

ARKONA PURPURE

The Trilogy

BOOK ONE

THE SCENT OF LEGACY

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This book is a work of fiction. All characters in this novel are fictional. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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To my son

In your eyes, I can do anything. That is why I fear nothing.

Prologue

March 20, 1973

Rügen Island, the Baltic Sea, the GDR

3:37 after midnight

Vigorous clatter of worn-out women's clogs resonates through the empty hallway of the disturbingly peaceful maternity ward of the Garz Hospital, north of Binz. Maria, a midwife, her gray hair meticulously combed into a bun, hastily opens the door to room NB2. Quietly, she sneaks between the seven tall picket fence cribs. She stops for a moment, turns around, and gently approaches a cradle covered with faded pictures of fawns, right next to the window, and slowly lays the tiny swaddle onto the ironed military bed sheet.

- You're lucky—she smiles.

- No roommates tonight – she says softly, pulling the pink baby cap over the sleeping infant's eyelids. She pivots on her heels and tiptoes through the room, making sure the massive doors don't slam shut. She lingers, still holding the doorknob, and leans onto the door.

Maria, a midwife, retiring this June, sighs loudly and shivers, realizing how quiet it is in normally the loudest part of the hospital. Her hand slides from the doorknob and she walks towards the open hallway window. She looks into the sky. Not a breath of wind. It is a clear March night, and the darkness envelops the treetops of the tall pines, standing on the cliffs like the guardians of the night, with their tops reaching for the stars gathered around the full moon. She flinches, noticing the strange purpurescent moon. She feels a shiver running down her spine. In one sudden movement, she lowers the inner windowpane.

- It's going to be a long winter – she thinks to herself, gazing at the watch fixed to the upper left pocket of her uniform.

The hands of the watch indicate it is 3:43 after midnight.

The midwife heads down the hall, slowly towards the break rooms, failing to notice how the moon loses its unusual shade, which, like the dust, carried by the wind, rushes towards the right wing of the hospital and the maternity ward. A thunderous blast, with its invisible force, opens wide all the windows and doors of the old building, causing a blackout and panicked bustle followed by hysteric scream of the awakened babies. The purple dust stops above the window of room NB2, and then, transforming into a thick matter, flies into the room. It spreads across the entire ceiling, making it resemble a Baltic tempest.

Revolving around its axis, the strange mass begins to boil, creating a vortex, the center of which begins to shine thin beams of blinding light, whilst the edges of the mass reenter the core, reducing its radius. Floating at a meter from the ceiling, the cloud rests above the cradle covered with faded pictures of fawns. The violent cry of the newborn begins to die down as the child becomes consumed by the glistening of the beams in the specter of unusual shades in the form of an eight-toothed cogwheel. Finally, the floating mass turns gray and takes the shape of two eyes. Hypnotized by the warm and benevolent gaze, the baby raises its tiny right hand, spreading its fingers towards the eyes. A touch of dust, turning purple, no bigger than a tear, falls from the floating mass, right in front of the little girl's nostrils. She breathes it in. Her eyes glisten. Her lips take the shape of a smile. Lazily, she closes her eyelids. Sleeping like nothing happened. The cloud vanishes, suddenly and unexpectedly. The hospital is dead silent.

Maria, a midwife, retiring this June, sighs loudly and shivers, realizing how quiet it is in normally the loudest part of the hospital. Her hand slides from the doorknob and she walks towards the open hallway window. She looks into the sky. Not a breath of wind. It is a clear March night, and the darkness envelops the treetops of the tall pines, standing on the cliffs like the guardians of the night, with their tops reaching for the stars gathered around the full moon. She gazes at the magnificent fullness of the moon, mesmerized. Her mind wanders off for a second. She feels a strange shiver running down her spine and in one sudden movement, she lowers the inner windowpane.

- It's going to be a long winter – she thinks to herself, gazing at the watch fixed to the upper left pocket of her uniform. The hands of the watch indicate it is 3:43 after midnight. The midwife heads down the hall, slowly towards the break rooms...

Chapter 1

I'm watching a child crossing a bridge. Wooden. Hanging. Rotten and flimsy. If what I'm watching had sound, there would be a squeak at every step of the tiny feet. If there were smell, it would be the smell of cold and fear. If there were color, everything would still be gray. At the end of the bridge, there is an old man. Lame, wrinkled, lifeless. Empty, sunken eyes carefully following the child's movement.

Thin lips distort into a smile as he raises his skinny arm. A bony-fingered hand appears under the ragged cuffs. He's waving. Calling the child over. The kid is standing in the middle of its way. Hesitating. Firmly holding onto the intertwined ropes of the bridge. I know that it's a boy, although he doesn't turn around. He's got ruffled short hair.

He takes another step. The bridge is swinging. He looks down timorously. He sees clouds. The dark clouds give the impression that he's far above the ground. I feel a shiver down my spine. I can't move. I can never move. I call for him. He doesn't hear me. He never hears me. He is still moving forward, towards the end. Towards the old man.

- Stop! - I scream without a sound.

I'm begging him to come back, to wait for me, because I'm coming for him. But my legs are nailed to the ground, my arms bound to my body. The terror of helplessness makes me break into tears. Without a sound. Without a flinch. Stop, I'm begging him, but no words come out. It's not right! It's not good! A sudden sound cuts through the air. Sharp and thin, like a moan, breaking the silence. At first, I'm not sure whether it's real, or whether it's all in my head. I look towards the bridge and wonder whether he heard it, too. But all he does is stand, little hands clutching the ropes, as the hunched old man waves his withered hand invitingly. The boy doesn't notice me. He never notices me.

- Stay! Stop! - I pray silently.

Daunted, I realize that the boy is moving forward again. Every muscle in my body is strained, but I'm still frozen. Fear for his life causes pain I cannot stand. Sharp, unbearable. I suffocate in the silence of the cries and numbness of the body. And then, from the depths of greatest grief, comes a cry I don't even recognize as my own. Sad and thin, carried by a sudden gust of wind, spreading all around me. The boy stops. Did he hear me? I watch the back of his head as it moves slowly, first left, and then right. He heard me! The horrified expression on my face gives place to a smile of relief. I look towards the old man. I'm surprised to see that he's not there anymore. The boy is still standing there. Still. Too still. That's not good. I'm panicking. I know that's not good. I look around. Some unusually sweet smell fills the air. It's floral. I don't know what kind of flower it is, but I know it's purple. If

you could smell colors, purple would smell just like that. Fresh, sparkly, sensual, yet simple. God knows why, but I instinctively close my eyes and try to take a deep breath. I feel dizzy. Somnolent. Lazily, I open my eyes and freeze as I suddenly meet those eyes. Gray, heavy, glistening. I boil with rage! They're so close I can see the face they belong to. I look intently into those threatening eyes. I can see the reproach in them. That's not right. Nothing here is right! Those eyes are dangerous! Why, then, instead of fear, I feel only discomfort? Did I do something wrong? The child! I look back at the bridge in panic. His back facing me, the tiny body in a red shirt still holds on tight to the ropes, but it has moved backwards in the meantime, so it's in the middle of the bridge again. I am wreathed in smiles. I did it. I made him hear me for the first time. And then I realize: there's no color. There's never color here!!!

All of a sudden, everything around me starts to collapse! The invisible strings that had been chaining me are now ripped. I'm free! I can move. I run to the bridge. Suddenly, there's a sound. Loud, deafening. I hear thunders echoing, ground cracking, haunting winds howling. I can't move as fast as I'd like to. I'm close. The bridge is shaking violently and starting to crack...

- Just a bit longer! Don't be afraid, I'm coming! – I'm shouting at the top of my lungs.

A massive explosion scars the sky and I lose the ground beneath my feet, landing on my back. In an instant, my leg slides between two cracked boards. I realize that the bridge is about to collapse. I desperately reach for a piece of rope and tie it around my left hand and elbow. Strong blasts of wind make whirls of dust all around me. I can't keep my eyes open. They're beginning to sting. I try to protect them with my right hand. Through clouds of dust, I see a red shirt and ruffled hair in front of me. I put my hand on his shoulder and try to outvoice the noise. I'm telling him that everything is going to be all right. Finally, I feel his little hand in mine. It's so warm and soft! He turns around. I want to see his face. Why can't I see his face? I can clearly see only his small lips moving, as if he's trying to say something. I'm not sure whether I can't hear him, or I don't understand his words. A cloud of dust blinds my sight as an unbearable blast throws me to the ground. This time, I land on my knees. I'm still clutching the little hand in mine. I rub my eyes against my shoulder in an attempt to regain my sight. The dust begins to enter my eyes and nose. I cannot breathe. I'm suffocating. I am horrified, realizing the little hand is beginning to slip from mine. I am holding it as tight as I can. He's slipping! I can't allow that.

- No, No!!!- I scream.

I throw the rope coiled around my left hand. Now with both hands, I try to reach the child. I barely touch his hand, a moment before I realize I'm now alone on the bridge. I look in terror as the little red shirt vanishes in the dark clouds. A second before it disappears completely, it turns gray. The colors are gone again... Why is there never color?

I don't know how long I stare into the abyss, paralyzed. I don't remember when everything went back to the way it was before. No sound. No smell. No life. Once again, I see the lame old man at the end of the bridge. A crooked smile on his thin lips as he waves. I am sure that I can see a trace of sorrow in his eyes before I jump. I'm falling. Plummeting so fast! My back brushing against the clouds. So dark, and yet so soft. Fleecy. I can feel their delicate scent. The smell of early morning, freshly-cut grass, light rain. The smell of spring. I love spring... I was born in spring, and I will die in spring. I feel no fear. Nor happiness. Nor rage. Nor pain. I feel nothing. I just want this to be over. I'm still falling. Before I touch the ground, the last thing I see are bright gray eyes, looking at me with reproach and concern. I don't know why, but I give them a comforting smile. Before everything vanishes into the silence of the dark.

My name is Purpure. Purpure Devan. Today is March 20, my birthday. Thirty-ninth.

Chapter 2

What's that saying – I raise my right eyebrow and a frown wrinkles my forehead – live your dreams and you'll live in the land of milk and honey?!

- Something like that - Luka shrugs.

- Still, if they'd known what you'd be like, they would've just said the land of milk. Spoiled milk, at that. Like this one in your fridge.

- Take the unopened one! –I roll my eyes, taking the milk carton from his hands. I throw it into the garbage, returning to the stove, crossing my arms as I wait for the water to boil.

He slams the fridge door shut and, stopping for a moment, he gives me a concerned look:

- You've never got this far. Why now? Do you think this is the end?

- I don't know. Everything was different tonight. The sounds, the smell, the colors, the fear, and the serenity in the end - for a moment, I'm in my nightmare again. I shiver. - ...and... and... I've never killed myself before.

The hissing sound of the teapot jolts me. I remove it quickly. As I'm getting the cups, I notice that my hands are shaking uncontrollably, which makes the hot water end up all over the countertop.

- Still, you almost saved him this time – he says, taking the teapot and pouring the water over the chamomile tea bags. – Maybe you'll make it next time! – he utters, sneaking a look at me.

- Next time?! – I turn pale. –I don't want there to be any fucking next time! Don't you get it?! Never again! I can't... - my voice is trembling as I struggle not to cry.

He puts his arm around me and I bury my head into his shoulder.

–Shhhh, darling. Everything is gonna be all right.

- I can't... - I sob – I can't do this every fucking year!! I want it to stop! Please, make it stop...

He rocks me in his arms, trying to comfort me by saying that everything will be fine. That it's just a stupid dream that will never happen again. Although I don't believe that, the comforting words calm me down. I sink deeper into his chest and I can feel a faint trace of his scent through the heavy bathrobe. I smile to myself. I love that scent. Luka smells of forest.

The first time I had the nightmare, I was five. Since then, I've had it on every birthday. My parents, realizing that talking, comforting, leaving the lights on, and sleeping in the same room and the same bed did no good, decided to take my nana's insistent advice and take a more radical approach – they turned to chants, fear banishing rituals, hanging ghost traps, screamers, and finally, dream catchers. However, as they were a respectable married couple, and acclaimed scientists, at that, after I turned seven, they started taking me to therapy sessions. First I went to see psychologists, then psychiatrists, as well as other experts. Now, thirty-two years later, exactly eleven scientific experts, two hojas, and one witch doctor have my record misplaced somewhere, with same notes and different diagnoses. They all agreed on one thing. – I must have had the nightmare before, but I first realized I was having it when I was five. However, the reason I have it, as well as why it's always the same and why I always have it on my birthday, was explained differently and incompletely by all of them. Whenever I have this dream, I wake up exactly at 3:43.

I take a look at the clock. It's already six. It's been an hour and a half since I left Luka sleep over on the sofa and I returned to bed. While he dozed off talking to me, actually – while my self-pity put him to sleep, I remained awake. His head buried between a pile of pillows and the sofa armrest, his arms bent at the elbows and hands fisted, resembling a boxing guard, he breathed evenly. I snuck out of the bottom part of the white sofa speckled with dark green flowers and got up. I carefully put a blanket over him and pulled out two crossed pillows that were holding his head up in an unnatural position. The sudden pull and loss of body support made Luka shift position and turn towards me. His right hand, still in the shape of a fist, fell onto the floor, and his head was now exactly in the middle of the sofa, thus, although in twilight, completely revealing his boyish good looks.

His symmetrical face, fresh, velvet skin, dreamy amber eyes with long eyelashes. The strong jaw and square jaw line further add to his masculinity. He would often say that he's got a thick beard thanks to serving in the army, because they made him shave every day while he was there, although he was basically beardless. His lips are full and in their corners I can see two thin laugh lines, which are, actually, the only wrinkles he has. His forehead is high and smooth, covered with wisps of hazel hair, always greasy, no matter what its length. My Luka is truly gorgeous. Weighing over 200 pounds and being six foot three, this history professor with broad shoulders and ever glistening eyes turns heads wherever he goes. Countless times have I thanked God, the universe, fate, as well as our grammar school administration that hired him. Eight years ago, I moved back in with my parents, and Luka came to live in the house across the street. I gently move the wisp of hair falling over his nose and head towards the bedroom. As I'm going up the stairs, I wonder why the two of us, apart from the unconditional, brotherly love, feel nothing more for each other. Because, no matter how much time we spend together, no matter how close we are in sharing our intimate secrets, or how drunk we are, I always see him as an older brother. My protector,

who takes me in his arms, the way he would hug a younger sister, and makes sure to hide me there from all the bullshit and the troubles. Over almost a decade, which is how long he's been living in our town, Luka has truly become a member of my family. A distinguished member of our community, loved by both the students and the parents, I cannot understand how he always manages to find a fresh pair of legs to spread. Behind his innocent boyish face is an insatiable thirty-seven year old playboy. Even at the time when due to our closeness everyone thought we were having a secret affair, both girls and women were literally throwing themselves at his feet. He would always try to keep his distance from them in a polite and chivalrous manner, flirting ever so subtly, so that he managed to stay on the good side of the male population. That's one of the reasons why men, too, enjoy his company, considering him the epitome of strong character, glorifying his fidelity to his girlfriend Christa who used to come visit him perhaps once a month. Regardless of the steady relationships, because after Christa there were several more labeled as steady, Luka regularly brought home the beauties he dated, some of them girls, and some of them already women. He often got into comic situations and I always had to cover for him, and if I started to nag or scold him, he would put on a vulpine smile and say that nature had two things in mind when it created woman: one is fucking, and the other one is giving birth. He would always add, jokingly, of course, that he would explain his claims much better if I just moved my panties to the side. I hate that kind of vulgar jokes, and really, Luka can sometimes be such a savage and a chauvinist, by I still love him, no matter what his flaws may be, because he needs no explanations in order to embrace me, my insanity and everything that goes with it.

I drag myself out of bed and sit in the corner of the sheets. My bare feet touch the massive floor, but as soon as I feel how cold it is, I pull them back up. I shiver and start searching the bed for the parti-colored winter socks my nana knitted for me. As a person who hates indoor footwear, I accepted winter socks as an ideal solution. Everyone stopped nagging about putting the slippers on, and I could stop wearing things that hamper my movement. As I'm putting the left sock on, I hear some sort of bustle on the other side of the door. Followed by the sound of suppressed laughter, the doors open slightly and for a moment, there's nothing but silence. Then, they suddenly fling open, letting in a typhoon of ginger hair, with the little person it belonged to jumping on me and leaving me breathless for a second. Strong grip of the little hands and a million kisses of the soft lips banish all the dark thoughts from my mind.

- Happy birthday, mom! –she screams enthusiastically, trying to kiss me with every sound she pronounces. The tickling of her thick curls makes me laugh uncontrollably.

-Thank you, my darling, thank you!–I can barely catch my breath.

Suddenly she screams as she finds herself in the air, wiggling her arms and legs. Luka is holding her like a sack, against his hip, trying to put his free hand around her mouth. Beila giggles as she tries to break loose.

- This little pain in the ass doesn't let anyone else get to you! – he grins, throws her on the bed, and makes a theatrical jump into bed. He pulls me in for a kiss on the forehead:

– Happy birthday and may our future springs be much merrier! - he whispers gently.

His attempt to nestle me under his head and put his arm around me is interrupted by Beila's pillow attack.

- How many times have I told you not to hit on mom? – she shouts, jumping at the bottom of the bed, ready for another attack.

- And how many times have I told you not to sabotage me? – he responds mockingly.

She stands stiff, wrinkling her freckly nose, frowning her messy eyebrows, and rests her head on her right hand, pretending to think hard. She speaks slowly, carefully enunciating every word:

-Hmmm, I don't think it's at all polite to talk like that to a nice six and a half year old girl, who catches you in an intimate and daring situation with her mom, and which seems to be a prelude to a delicate activity! – she sticks her tongue out at the end.

We burst into laughter.

- Intimate and daring situation? Prelude to a delicate activity?! For heaven's sake, Beila! I seriously forbid you to read and watch that kind of stuff, which is forbidden to you anyway!! Luka, let's go straight to her room and find that forbidden literature! – he responds to my order by jumping out of bed, standing up straight and saluting.

– You'll never find it! – she says, still standing at the bottom of the bed, her hands crossed, giving us a fierce, victorious look.

– Soldier, to the doll house, at once! I've always found it suspiciously pink for a little girl's toy! – I say in a strict voice.

- Yes, ma'am! –pivoting on his feet, Luka heads towards the door. Beila giggles and starts jumping on the mattress.

- You'll never find it! – she yells joyfully.

Luka turns around quickly, winks at me and two steps later he's in the bed with Beila in his arms.

- If we can't find it ourselves, we can always squeeze the information out of you – I say and laugh as Luka and I start to tickle her.

- Nooo, I'll never tell you! - she squeaks. -I'll pee myself laughing if I have to! Actually, I'll do it for reeeaaaal! – she wiggles and smiles. – Stop, stooooop! Ok, I'll tell you! I'll tell mom, I promise I'll tell her! – she senses that we're becoming more lenient. She snuggles next to me and moves a wisp of hair from my ear. Looking at Luka, with his ruffled hair, she whispers gibberish into my ear.

The victorious grin on her face makes Luka try to retreat from the bed.

- Oh, noooo, you're not getting away with this, I'm still – the weight of Beila's body and mine prevents him from finishing the sentence.

-Oh, fu...! – he bites his tongue – That's exactly what women are like! – he says laughing – No matter what it is, ahahaha, in the eeeeeend, they unite... ahaahaha...

They are now applying a clinch hold on me, trying to take off my winter socks. Suddenly, the phone rings. Everyone jumps up, trying to catch their breath. Luka launches another pillow at Beila, and she falls down on the bed. Picking up the handset, I watch them as they try to suppress laughter. He raises his arms victoriously, Beila dangling from his hands, trying to come down.

- Hello? -I answer, trying not to laugh.

- Hello, darling - the monotonous male voice on the other end of the line brings me back to reality – why aren't you answering your phone?

- What do you mean, I'm not answering, Phillip? – I ask, trying to signal Beila and Luka to be quiet.

- Well, darling, - he continues monotonously – the phone must have rang more than four times before you answered.

- Could be. – I try to justify myself – We were playing a bit, Beila, Luka, and I. I didn't hear it right away.

- Of course you were playing! – he interrupts me harshly. - And of course Luka is there! Anyway, I have no time to argue. I'm calling to remind you about the tonight's reception. Wear something appropriate!

I smack myself on the forehead. I completely forgot I have to be at the Continental Inn in Belgrade tonight, at the five year anniversary of *Arkona East*. Although I hardly ever accompany my husband to such events, he specifically demanded that I show up tonight,

regardless of the fact that it's my birthday. It's been announced that Alec Lirai, the owner and CEO of the *Arkona Group* conglomerate, will attend the event, and Phillip couldn't miss the opportunity to meet him. Showing up with his wife will make him look more serious and respectable, since his reputation as a womanizer is hardly something he'd like Lirai to be aware of.

- Helloooo?? Darliiiiing - Phillip spoke slowly and nervously, which made me pay attention to his words again.

- Hey, I'm here! I'm here. You're breaking up.

- Of course I'm breaking up! - he mustered.

- I'll see you tonight, then, and I beg you, try to be nice to my colleagues!

I can hear shrill woman's laughter in the background.

- Mia says hi - he adds quickly.

- Kiss Beila for me. Say hello to that clown and tell him he should find some decent chick. Call me when you arrive at the hotel.

- Ok, ok. Fine, just, what do you mean, when I arrive at the hotel? You're not coming to the apartment first?

- I can't make it. I'm busy all day - he says in a rush. - Make sure you arrive at seven thirty at the latest. Happy birthday! See ya - and the call ended.

Red with anger, I put down the handset. Luka's looking through the window, trying to ignore my conversation with Phillip, the way he's been trying to ignore my marriage to him. Beila comes closer and sits on my lap. She lays her head on my chest:

- Tell daddy I said hi, too... - she whispers.

And then there's silence. I pull her head closer to my lips and give her a comforting kiss. I feel like her curly hair smell strange. I frown. I sink my face into her hair and take a deep breath. My whole body fills with the aroma that makes my skin crawl. My daughter smells like early morning. Freshly-cut grass, light rain... My daughter smells like spring. I goggle at her, petrified, and then move away from her.

- Mommy, are you all right? -she asks me, noticing my reaction.

- Y..yes... - I stammer. Luka turns away from the window. He raises his right eyebrow inquiringly. - Is everything ok?

- Y..yes... I just remembered I've got tons of things to do. - he knows I'm lying.

- Well, then, let's not waste any more time. Get ready, and let's get the party started. If he stopped me from hitting on your mom, we can't let him ruin her birthday as well, can we?! You, pain in the ass, go to your room and get dressed, and you, old lady, straight to the bathroom and clean yourself up a bit!

Beila squeaks with joy and runs after him, then stops, returns, and gives me a hug.

- C'mon, mom, you have to see the present you got from grandma and grandpa. If Luka promises to be nice, I'll let him hit on you for 15 minutes.

Then she gives me a soft kiss and I notice that her hair smells the same as always, it smells of kids' raspberry shampoo.

My daughter goes out of the room with her godfather, pushing and shoving all the while.

Sometime around ten o'clock, carrying a large tray filled with hot drinks, I go out of the kitchen and into the spacious living room, in our family house in Old Skies. In accordance with our family tradition, the gifts are to be opened after breakfast, when the birthday boy or girl serves all the guests, and this morning, I have five of them. My parents, my aunt, Luka, and, of course, Beila. As she's messing around the boxes with presents lying on a low table, my father Milos is waving his hands in front of the wide windows looking into the backyard, showing Luka the strategic points where mole traps should be placed. Emma, my mother, and aunt Amelia are sitting comfortably in the sofa, flipping through old photo albums. As I carefully pour the coffee, I watch them all. Warm, kind people, honest and open-hearted. Milos, a determined contrarian, with fair skin and white hair, slump posture, keen eyes, always peering over the tops of his tortoiseshell glasses, a real enthusiast when it comes to his work. My dad has a PhD in biochemistry. He's a true Darwinian. A natural scientist, who strongly believes that every living creature has the right to decide about its own destiny. He likes his coffee strong, with a lump of sugar and just a drop of milk. He winks at me as he passes him the indigo porcelain cup with a worn-out cobalt pattern around the rim. As always, he frowns, darting his tongue as he takes a sip of hot coffee, and then continues his conversation with Luka.

Mum gives him a quick, stealthy glance and smiles gratefully as she accepts the cup I offer her. Emma likes her coffee weak, no sugar, no milk, poured into the large, white porcelain cup from Kyoto, with a thin handle and hand drawn purple lilies. Short, skinny, with short chestnut hair, delicate complexion, some freckles here and there, warm, olive eyes, dressed according to the latest fashion trends, one would think that she has nothing in common with her husband Milos. However, apart from the fact that she cares about her appearance and likes weak coffee instead of strong, the two of them are almost exactly alike. They met

in a library in Cambridge, in 1968, where Emma studied medicine and Milos was working on his PhD thesis. They describe their love as a chain chemical reaction, which, thanks to the laws of physics, lasts to this day.

I give the white tea cup made of Chinese porcelain, with a large, gold-plated handle, to my father's younger sister, Amelia. She studied medicine in Berlin, and decided to finish her specialization in Belgrade, where she met her fiancé, Ivan Gorov, a Russian chemist, who invited Milos to Rügen in March, 1973, to give a lecture on "The Reaction of Molecules to Sunlight", as a part of a science conference of chemists and biochemists in Binz. Amelia's got thin, salt-and-pepper hair, round, sweet face, rosy cheeks and sad, round eyes and likes her coffee black and strong. Her cup is a part of the set she and Ivan bought three days before he was arrested in Budapest, under suspicion that he was a western spy, and where he died in 1976, in a remand prison, from pneumonia. Amelia could never make peace with the reason of his death, which is why she never remarried. When she visited us for the first time, she liked Old Skies so much, she soon joined us herself.

I finally serve Luka and Beila and I sit down. As I'm drinking my strong, bitter coffee, I watch my little family over the rim of my cup and listen to them talking. I smile and nod, once again completely aware why everyone has always considered us freaks. At moments like this, you can hear three languages being spoken in our house. While Milos and Luka talk in Serbian, Amelia and Emma talk in German, and Beila is singing a song in Czech. Although they are both German citizens, my parents come from mixed marriages. My mom's father was German, and her mother was Russian, while my dad's father was German and his mother was Czech. Although it seems strange to others, in our house, all three languages are used equally, along with Serbian, especially since Phillip moved in after Beila was born. At first, Luka couldn't keep up with our constant switching from one language to the other, but after a few years, he learned how to speak Czech quite well, and he mastered German he once learned in high school.

- Moooooomm!- shouts Beila in a shrill voice, drawing everyone's attention.

She frowns as she pulls out a large box, wrapped in mate silver paper, with a silver mesh bow.

- Will you open grandma and grandpa's present already! I have no idea what it is, but you'll really like it! - she raises her messy eyebrows and shrugs.

- I think I'll open yours first! - I say and approach the table, moving my finger across the parti-colored boxes. I choose one, the size of a shoebox, sloppily wrapped in Mickey Mouse paper.

Beila quickly drops the box from her hands and snuggles next to me, smiling impatiently. In the box, there is a photo of the two of us, exchanging presents at Christmas. The picture is in a handmade purple plaster frame, embellished with every ornament Beila could get her hands on. It looks so jumbled and tacky and gawky and absolutely perfect! I hug her tight, trying not to cry. I press my lips against her forehead, thinking she's the most wonderful gift I've ever got. Beila hugs me with her little arms and then quickly places my aunt's present in my hands. I'm delighted to see that it's a copy of Jamie Oliver's book, "Jamie at home", signed by the author himself. I smile broadly. My aunt always knows a guy who knows a guy... Luka's present makes everyone laugh their hearts out. Under the gentle wrapping with a baby pink bow is Festool LEX 2 125/7, an excenter grinder I have been eyeing online for a while. The gift from Milos and Emma leaves everyone breathless. Under the wide lid of the large box is a royal purple long cocktail dress, made of heavy frilled silk! Over the left side of the chest, across the right shoulder and down the back, in the shape of a long and wide cape, there's a piece of emerald silk, ending in thin cobweb train. Feminine and theatrical, it was inspired by the dresses of the ancient Rome princesses and is a part of the fall collection of Zuhair Murad. It's one of those dresses, that, once you see them, you can't stop thinking about them. I've always said that I'd have it one day, even if I had to wear it around the house. I can hardly cope with the pleasant shock. I give everyone a grateful kiss.

- Well, at least you'll have something to wear tonight! – says Luka. - Just try not to seduce Phillips colleagues – he says, shaking his head reproachfully.

- Then they'll be just as annoying as you are! – Beila mocks him.

Luka approaches her and pinches her nose, saying that she's the most annoying creature he's ever seen. She kicks him in the shin and runs away.

- You'll never catch me! – She sticks her tongue out at him before she vanishes behind the dining room door. He runs after her.

- Shall we all have another piece of cake?! –I ask, placing the cups back on the tray.

- We all shall, except for you! – responds Emma with a sour smile. She notices the black look I'm giving her and adds, almost as if she's singing, that the dress is not made for those with a few extra pounds.

My mom, I think to myself as I'm entering the kitchen, is probably the only zoologist in the world who sees bad calories as the mortal enemies of the female body.

- Where youth ends, calories and gravity begin – she always says.

We spend the rest of the day in casual conversation, remembering my childhood mischiefs. We interrupt one another, correct and fill in the gaps. We laugh so hard, we cry. Then the hairdresser rings the doorbell and we all jump up, realizing that the day flew by, and that no one did what they planned to do. Before everyone goes about their own business, we agree that Milos and Emma will take me to Belgrade, because they're going to a premier at the National Theater anyway. Luka sighs theatrically:

-Oh, thank God I don't have to take her! I've already made some plans.

I roll my eyes, knowing exactly what kind of plans they are, and go into my room, where the hairdresser has been waiting for me, tapping her foot nervously because I haven't washed my hair yet.

Chapter 3

It's seven twenty when I arrive at the entrance to the new Belgrade hotel, Continental Inn, which is itself a part of the *Arkona group*. On the way there, Phillip informed me that there is a massive crowd in the hotel, adding that he is neck-deep in important conversations, which is why he recommends that I go straight to the Crystal Hall, table seven, reserved for the management of *Arkona East*. After trying to persuade me for a while, my parents finally agree not to go in with me, as I convince them I felt great, which is far from the truth, so I take a deep breath and walk away. Clutching the top layer of my gown, I nod at the doorman and go inside.

Loud chatter, colorful gowns, and mixed scents fill the room as I walk into the grand marble hall, the mixture of it all making me a bit dizzy, which is why I move away from the center of the crowd in a few quick and short steps. Pressing my bare shoulder against the cold marble column, breathing heavily, I watch the bustle around the entrance to the Crystal Hall. If there's something I hate, it's what is now waiting for me behind the glass door. I have no problem with coming in alone. In fact, I'm relieved, because Phillip is already inside and I'll avoid most of the handshaking and emotionless smiling.

When I was little, I fantasized about situations like this. I dreamed about ballrooms, long dresses, looking so beautiful and weightless as I spin around in my strong prince's arms, with everyone watching us in awe. However, now, as I'm close to saying goodbye to being thirty-something, before I enter the ballroom, in a heavy dress that makes me feel even fatter, I spin my clutch purse and lurk from a distance, like a maniac, trying to choose the perfect moment to sneak in, and then, after getting through the formal part, meeting Lirai, and faking a perfect marriage, hide in some lonely, hidden part of the hall, where I'm going to get drunk and text Luka about all the women he's missing out on.

I sigh, realizing that I'm late more than I expected. I pick up the layers of my dress, make sure I packed my self-confidence somewhere, and head towards the entrance that's still impossible to get through. I stand among the last ones who've joined the line and give them a warm smile, but get none in return. Tapping my foot nervously, I decide to kill time by texting, which will also make me feel less uncomfortable about standing alone among a bunch of people I don't know. To my amazement, the phone screen reads nine missed calls and four messages. All of them from Phillip. I start reading them in panic, expecting standard complaints about my incompetence, but he's actually informing me that I can take my time, since the program begins no earlier than an hour from now. Although I was just about to enter, the great news serves as a good excuse to get out of the line.

- *I still have more than forty minutes all to myself* – I think to myself – *after all, who would want to spend their last birthday before turning forty, surrounded by plastic strangers?*

I shove my phone back into my purse, bend my arms at the elbows so I could pick up the cape and the train, and accidentally push a tanned black-haired girl in a tight red Armani-like dress.

- Oh, I'm so sorry! I'm having a misunderstanding with my dress. – I smile and shrug, expecting her to understand, being a woman, and seeing the amount of silk I'm holding in my hands. However, she just gives me a black look.

- God, who let these people in? – she makes a snotty comment, making her girlfriends cackle, checking me out with a sneer.

I feel my face turn red with rage and heat. I can't stand cheap and shallow people. I drop the ends of my dress and slowly slide my palms over the frills on my hips, as if I want to straighten them. I look at my dress.

- Oh, Zuhair, I'm so sorry! I failed to introduce you to the other dresses here tonight – I look at the surprised faces in front of me.

- So – I raise my hand theatrically up to my chest – Murad – I move my hand towards the black-haired girl – Mexican Armani. Mexican Armani, Murad. – I lower my hand onto my chest once again. - It's been a pleasure! –I smile as wide as I can at the shocked crowd. I wink at them and make my way out of the line.

Feeling proud of myself, I decide to treat myself to a glass of good wine at the hotel's *Piano Bar*.

Since this is, after all, a gala event, the bar is empty. Apart from the bartender, who is wiping the glasses indifferently, and the waiter leaning onto the bar, the only guest is a petite blonde, sitting at the table right next to the concert grand piano. At the piano, there is a pianist with honey blond hair, whose rendition of a lovely piano piece makes me feel all warm and fuzzy inside. I lean against the bar, travelling on the wings of the familiar song. It's one of my favorite tunes, *My Lonely Road*.

I order red wine. Warm sparks fill my body. I sit on a barstool and close my eyes, letting myself drift away, listening to the moving notes, completely ignoring the sound of the stool right next to me being moved. As the song is about to end, I raise my glass in order to toast to the pianist. Someone next to me starts clapping, which makes the pianist turn around, take a bow, and then passionately embrace the blonde who runs into his arms. He lifts her off the ground and gives her a long, gentle kiss. The girl in the light blue dress, petite, thin like a fairy, gives a shrill laugh.

I'm still standing at the bar, holding my glass, petrified, pale, as if someone has just sucked the life out of me. Although I can hear my heart pounding and pumping, I wait for my brain to get enough oxygen, so I can produce any kind of reaction. Rage, tears, a fit of madness, anything. And yet, I feel as if I have just got up from the stool. I hold my glass halfway up, and, instead of running away, I stand there, a blank expression of my face, the familiar tune still echoing in my mind. I start bobbing my head to the tune only I hear. I feel every single note, softly kissing my heart, and then piercing it savagely. Excruciating pain in my chest makes me look down, and it is only then that I notice the sleeve of the man standing near, obviously looking at the scene next to the piano.

- Beautiful! – I hear his hoarse, yet soft voice.

Actually, the softness of that voice stops my body from being torn apart, but just for one brief moment, because the pain soon returns and I continue staring at the part of my body where my heart should be, expecting, I guess, for something to appear there. A wound, blood, a void, something to confirm that what I'm feeling is in fact mere physical pain. Instead, I feel my chin quivering and tears flooding my eyes. I close my eyes by reflex and clench my glass. I try to gather my strength and walk away without crying.

- You can really see that they are in a wonderful relationship, or marriage. – Although he speaks in English, the softness of his voice touches me again and I am calm for a moment.

– They're not married! –I say, opening my eyes. I stand up straight and leave the glass on the oak countertop.

– How can you tell they're not married? Do you happen to know them? – I hear him say, almost mockingly.

- Well... - I sigh – I happen to know only him... He's my husband. – I give him a brief look from the corner of my eye and turn away because tears come to my eyes once again and I finally take a step towards the exit.

Unfortunately, I clumsily step on my cape that somehow got wrapped around me. It makes me slip and rip a piece of silk that's now lying on the floor. However, the strong grip of his hand clutching my right arm prevents me from falling. Then I felt his other arm around my waist. I hear suppressed laughter coming from the woman kissing my husband. Turning away from Phillip, I struggle to stand up straight, holding onto the stranger's shoulder. The terrible pain, made even worse by humiliation, breaks me apart and tears start rolling down my face. Regaining my balance, I try to smile and say a silent "thank you." I look into his warm eyes whose color I can't define, and the mildness reflected in them gives me chills. I feel weak again, and, as if that's not bad enough, my knees tremble and I fall right

into his chest. I don't know if this lasts for a second or even shorter, but for me, it seems like everything around me freezes and goes silent.

Like under water, I can only hear myself breathing and I feel peaceful. The last time I felt so peaceful was when I was a baby and my mom was holding me in her arms. I can smell the extraordinary scent from his body, the scent that makes me relax completely and try to snuggle into his shirt, leaving a visible trace of smudged makeup on the white cotton. Sparkly, fresh, simple scent. The scent of my name. The scent of purple enters every my pore, making me open my eyes wide in disbelief and jump back, as if I touched fire.

I stare at him like a crazy person, inspecting every feature. Every millimeter of that gorgeous face. I suddenly turn around, once again aware of the feeling of betrayal, pain, humiliation, but also something new, and I run out of the bar. I rush towards the ladies' room and leave him shocked and convinced that I'm the craziest and also the saddest thing he's ever seen in his life. Fuck!

Holding my dress up high, almost up to my knees, I open the door with my elbow. I pass next to the cleaning lady without saying hello and run into the first free booth. I sit onto the toilet, crushed, and notice that I'm still clutching the silk in my hands, and I let it fall onto the floor.

I look at my destroyed, crumpled dress. At first, I try to slowly smooth the creases, but then I start to speed up more and more. The creases constantly reappear. I lick the tips of my fingers, trying to iron the crumpled silk with moist fingers. Nervously, I'm rubbing, but I'm not sure what anymore. I feel a sharp pain in the stomach, bent over my arms, I push my despair back inside. Hunched up on a toilet in a hotel restroom, wearing my several thousand euros worth dress, I sob quietly at first, and then I start crying my heart out. I let the tears wash away all the horror of the past hour.

- Miss! - I hear a woman's voice, followed by a light knock on the door.

I say nothing. I don't breathe. I don't move. - *Go away, I'm not here!* - I shout to myself. - *I shouldn't be here.*

- Miss, are you all right? - the woman's voice sounds concerned. She knocks and puts her hand on the knob.

- Darling, please! Do you need anything? Are you all right? - she repeats.

I'm still silent. - *You stupid cow!* - I begin to get mad. - *How do you think I'm feeling, sobbing for so long in a toilet booth?* Suddenly, I hate her. I hate her little world I don't even know, I hate it that she saw me, I hate it that she heard me sob in this fucking filthy toilet booth, as I wipe tears and buggers from my face, in my gown that costs more than she can earn in two

years. I hate it that she's trying to take care of me. *What the fuck is she doing? Fucking old hag...* I'm still quiet.

- Ok, darling. If you need anything, just let me know - she says in a motherly manner and lets go of the knob.

I want to slap myself for feeling such rage and directing it towards a completely innocent being. I take some toilet paper, one square at the time, and start to wipe my eyes and blow my nose.

- Yes, yes, I'm fine - I say quietly - I just need a minute to pull myself together, and I'll come out.

- That's ok, darling. Take it easy. The gentleman has been at the door four times already, asking about you. I think he's still waiting outside. I'll tell him that you're fine.

- *Of course the gentleman is worried about me. Fucking jerk!* - I think to myself as I finally get up. - *He must be eating his heart out, waiting for his darling wife to join him in kissing Lirai's ass. That bastard! It's true that our marriage is a sham and that it's completely logical that he's seeing other women, but was it so hard to keep it in his pants, at least tonight, on my birthday, when I came here, all dolled up for him, so he can show me off like a trophy! That cunt! Now he's coming four times to check on me, and just a moment ago...* - and then I realize.

Oh, dear God. Phillip doesn't even know I saw him, he doesn't know where I am. Wait... Then who's the gentlemen who's been asking about me? I crack the door open, and, hiding behind them, look towards the exit. The cleaning lady with short gray hair, in an old-fashioned beige women's suit and white Borosana shoes, is talking to someone through the cracked door. I can't hear anything because they're too far, so I tiptoe to the wall on the right, followed by the sound of rustling silk, and hide between the hand dryer and the paper towels. I slowly take out a towel and listen to them talk.

- All right, I'll tell her. - says the cleaning lady, and then moves to the side, letting a tall brunette in.

The woman, looking at her phone, pays no attention to me. She heads towards the booths in the back. The cleaning lady sees me as I try to get rid of the bunch of paper towels I'm holding.

- What did I tell you! You can see for yourself that she's fine - she opens the door for the man, pointing at me.

I feel my knees tremble again. Frightened, I lean against the cold tiles of the restroom wall.

– Oh, all right. Now I can see that she’s fine – he says with a broad smile on his face, showing his perfect teeth. –I can go then, clean myself up a bit – his lips pursed to the side, he points to the stain on his shirt.

In an ink black Henry Poole tuxedo, he’s still standing at the ladies’ room door, looking so tame, as if what he sees in front of him is the sweetest thing there ever was, and, apparently, expecting some kind of feedback from me. However, I just stand, with a blank expression on my face, staring at him as if he was a miracle, a freak, a god, or the first gorgeous man I’ve ever seen. Actually, scanning every wisp of his chestnut hair, his symmetrical face, flat nose, high, wrinkled forehead, his light, straight eyebrows, and dreamy, dark gray eyes with crow’s feet at the outer corners, I realize he’s not as gorgeous as I thought. Because he’s definitely not Luka, the epitome of boyish beauty. Nor Phillip, the epitome of cold maturity. He’s something completely different, something more important and incredible. Something, which makes me unable to move or speak. He’s, actually, the incarnation of the man I’ve been seeing in my dreams all my life, and the one I had in mind when I was puzzling together the image of an ideal man, only older. It seems that the man at the door of the ladies’ room at the *Continental Inn* in Belgrade has stepped out of my wildest fantasies. If that’s true, he must have a big dick as well.

This last thought makes my heart pound and blood rush into my body, sending fire into my cheeks stained with bleeding mascara. For heaven’s sake, Purpure! I feel ashamed of my naughty thoughts and I scold myself, full aware that he must have concluded by now that I am completely insane.

- Thanks once again! – I say, bending my arm at the elbow and waving at him. I realize too late that I’m still holding a bunch of paper towels in my hand. – They’ll come in handy. – he says, looking at the pile of papers in my hand, and then waves back at me. - Duty calls! I must go now. – he says, bows, and leaves.

The cleaning lady closes the door, puts her hands on her hips, and looks at me from head to toe, clicking her tongue.

– Let’s see what we can do. – she says, approaching the shelf filled with hairpins and brushes.

Thoroughly surprised, I approach the woman. The brunette goes out of the booth, still typing something on her phone. Then she puts it down to wash her hands, looks at herself in the mirror, and sees me, my hair ruffled and my face stained with makeup.

– Oh, mein Gott! – she exclaims in German and opens her purse, showing its content. - I think you’ll need my help as well. – she says in fluent English.

I nod gratefully.

In the next fifteen minutes, Mrs. Mira and Inga, an extremely nice German girl, manage to make me look decent. While Inga tried to fix my makeup, Mira improvised something with hairpins and fixed my cape using needle and thread, and then, realizing my hairstyle was ruined beyond repair, following the locks sticking out of the bun, she made a loose braid, letting it fall over my left shoulder. Inga finally applied a layer of powder foundation on my lipstick to make it last longer, and then, together with Mira, looked at my reflection in the mirror, feeling proud. I looked perfect, and apart from the blurry eyes that still showed the depth of my sadness, almost nothing showed how distressed I was. I smiled gratefully at these two strangers, hugging first the beautiful German girl, and then Mrs. Mira.

- I really don't know how to thank you. – I shrug.

- Come on! Off you go, my beautiful Purpure! – the woman takes my hands gently into hers.
- I'm not saying that I didn't enjoy your fits of madness in the restroom, but please, you shouldn't keep the gentleman waiting any longer. He was so worried, I thought he was going to break in.

My attempt to explain that I know her better than I know him gets interrupted by the sound of my ringtone.

- For heaven's sake, darling, do you know what time it is? – Phillip asks me, as usual, in a monotonous and emotionless voice. – The formal part has already ended. If your plan was to make me look like a fool, you could have told me sooner, so I could prepare. This way I look ridiculous on possibly the most important night in my career.

- I'm coming. – I say bitterly.

– Where are you? –I blow another kiss to the lovely ladies and go out.

Before I step into the hall, I take another deep breath and go on, holding my head up high. I hold my right hand on the braid, so it doesn't move, and walk steadily towards table seven, reserved for the management of *Arkona East*. Five male and four female heads are looking towards the stage, hypnotized, so they don't even notice me. I slowly pull out the chair next to Phillip, and just as I'm about to sit down, there's a thunderous applause and everyone rises from their chairs in order to welcome the speaker. I start clapping and nodding my head approvingly, as if I know who we're welcoming so enthusiastically. Once jazz starts playing, the clapping stops and everyone sits down. Phillip's colleagues notice I arrived and greet me, one by one, and I smile prettily at all of them. For the first couple of minutes, Phillip doesn't even look at me, his eyes searching the crowd, as if he's looking for someone. Then he focuses his gaze on the group of men gathered around the balcony doors and gives me a cold look over the shoulder, asking me what kept me so long.

- Sorry, darling, I stayed a little longer at the piano concert at the hotel bar. – I say kittenishly, almost touching his ear with my lips.

- The pianist played our favorite, *My Lonely Road*. Imagine that!

My words burn him like fire, and he turns around, examining me with his ice blue eyes.

- Afterwards, I just went to the toilet to flush away my pride. There wasn't much of it left, but it took a while to send it among the pieces of shit like you. – I add coldly, and then start a conversation with Catherine, wife of the senior manager of *Arkona East*.

- You're so lucky you're married to Purpure! – she winks at Phillip, who's still in a state of shock. He gives her a faint smile, gets up, grabs my hand, and pulls me up.

- Excuse us for a second. – he says to everyone at the table – We'll be right back. – he nods in the direction of the open balcony doors.

Clutching my arm so much it hurt, he leads me through the magnificent hall with massive crystal chandeliers. Round tables and chairs, just like the entire interior, are white as snow, decorated with silver powder and glass pearls, as well as extraordinary bouquets of white lilies with puprure petal edges. Approaching a group of men in dark suits, half of which are outside smoking, Phillip lets go of my hand, warns me that I should be civil, and says that it will be for the best if I speak nothing. Mikhail, the skinny Russian with white hair and a neat goatee pops his head out of the crowd when he spots us.

- Oh, Phillip, right on time! I was just talking to Alec about your proposal for our business in Southeast Europe.

Phillip shakes his hand and clears his throat:

- Mister Lirai, I don't think we've officially met.

- *Oh, fuck. Oh, shit.* – that's all I can think as one of the people Mikhail was talking to turns around. – *Ooooh, fuck, I think I'm going to faint.*

Lirai shakes Phillip's hand. – It's nice to finally meet you. – he says coldly and then tilts his head, focusing on me.

His look gives me goose bumps, sliding from my head to my toes. He comes a step closer, close enough for me to feel his unique smell again. Looking at my cheeks as they turn red, he stares into my face, and then turns to Phillip and his colleagues who are astonished by the way he was looking at me.

- Oh, I'm sorry! This lady reminded me of a person I met a long time ago. I assume this is your wife?

-Yes, yes – Phillip stutters – this, I mean, she’s my wife – he says, putting his arm around my waist.

His touch is a cold awakening. My face goes back to being pale as always, now that I know that Lirai isn’t going to mention our previous encounter, at least for now. I offer him my hand and he takes it softly into his.

- Purpure– I say, God knows why, and bow my head, as if I’m being introduced to a king. I catch a glimpse of Phillip’s mocking smile, telling me that I’m dumb.

- Purpure...What an unusual name! – still holding my hand, Lirai sounds surprised. The warmth of his hand makes my palm sweat.

- Unfortunately, I don’t have such a beautiful and unorthodox name. I’m Alec. – he says, kissing my hand so softly I can feel my skin blossom under his lips.

- *For fuck’s sake, Purpure, breathe. Breathe normally; what the fuck is the matter with you?* – I start scolding myself in my mind.

Lirai, understanding how uncomfortable I feel, finally lets go of my hand and puts his into his pocket, as if he wants to hide the drops of my sweat that linger on his skin.

- I have to admit, you’re a lucky guy. –he addresses Phillip.

- Tell me, Purpure, you didn’t like our program? I didn’t see you by your husband’s side during the formal segment.

- Oh, you know, women and their dresses! - Phillip answers the question for me.

- No, I don’t know. – says Alec indifferently. – Please, enlighten me. – he gives him an inquiring, slightly cynical look.

- Well... you know, my sweetheart is more of a housewife. A simple woman. – Phillip stutters. – I mean, she, she’s not used to wearing anything longer than a miniskirt, nor going anywhere other than shopping malls. So she stepped on her dress a bit...

- *What the fuck is he talking about?!* – I give Phillip a black look, as he waves around, telling his own hyperbolic version of things that happened to me, painting a picture of a completely incompetent, spoiled woman.

Everyone laughs as he talks about the time we were at the Indian Embassy in Doha, some four years ago, and I was, kind of, dancing during the reception. I listen to him, shocked by his ability to completely distort my witty remark that their national anthem is perfect for dancing. I start to boil with rage, and just as I’m about to yell – *Hey, dipshit, that same CEO just saw you making out with another woman!* – I notice the way Alec’s looking at me. He

pays no attention to Phillip's words. Instead, he's entertained by my reactions. Once again, I feel really uncomfortable. I become aware that this man here, after all that he could see and hear for the past three hours or so, must think I'm a complete loser. And, instead of picking a fight with Phillip, regardless of the consequences, I simply take a glass of champagne from the waiter who was standing there, take a big sip and start staring into the ceiling, trying to count the crystals on one of the chandeliers.

- Oh, well, you must find this gathering of ours extremely boring - the velvet voice lures me back from my thoughts.

- Oh, actually - I say, taking another sip - I could have wished for nothing better for my birthday than attending the celebration of the Arkona empire. -I answer ironically, finishing my drink.

- And now, if you'll excuse me - I say, placing my empty glass in Phillip's hands - I have to get back to a buyer, I've been having some problems with his order.

Theatrically, I bow my head to everyone:

- See ya later, Tiger - I wink at Phillip, leaving him with a bewildered look on his face.

Without looking back, slowly, my back straight, my head up high, walking like I have the world at my feet, strutting in my dress, the new Louboutins, and the massive tanzanite jewelry, I simply leave the hall.

I have no idea where I'm going and I find myself once again in front of the *Piano Bar*, which is still hauntingly empty. I look towards the concert piano and shiver with disgust, remembering the scene from before and how I felt. The bartender asks me if I'm all right. I nod and order some wine.

- Um... well, how long are you planning to stay? - he starts to stutter - you know, we'd like to close a bit early, since there are no guests tonight.

- Listen to me, boy! - I say, trying to sit on the barstool in my huge dress - please, get off my back, will you? You see, a moment ago, I caught my husband here, dry humping some blonde, which is why I cried my heart out on this CEO's shirt, and considering the fact that it's my birthday for two more hours, I'd like to ask you to leave a bottle of wine for me and play some music, and then you and your pall can go wherever you want.

I open my purse and leave a one hundred euro note in front of him.

- Enough? - I ask, raising my eyebrow.

He quickly takes the money, leaves an open bottle in front of me and plays some romantic music. He goes for the door, and then returns, leaving a pack of Marlboro Reds.

- I don't know if you smoke, but you might need it...

On his way out, he stops and turns the sign from "open" to "closed".

- That's it, Purpure. Well, happy birthday to you! – I toast to myself and finish my drink in one gulp. I feel alcohol entering my bloodstream. Now I feel better, much better. Pouring myself another glass, I notice that my purse is vibrating and look at the display that screams Phillip's name. I reject the call. Just as I'm about to take a sip, I hear my phone again. Phillip! I sigh and answer.

-Purpure? Purpure, hello, where are you?! *–that's interesting, his voice doesn't sound monotonous anymore.*

- Yup –I answer, twirling a pack of cigarettes on the counter.

- Where the fuck did you go? You're making me look like a fool!

- I'm in a shopping mall, dancing to the Indian national anthem. Why do you ask?

- For goodness sake, you crazy woman, I had to justify your behavior somehow – he says, back to his monotonous voice – tell me where are you?!

- Trying out some miniskirts. They match my IQ.

- Purpure, there's no reason for you to be stubborn like this. What you saw is no big deal. We'll talk about it when we come home. Tell me, where are you? Alec has been asking about you. We can't let your stupid behavior ruin the fantastic impression we've made.

- Oh, WE have made a fantastic impression and are already on a first-name basis? – I say, taking a cigarette from the pack.

- Well, yes. After you messed up by hinting that you work and that it's your birthday, he got interested, so I managed to fix things a little bit by saying that your hobby is furniture restoration.

- Oh, well, everything is clear then! Aren't you swell! – I say, playing with my cigarette.

- Purpure, I'm serious, stop messing around! We have a deal, and you'll have to respect that, unless you want to suffer the consequences! – again, a trace of emotion in his voice.

God, how could I do that to myself and Beila? – I shiver with disgust and put a cigarette in my mouth.

- Listen, Phillip! There's no need for you to remind me about the consequences of my disobedience, but my current state could only tarnish your reputation. So, since you're such a great man and such a good manager, I'm sure you'll think of a decent story and explain why I left. As always, I'll give you an idea. Tell him I went home because Beila was feeling ill. No one can have a problem with me being a good mom. That's one thing. And the other thing you should know is that I'm already on my way to Old Skies, and you can do whatever you want and sleep wherever you want.

With a cigarette in my mouth, I lean over the counter, looking for a lighter.

- And Phillip: stop calling me. My battery is empty.

I don't hear a word he says after that. I turn off my phone, take the cigarette out of my mouth, break it in half, and drink another glass of wine in one gulp.

- Honestly, I'm beginning to think you're following me – I murmur, keeping my eyes on the empty glass, suddenly overwhelmed by the familiar scent.

- Would you like me to follow you, Purpure? – he whispers, taking the glass from my hands.

- Empty? Would you like another one? –he says softly, going to the other side of the bar.

I'm still silent, holding my head down. I just shrug. I've already had enough to feel dizzy and numb. Why can't I be indifferent to his scent, his voice, his presence?