

– What was the problem between the two of you, actually, that you now have solved? Frederick asked.

– That is something private between the two, Philomena protested, and nothing that anyone else has to worry about.

– I agree with you to one hundred percent, Philomena. You and Frederick should keep your noses out of it.

– Well, I guess you're entitled to that opinion, miss Fergusson. Please forget that I asked the question, and excuse me for my curiosity. It will not happen again.

– But if you're so eager to know, it was just because I didn't want any of us to get hurt when we realized that you are right, Frederick, and we don't fit together. But it's already too late, because Johnny apparently got devastated when I dumped him. So now it's just my feelings that's on the line, and I can take a broken heart if it goes that way.

– Somehow, I think you deserve better, Miss Fergusson, Frederick replied. I admit that my fears around your life have partly come into shame. You give the impression of being extremely virtuous today. However, I still think that your background is too different to Johns, so I don't want you to be together. At the same time, I realize it doesn't matter what I think, but John will do what he wants anyhow. In one way, I appreciate that he wants to make independent decisions about his life. Therefore, I will accept your relationship and welcome you to our fellowship.

Therese didn't really know how she would react. Admittedly, it was good that he had decided to approve her and acknowledge that he was wrong, but at the same time he had a snobbish tone that she had difficulty accepting.

– You're absolutely right that it doesn't matter what you think, I will not marry you. I may not marry Johnny either, but the future will show that.

– Completely accurate. We can never foresee the future. Statistically, it's rare that such young love lasts, but it's not impossible. I hope it doesn't last, but most of all, I hope that when it's over, it will be so it without being painful for any of you.

– Yes, you can hope for that. Until then, I'll enjoy what I have, instead of being sad for what I experienced before nor worrying about what's coming.

– That, my young lady, is a healthy attitude that I salute.

– For my part, I hope you two will be happy together, Philomena said. Now I wonder if you wish to be taken home tonight or do you accept my invitation to stay here for the night?

– It will become quite late if I go home tonight so I'll stay overnight. Johnny and I can take the bus home tomorrow.

– Well, now when my wife has promised you to sleep over I have nothing to object to it. I will ask the maid to install you in one of the guest rooms.

– That's not necessary, I can sleep in Johnny's room.

– I think that would be particularly inappropriate. It's no trouble at all to arrange your own room to preserve the virtue.

– Do you really want to drivel about such a ridiculous thing?

For the first time Frederick showed his feelings when he responded with an annoyed tone of voice.

– For us, this is no "ridiculous thing". It's a very important matter whether a couple in our position is sleeping together before you are married spouses.

– Hey, I'll give up with you and your "position", Therese snapped of. Philomena, take me home now. I don't want to have anything to do with this anymore.

– I'm coming with you, John said quickly. We can sleep together in my dorm, because my roommate is not there over this weekend.

– Frederick please, Philomena said. Don't spoil what I managed to accomplish. I agree that they shouldn't sleep together, but how important can it be? They have already acknowledged that they have been intimate.

– But, the custom is to...

– Either do you agree with Tess requirements, or do I drive them both to town and stay there in a hotel room!

Therese smiled inwardly when she saw how Frederick's jaws mourned with anger, but how he realized that there were him against all three of them.

– Well, I guess I have no choice then.

Therese could not help turning the knife in him a little bit.

– It doesn't matter anyhow, I'm already pregnant with Johnny's child. Hasn't he said that to you?

Frederick stood up and looked like he was going to explode. Then he saw Therese's cunning smile and realized that she was just pulling his leg.

– We're even now, Therese said. You tricked me before and I tricked you back.

Frederick still looked a bit angry, but Philomena was struggling not to laugh. She really began to like this presumptuous girl.

– Come on, Johnny. Show me where your room is so we can go to bed.

The youngsters left Frederick and Philomena arm in arm and Frederick sighed deeply but didn't say anything more. After all, there was something solid about this girl, though he didn't really like her attitude.

John was delighted that they were together again, although it was still very tense between her and Frederick. He hoped, however, that Frederick also could learn to like Therese. She had some difficulty sleeping when she laid next to John in his bed. She wondered what feelings she really had for John. What feelings he had for her had become painfully obvious now. She hugged his arm and thought about how it felt when Mia had fallen asleep at her side hugging her arm.

The last thing in her head before falling asleep on his arm was how Mia was doing. Could she sleep now when "Auntie Tess" was not there?



CHAPTER 18

Mia's Mother

Mia laid in bed and couldn't sleep. She had turned very sad when Therese left in that nice, big car to talk to Uncle Johnny. It was Ruth who had helped her to go to bed, and it had not felt good at all. Finally she could not handle it anymore but went into the bedroom of Ruth and Ronald. She stood for a long time watching them before she finally pushed Ruth slightly and she woke up. She looked around confused before she saw Mia standing next to the bed looking sad.

– Hi, Mia. You look sad, can't you sleep?

– No, Mom. I'm scared.

Ruth's heart began to bump faster. This was the first time Mia called her for "Mom" and it felt amazing. She sat up and held her hands towards Mia, who, to her great surprise, crept up in bed next to her and hugged her.

– What are you afraid of, dear Mia?

– I'm afraid that Auntie Tess will not be happy.

Ruth could not help smiling.

– Why do you think she will not be happy then?

– I don't know. I dreamed that Uncle Johnny don't want to be with her anymore. And then Auntie Tess became so sad that she don't want to live anymore. It was horrible!

– It really sounds like a horrible nightmare. But, Mia, it was just a bad dream. Tess is with Johnny right now and they are surly very happy. And even if they would break up, then Tess is not alone anyhow. She has us, right?

– Mm. Maybe. I miss her very much, Mom.

– Mia, little darling, of course you do. We both misses her. But you understand that she will not live here for her whole life? She already has a boyfriend, and before we know it they will marry each other and move into their own house.

– Do... do you think she will stay forever with Uncle Johnny now?

– No, she's coming home again. But in a few years, she might move out. Though I'm absolutely sure she will never forget you, but will come and visit you sometimes.

She could almost hear how Mia was thinking. She didn't want Therese to move elsewhere, but realized that it must happen eventually.

– So you think Auntie Tess will be happy then?

– I'm convinced that she will, Mia my love. And you will also be happy then, because you will live here with me and your dad, because we love you very much. I want you no know that.

Mia looked at Ruth with big eyes and smiled, but she still seemed worried.

– Mom ... Can ... can I sleep here tonight? I'm afraid the nightmare will come back.

– Of course, Mia. Just lay down beside me and you'll see you fall asleep soon.

Mia laid next to Ruth and cuddled. It was a whole new experience for Ruth to have an anxious child in her bed, but it felt amazing that Mia felt so safe with her now that she really wanted to sleep here when she was afraid.

The next day, Therese came home at lunchtime with John, who was not prepared to depart from her yet. Therese went straight into Mia's room to see how it was with her. She was worried when Mia was not there, so she went into the

kitchen to ask Ruth, who was preparing for lunch. To her great surprise, Mia was in the kitchen rolling meatballs.

– What are you doing, Mia?

– I'm helping Mom to cook meatballs. You know I love meatballs.

– Wow, have you started calling her for "mom" now?

– Yes, you told me to call her that.

– Alright, alright, I said that. Do you need any more help with the food, Ruth? You know I love to cook.

– You cook amazing food, Tess, but I think Mia and I have the situation under control. How did the meeting with Johnny's parents go by?

– It was about as enjoyable as getting a nail in the foot.

– Oh, was it so hard?

– Well, Frederick is an inflated snob and he asked a lot of nosy questions that I had to answer. Obviously, he doesn't want Johnny to court me, and he made that very clear to me.

– Does it mean it's over between you and Johnny, then? It sounds a bit of a pity, he seems to be a nice guy.

– No, Johnny refused to break up. He seems to be really in love with me, much more than I in him. And neither he nor I cares what Frederick thinks. In addition, he is standing there listening to you.

– Oops! Hi Johnny, I didn't see you. So you two are still a couple?

– Fortunately, we are. Hi, Ruth. Sorry I didn't announce my arrival, it was a bit thoughtless.

– It doesn't matter, you are always welcome here.

Therese was currently mostly interested in getting Mia's attention again.

– How are you doing, Mia, do you need help with that?

– No, Auntie Tess. Mom has shown how to do it. I'll be fine.

– You have not missed me too much then? Because I've missed you very much, you'll know, Mia.

– I was a little scared tonight, but Mom let me sleep in her bed.

Therese became almost jealous when she heard it. It was also a bit sad that Mia hadn't came running to hug her as soon as she opened the door. She tried to shake off the feeling and convince herself that it was good that Mia felt safer.

– I hope you stay for the food, Johnny. It would be nice unless you have nothing else for you.

– Thank you for the question, Ruth. I accept with pleasure your invitation.

– Excellent. You and Therese can go to her room while Mia and I finish the food.

Therese and John went to her room and John began to persuade her to spend the rest of the day with him.

– Tess, honey, I know an excellent activity center not far from here. There is bowling, billiards, miniature golf indoors and a lot of other nice things. You can also get really good food and it even has a relaxation area.

– That sounds nice, Johnny, but I was planning to go to a playground with Mia after the food. You have to understand that Mia needs me.

– I thought you wanted Mia to start spending more time with Ruth so she's no longer so dependent on you. Isn't that what you said before?

– Maybe so, but I like being with her.

– Don't misunderstand me, Tess, but I also like to be with her. At the same time, you and I have never really been alone together. Please, can't we hang out without Mia today?

Therese continued to protest, but John was so stubborn that she eventually gave in. After all, she liked his persistence, so they decided to go by themselves. As

they sat at the table, Therese told Mia about her plans and was almost disappointed that she didn't seem to be sad, but just said:

– Mom and I will go to playground today. I have never been to playground with Mom before. I think it will be great fun!

Therese's mood fell several levels and she looked a bit angry. John saw it and tried to cheer her up by gently putting his arm around her and kissing her. She melted a little and answered his kiss. Mia looked at them and giggled.

– Auntie Tess, why are you licking on Uncle Johnny?

– He tastes so good, Mia, and I'm hungry now.

Then Mia laughed happily, and Therese joined in. Immediately after the food, she and John left, and soon Mia eagerly went with her new mother to the playground. Ruth had never taken a child to a playground before, so it was a whole new experience for her. She was so lucky to see Mia laugh and cheer when climbing the frames, ball sees, tunnels and slides.

– Look at me, Mia shouted!

She threw herself down in a ball sea from a climbing wall. Ruth became all feeble to run after her all the time, but it was obvious to everyone around that they were both lucky.

– Have you seen that mother with her child? a mom said to a friend. She looks quite exhausted. Doesn't she seem a bit old for such a young child?

– You know that some are starting so late nowadays. In my time it was all different! Then we got children when we were young enough to cope with it.

– Well, she seems to be just as good as a parent. Though it may be her granddaughter as well.

– Maybe her daughter was still child when she became pregnant. You know that youngsters are starting sooner nowadays. In my time it was all different! Then we knew to take responsibility, and not only just produce children.

– Is there any age where you think it suits to have children, or do you just like complaining about others?

Ruth and Mia were happily ignorant of the increasingly heated debate between the women when it was appropriate to have children. They were just happy together. When Ruth heard Mia's happy laughter, her heart bumped like a hammer in her chest. She began to imagine that Therese would soon also would get her own children, maybe with John, and then she would have several small children to pour her love over.

John thought that the Sunday went too fast with Therese. It had been a wonderful day full of pleasures for both of them. Therese had really appreciated testing both bowling and miniature golf for the first time. And when they laid down in the relaxation area, she put herself really close to him, and it felt like Therese had really begun to love him too. In fact, she missed Mia and was imagining that John was Mia.

It was quite late when they both came home and Ronald met them at the door, but with no complains about that they were out late. Therese was worried about how Mia was doing.

– Just take it easy, Tess, Ronald replied. It's just fine with Mia, she let Ruth brush her and read the bed time story so she's sleeping now.

Therese was relieved but at the same time she felt annoyed that she had come home too late.

~ ~ ~

On Monday it was time to go back to school. Fortunately for John, Therese no longer had anything agains hanging out with him during the breaks so that they were always seen together to his friends' amused comments. But Therese could not help thinking about Mia, so for once she longed for the end of the school day, after which she hurried home and eagerly opened the front door.

– Mia, I'm home now!

There was no response, and she went into Mia's room but she was not there. Neither Ruth was at home. In fact, the house was empty apart from herself. She felt really disappointed when she walked into her room to play some guitar. After half an hour she heard the sound of the front door that opened. She walked out into the corridor and saw that it was Ruth and Mia who came home with Viola in the stroller. Mia laughed and hugged Ruth's hand when she saw Therese.

– Hi, Auntie Tess. Mom and I have been outdoors and played all day. It's been great fun! Even though it's so cold!

– That's nice, Mia.

Therese felt some discomfort, but could not pinpoint what was wrong. She should be glad that Mia was so happy, but in some way she couldn't. After the meal, Mia didn't want to go out again because she'd been out all day and wanted to warm up, as she said. To scatter her thoughts, Therese sat in her room and continued to play her guitar. She tried to write her own song, so she forgot about time. When she heard a sound from the room next to her, she hurried to check how Mia was. She was already in bed while Ruth tucked her in and kissed her on the cheek.

– Come, Mia, you have to brush your teeth before you go to sleep.

– But, Auntie Tess, Mom has already brushed me and read my bed time story. It's she who does it now.

– Okay, so you don't want me to do it anymore.

– You can give me a good night kiss too, if you want, Auntie Tess.

Therese smiled and bent over her and kissed her on the other cheek.

– Good night, Mia, she said.

– Good night, love, said Ruth.

– Good night, both of you Mia said and smiled with her whole face.

Therese went back to her room and closed the door hard. Ruth looked long after her and then went to Ronald who sat in the living room.

– Now Mia has gone to bed.

– Good. It's so nice she's feeling so safe with you now.

– Yes, it's definitely a good thing. Though it seems that Tess was not so happy tonight. Perhaps she feels disappointed that Mia let me put her to bed today.

– Why do you think Tess doesn't like it? That's exactly what she's always tried to accomplish.

– Certainly, but she slammed her door quite hard as she walked into her room. I just got the feeling she's angry. Perhaps something happened in school today that made her angry.

– I'll go talk to her, so we don't have to wonder.

– Just take it easy. She's still pretty sensitive, especially after what happened this weekend with Johnny's parents.

Ronald knocked on Therese's room and then went in when she responded that he could come in. She laid on the bed and seemed quite sad. Ronald saw that her eyes seemed a little red.

– Hi, Tess, how are you today? Ruth said you seem a bit angry.

– No it's fine. I manage, I always do.

– You don't have to say you can manage it, I know you're always strong. But you can have better and worse days, and I have the feeling that this is one of the worse days.

Therese sobbed slightly, but did her best to hide it.

– Just leave me alone. It's nothing.

Ronald didn't settle for that, but to her irritation he sat down in the chair at the desk and continued.

– I know I'm not your dad, Tess. I also know that you have not seen me as a person that you can confide your secrets or feelings with. But believe me, it will feel good for you if you're prepared to let me in. Nobody is that strong that you're not feeling better from seeking support from others. It's obvious that something bothers you, and the best way for you to get over it's to get it out of your system.

I'm willing to listen to you, and maybe give you some advice. Then it's up to you if you want to listen to my advice or not.

Therese sighed deeply and looked at him for a long time. At this moment, she didn't feel strong at all, but was too proud to admit it. Though both Ronald and Ruth had always been nice to her, and never judged her. Ronald could almost see how her brain worked, so he sat patiently waiting. After a long silence, she finally opened her mouth.

– Well, I don't really know. It feels like my whole new life is collapsing under me right now.

– What makes you feel that? As I see it, everything seems to settle for you, and everything goes your way. You already have a boyfriend who loves you very much, in addition, from a nice family. Then it goes very well in school and you have plans for your future so it seems really bright, I believe. Not to mention that you have a new family right here, who loves you, including yours truly.

– Well, maybe. But it feels like my life has an meaning just because there are others that really need me. That's what made me want to change before. But now Diana has started to stand up for herself at school, and tonight Mia almost didn't want me. No one needs me anymore, and that's why I feel a bit bad today.

Therese stopped talking, almost afraid of opening up so much to Ronald. He looked at her and nodded.

– Now I understand how you feel. It's natural to get out of balance when the surroundings changes. But have you wondered why Diana can handle herself, and why Mia became safe with Ruth?

– Well, I don't know. They have matured?

– Not at all. Or, maybe to some extent. But most of all thanks to you. It's you who have influenced them, giving them both greater self esteem and confidence. When you first came here, I was really afraid that you would make everything difficult for us by being a bad influence over the others. But in fact, it was just the opposite. Without you, Diana wouldn't have been feeling this good today, Viola had not been such a safe child. In particular, Mia had not been so happy. You

know as well as I do that Mia was a complete wreck when we first met her. Look at her now! What you've done is a miracle, and I'm so proud of you.

– Maybe so, but I don't want to lose her because I actually love her.

– You will never lose her, believe me. What you experience is something like parents experience when their children finally moves out from home and no longer needs them. At the same time, it's every parent's goal that their children should become independent, not having to take care of them for the rest of their lives. But the separation itself is always difficult.

– I'm not sure it makes me feel better. You mean that Mia and I will no longer be together?

– Not at all. Maybe it was not that good parable. Or maybe still. One's child don't abandon you just because they move away from home. You will still have a close relation to them. What I mean is that Mia and you certainly will always have a special relationship whatever happens. However, Mia no longer needs you to feel safe. Probably you will move out from here in a few years to begin your adult life. Who knows, you and Johnny may move in together. Have you thought about what happens to Mia then? Do you think she will follow you and live with you?

– No, of course not. You two are her parents now.

– Exactly. So then it's only nice that you have helped us get a good relationship with Mia. You should instead be proud of yourself and over Mia.

– You probably have a point. I can still spend time with her, even if you and Ruth also do it, right?

– Of course. Mia needs more than one person she feels safe with, just like you need more than one who likes you. Surly it must feel good having a boyfriend who obviously likes you a lot?

– Well, that makes me feel appreciated in a different way.

– Somehow, Johnny needs you as much as Mia needed you before, even though he's so much older. So it's not true at all that you're no longer needed by anyone just because Mia and Diana started to become more independent.

– You're actually right, Ronald. Johnny became almost like a baby when I dumped him. He really needs me in some strange way. Thank you, now it actually feels a bit better anyway.

– In addition, you're probably going to spend more time with Johnny now, right? Then you'll spend less time with Mia anyhow.

– Probably.

– Then it's good, she's not just sitting in her room crying while you're with him, but still glad and happy?

– Hey, I have not thought about it that way.

– You have your whole life in front of you, Tess. With guys, love, future dreams and maybe even some broken heart sometime too. Surely you will also in some future have your own children to love and be loved by. Don't understand me wrong now. Don't rush yourself with your own children but wait until you have a stable, personal life.

– My own children. Wow! Yes, I will get that. Maybe I can ask Johnny to help me with that tomorrow?

– What!?!

– I'm just kidding. First I have to be a gourmet chef, then I can have children. Maybe it will be with Johnny, but we'll see about that. Thank you, Ronald, I'm probably feeling a bit better now.

– You are welcome, Tess. Hope you feel that you can always come to me or to Ruth if you have any problems, big or small.

Ronald went back to Ruth in the living room and told her what it was that had disturbed Therese, and that it was better now. At the same time Therese had gone out into the bathroom to brush herself, and found Teddy there. She became terrified, for she knew that Mia could not sleep without it, so she hurried into her room with it. Mia looked dazed at her with a questioned face.

– I found Teddy in the bathroom and thought you needed him to sleep.

– But, Auntie Tess. I have stopped sleeping with Teddy, now. When I was sleeping in my mother's bed, I forgot Teddy. It went well anyway, because I'm not alone anymore.

Therese didn't know how to react when she went back to the bathroom to finish brushing herself. It was now obvious that Mia had found safety here, and didn't need herself or even her Teddy anymore. As Ronald had said, it was true that this is what she had wanted from the beginning, but still.

That night it was Therese who had difficulty falling asleep. Would she ever find the same total happiness that Mia and Diana apparently had found?

✯ ✯ ✯

CHAPTER 19

The Party

Therese stood in her room checking the clothes she had taken out and put down on the bed in front of her. Should she wear a dress or pants today? It was Friday and she had promised John to accompany him to his parents' mansion to spend the weekend there. Eventually, she chose her pants. "They really have to accept me as I am", she thought. "I always wear pants unless there is some special occasion".

Mia came into her room looking curious when Therese packed a backpack with some clothes and other things she would need.

– Are you gone all weekend, Auntie Tess?

– I want to hang out with Johnny, you see. But I will miss you so much. Don't you want to come along?

– Well, I like to be here. My mom is so funny to play with all day long.

– But you've hardly ever been with me for a couple of weeks now. Can't you come with me? It's only until tomorrow, then we'll be here again.

– I love my new mom, but I love you too, Auntie Tess. I'd like to come along, but I'm afraid of all new people there.

– You know that you don't have to be afraid of anything when you're with me, Mia. I will not let anybody hurt you, you know that?

– Yes, but anyway. I'm still scared.

Mia was thinking while Therese was waiting. Then she said:

– But I like Uncle Johnny too, so why not?

Therese turned happy and hugged her. Then she went to ask Ruth if it was okey with her that Mia accompanied her to John.

– Of course Mia can come along if she wants to. I fully trust you, Tess. Mia, darling, you have to promise to be nice there and don't mess around too much.

– I promise, Mom.

– Then go and and pack some clothes, toothbrush and anything else you need. Tess can help you.

John was a little surprised when he discovered that Mia would come too. He didn't mind it, he had also become really fond of in that little girl. Mia had actually begun to trust him too and let him carry her when she got tired in her legs. She gave her little bag to him, and he took it, and then she took the hand of Therese while walking to the bus station.

After almost two hours they arrived at the mansion and entered the front door. Frederick and Philomena came towards them because they had been forewarned by Charles that they were on their way up the driveway. They stopped from surprise when they saw Mia who was pressing herself close to Therese, afraid of the big house and all strangers.

– No, but look at this. Who is your little, cute friend? Philomena asked.

– This is my daughter Mia, Therese answered without blinking.

Mia giggled a bit, but Frederick frowned his eyebrows and began to say something, but hesitated at the last moment when he remembered the crisis from last time she was here. He really wanted to know more about this little girl, but didn't want to risk a altercation again. Philomena knelt down and stretched out her hands towards Mia, who just hid behind Therese's legs. Fortunately, Philomena was wise enough not to insist, so she stood up again to not scare Mia further.

– You don't have to be afraid, Mia. I'm not dangerous and you can feel completely safe in this house, she promised.

Frederick decided not to ask anything about Mia right now. Instead, he pondered how he would formulate that he absolutely didn't want Therese to sleep with John again. He realized that if he said it the wrong way, it could backfire and be a repeating of the previous drama. Before he figured out how to phrase is, Therese said:

– Can you please show me what room that you planned for me so stay in, so I can put my backpack away?

– Of course, Frederick answered quickly. We thought you could have your very own wing together with your own bathroom, Miss Fergusson. This way if I may, I'll show where it is.

Soon he showed them all into a big, spacious room. There was a four poster bed that seemed very comfortable, a mirror and a desk, both with a comfortable chair, and even a small couch group. Everything looked luxurious with heavy drapes in front of the big window and a thick carpet on the floor. Therese didn't want to admit it, but she immediately became fond of the room. This seemed almost too good to be true.

– This room will be perfect for me, she said.

– I have to admit that I personally have furnished this room to make you feel really welcome here, Philomena said.

– I suppose that You have spent a lot of money here, Therese said with a little sour voice.

– Not at all, these are furniture that existed in other parts of the house and in storages. The staff helped me to move them in here, but then I have refurnish the room myself. Well, to be honest, I might have bought some new bed sheets and a tablecloth, but no expensive things. I thought you would be angry if I had done it.

– You're right, Philomena, I would have been mad.

She looked around and caught sight of a door on one of the walls and asked:

– Where does that door lead?

– It leads to the next room, which is empty. Come, I'll show you.

The second room was almost as big, with a bed of an older model and not much other furniture.

– Here we sometimes have guests, as we usually have in your room, Philomena said.

– Do you think Mia can sleep in this room?

– No problem, we can certainly find some furniture for this room as well.

– What do you think, Mia? I'll sleep just on the other side of that door if you'll be scared at night.

Mia nodded a little shy still pushing herself close to Therese. Philomena stretched out her hand again to her and said:

– Come with me, little friend, let's see if we can find some furniture and other things for you too.

– Johnny, you can accompany them and help to carry it while I'm unpacking and make myself comfortable in this room.

John immediately understood that she meant that Mia wouldn't dare to go alone with Philomena. So he took Mia's hand and followed Philomena down the corridor. Frederick sat down on the couch and was unsure how he could express his questions to Therese without her being angry again. She put her clothes into a closet while she was looking at him with amusement when she saw his agony. Soon she was ready and sat down in the other couch and looked firmly at him.

– Is it something you want to ask me, Frederick?

– That's totally correct, there are a few things, Miss Fergusson. First, I wonder if it's really true that Mia is your daughter.

– Are you calling me a liar, or what?

– No, not at all. However, I think you are pulling my legs again. I counted a bit backwards. Mia seems to be around four years and you are fourteen. That means you were ten when she was born and only nine when she, well, was created. It seems extremely unlikely that a nine year old girl can become pregnant.

– It may be unusual but it's not impossible.

– Certainly not, but you don't seem very highly developed. In addition, the two of you are completely different in your face, not to mention she was giggling when you said she was your daughter. I have the feeling that you're just kidding. Is that the case?

– You can trust your gut feeling. I don't know how much I'm allowed to tell about her, but she came to the foster home one week after I got there because she also had problems. So she became my foster sister, though she calls me her "heart-mother" because we have a relationship more like mother / daughter. She means more to me than anyone else, including Johnny. He actually had to chose to accept Mia or to dump me. It's quite obvious what he chose, and as you can see, he has also become really fond of Mia.

– How did you two develop such a close relation with each others?

– I don't really understand that myself. It feels a bit like we both were completely lost and alone on each tiny rafts in a stormy, big ocean with giant waves. Then we just met there by a coincidence on that sea and realized that we needed each other to survive.

– A great parable you made there. It sounds extremely interesting, and really nice. Not to mention that Philomena really lived up to having small children's feet in the house again. She will certainly do everything she can to transform the next room into a real children's room. Speaking of these rooms, I was pleasantly surprised that you suggested that you should sleep in your own room and not with John. Am I completely wrong when I suspect that last time you where here, you required to sleep with him just to make a stand against me?

– Well, that was part of the reason. Initially, it was because I had a bad conscience because I made him so sad and wanted to make it up with him. Then it was just for a single night. It was when you responded so harsh that as I wanted to put up against you, and show that you can't decide over me. But now it's a bit more permanent, so it's good to have my own closets and kind of feeling a little bit home myself here too. But mostly is is Mia that I think about. It would be terrible

if she got scared at night and came in to me for comfort just to find me naked in the same bed as Johnny.

– I agree that it could be a traumatic experience for her. At the same time, I'm happy that I can feel a bit calmer when you two are not in the same bed.

– Well, Frederick, I want to make one thing clear for you. As I said, we have had sex, but that doesn't mean we are shagging like rabbits. When we laid together in his bed here, nothing happened more than we were cuddled a bit before we fell asleep. So you can cool down a couple of levels.

– Thank you for that information, he answered huskily. Certainly, I understand what young people do when they are together, but I would rather not have to experience that inside this house. It would be hard to explain to relatives and friends.

Before Therese responded, Mia came rushing in from the other door and threw herself on Therese's neck. She looked happier than ever before.

– Auntie Tess. You have to come and see all the great things that Auntie Philly has found. She said I can use all the things when I'm here. There are lots and lots of toys and a giant bed and table with drawers full of crayons and paper. It will be great, great fun to be here. Auntie Philly is so kind too let me have all that.

– As I said, Mia, you haven't got the toys, but you can play with them whenever you're here, Philomena smiled.

– Do you call her "Auntie Philly" now? What do you think about that, Philomena?

– It's my own proposal, Tess. I know that "Philomena" is hard to say if you are as young as Mia.

– However, I'm not very fond of the feeling that you want to buy my friendship. You both have to learn that I'm not for sale, either to you, to Johnny or to anyone else.

– It's definitely not what we're trying to do, Frederick said. We just want both of you to feel at home here so you want to keep coming here.

The rest of the morning was nice. Mia played with all the fun toys while Philomena watched her. When Therese saw that Mia didn't seem to be afraid of Philomena anymore, she asked John to show her around the mansion and he presented her to most of the staff. When it was time for lunch, he disappeared for a while, but soon she showed up again and they all gathered around the dining table to eat. The cook was called Marjorie, and she smiled a little ambiguously when she served the food. Philomena took a taste and exclaimed:

– Wow, Marjorie, this tastes amazing. Is it a new recipe, because I don't recognize this dish?

– It's actually Miss Tess who has cooked it. She came into the kitchen half an hour ago and asked if she could help me.

– This is really delicious, Frederick said after having tasted too. You have a talent in cooking, miss Fergusson.

– Thanks for that. I have probably not told you about my plan of becoming a chef at a luxury restaurant when I finish school. I just love to cook.

– I will definitely be a regular customer of that restaurant, you can trust that. Marjorie, my friend. Sit down with us and eat, you too.

Therese looked on in appreciation when Marjorie fetched a plate and sat down beside her. She felt that it was a good sign that an employee was treated like a family member like this. Frederick silently watched Therese with contemplation while wondering what he had been pondering over during the past weeks.

– Miss Fergusson. I would like to tell you something if I may.

– Sure you can, Frederick, but only if you start calling me "Tess" like everyone else is doing.

– Well, Tess, as you wish. It's like this. I have been thinking deeply during the past weeks what I wish for a future daughter-in-law. You may know that Miss Nathalie was John's girlfriend before. Her parents are our good friends and of a very nice family as well. So Nathalie is a girl with a perfect background for our

son. Unfortunately, I learned that she doesn't have a spotless character. In fact, she could lie about things that wasn't important, just to make a better impression.

– That doesn't sound so nice.

– You, on the other hand, sat in front of me and met my eyes while telling some very uncomfortable truths. You didn't even try to omit things that made you look bad but you showed me a brutal honesty. That character is exactly what I want from my daughter-in-law. Of course, your background makes you unsuitable, but if I have to wait for a girl of your character and with a nice background, which is also free and interested in John, then I'll get old and gray before I get to see his wedding.

– What are you actually trying to say?

– What I'm trying to say is that I've decided that you're probably the best I can ask for, and from now on I will not criticize you anymore, but instead defend the choice that John made, if ever needed.

Therese chewed the food while trying to decide if she would be happy or annoyed by his comment, but decided that the first option probably was the best one.

– I promise you that I'll try to be as nice a girl as you want me to be. It's impossible for me to change my background, but I can influence my future. Who knows, if I try to behave like "nice people," maybe I'll start to like it.

– Don't misunderstand me now. I don't want you to change your personality, it's absolutely excellent. Maybe, there may be some details in your etiquette that may need to be slightly adjusted.

Therese thought the rest of the meal on what he meant with "details", but chose not to ask. She saw no sense in seeking a conflict with Frederick. After the meal, she gathered all the plates and brought them to the kitchen even though Marjorie insisted that it actually was her job.

– It doesn't matter, Marjorie. You can do the dishes if you want.

After the meal, Frederick wanted them all to sit for a while in the parlor to talk. Both John and Therese suspected that he, after all, was not completely pleased with Therese and she had some bad feelings, but they still went with him.

– Now, Tess. I have a few more questions that I would like to ask you. It's not about your background anymore, but rather about your future with us. You may already know that John is celebrating his seventeen year's birthday in about a month.

– Yes, he has told me that.

– Now he's going to have a birthday party here on the Saturday after his birthday, and if he doesn't mind, I'd like you to come to the party. Unless you have anything to object to that, John?

– Not really, it's just that I'm not sure that Tess will feel it's a fun party. You see, Tess, it's a very formal party with tuxedo, evening gowns and such. A lot of adults will walk around drinking sherry with their pinky stretched out and talk about the stock market and the likes.

– You don't have to decide now, Frederick said. In fact, you don't have to promise anything at all, but if you want to come, you're welcome. It's good if John knows if you will come or not so he will not be disappointed if he thinks you will come and then you don't. However, I will not be disappointed if you don't want to come, I understand it's not the kind of party you're used to going on.

– I don't need to think it over, I'm coming to the party.

– Great. You are so welcome, Philomena said. I want you to also to know that you are always welcome to visit us here without asking in advance. We would love to get to know you more so I really hope you can spend the weekends here, especially as John usually stays here.

– It sounds nice. Johnny and I have not been hanging out so much on weekends because he's been here. So if I tag along, we meet more often. At the same time, I can get to know you two better then.

– Speaking of that, there are a few other things I would like to ask you because you accepted our invitation to John's birthday party. I realize that these questions can be conceived as provocative in some way, and that I must be particularly careful asking them. The last thing I want is to make you sad or upset now that I fully has accepted you. So I appeal to to not to respond negatively to my questions.

– Stop running like a cat around the farm, Frederick. I can handle what ever you want to ask me, you should have understood that by now.

– The first question is if you could accept getting some tutoring from, for example, my wife on what is expected in the form of a etiquette on a formal event.

– Do you mean I don't know how to behave? Therese asked with an angry tone. I'm not still not fine enough, or what?

– Oh no, I definitely don't mean that, I assure you.

– You're afraid I'll do something you'll be ashamed of, she continued angry. So I have to learn how to drink sherry with my pinky stretched out?

Frederick began to get more worried that he caused a big fight again and desperately tried to smooth things out.

– I'm not worried at all, it's more about I don't want you to feel bad because you can't reasonably know all the unwritten rules that exist.

– And you still don't understand when I'm kidding, she said in the same angry tone.

Frederick looked uncertainly at her and then released a sigh of relief when Therese no longer managed to hold her face.

– Wow, you scared me there. You're not angry at all, or?

– No, not at all. I understand I don't know how to behave at such a party. It would feel safer if Philomena can give me a small etiquette school beforehand. Not because I necessarily are going to do everything correct, but it would be nice to know what's expected of me.

– It sounds amazing. Finally it's one more thing about this party. The dress code for the women is an evening gown, and this means a particularly elegant and thus expensive dress. I wouldn't even dream of claiming that the dress you had at your last visit here was substandard or that it would apply to the clothes you have today. But an evening gown is a completely different class that I can't ask you to pay for yourself just because I invited you to a high society party. So I don't think it's not more than right that I pay for the evening dress, which of course you choose yourself.

– Even if it feels tempting to make you pay for a nice dress for me, I'll nevertheless decline. You see, I really don't want anyone to think I'm interested in Johnny because his parents are rich. So I don't want anything from you. Don't take it badly, but this is important to me.

– Well, I understand and accept. I just wonder out of pure curiosity if you would decline also if John would like to give you a gift as part of his courting of you? Let's say he gives you a nice bracelet or a pair of earrings. Would you refuse to accept it from him, even though that is what we men usually do for the woman we love and court?

– Well, if Johnny would give me something, I would of course accept it. I mean, the restaurants that he invited me to are not cheap at all.

– This, though, you of course realize that the money he spends comes from the monthly allowance he receives from me?

– Does it matter how he got the money? The important thing is, though, that he chooses to use his money to make me happy, right?

– That is completely accurate. So if John would offer himself to pay for your evening gown then you'd think it would be all right. It's, however, actually his party.

– Yes, I suppose it would be okay.

– Well, then, it's decided, Frederick said with a happy smile.

– Sure, if it makes you happy.

Therese noticed Fredericks smile and suddenly she realized that she had been tricked.

– Wait a moment! You knew I would refuse to let you pay my evening dress, but still suggested to pay it just to pave the way to make me accept that Johnny is paying it with your money. It were just a trick, and I fell for it. Again. You are a sneaky guy!

– I'm begging you not to get upset. You are not the first person that I persuade. I have entered business deals all my professional life. I have not fooled you, I never would, but influenced you to give me what I want, a nice dress. You will not change your mind now, I hope?

– When I promise something, I'm standing by it. And I'm a woman too, so the thought of having a nice dress feels very pleasant at the same time.

Philomena sighed by relief. She had been a little worried that the conflict would blossom again, but Therese seemed completely relaxed this time and not as tense as last time.

Mia had become bored from the conversation, and had fallen asleep in John's knee with her cheek to his stomach. Therese lifted her legs so Mia laid comfortably over their two knees and John carefully pulled the hair from Mias face and then put his other arm around Therese.

Philomena smiled when she saw the two youngsters sitting next to each other with a child in their lap. It looked so amazing to see how the three cuddled together. Philomena was completely surprised but at the same time excited to see her own son cuddle with a little child and her pretend mother. She imaged for herself how he formed a family and gave her a grandchild. She realized that she needed to take it easy, John was just sixteen years old yet. Instead, she half asked Therese half to her husband:

– So what do you honestly think about this that I gives you some advice in preparation for the party, Tess? Sure you don't mind it?

– It's cool, "Auntie Philly". I want to learn myself what is expected of me so I don't need to be nervous at the party.

– Good. We can start this afternoon.

~ ~ ~

Therese got out of the car and thanked Ruth for driving her. Now it was time for her first party! She walked up the stairs to the mansion with some difficulty because of the voluminous dress she was wearing. On the outside she was her usual self confident girl, but inside she was nervous at the limit of panicky. What would happen if she forgot everything Philomena had tried to teach her? Charles was waiting for her at the door and escorted her to the ballroom where they both stopped next to each other just inside the door. Everyone's eyes turned towards her while Charles solemnly presented her with a loud voice.

– Miss Therese Fergusson.

It was as embarrassing as Philomena had warned her about, because Therese, according to the etiquette, was forced to stand there waiting until her cavalier came to escort her into the room. Because John was the central person at this party, he was forced to be there when the party began, so it was not possible for them to come together, which would otherwise have been natural. Therese had assured Philomena that she was not afraid of standing in the center, yet it felt like she had to stand there for an eternity while everyone stared at her while whispering to each other.

John was standing with his parents talking. He didn't realize at first that the ravishing, beautiful lady who just came in was Therese. Philomena pushed him in his side to get his attention.

– John, are not you going to welcome your girlfriend?

He went to Therese while gasping for air of surprise. Even though he had been with her when she bought that dress, it was amazing to see it on her. And with her hair and face styled she just made him beside himself. He was fully aware that everyone was watching them so he was careful to follow the etiquette. Therese, on the other hand, decided to violate the most important rule Philomena had taught her, not to take physical contact. She wanted to make her own stand, so she

grabbed John's neck and gave him a big kiss to his mouth, to the surprise of other guests and, in some cases, with disgust.

– Hi, Johnny, she said joyfully.

He was surprised but answered her kiss. Then he gathered himself and said:

– Hi, Tess. Welcome to this place. If I may...?

Now she put her hand behind his elbow and let him lead her over to Frederick and Philomena. They had been talking with several close relatives and smiled when the young couple approached them. John's uncle was the first one to speak.

– Good job, Johnnyboy. Got a girlfriend already? And a totally beautiful looking girl in addition. Hi there, Therese. My name is Alfred and I'm Frederick's rascally brother.

He gave his hand to Therese, who tried to take it politely, but he quickly pulled it away the second before she could reach it.

– Ops, too slow, he said with a smile.

Therese smiled back and felt a bit better already. She pointed to his tie and said:

– You seem to have spilled out something on your tie there.

When he looked down out of reflex, she quickly raise her hand and snapped him on his nose.

– I made you look!

Alfred first looked surprised, but then laughed heartfelt. He pushed John in his side and said to him:

– Wow, Johnnyboy. You've got a girl with a strong spirit. Good luck riding that wild horse. Not literally meant, of course. Who knows, maybe she may even can put some sense into your skull?

– I'm doing my best, Therese smiled. But it won't be a simple task.

– You have my full support, young lady.

Therese started to relax a bit. It felt more and more like this party wouldn't be so hard after all. Nathalie just felt the opposite where she stood with her parents and tried to make herself as invisible as possible. Her parents had been invited because they were good friends to Frederick and Philomena, and they insisted that also Natalie should accompany them despite her protests.

– Come here, Natalie. Let's go to John and his girlfriend and congratulate him for his new relationship.

– No, please. Isn't it enough that I'm present here and that I congratulated him to his birthday when I arrived?

– Now you come along and show that you are a Lady. Hey dear, it's over half a year since you ended your relation with him. The least you can do now is to show that you don't mind that he has overcome you and are moving on.

Natalie felt terrified of what Therese would say and most of all wondered if she would reveal that she had been fighting with her. In addition, she had lied to her parents when she said it was her who had ended the relation with John and not the other way around. Still, she was forced to plaster on a smile when they reached the group around John.

– Hello John. I want to congratulate you on your new girlfriend. I'm really surprised to see you with another. No evil blood between us, I hope?

She addressed John but looked at Therese when she finished the sentence. Therese smiled and understood exactly what Natalie meant and was amused when she saw her agony.

– Hope you and I are okey too, Therese said. I mean, it note like I stole your boyfriend from you, because it's been a long time since you went separate ways, right?

– Sure, Nathalie replied quickly. No problem between us at all. Not because of anything, right?

– Right. It's just your parents that happens to be friends with Johnny's parents, so you and I actually don't have any business with each other.

Nathalie let out some air loudly and her mother looked vigilantly at her. She had an undefined feeling that there was something that they concealed. But when Philomena changed the subject and instead began to discuss other things, she tried to shake the thoughts off.

Therese started to like this party. It had not been as boring as she thought it would be. She even appreciated the whole concept of walking around chatting about inessentials with people she never met before. John was not at all that enthusiastic, but was keeping up as he was used to this. Soon it was time for the food, so everyone moved into a big hall with long tables and sat down. Therese thought the food was unexpectedly good and strived to eat nicely and follow all the rules she had been taught.

The conversation tone around the table was pleasant until someone she didn't know, spoke with a loud voice:

– Frederick, how can you to let a person of such low class fraternize herself with your own flesh and blood? Is it only me who react to the inappropriate in this situation?

The room went completely silent while Philomena looked at Frederick who irritated wrinkled his eyebrows. John reacted strongly and looked at Therese, who, however, looked unexpectedly calm when she responded instead of Frederick:

– You talk about me, I guess. Have I done anything to displease you?

– I've talked to Max and he told me about your background. Certainly not a background we wish to destroy our fine family name with. There are servants and there are gentlemen, and they will never be mixed.

It had became embarrassingly quiet around the table. Frederick opened his mouth to protest but he was to late as Therese continued, encouraged by the fact that most of the other guests seemed as if they also disliked the comments.

– I would like to ask you something. You certainly don't know about this, but I have decided to become a gourmet chef. So in a few years from now you may go to a restaurant and find that the food is unexpectedly good and you tell the waitress that you want to give your compliments to the chef. When I then stand there

in front of you and you compliment the food that I have cooked, there is no doubt that I'm your servant, right?

– Without the least doubt.

– Then I wonder one thing. Who of us has the greatest right to feel pride at that moment? Is it me who was born by a drug addict without the slightest chance of getting a good upbringing but who overcome all the problems of my own power and have got myself honorable job that can satisfy nice people like you? Or is it you who has the greatest right to feel pride who was born with a silver spoon in you mouth and didn't need to lift a finger to achieve what you have?

The man became deep red in his face of equal parts of irritation as shame. He prepared himself for a snobbish answer, but he barely got to open his mouth before he was interrupted:

– We all know the answer to that question, Alfred replied. You should be ashamed, Chadwick, who has the nerve to criticize the girlfriend for this party's center character.

– I have to agree with Alfred, Frederick said. You should apologize to Miss Fergusson, Chadwick. For your information, I know everything about her background, and I have no problems accepting it because it's not self chosen. The only thing that matters is what she chooses to do today and in the future. If you can't accept it, I suggest you leave this party, Chadwick.

Chadwick began to protest but was interrupted by several others who didn't appreciate his attitude either. Therese felt really pleased what it seemed as if everyone, or at least most of them, already seemed to accept her. She could not help answering scornful:

– What happened, little Chadwick? Have you lost your tongue now?

– I suppose that I need to apologize, as I was not acting entirely as a gentleman, Chadwick answered in a uneasy way and not very willingly.

– What do you think, Tess? Frederick asked. Are you happy with that excuse? I am a little doubtful if it's enough.

– I suppose it's the best one can ask for someone who doesn't have enough common sense to know how to behave.

– Boom, Chadwick. There you got it. Come on, young lady, I'm cheering for you. But, Johnnyboy, how come that you didn't defend your own girlfriend? You are not usually the one who keeps silent otherwise.

– As you've already noticed, Albert, Tess doesn't need someone to defend her, she's fully capable of defending herself. That's exactly the reason why I love her, not because she had a bad upbringing.

The dinner continued and several other people started talking to Therese who felt that she started getting more friends than she ever had before. She really began to feel comfortable now, and realized that John's family and their friends were not as stiff and snobbish as she thought, but showed a warmth to her as she hadn't expected.

After the meal, the guests started to drop off. Nathalie's parents took Therese aside as Nathalie's mother couldn't forget her gut feeling that there was more to know about their daughter's relationship with Therese.

– Well, excuse me if I getting pushy, Therese. It's just that I have a feeling that you know Nathalie more than you want to show. Is there any problem between the who of you?

Nathalie stood beside her looking very uncomfortable. But Therese chose to follow Philomena's advice on moderation and chose to try to smooth things out.

–No, not now anyway. We had some friction before. Nathalie went after me because I was new to school, as many experience. I challenged her authority and humiliated her in front of her friends, so we started fussing and subjected each other with pranks. But wasn't in you, Nathalie, who eventually suggested that we should have a ceasefire instead?

– That's right, Tess, she replied quickly. And you answered that peace is better because ceasefire sounds so temporary.

– Exactly like that. Since then, we have not interfered with each other, and there is no reason why we should start with it either.

Nathalie's parents were satisfied with that answer, and went out to say goodbye to the hosts. Nathalie was relieved that the whole truth wasn't revealed this time either. Before Therese had time to leave the room, John's grandfather entered the room and looked firmly at her.

– I have heard a lot about you and your background today, and I would like to ask you a frank question, young lady. With age's right, I take the liberty of being completely straight with you.

– What are you wondering, grandfather?

– What I'm wondering is not based on something you've done or that I suspect you're planning to do, but on what others have done. Are you an gold digger who only wants a better future by getting married with a wealthy family?

– A straight question that requires a straight answer. No, I'm not a gold digger.

– Good. Not that it would be strange or even immoral if it were true. I just wish that you make my grandchild happy, hope you understand that.

– I fully understand your concern, which could be justified. In fact, it's rather the opposite. Johnny's wealthy background is a problem for me and not an advantage. He is the one that's running after me while I'm the one dumping him.

Frederick just entered the room and heard the last comment from Therese.

– What on earth am I hearing, are you dumping John again? What did you say to her, Father? Now that I finally managed to persuade her to stay with him.

– Take it easy, Frederick. Your dad has just asked a straight question and got a straight answer. I actually appreciate people who express exactly what they feel and don't embed what they want to say in a lot of garbage.

– The way that I do it, you mean, Frederick smiled. Are you heading home now, Father?

– Yes, it's time for me to go home. You live in the city, right young lady? Do you want to tag along in our car, I can ask our driver to drop you of at home?

– No, thank you, I'm planning to stay here. I already have a change of clothes here so I can go home together with Johnny tomorrow instead.

– Are you already sleeping together? he asked with wrinkled eyebrows.

– No, Father, Therese are staying the west wing by herself. She uses my room from when I was a child while John's room in where it's been before.

– Excellent, excellent. Then I bid you farewell, young lady. I hope we will meet again in the near future. Make my grandchild happy now, so that you at the same time you makes an old man happy.

– I promise, Grandfather.

Frederick could not help smiling when he heard her say "grandfather". It sounded so nice and familiar. He really started to like this girl. The three had reached the entrance where John and Philomena was waiting and Therese curtsied politely when she said farewell and Frederick nodded in appreciation when he saw it. He had certainly been pleasantly surprised at how this evening had gone. Not only that Therese had been as elegant as he had wished for but not dared to dream about, she had also taken care of the conflicts that emerged as a true Lady. Now he was absolutely convinced that she would become a really good daughter-in-law in the future. He could not help saying that.

– Tess, I have one thing I would like to say to you in front of John and my dear wife. As you know, I'm a slick businessman and I am rarely used to be wrong. When I met you, I thought you didn't fit in here, and I preferred that John didn't court you. I was convinced that you are directly unsuitable as my daughter-in-law. Now I have to say that even I can be wrong sometimes, and when I'm wrong I'm really totally wrong. For today you showed with clearness that you fit in here in every possible way. So I apologize from the depths of my heart that I doubted you before. I really liked the way you handled Chadwick.

– Well, he was not that hard to handle. He just made a fool of himself immediately. But I agree with you, Frederick, that it actually feels completely right to be here now. I even thought that this party was really nice.

– I also thought it was nice, honey, John said. But not the party itself, because it was as boring as always, but the evening was very good because you were here.

– Come here your big lout and you'll get a kiss!

She kissed John intensively to Frederick and Philomena's delight. Right now, it seemed obvious that it was only a matter of time before she became their daughter-in-law.

– Good night now, everyone! I'm exhausted and I'll go to bed.

– Good night, Tess, all three said with one mouth.

Soon Therese laid in the big comfortable bed in her room in the west wing. She was thinking on how the evening had been and thought she could easily get used to this life, although it felt unaccustomed at the moment. At the same time, John himself seemed a bit uncomfortable, so they probably wouldn't go on this kind of stiff party all the time.

It took a long time before Therese could fall asleep. She was thinking of everything that had happened lately. Mia had clearly shown that she still loved her, and wanted to be with her but at the same time she didn't depend on her. Frederick had not only accepted her, but even fully repented and seemed to want her to become part of this family. She also became increasingly aware that a lot of her concerns that this so called "society" would be snobbish also became ashamed. She had never felt the warmth and empathy that she had received from most guest at this party. Well, there were some exceptions, with only a few.

– Auntie Tess!

Therese looked surprised at the door of the room next door. Mia wasn't here today, or what? She realized it was only her imagination played her because she loved Mia so much.

And John. “Now, what do I really feel for Johnny,” she thought. She got very hot in her body of the thought. “I have to be in love with him right now, why would I otherwise feel so strange just thinking about him?” she continued thinking. Finally, she tried to list all her current problems in her head. The problem was that she could not find any problems anymore. And if some would appear in the future, she knew she could handle them like that with Chadwick and Nathalie today.

It felt like all her worries were over now and that she finally could relax totally. She fell asleep with a happy smile on her lips.



Epilogue

Therese dumped John shortly after the party because she caught him to sometimes look at other girls. Soon she discovered that if was not only John that begged her for another chance. But both Philomena and Frederick tried to make her accept that John's heart was completely lost to her, even though his eyes sometimes wandered other ways. She decided that she maybe shouldn't be so categorical, so they reconciled for a while just to soon fight again. But with each fight it was a new reconciliation afterwards and eventually their relationship grew so strong that John proposed to her before she even got eighteen years old.

Of course, Therese replied "no," because she first wanted to be independent from his money to show that she was not a gold digger. After completing cooking school, she got a job as a sous chef at a luxury restaurant downtown. Then she shocked John by proposing to him instead. He was, of course, overjoyed and answered "yes", even though she demanded that it was she who would support him until he finished the university. The wedding was of course a particularly big party, after which they moved into a villa together.

Diana's relationship with Leonard however didn't survive when she started at the local university with her scholarship while Leonard started at an university far away across the country instead. She was not too sad about it because she had begun feeling that it was not enough that he had been the one that helped her when she had a hard time. She actually didn't have such deep feelings for him, and Leonard felt the same for her, but they continued to be friends for the rest of their lives. At the university her new self confidence became even stronger and she

started dating boys at school. She was considered tough because she already had a daughter. It didn't take long until she found true love, and got engaged with a guy named Phillip. After graduation, they moved in together and began discussing marriage. Viola also became fond of Phillip, who answered the feelings. Viola grew up and became popular when she eventually started school because she also was so safe with herself.

Mia didn't forget her "Auntie Tess", but really began to love her new parents too. She was so happy about her new life and grow up into a tough and self reliant girl. Her early experience of being forced to take care of herself had really made her able to always find a solution to whatever she encountered. Thanks to that, she became one of the most popular girls in her class when she started school, both among her classmates and with the teachers.

All three former foster children continued to meet each other. Therese and Ruth were taking turn to invite the others to Thanksgiving and other celebrations. Ruth and Ronald had stopped accepting foster children and were content to have only Mia. The nicest moments were when they spent time with Diana, Viola, Therese and Mia together. Of all their foster children, these were the ones who had come closest to them. Or as Ruth once said when they met.

– This is the best family possible, even though none of us is actually related! You have made me and Ronald so happy!

– That's nothing compare to what you both did for us, Diana and Therese answered with one mouth.

Mia nodded in agreement and they all folded their arms around each other in a group hug.

✯ ✯ ✯