

ELIAS & LOVISA

When Two Hearts Speak Different Languages



Ola Montán

FOREWORD

This book is about a young man with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). His way of perceiving the world and relating to others often complicates romantic relationships, despite a strong longing for intimacy and love. Some situations are deliberately amplified for the sake of the narrative but are based on real experiences and recognisable patterns. I have encountered many of these challenges myself, as I am also on the autism spectrum.

Other details are factually possible, even if they sometimes appear improbable. The aim is not to reproduce reality exactly, but to portray an inner and outer reality that many will recognise.

The images in this book were created with the help of artificial intelligence. The quality varies, and the style may shift from image to image. Should any image happen to resemble a real person, it is not intentional, but a coincidence or a result of the algorithms' own expression.

This narrative is presented in Standard British English. Terminology for social services and child welfare used throughout reflects the systems in the United Kingdom.

The Author

Frightening Encounter

1



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

floor felt too loud, every glance from other shoppers a quiet test. Elias was here, surrounded by the colours and smells that pulled at his senses, yet like a shadow in the background, always on guard, with the children ahead of him like small beacons he needed to steer.

Then he stopped dead when he spotted a woman at the produce section choosing apples. He felt his heart pick up without her having the slightest idea he existed. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Fair skin with small pale freckles across her cheeks, and the subtle patches of psoriasis on her arms and neck made her somehow more present, more human. Her long red hair fell in soft, fluffy waves over her shoulders and caught the light as though it glowed. She stood there, leaning forward slightly to feel an apple, every movement easy and full of life. The simple, close-fitting clothes, a white top, and tight pink trousers only made her seem more natural and alive. *Oh God, she's beautiful, he thought. What wonderful, long, fluffy hair... and what a fantastic bum... and wonderful breasts... Help! Did I really just think that? I didn't say any of that out loud, did I?*

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

Elias looked away and discovered with a start that all four children had more or less dissolved into the shop and out of sight. He hurried off to find them. Fortunately, they hadn't gone far and were busy examining the fruit themselves. One of them had peeled a banana and started eating it. Elias corrected him calmly, without raising his voice.

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

— But that's where I got this one from!

— Blimey, you're right. I'm sorry for having a go at you.

— You didn't really have a go, did you? You never do. You're always kind.

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

Before long, he was done with the fruit and veg and moved on, still keeping a close eye on the children. They were a lively lot, but Elias made sure they didn't cause any trouble, not once raising his voice. When he turned into the bread aisle, the beautiful woman was already there and

seemed to be watching him. He nervously picked out bread he knew the children liked, something nutritious as well, then hurried on to get away from her gaze.

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

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

— Cheese! the eldest boy shouted.

— But I said cheese first...

— Hang on, I haven't even had a chance to say mine! the second one burst out.

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

— Cheese and ham, that's the best—

— Jam's better!

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

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

He felt the woman's eyes on the back of his neck and glanced discreetly over his shoulder. She was watching him intently, so he quickly grabbed the sandwich ham one of the

children was pointing at and hurried on to the next section to get away from her gaze.

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

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

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

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

— Hi there, I'd like a word with you!

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

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

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

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

— Yeah, yeah, he managed, for lack of anything better.

He drove home with all the children and made dinner from the ingredients he had just bought. It was hard work managing four children at the table, but at the same time, he loved it. After the meal, he asked them to put their plates and cutlery in the dishwasher, and after some gentle persuasion, they did.

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

The children wanted to go out, so he helped them with their coats and shoes. Then he took them to the play park where they could really burn off some energy. There were several other children there. Unlike the other parents, who sat round with their phones in hand, he hadn't brought his

out at all; he was completely focused on what the children were doing, stepping in whenever one of them wanted help with something.

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

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

After drifting through a few episodes of something on the telly, he went to bed and slept through the night, even though he dreamed about her.

The following day was Sunday, so he wasn't working then either. He was on a 10% contract at an IT company, but never at weekends, well, except during the weeks he was on

call, of course. The children had breakfast and then played reasonably well in the children's room with him. As lunchtime approached, they began to chant:

— Maccies! Maccies! We're going to Maccies!

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

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

Elias hesitated. He hadn't meant to say "yes" at all, but the children had clearly taken it that way. They looked up at him with wide, pleading eyes. He caved immediately. Damn him for never being able to resist pleading little faces. He looked at the time. Nearly twelve.

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

— Yay!

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

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

He was almost in a panic about whether the beautiful woman would be there and start giving him a dressing-down.

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2



Elias walked into McDonald's with all four children gathered round him. The first thing he spotted was a wave of red hair that seemed to light up the whole restaurant. *Bloody hell, she's still here!* he thought. *It's passed one o'clock. Why is she still here?* He shepherded the children towards the counter to order. It turned into a proper circus at the till. All the children started shouting at once, eager and bouncy as though their lives depended on getting exactly the right thing from the menu:

- Nuggets, I want nuggets!
- Burger and chips!

— I want **cheese** on mine!

— I said **nuggets**!

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

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

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

— We'll wait over here while the kind people sort out your food. Other people want to order.

— Yes, like that lady with the fire hair!

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

The woman heard the remark and smiled warmly at the children and at Elias. He could feel her gaze boring into him. She ordered her food and then stood a little way off, watching him and the children the whole time. He shifted uncomfortably and stole a glance at her. *Oh God, if only she weren't so beautiful*, he thought. *Then maybe I'd be able to stop staring like an idiot.*

Before long, he had all the orders stacked on a number of trays and carried them to a table with enough seats for everyone. He sat down at the end, and the children took the remaining chairs, eagerly tearing open their Happy Meals. Things got a bit chaotic before everyone had their own box, but patience was never a problem for Elias.

Once the children started eating, Elias noticed that the woman had sat down in the last chair to his left, with only one child between them. His stomach tightened with nerves, and he focused entirely on the children. He helped them put their toys together, and when they spilled things, he calmly wiped the ketchup from their faces. There was organised chaos at the table, but Elias never lost control or his composure.

Eventually, the children finished eating and wanted to play in the play area, so he let them run in. Since he had his back to it, he moved round so he could keep an eye on them. In doing so, he ended up on the opposite side from the woman, which put her squarely in his field of vision. He kept his gaze fixed straight ahead, but out of the corner of his eye, he saw her lean forward and say, quite openly:

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

— What?!

Elias turned his head towards Lovisa, his face full of disbelief and a touch of alarm. She looked him straight in the eyes, stirring that same unease in him again. Out of habit, he dropped his gaze. *No, stop looking at her breasts, you idiot!* he thought. The fear of conflict inside him surged like a storm, and his eyes began to dart about again.

— What did you say?!

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

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

— But... right... I mean... I don't think... Hang on, wow...

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

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

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

— I'd rather not... it doesn't... matter...

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

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

Elias felt mortified that he couldn't even find the right words when he was nervous. Oh God, *"is suited for"*, *what on earth is that supposed to mean?* he thought. But Lovisa simply carried on, completely undeterred.

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

— What? No! Well, I mean...

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

— Ah, what... no...

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

— No... they're... social... social services...

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

— Er, confidentiality...

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

— No... emergency... respite... sort of.

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

— Well, not always... forcibly...

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

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

— I'm not... boyfriend material... people have said so, so...

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

— Right, well... I've also got a diagnosis... and all that...

Elias's eyes darted more and more between Lovisa and the children. He had almost never mentioned his NDD diagnosis. He was so incredibly ashamed of having a neurodevelopmental disorder and felt like a mental case because of it. As if he were worth less.

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

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

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

Lovisa thought about what ASD meant. She had heard it before, through work. *Of course, that's it*, she thought after a moment.

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

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

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

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

— I... it's nothing... nothing important...

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

— It was... so you'd know...

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

He didn't answer.

— Is it difficult that I'm asking?

He gave the tiniest nod.

She pressed on, gently but persistently.

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

He swallowed.

— I... I don't want to...

The words ran out there. One of the children fell at the bottom of the slide and began to cry. Elias was on his feet before the sound had finished and was there to comfort them.

— See that! You're absolutely wonderful with children, she said when he came back, and her words washed over him like a small storm.

— It's completely obvious! I mean... really, completely, completely obvious! You're going to be absolutely wonderful... as my husband! Surely you can see that?! I mean, look at you! Look at the way you touch them, the way you talk to them, the way... the way everything just... just flows! I can't think about anything else! I mean, how can

someone like you not already be with me? Get that through your head, get it through your head RIGHT NOW!

Elias grew more and more desperate. The woman in front of him didn't seem to notice his attempts to pull back, as though his boundaries simply didn't exist. He glanced round the room, looking for someone who could help him, anyone at all. *What am I thinking? There's never anyone who helps me!* he thought. Lovisa kept pushing, every word and movement like a hook pulling him closer, and he resisted with everything he had. The harder he struggled, the stronger she seemed to become, as though his resistance only made her more animated, more... on top of him. He felt like a fish on a line, caught and without the strength to thrash properly, without air, without anyone to call out to.

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

Suddenly, his text message tone went off, and he took out his phone to check who it was. When he looked at it, Face ID unlocked it automatically, but it was just some sort of advert. He set the phone down on the table to carry on helping the children. Quick as a flash, Lovisa snatched it up. Elias froze,

shocked, and reached for it, but she was faster. Her fingers flew across the screen. A moment later, a ringtone sounded from her bag.

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

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

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

— No... I won't answer... Ever...

The words came out short, almost mechanical.

He said nothing more. With shaky movements, he gathered up the children's things and their toys and hurried out in a panic, while she stayed sitting, giggling and bright-eyed, as though she had barely noticed him leave. He tried to work out what to do now. This madwoman had got hold of his phone number! He'd have to pull out the SIM card and bin it. Wait. That wouldn't help.

He drove a few hundred metres away and then pulled over to search for his phone number online. All his details were there: name, address, the lot. *Damn it, killing the*

phone or the number won't do any good, he thought. The nutcase has probably already copied all my details.

Elias drove home with the children and tried to focus on them. All the same, he was worried that the madwoman might turn up before long and cause a scene.

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

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



3



Elias's phone pinged, and he read the message that appeared with a sense of unease.

"Hi Elias. It's Lovisa. We met at McDonald's a fortnight ago. I'd really love to see you again. Could I pop round?"

He shuddered. Did he really want to meet this mad woman again? Not a chance. She was beautiful, granted, but completely off her head, and he was frightened of her. He started typing back: "You can forget that", but his thumb slipped, and it came out as just "You can". *Hang on, wait, I need to write the rest*, he thought, but his fingers wouldn't quite cooperate. Then the doorbell rang.

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

— Hi Elias. Please don't slam the door in my face. I know I came on too strong at McDonald's, but please, can I come in so we can talk for a bit? I promise I'll stay calm and leave the moment you tell me I'm not welcome. Please?

Elias hesitated and couldn't help looking at her where she stood. She looked him straight in the eyes, which made him uncomfortable, so he dropped his gaze as he usually did. *Nice breasts. No, help! Don't stare at her breasts, what am I thinking?* he thought. *Don't just stand there like an idiot; invite her in instead. And stop staring, for heaven's sake.*

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

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

of himself, and deeply uncomfortable about the whole situation. Lovisa could see it and understood she would need to tread very carefully if she had any chance of winning his interest.

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

Elias flinched at that last part.

— No, what I'm interested in is getting to know you with a view to, somewhere down the line, if we work well together, actually marrying you. I genuinely do want children of my own, so it matters to me that you'd want that too. But I'm not suggesting we jump into bed here and now. I'm ready to take it slowly, one step at a time. What I meant was, what I still mean, is that the goal is for you to become a life partner to build a family with. Does that make more sense?

Elias gave a nervous nod.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

— Well, that's confidential. They've... sort of... moved on. To other places and people. Not that... you know...

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

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

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

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

— So... you mean you... actually... understand me now, after all that?

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

Elias looked at her with a blank expression.

— Well then, Professor. Did I pass?

— Yes... that's... fairly accurate...

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

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

— Well, I don't know... I can be cross with a child for doing something daft without looking cross. Patience comes naturally, too, at least when it's something you're focused on.

— Wow, whole sentences. I love it!

Elias flushed slightly but carried on anyway.

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

— Repetition?

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

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

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

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

— Hm... brother... well, half...

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

— Born here...

Elias went quiet again.

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

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

— Fair enough. Let me read the room. A sofa facing a large telly on the wall. I take it you watch a lot of telly. Freeview or streaming?

— Streaming, I suppose...

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

— All right...

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

— Yes, a few...

— Pick one for us!

— Well... "The Good Doctor" maybe...

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

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

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

— Well... we could watch from the beginning... better that way...

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

- That's not really how you'd act.
- Now that's a genuine problem.
- Did you see what he did there?
- That's a bit exaggerated, but essentially true.

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

- This has been really lovely, Elias, but it's getting late.
- Yes, he said, glancing at the clock with a slightly anxious look.
- I suppose I ought to head home, but could you answer one thing first? This series about Shaun: did you choose it to explain how **you** work? It feels as though you're talking about yourself when you talk about him.
- Er, yes... Is it that obvious?
- I'm good at reading people, so don't take it personally. Anyway, I'm heading off now, but would it be all right if I came back tomorrow?
- If I say "no", does that mean you won't come tomorrow?
- I'll probably come anyway, she laughed.

— So why are you asking?

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

— Goodbye, Elias darling. See you tomorrow.

— I suppose so, Lovisa, er...

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

He was deep in thought as he went to bed, wondering what the next day would bring.



4



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

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

goes wrong, we'll talk about it, Elias darling, without getting angry. Does that work for you?

— That's the only way I can communicate. You've seen Shaun. He filters nothing.

— No, I've noticed that. And you can do the same. Just go for it, stop thinking so much before you speak. But there's one more thing. When you talk to me, your eyes dart about, and it actually makes me a little uncomfortable. I'd be glad if you could try to focus on me when we're talking.

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

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

— Yes, maybe...

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

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

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

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

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

— Lunchtime! Hungry?

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

— Seems unnecessary.

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

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

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

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

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

— What?

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

— Yes, a bit... is it that obvious?

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

— Well... when you have ASD, social interaction isn't something that comes naturally. It's learned.

— I've come to understand that too. The psychiatrist I spoke to explained it.

— Which means I can learn to behave if you just teach me.

Lovisa was taken aback by that. Were there really men who could be shaped into exactly what she wanted? Apparently so.

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

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

— Didn't we discuss this yesterday?

— Yes, we did. But tomorrow I'll probably come later because I'm working.

— Right... of course.

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

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



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

— I've got a little angel to look after today. Sorry, I need to go to her.

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

— Why can't Mummy and Daddy love each other like before? Why do they always have to argue?

— The thing is, my angel, sometimes people argue even when they don't want to. It doesn't mean they don't love you,

because it's completely impossible not to love such a wonderful angel as you.

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

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

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

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

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

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

They watched another episode of their series before Lovisa realised it had got quite late, and Elias was struggling to keep his eyes open. No surprise there; it had been a tiring day for him.

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

— What's that?

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

Elias looked at her and was quiet for a long time.

— You know you can speak freely, without filtering?

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

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

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

— Except your mother, of course.

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

— Especially my mother. No, every woman, without exception. Until today. Because you're right, I feel

comfortable with you. It's completely overwhelming, and I can't understand what's happened. What have you done to me?

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

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

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

— I'm actually a systems programmer, but I only work 10% at an IT company.

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

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

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

— You know what happens if I say no, don't you?

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

★ ★ ★

5



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

On Friday, social services finally decided that the girl should return to her mother while the parents worked out the arrangements for contact. Lovisa was there when the mother came to Elias's house on the Saturday, just after lunch, to collect her daughter. She was struck by how settled

her daughter had become under Elias's care. She barely seemed sad that her mother had come alone.

— Mummy... are we going to live without Daddy now?

— Yes, it looks that way, my darling. But don't be sad about it.

— I'm not, Mummy... Fosty Eli said it's better if you live apart. So you don't fight.

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

— It's been a true pleasure spending time with your daughter. My angel, it's time for us to say goodbye now.

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

— Bye-bye, Fosty Eli... the little girl said. I love you... but Mummy... most!

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

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

— You'll miss her, won't you?

— Yes, of course. I love children.

— When did you realise you love children, Elias?

— Well, I suppose I always have. After I'd finished school, got a job, and done up the whole house, I noticed something was missing. What was missing was the sound of small feet

on the floor. So I realised I didn't want to be the last of my family, that I genuinely wanted children of my own to love and look after.

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

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

— A dating app, maybe?

— Exactly. Downloaded an app, created a profile, and started swiping left and right to find someone. Got a match with one who was fairly attractive, chatted back and forth for a bit, and eventually asked her out for a coffee. We ordered coffee and a cake... but before we'd even tasted it, it happened. Bang, just like that.

— Oh no, what happened?

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

— Did that go better?

— Well, before I knew what had happened, she threw her coffee in my face, snarled something, and left. There I sat, drenched in coffee. Fortunately, it had cooled down a bit. So I hurried out, went home, got changed, googled some more,

tried some AI, and carried on swiping. The third one went really well, I thought. We had quite a pleasant conversation, and when the coffee and cake were done, I was wondering whether to ask if she wanted to meet again. Then she stood up and said:

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

— What did she mean by “someone like you”? What right did she have to say something like that?

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

— Oh God... the fact that you didn't just give up after a knock like that!

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

— Good grief... the nerve of some women.

— Well... I went home, googled, and started swiping.

— Oh God, I love you so much right now. The fact that you didn't just give up after knocks like that.

— I need a woman to have children. So I felt I was still heading in the right direction. Found one with an ordinary sort of look and took her to the same restaurant. She was really pleasant, and I was hopeful again. When I asked if she wanted a pudding, she stood up and said: "I've been trying to work out how you imagined this evening would go. But if this is your best, and it is, isn't it, then it's not enough. It will never be enough. No woman will ever be able to cope with you. You are completely unreachable. And the longer this evening has gone on, the more certain I am: you will die alone, and you will never understand why."

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

— What did you do then?

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

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

— Then I went in, deleted my profile, and then the app. That was when I realised I'm completely impossible as a boyfriend. Honestly, I don't understand what you're doing. This between us can't last. I have five women who have explained that to me with remarkable clarity. But I enjoy being with you, so I'm making the most of it while I can, even though I know you'll leave me in the end.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

— Well, then the pandemic came, and I loved it. Not that people were getting ill and dying, of course, but I liked the solitude. I was working 100% at the same IT company at the time, but all the programmers had to sit in open-plan offices, and I hated it. You were crammed in together, constantly hearing other people talking, and everyone came to me for help. I was quite popular to go to, because they thought I was better than them.

— I can believe that.

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

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

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

Lovisa laughed and replied:

— You told him to get lost, obviously.

— Of course, Elias laughed. Not.

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

— Well, I did feel a bit cooped up all the same. I hadn't been outside the house in over a year. Well, except to sort out the garden occasionally. So I started going for walks in a woodland area not far from here. It was wonderful to hear birdsong, the rustle of leaves in the trees, and the scurrying

of small creatures in the undergrowth. And to breathe fresh air, smell flowers, the trees, moss, and sweaty joggers.

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

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

— Maybe they'd run away from home?

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

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

— Almost certainly. So I came back every day with hot dogs, burgers, and sometimes pizza. And fizzy drinks. Lots of sugar and lots of fat, because they needed it. After about a

week, they started waiting for me when I arrived. But it was the same routine every time: I put the food in the middle of the clearing and backed away.

— Did they say anything?

— They were still frightened of me. But eventually, they started responding a little when I spoke to them, and yes, they had run away, but from foster families. Their parents were dead. Days turned into weeks, and I kept working on getting them to come home with me, but they wouldn't. Though they were less frightened of me now, at least.

— What patience you had. Weeks of work to earn their trust. Oh God, Elias darling, I love you so much right now!

— Well, I just couldn't leave them there. It was getting colder, with autumn coming on. I bought them a blanket each to keep them a little warmer. Then one day it rained quite heavily. I bought a pizza, went out to the clearing as usual, put it on the stump, and sat down to wait for them.

— Didn't you get soaked and cold sitting there?

— Yes, it wasn't much fun. I had a rain poncho that kept the worst of it off.

— What are the children called, actually?

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

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

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

★ ★ ★

6



Elias sat in the clearing as the rain poured down. He had bought a pizza for Carl and Sonja, which he had placed on the tree stump in the clearing as usual. Eventually, the children came trudging along, clearly exhausted. They had their blankets wrapped round them, but they were soaked through and shaking with cold. When they tried to lift slices from the pizza, it fell apart, having been soaked through the cardboard box. When they began despondently scraping up the filling with their hands to eat it, Elias said:

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

Sonja looked at him eagerly, with a longing expression.

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

Sonja looked at Carl beseechingly.

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

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

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

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

— Come and have a look, he said.

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

— See here. Now you can lock yourselves in.

— You've probably got more keys.

— I have, yes. But look at this.

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

Elias was a little worried about what they might get up to in there, but then again, he had cameras throughout the house, so he could see what the children were doing. He also knew how to knock out the hinge pins if it came to that. He watched them undress, dry themselves, and put on his clothes, then begin examining the toy.

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

He had probably never seen anyone eat so much spaghetti before or since. After the meal, they went back to the room, and Elias managed to persuade them to sleep there by tempting them with the warm, soft beds. They kept the door locked the whole time, but grew steadily less afraid of him.

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

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

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

Carl stood up and looked towards the door.

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

— No! Never. They're horrible there!

Elias spent several more days trying to persuade them. He neither threatened them nor raised his voice, showing endless patience, and at last, next Friday, they agreed. So he rang social services, in spite of how hard he finds it to talk on the phone, though he had no choice, for the children's sake.

— Erm, yes, Elias here...

— Yes, hello?

— I... there are two children. Carl and Sonja.

— Right, and what about them?

— I... well... I think they've run away...

— I see. Where did you find them?

— Outside...

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

— Yes... two o'clock Monday.

Elias hung up, breaking out in a cold sweat. God, that had been hard going. But it felt as though he had been given a sort of permission to have the children with him. So that weekend, he felt confident enough to take them to a play park, since the weather had improved.

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

— You... dream on! Forget it! You're not bathing us!

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

So he ran the bath, set out towels and soap, and told Carl to make sure they both soaped themselves from head to toe and washed their hair. Then Carl locked the door from the inside. There were no cameras in the bathroom, but Elias could hear them splashing and laughing, and thought that if they were laughing, things must be all right.

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

— It doesn't matter. It's only water, and a bathroom should be able to cope with water.

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

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

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

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

They were sitting waiting in the waiting room when the social worker, Clara, arrived. Even though Elias was hopeless at reading faces, he could see at once that she had not expected to see the children, especially not freshly bathed,

newly trimmed, and dressed in clean, smart clothes. She grabbed a doorframe to stop herself from falling over. Then she made to run towards them, but Elias blocked her way.

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

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

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

Clara looked at Carl and Sonja, who were sitting close together on the sofa. Sonja pressed herself against the back of the sofa, eyes wide with fear, not daring to meet Clara's gaze. Carl sat watchful beside her, his eyes fixed on Clara and his hands poised over Sonja as if to protect her.

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

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

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

— Do I... have to say?

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

— But... won't she be angry with us?

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

Carl nodded and seemed to relax a little. Clara could clearly see that both children were absolutely terrified, but that Elias was the only adult they trusted.

— What do you mean when you say you've seen for yourself what we do, Elias?

— Well, I was placed in foster care when I was fifteen. Jessica was my social worker.

— Ah, that explains your knowledge.

Clara fell silent and looked at the children, who didn't dare look at her and were staring fixedly at Elias. After thinking for a moment, she turned to Elias, her voice soft but firm.

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

— Of course, Elias said, a little uncertainly. A few more days, I can manage that.

— I'm grateful for that, it makes things much easier for me. But under the rules, I need to come home with you to inspect the accommodation from a child safety perspective. I just need to check that everything is safe and secure for the children.

Elias wasn't keen on that, but he rarely said "no", so he let Clara come home with him and look round the whole house

and inspect every room. When she had finished, she explained:

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

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

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

— Hello, Elias. I did warn you, as you may remember from yesterday, that I might make unannounced visits. So here I am, and this is my manager, Anders, who would like a word with you about the children.

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

— I hope you understand that we need to assess your suitability, given that you have Carl and Sonja with you. Your previous social worker described you as reliable. But what exactly is your agenda with these children?

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

— When did you first see them?

— Erm... maybe... nearly four weeks ago...

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

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

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

— I find this sort of thing difficult... talking...

— You... do you have Asperger's syndrome?

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

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

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

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

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

— Hm... possibly. Let me speak to the children now.

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

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

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

— Lias...? Can you tell him? I'm scared!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

— STOP. You do not shout like that in front of children. You do not swear like that in front of children. Look at Sonja,

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

Anders started at his words. He breathed deeply a few times and sat back down. His eyes found Elias, and he nodded slowly.

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

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

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

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

Elias and the two children went into the living room, all three of them on shaky legs. Anders had sounded so angry! Elias sat down on the sofa, and Sonja curled up close beside

him. He steeled himself not to pull away. It was obvious that the little girl was comforted by his closeness, and he couldn't deny her that. Carl sat down on the other side of Sonja, and they all looked anxiously at Anders, who was pacing back and forth, clearly agitated.

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

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

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

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

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

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

– ...from today, this is an officially registered foster home under social services.

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

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

He tapped the table again with his finger, while Elias, completely shocked, was screaming: *No, are you out of your mind, you idiot! You can't give me responsibility for two children! I'm not ready! I'm not right in my head! Absolutely not, forget it!* He realised he was only screaming inside his head, and as usual, nothing showed on the outside.

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

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

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

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

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

Elias was a little surprised, but went into the bathroom and did his best. Clara had left the children's belongings, so

their toothbrushes were now there. After helping them both brush, they went into the children's room, and Sonja said:

— Story?

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

— Kiss?

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

— Me too!

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

— Wait a moment!

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

— We don't need this any more.

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

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

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

— And we are so happy, tra-la-la-la!

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

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

So when the paperwork arrived from Anders, he signed it and sent it back. Elias was desperately worried about the whole situation, but for the children's sake, he felt he had no choice. He knew nothing about how to look after children, and now, all of a sudden, he was responsible for two of them.



7



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

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

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

— Exactly. I had the children I'd been longing for. I was planning a future for them: school, homework. And when

they turned eighteen, I'd carry on being their dad and stand there bursting with pride at their weddings. There were children in the house!

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

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

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

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

— Nope. Worse. An aunt turned up.

— I thought the children had no relatives.

— Everyone thought that. Their parents died in a fire they'd started themselves while blind drunk, but the children also had an aunt. She'd fallen for a bloke and moved in with him. The problem was that she'd become terribly clumsy. Time and again, she had to visit A&E or the health centre because she'd tripped on a staircase, walked into a door, fallen off her bike, tumbled off a kerb, and all sorts of other things. She hadn't been that clumsy before she met this man.

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

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

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

— But he hadn't murdered her?

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

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

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

— So you took it to the family court?

— Well, I calmed down and listened to myself. There was an awful lot of **I, I, I** and **mine, mine, mine** in there. I already had this firmly held view about children. And if you don't accept that, the door is over there!

Lovisa started. What had he said? An ultimatum!

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

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

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

“Entschuldigung, kann ich Ihnen helfen?” he said.

— Hang on, Lovisa said. You mean he spoke German to you. Do you understand German?

— Yes, fairly well. But I answered in English all the same.

“I... I just want to talk to Molly, please,” I stammered.

He pressed me: “Who are you, and what do you want?”

I managed: “Just... the children... eh...”

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

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

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

— Molly wondered the same thing and said:

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

“Enemy is a strong word. I want to understand what you mean to them. If I can see that they'd rather be with you, I'll

withdraw my claim. I want you to do the same in return. Let the children decide instead of us fighting it out in court.”

— That was very generous of you. You love the children, and yet you give Molly a chance with them.

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

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

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

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

— Yep. Hans and Molly came to my house with Clara and Anders to collect them. I had packed all their things and helped load everything into Hans’s car. Clara was a little surprised at how much there was, since she hadn’t seen any receipts for everything I had bought. But it was the children’s

things that I had bought for them. When I went to put the children in the car, Sonja threw herself round my neck.

“Wow, Sonja. What have I done to deserve a hug as big as that?” I said.

“Thank you, Unca Eli. Thank you for letting us go with Auntie. I love you, but I love Auntie too.”

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

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

“Thank you, Elias, for looking after my little sister when I couldn’t manage it. And thank you for letting us go with Auntie.”

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

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

“Excuse me, Elias, I just wanted to ask...”

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

Lovisa stared at Elias in shock.

— The thing is, Lovisa, I have never had an outburst like that before or since, and I have never used such horrible words either. But I was genuinely out of control right then and there. Anders turned on his heel and left. I closed and

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

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

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

— What! Psychiatry! Lovisa exclaimed in astonishment.

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

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

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

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

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

— The Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service?

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

— Well, apart from your parents and perhaps me.

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

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

— I don't think so, actually. Depressed, definitely. I think they mostly misunderstood me. I was there for just over a month in total. Then I was allowed to go home with clear instructions about the antidepressants and to try to go back to work, as though having structure would sort out the rest of the muddle in my head, and the memories of the children in particular.

— So you went back to the IT company?

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

— Elias darling...

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

— Oh God! But the house is still standing, so you stopped yourself?

— Yes, my ASD brain eventually kicked in and made me realise that none of it would help, other than leaving me

homeless as well. I sat on the threshold with the axe in my lap and tried to think of a solution. In the end, I realised there was only one thing to do.

— What was that? Lovisa asked anxiously.

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

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

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

— You were afraid of it happening again, weren't you?

— Exactly. That was when he suggested an emergency foster carer, someone who can look after children who have been taken into emergency care for a week or so while the assessment is completed. I accepted gladly, and he said there was a little boy in another room who urgently needed an emergency foster carer.

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

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

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

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

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

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

— You know the answer, so I don't understand why you always ask, Elias smiled.

— See you tomorrow then. But before I go, next weekend is Easter, and I usually visit my parents then.

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

Lovisa felt a warmth spread through her. Not only did he clearly show that he accepted her needs as well, but he had actually remembered that she had told him where her parents lived.

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

Elias hesitated, and she understood that she was being rather forward.

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

Lovisa walked away with her heart pounding so hard it almost hurt. What a surprise her mother was in for when she got to meet this wonderful man!

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8



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

All her friends then piled in with comments about how daft it was to bring him to meet her parents after just one

week. Lovisa realised they were right, especially given how quiet Elias had been earlier.

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

— Right, Elias darling, I've been thinking. You might not be ready to meet my parents, so you don't have to come. I know I can be a bit too spontaneous sometimes, so I'm sorry.

— Sure, no problem, he replied.

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

— What's that bag, Elias darling?

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

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

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

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

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

So just before lunchtime, they both got into Elias's car and drove off. Lovisa's parents lived nearly three hours away, but the conversation in the car flowed reasonably well. She talked a little more than usual to keep him distracted, since she wasn't entirely sure he was comfortable with meeting her parents.

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

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

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

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

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

— Darling, Lovisa, her mother said. There's no need to be so aggressive. I thought you and Steve might make a lovely couple.

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

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

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

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

— What are you waiting for? Drive, Lovisa screamed.

— The bags... they're still out there... Elias stammered.

— Then get them and drive!

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

— Excuse me, but I just want to say something. First of all, we're both glad you have a boyfriend, Lovisa. Hello, by the way. My name's Kenneth, Lovisa's father.

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

— I understand this must be a shock for you, Elias, and I apologise for Lovisa's mother. The whole Steve business was a bad idea from the start. She's already had a proper telling-off, and he's on his way. I don't think we'll ever see him again. Lovisa, darling, I'm begging you, please don't let Easter be ruined by leaving in anger.

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

— I understand, Kenneth replied, his voice even softer. But Steve is gone, and it's only Mum you're angry with. Can you at least try to calm down a little, even though you have every reason to be furious? You know Easter is important to me, because it's about the resurrection of Jesus Christ. I'll leave you in peace now, but please... think about what I've said.

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

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

— I don't accept your apology!

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

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

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

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

— Right, well, my first instinct is to drive away from here as fast as possible and never come back. But you know this isn't some stranger you can turn your back on forever. This is your own mother, and you'll have to make things right sooner or later. Today, tomorrow, next week, next month, next year. But the longer you wait, the worse it will be for both of you. So you should really try to sort things out here and now, to minimise the damage.

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

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

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

— What do you mean?

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

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

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

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

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

— Of course. Maybe call me your "boyfriend prospect"?

— I like that, Lovisa laughed. And that makes me your "girlfriend prospect", doesn't it?

— Yep. Shall we go in, then?

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

— I'm a grown man. I'll manage.

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

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

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

— Mum! You and me: my room. Now!

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

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

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

— Viktor. I'm Lovisa's cousin. This is my wife, Alva.

— Hi, Alva said warmly, nodding at Elias.

— Oskar, Lovisa's little brother, the next person said.

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

Elias was uneasy at how many of them there were. Seven people in the room, he counted quickly, including himself. They all fired questions at him, but he barely responded, sometimes just a word or two. Eventually, Teddy said firmly:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

— Two, Elias corrected.

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

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

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

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

— Um... children, mostly...

— Children? What qualifications? Maja said.

— Er... systems... programmer...

— IT and children? That's a bit of a contradiction, Viktor said.

— Got an IT job as well...

— So which is it, IT or children? Oskar said.

— Who do you work for? Kenneth asked.

— Um... Intetra IT... part-time...

— Part-time? How do you live? Alva said.

— House...

— Are you handy? Oskar asked.

— Well...

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

— Moving in together? Alva said.

— Not really...

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

— Er... I... yes... well...

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

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

— Oh, right...

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

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

— Of course, Mum, no problem.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

— Lovisa!

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

Kenneth stepped in to defuse the situation again.

— How's the food coming along, darling? Is it nearly ready?

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

— The lamb probably needs another quarter of an hour, maybe half an hour.

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

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

— ASD, Elias said.

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

— Sorry, what did you say, Elias?

— ASD. I have it.

— What's ASD?

— Google it.

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

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

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

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

— Lovisa? Elias said, glancing at her.

— All right. I'm describing ASD, not Elias, Lovisa began. So, ASD has three letters. The first is A for **Autism**. That can mean many things. Take social interaction: it can be hard to read what other people are feeling or meaning. One might come across as insensitive or socially awkward, but it's not about lacking empathy. Many people with ASD actually feel things very deeply; they just express it differently. Body language, facial expressions, and other non-verbal communication are difficult to read. Eye contact is basically impossible. Starting or ending conversations is hard. But when one does say something, it's straightforward and without a filter. What else?

Lovisa paused, as though running through a mental checklist.

— Right, one tends to have certain special interests that take up a lot of time, and focus on them with extraordinary intensity, but find change very stressful. Breaking routines is difficult, and one can react strongly to sounds, light, smells, or touch. Generally, one is hypersensitive to sensory input, though sometimes it's the opposite. One might need more stimulation than others to feel present. Making friends is

hard. There can be repetitive or stereotyped behaviours, and one follows rules to the letter. Have I missed anything?

Elias shrugged, but she continued before he could reply.

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

Lovisa paused for a moment and then continued.

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

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

— Finally, and this is important, Lovisa said warmly, the last letter is D, for **Disorder**. But that doesn't mean it's a **disease** in that sense, but rather a different way of thinking, feeling, and experiencing the world. It's not wrong, just different. So don't come here complaining if you notice

anything autistic about Elias. He can't help it, and I love every single thing about him!

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

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

— I couldn't agree more, Kenneth added. Be yourself, but there is one thing I ask of you. I can see that Lovisa is deeply interested in you, more than I've ever seen before. As long as you make Lovisa happy, I'll accept you wholeheartedly. Can you do that?

Elias looked uncertain, but realised he had to respond.

— That's the plan, at any rate.

— Good, then we'll leave it there. Darling, shouldn't the food be ready by now?

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

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

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

— Alva, how's Seb doing? Shouldn't he be asleep by now?

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

— I heard him whimpering some hours ago, Lovisa said.

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

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

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

— What on earth is going on in here?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

— Do you understand now why I love him?

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

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

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

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

The conversation about Elias faded, and soon it drifted on. Alva and Viktor strained to hear if Sebastian became unsettled again, but heard nothing. After a while, Elias slipped quietly back in and sat down in the chair beside Lovisa again. No one but Lovisa noticed him at first, but after a while, they realised Lovisa had gone quiet and was simply

gazing at Elias with a longing look. Teddy noticed after a moment.

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

— Er... right... children's social care, I suppose.

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

— Not only... compulsory...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

— But that's where Viktor, Alva and Sebastian are sleeping.

— The living room, then?

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

Lovisa looked a little worried and glanced at Elias.

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

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

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

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

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

Lovisa's room was not particularly large, and the bed was a small double, barely big enough for two.

— So, Elias. What's your plan?

— I don't have one.

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

— No, I don't know. But when your dad started looking for a hotel for me and offered to pay, that felt wrong. This is my fault, and I can't expect your dad to pay to fix it.

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

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

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

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

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9



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

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

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

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

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

— If you like. But I thought we were going home this evening.

She realised that was true after all, so they got washed and dressed and went out to the kitchen where the others were having breakfast. Elias was just as quiet as he had been the day before. After breakfast, Sebastian left with his family. Teddy drove off as well to visit some old friends nearby. Before long, they were sitting in the living room, and Kenneth was very keen to find out more about Elias, though he knew there was no point asking his daughter.

— Elias, I'm still a little concerned about whether you're the right man for my daughter, but I realise it doesn't matter what I think. She makes her own decisions. I've learned that the hard way.

— Exactly, Dad, don't forget it.

— But I have two questions for you, Elias. You don't need to answer now, but I'm genuinely interested. The first is how someone who's an expert in computers ends up working with children. The second is a bit more romantic, because I'd love to know how on earth you two met and how you managed to charm my daughter so completely.

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

— You know, Dad, that's none of your business. If he wants to tell you, he will. Otherwise, you'll just have to live without knowing. Is that clear?

— Of course, darling daughter. I understand completely. There is one thing, however, that really matters and that I do need an answer to. You don't say much, Elias, and that's perfectly fine here. But I sincerely hope you're open with Lovisa, because in a relationship, communication is everything.

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

Lovisa then skilfully steered the conversation onto other things, and nearly half an hour passed. Suddenly, Elias spoke:

— Right, so I work for Intetra IT as a programmer, but I didn't like sitting in an open-plan office.

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

— The pandemic was wonderful because I got to work from home. But once it was over, I felt cooped up and started going for walks in a woodland area nearby. It was wonderful to hear birdsong, small animals in the bushes, and to smell flowers, leaves and sweaty joggers.

— Sweaty joggers! Karin exclaimed.

— Yes, that was less enjoyable, so I went deeper into the woods and found a couple of children in a clearing. They were alone, dirty and worn, so I guessed they had run away and were living in the forest. So I used all my patience to win their trust, mostly by giving them food. After several weeks, I

managed to get them to come home with me. Then they let me take them to children's social care.

— Had they run away?

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

— Wow, do you still have them?

— Nope. An aunt turned up and applied for custody. After a great deal of anguish I realised the children would be better off with her, so I let it happen. I was so unwell that I had to go on sick leave. After a week, my manager at Intetra demanded a doctor's note, so I went to the GP. When they heard what was wrong, they took me straight to the psychiatric emergency unit because of suicidal tendencies. A decision was made for compulsory psychiatric care and I was given sedative medication. It took over a month before I was considered well enough to go home. But I broke down when I saw the children's room and had destructive thoughts.

— Oh God, how destructive?

— Burning the whole house down. But I pulled myself together and went back to social services and asked for more

children, though nothing long-term, so I wouldn't bond again. So I became an emergency foster carer instead and asked for extended leave from Intetra. One day I already had two children when I was given three more, one of whom was a teenager. I didn't even have beds for everyone, so the teenager had to sleep on the sofa. It was chaos, and I couldn't even get to the shops. So I sent an email to my manager saying I was quitting as an emergency foster carer and contacted Intetra to end my leave.

— But I thought you still work for social services?

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

— He was very keen to keep you.

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

— Then things calmed down, did they? Karin put in as Elias paused to catch his breath and take a sip of something.

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

— Steady on! Don't say that in front of your girlfriend!

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

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

— Exactly what I thought. She's completely out of her mind. Naturally I was frightened and tried to fend her off, but she still managed to nick my phone and get my number. Two weeks later she turned up at my front door. She absolutely refused to leave me in peace and wanted to drag me to her parents'. So two weeks later, here I am.

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

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

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

— Wow, I am absolutely staggered by all of this. Let me explain why. First of all, yesterday you sat here, Elias, grunting out single words like you could barely string a sentence together, and now suddenly out comes this whole long, coherent story. Then I'm staggered by what happened to those children you found. But what staggers me most is the way you just casually mentioned ending up in a psychiatric unit, as though it were nothing.

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

— Yes, I suppose so. I have a serious question for you. There's no question that Lovisa loves you, but I want to know whether you love her in return.

— Define love!

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

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

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

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

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

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

— It’s certainly a clear sign of it.

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

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

— Well, it’s because...

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

— I probably shouldn’t answer that, he continued.

— That’s perfectly all right, whatever it is. I don’t judge anyone.

— Well... it’s not exactly flattering...

— For whom?

— For me.

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

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

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

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

— What on earth are you sitting there saying?! Are you trying to shift some kind of responsibility onto her and threaten to harm yourself if she leaves you? How can you...

— Dad, SHUT UP! Just stop it!

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

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

Kenneth looked at her and nodded slowly.

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

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

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

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

— We're going home. Right now.

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

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

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

— No, I may as well come with you.

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

— Of course, Elias. We understand. Go and look after the children. How old are they, and why are they at the police station?

— They're between two and five. Why they're at the police station I'm not allowed to say, because of confidentiality.

— Of course, you work for social services, Karin continued. We're very glad you chose to come and visit us,

even so. But now it's your turn to bring Lovisa to meet **your** parents, isn't it?

Elias's face went completely blank.

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

— Yes, I only mean...

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

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



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

— I don't think your dad likes me.

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

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

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

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

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

— What do you mean, Elias darling?

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

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

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

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

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

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

— That's completely fine. But you should know that if you need to talk about something that makes you sad, it's best to do it with someone who makes you happy, because then the sadness passes quickest.

— Maybe, but I still don't want to.

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

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

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

Elias was quiet for a moment, then replied.

— If you were to do that, you'd have to promise not to interfere with what I'm doing and to follow my lead exactly. I don't mean that I'm better than you. If you want to criticise or correct me, you're very welcome to. But afterwards, and not where the children can hear. I'm completely open to constructive criticism, but I can't be interrupted when I'm doing my thing.

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

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

— Of course, Elias darling. But don't mention that I'm really there as a nursery teacher.

— I don't want to lie.

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

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

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

— Hi... my name's Elias. The duty officer Jan knows I'm coming.

The door opened shortly after and Jan came out.

— Welcome! From social services, I hope.

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

— Perfect, that matches the details the social services out-of-hours team sent through.

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

— Of course, the more the merrier, probably. The children are absolutely wild and will likely be a real challenge for you.

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

— All adults except Lovisa leave the room now!

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

— I said: all other adults leave the room!

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

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

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

— No, they haven't.

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

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

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

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

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

All four officers left the room and the children began to thrash, scream and hurl themselves at everything in sight. Elias sat down on the floor near the door with his legs crossed, and Lovisa sat down beside him. Then he began to speak to the children in a quiet, calm voice.

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

None of the children seemed to listen at first, so Elias repeated what he had said several times, varying the words slightly, but always keeping his voice low. Eventually one of

the children began shushing the others so they could hear what Elias was saying. Slowly, slowly they calmed down and stopped screaming.

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

— We want Mummy! Now!

— We want Mummy and Daddy!

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

— Nooooo! We don't want that!

— I don't want to be here!

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

— What?! No! That's not possible!

— No! Don't be silly!

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

The children pressed close together and stared at Elias with wide eyes. They were completely quiet now and beginning to look frightened. Lovisa looked at Elias in bewilderment. What was he up to?

— Wait, I've just thought of something. You could come home with me as well. I've got beds for all of you and I can cook your favourite food. There are a few toys there too that you can play with.

— Are there any good toys?

— Let's do this. I promise to take you to a toy shop where you can each choose any toy you like in the whole shop, within reason.

— One toy each or just one to share?

Lovisa was almost stunned. In just a few minutes Elias had not only calmed them down, but had them listening.

— One toy each. But it has to be a toy that's right for your age, so you can't choose a grown-up toy.

— Yesss!

— I want a teddy!

— No problem, you can have a teddy if you like.

— But how do we get out of here? Those stupid police will never let us out!

— It's simple. We just walk out, trust me. I can carry you if you like, Elias said, pointing to the youngest, and then you can hold my hand. And then Lovisa here can hold the last one's hand, and we just walk out. Trust me!

The youngest girl ran to Elias and held her arms up to him, and he lifted her up. Then he held out his hand to the next one, who took it without hesitation, and the last one took Lovisa's hand. Then Lovisa opened the door and they walked out calmly. The children pressed anxiously against

them and stared wide-eyed at the police officers, whose jaws dropped. Elias addressed the loudmouth from before:

— You there, the one with the big mouth! I know there's a box of the children's things somewhere. You can carry it out to the car!

— Look, you don't tell me what to...

— Kent, take the box out now, Jan ordered.

While Jan walked towards the exit, Kent picked up a box and followed them out. He couldn't help asking:

— How the hell did you manage that? Those kids were absolutely feral before.

— They're not kids, they're little angels. And I'd suggest you stick to catching criminals and leave those of us who know what we're doing to help with children.

— Fair enough. I deserved that. Good luck now!

The little girl giggled and Elias got into the car to drive off. It was a bit of a squeeze in the back and not entirely legal perhaps, but it would do. He turned round partly to wait for Kent to go back inside, and said:

— Right, here's the thing, my little angels. The toy shop is closed today and tomorrow. Would you like to go to another shop that has just a few toys to choose from, or shall we go the day after tomorrow instead, so you can get exactly what you want?

— I want a BIG teddy.

— Better to wait, then!

— Brilliant, home it is, then.

Elias drove home, and then the children were allowed to look round and choose where they wanted to sleep. There were two rooms: the children's room with two beds, and the study with one bed. They wanted to sleep in the same room, so Elias got the children to help him move the bed into the children's room, and then rearranged it however they wanted.

Lovisa was utterly fascinated, both by how calmly yet firmly he had taken control of the chaos earlier, and by how he now seemed to let the children decide everything. She realised he had been guiding them in the right direction all along, but making it feel as though the decisions were theirs. Her heart was beating so hard it was almost ringing in her ears.

— I think I'll head home now, Elias darling. You probably don't need my help here, do you?

— No, I don't think so. I assume you'll be back tomorrow?

— You know I will, darling.

— I'm looking forward to your feedback on how I handled the children.

Lovisa smiled and went out, and heard Elias go to the children to ask what they wanted to eat. She lingered in the doorway and listened as he was met with a flood of different requests, but handled it all calmly.

When Lovisa got home, she rang her mum on a video call.

— Hi, Mum. Just wanted to say we're home now. And, wow, I love Elias so much! He let me come along when he

picked up the children, and you cannot imagine how incredible he is with them. They were completely wild but it didn't take him long to calm them down, win their trust, and get them to come with him voluntarily. Absolutely unbelievable! You have no idea what a wonderful man he is.

— Oh, hello, Lovisa. Goodness, you're chatty. I really hope you're not still angry with me.

— No, I got it all out yesterday. And it was mostly Steve who was an idiot, anyway. Who tries to kiss a woman he's meeting for the first time?

— Who tells a man the first time she meets him that she wants to marry him and start a family?

— Touché! You got me there. But I seem to have pulled it off anyway, haven't I? He even came home with me to see you, even though he didn't really want to.

— Well, he does seem a little overwhelmed by you. At the same time he seems quite calm by nature; maybe he can get you to slow down a bit.

— If you only knew! What did you make of our chat yesterday about Steve?

— Well, first we were all surprised that you actually came inside. Then you were unexpectedly calm compared to what I'm used to. I really thought you were going to explode at me.

— It was Elias who said I should sort the conflict straight away, since I'd have to deal with it sooner or later, so the sooner the better. He also said I have two ears and one

mouth, so I should listen twice as much as I talk and try to understand your side of things as well.

— So you're seriously saying it was thanks to Elias that what we all expected to be a huge row turned into a reasonably calm discussion?

— That's exactly what I'm saying. I hope Elias can become a bit more spontaneous as we go on, while he helps me become a bit calmer. At least things are moving in the right direction so far.

— I really hope so, for your sake. I noticed something that I'd have thought would irritate you, or at least bother you. Elias seemed to be staring at your chest rather a lot. Have you noticed?

— Yes, I know. It was me who told him he could. Someone with ASD finds it uncomfortable to look another person in the eyes, so I gave him permission to look at any other part of my body instead. Yes, you saw what he chose. In a way it feels rather lovely, you know. I've always been self-conscious about them being so small. But at least he likes looking at them.

— Well, yes. As long as you're happy, we're happy. We are a little worried about his diagnosis, but we'll simply have to trust you. Is he good in bed as well?

— We haven't been intimate yet, so I don't know.

— Darling, you don't need to hide anything from me. You've always had quite a strong drive. I don't believe you're

suppressing your own needs for his sake. And you know I won't say anything to Dad.

— Yes, I know. It's just that Elias isn't comfortable with physical contact yet, so we don't even hug.

— Not even hugs? Isn't that hard for you?

— Yes, it is rather. But I'm counting on it not being like that forever. Anyway, I should try to get some sleep, even though I'm buzzing after everything I've seen today.

— Goodnight, darling, sleep well.

— Goodnight, Mum. Tomorrow I'm going to carry on courting my dream man, and I'm hoping I might get a hug soon! I'm starting to despair at never having any physical contact with him at all. Something has to change soon!

Lovisa hung up and walked to bed. Her body hummed with restlessness, and she knew her mum had been right. It hurt that Elias wouldn't even touch her. But she made up her mind: she wasn't going to give up. Soon, soon he would let her close. She would make sure they hugged.

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Sadly, Lovisa's hopes of getting a hug from Elias any time soon were dashed. The months passed, and when they sat on the sofa she would carefully try to place her hand on his arm or his hand, and every time he pulled away. She took him for walks through the city's parks and along busy streets. Sometimes she dragged him to the swimming baths. Elias's mind was boiling with stress: people everywhere, swimming costumes, practically naked. But still he went. She noticed his resistance, but she kept on trying eagerly to get closer to him.

All she really wanted was a simple gesture, a hug that could say “we’re here together”, or just for him to want to hold her hand when they were out. But every time she moved closer he backed away. Her frustration grew at how slowly the relationship was moving forward, and every attempt to get near him was crushed by his caution and his aversion to physical contact.

One Sunday she arrived at Elias’s fairly late, since he had mentioned that two new children were coming that day via the police. She knew from experience that Elias would be completely absorbed and focused on the children when they were new, and would therefore give her no attention. She was not only fine with that; she loved watching him always put the children before her. She rang the doorbell and waited for him to open.

— Hi, Lovisa. Welcome. I’m a bit busy, as you know. The children.

— Yes, you mentioned it before, that’s why I’m quite late today. How are they getting on?

— They’re absolutely wonderful. Twins. Not the least bit sad about being here; almost happy about it, in fact. Come and meet them.

Lovisa followed him into the children’s room where two children of about two years old were sitting on the floor playing.

— Hi, I’m Lovisa. You two are absolutely adorable. What are you playing with?

— We're building a tower. It's going to be really, really tall, one of them said matter-of-factly.

— Lovisa, could you watch my little angels for a few minutes? I just need to pop to the loo.

— Of course, Elias darling. We'll be fine.

Elias headed to the bathroom. Lovisa noticed he was limping badly on his left leg and wondered why. Then she turned her attention back to the children, who laughed when their tower fell over. She carried on playing with them and could only agree that they were absolutely wonderful to be around.

After a while she glanced at the time. *When did I actually get here?* she thought. *Surely it's been nearly half an hour since he went to the loo!* She was starting to worry. Who spends that long in the bathroom? After a moment she went over and knocked.

— Elias darling! Is everything all right in there? You've been in there quite a while!

She got no answer, so she knocked harder.

— Elias darling! Can you hear me?

She pressed her ear to the door and thought she could hear a faint whimpering sound, which made her genuinely worried. She fetched a kitchen knife and began hammering frantically on the bathroom door.

— Elias darling! Elias! I'm getting worried! Elias!

No answer.

— Elias, I'm coming in now. Say something if you're not decent.

When she still got no answer, she took the kitchen knife and turned the lock from outside and opened the door. To her horror, Elias was lying in the foetal position on the floor, shaking violently and breathing fast. Lovisa crouched down beside Elias and took hold of his shoulder and gave it a gentle shake. He jolted awake and pushed himself backwards, then hauled himself to his feet with difficulty.

Lovisa looked at Elias's face, which for the first time was not expressionless but appeared to be in complete shock. His eyes were blank and his whole body was shaking violently. She took a step forward and threw her arms around him in a hug to calm him down. He went rigid as a board and seemed to freeze on the spot. Lovisa remembered that he didn't like being touched; she had tried to take his hand many times and he had always pulled away. And now here she was with full body contact. She let go and stepped back.

— Oh, wow, sorry. You don't like hugs, and I know that. I don't know what I was thinking.

Elias looked at her with a reproachful expression. Then he suddenly jolted and exclaimed:

— The children! My angels!

He began to make his way out of the bathroom and Lovisa stepped back and to the side as Elias walked towards the children's room like a robot. In the doorway he turned round and said:

— It's probably best if you go home now.

Then he went in to the children and greeted them cheerfully, as though nothing had happened. He carried on playing with them for an hour or so and then began the bedtime routine. After teeth-brushing and a trip to the loo he read them a story, then tucked them in.

— Goodnight, my little angels!

— Night night, Kind Eli, the twins said as one.

Elias smiled at them and closed the door. Then he made his way to the living room, his head feeling as though it might burst. He was in pain and the memories of the day were tormenting him. The lights were off, but as he came into the room a shadow moved towards him and startled him.

— Oh, Lovisa, you're still here? You nearly gave me a fright.

— I'm worried about you, Elias, I hope you understand that. And I want to apologise for hugging you in the bathroom earlier. I know you don't like it. Can you forgive me?

— I don't accept your apology.

— Please, Elias darling, I really am sorry.

— Aren't you going to ask why I won't accept it?

— All right, why won't you forgive me?

— Because you should never have to apologise for who you are. You're spontaneous, you saw something and reacted without thinking. So you have nothing to apologise for.

Lovisa let out a sigh of relief.

— You know perfectly well that I don't like hugs. Not from anyone. Unless they're from small children, of course. That I actually do like. And besides...

Elias took hold of Lovisa's hands, to her great surprise. He paused for a few seconds, then drew her closer and put his arms around her.

— ...from you. I've been thinking about that hug ever since I got it, and I've come to the conclusion that I like this, much to my own surprise.

She hugged him back and felt a wave of happiness as he returned the hug with a contented sigh. He held her close, and she had absolutely no objection to that.

— Now I finally understand why children always want hugs. It feels as though all the bad things are just draining out of me right now. I do hope they're not draining into you, though.

— Don't worry. All the bad things draining out of you land on the floor and disappear.

They stood holding each other for a long while, until he suddenly let go and stepped back with an embarrassed expression.

— Oops. Something happened there; that wasn't intentional.

— What happened?

— Something...

— I think I know what you mean. You got an erection, didn't you?

He went bright red and stammered something inaudible.

— You really don't need to be embarrassed about it, trust me. I've had several boyfriends and I know how erections work, that they can happen completely without warning or control. I also know they don't happen because of bad feelings, but because of something positive and pleasant. You don't need to hide it from me. And an erection doesn't mean we have to rush off to the bedroom right now. An erection is just one part of things; it's not the only thing that determines whether you have sex.

— Can we... please... stop talking about my erection now?

Lovisa laughed and replied:

— Of course, Elias darling. But you know you need to tell me what happened, don't you? I found you completely out of it on the bathroom floor. Why?

— I don't want to tell you.

— I understand that, but you need to tell me anyway.

— Yes, I know. I don't want to, but I have to.

Elias switched on a lamp and went to the sofa, and Lovisa sat down beside him. He breathed deeply a few times and Lovisa took his hands, and this time he didn't pull away.

— Right, so as I mentioned, I was going to pick up two children from the police because they'd been taken into care. That's nothing unusual; you've been there yourself when I've collected children. But this time it was different. When I

arrived I was shown into what I'd call a war room. A whole group of police officers in black, most of them in bulletproof vests and with stern expressions. On a side table lay riot helmets, shields and breaching tools. The atmosphere was extremely tense.

— Wow, and that's where the children were? The twins?

— No, just police officers. The officer in charge explained that they were about to raid a flat where a couple of career criminals lived; drug related, I think. Their whole gang was there and the police were going to break in. The problem was that there were also two children in the flat. The police were worried that the children would either be terrified by all the commotion when they broke in and might come out of their room and be in direct danger. In the worst case they could be used as a shield or held hostage, and the whole situation could become very serious. So they wanted someone from social services there to secure the children and calm them down immediately.

— And that was you, was it?

— Exactly. I was to be part of the operation itself.

— Oh God, with a weapon and everything?

— No, of course not. I was to go in last, behind a substantial police officer with a bulletproof vest, a riot shield and a helmet. I was to walk behind him and he would protect me, so to speak.

— Well, that's a relief at least.

— Yes, in theory. So we were standing outside after creeping up to the flat door. The officer in charge counted 1-2-3 on his fingers and two officers broke the door open with enormous crowbars in a matter of seconds, and everyone rushed in with their weapons drawn, shouting. Right after them ran the officer who was meant to protect me, a bit too soon, I thought.

Elias paused and breathed heavily before continuing.

— The moment I stepped over the threshold, the bullets started flying round me.

— What! You mean actual bullets?!

— Pistol, revolver, rifle, I don't know. They hit the riot shield and slammed into the walls around me.

— Oh God, how awful! No wonder you were traumatised. You could have been hit by a bullet.

— Yes, well... as it happens...

Elias paused while Lovisa studied his face.

— The first bullet hit here.

He pointed to the left side of his body, a few inches to the side of his navel. Lovisa gasped.

— Oh God, you've been shot?! Are you still bleeding, or has it been dressed?

He lifted his T-shirt and showed a large, ugly bruise.

— I was wearing a bulletproof vest as well. But it still hurts like hell. Most people don't realise how much it hurts when a bullet hits a vest. But I was so focused on the door to

the children's room a few metres in and so full of adrenaline that I just kept going.

— Wow, that you managed to do that!

— The second bullet hit my leg.

Lovisa gasped.

— I'm going to do something extremely embarrassing now. You have to promise not to look in the wrong place and make it uncomfortable. I'm going to drop my trousers to show you where I was hit.

— I promise!

Elias undid his trousers and let them fall to his ankles. Lovisa gasped when she saw his left leg, high on the outer thigh. A fair amount of blood had run down the thigh from a gash left by the bullet. That was why he had been limping!

— Oh God almighty! I need to clean that. Wait there, I know where you keep your first aid kit.

Before he had time to protest she half-ran to the kitchen and fetched the first aid kit. She also filled a bowl with lukewarm water from the tap and came back.

— I can clean it myself, but thank you anyway.

— Now you're going to let me help you! I know you can manage on your own; you can manage everything. But right now you happen to have a girlfriend prospect, and this is what we do out of love.

She dipped a clean sponge in the water and moved towards him and his leg.

— STOP, STOP IT, I mean it!

— Don't be so stubborn! I'm going to help you whether you want me to or not.

— You shall do it, you stubborn young woman, but first I want you to document it. Here, take my phone and take some photos. Just avoid photographing my bits.

Lovisa smiled slightly and took a number of photos from different angles. Then she began to clean the wound. Elias flinched when she touched it, so she made every effort to be as gentle as possible. When it was clean she opened a packet of antiseptic gauze and began to disinfect the wound. Elias cried out as the antiseptic stung sharply.

— I'm so sorry, my darling, but I have to clean it properly.

— Just carry on, Lovisa. Ignore the fact that I'm crying out. Try to get right into the wound as well. I do **not** want to get an infection.

Lovisa carried on cleaning and Elias bit his hand to stop himself from crying out again. Eventually she was satisfied and picked up his phone again to take more photos. Then she applied a sterile dressing and a bandage. Finally Elias was able to pull his trousers back up and sit down. Lovisa sat beside him and looked at him anxiously, hoping he wasn't too cross given how much it had hurt.

— Wow, he said with a wry smile. I didn't know love could hurt this much.

Lovisa laughed.

— You'd better get used to it, because I'm not going to stop loving you. But shouldn't you carry on now? So you were hit in the leg. I assume you collapsed at that point?

— No, actually I didn't. The adrenaline was pumping through me so I couldn't feel anything right then, just that my leg had stopped obeying me. I had such tunnel vision that all I could see was the handle of the door I had to get through and the fact that there was a key in the lock. The only thing in my head was getting to that door and through it. Soon I reached out and took hold of the handle, and realised the door was locked. I turned the key, opened the door, took the key with me and went in.

— Goodness, how I love you right now. That you can focus like that just to help children you've never even met!

— Well, focus is what I'm good at. Anyway, once inside the room I tore off the bulletproof vest and threw it in a corner so as not to frighten the children. Then I sat down on the floor as usual, though it was more like falling down because it was excruciating in both my leg and my side. I pressed my hand hard against the wound in my leg to try to stop the worst of the bleeding. To stop myself from collapsing I leaned against the door and reached up and locked it from inside.

— The fact that you can be so present despite being in such terrible pain.

— I had to be; I didn't want to frighten the children. I started talking to the twins. You've been there yourself, so

you know how I usually do it. When they understood what I meant they were quick to say they wanted to come with me most of all. They said they were frightened even of their own parents because they often had “strange eyes”. They were probably high a lot of the time.

— Yes, drugs can make your eyes go red or give you a very fixed stare. That could be frightening.

— Exactly. I felt the door handle move, looked up and spotted a hole. I realised bullets could easily pass through, so I shuffled closer to the twins after asking if that was all right. I found a towel that looked clean and pressed it against my leg. The children weren’t frightened of me at all; they started packing toys into big bags. I asked them to pack their clothes as well, mostly to keep them occupied so they wouldn’t hear all the noise from the rest of the flat.

— I can’t understand how you managed to stay so calm! I’d have been hysterical in that situation.

— Well, another thing I’m good at is mentally blocking out certain thoughts so I can focus on what matters in the moment. I kept pressing on the wound. The burning was there, but the real pain didn’t register. The adrenaline took over. Anyway, after a while the police officer knocked on the door in the code we’d agreed on: long, long, long, pause, long, short, long.

— What a strange signal.

— It’s Morse code for OK. Anyway, I struggled to my feet and unlocked the door. The officer said quietly for me not to

let the children see the rest of the flat, so we played blindman's buff out to the car. I took a quick glance into the flat and immediately regretted it. There was blood on the walls and floor, several people were lying there bleeding, and at least one appeared to be dead. That sight is probably going to haunt me for a long time.

Lovisa shuddered.

— Well, then I got out to the car and the twins climbed into their car seats while a police officer loaded the bags into the boot. Fortunately I have an automatic, because I couldn't have managed a clutch pedal. Then when I got home they came inside with me and helped carry the bags in. Then you arrived, and you know the rest.

— Goodness, no wonder you collapsed in the bathroom. If it had been me I'd have just sat on the floor and sobbed. I love you so much for being so strong when it matters.

— Well, I first tried to decompress in front of the mirror, leaning on the basin. Then I looked up and saw this.

He tilted his head down and Lovisa saw a vivid red streak across the top of his head and gasped.

— A bullet must have gone through the door and grazed me. I thought about what could have happened: the first bullet could have destroyed my abdomen and caused me to bleed out internally, the second could have shattered the bone and meant an amputation, and the third, well... just one centimetre lower...

Elias shuddered.

— That's the last thing I remember until you came in and grabbed me.

Lovisa took out a fresh wound wipe and cleaned his head as well, and took several photos.

— Do you feel a little better now, at least, Elias darling?

— Right now I just feel exhausted. I'm going to take some painkillers and go to bed. Thank you for cleaning and dressing my wounds.

He got to his feet and headed towards the bedroom, still limping badly.

— I assume you're heading home now, Elias said quietly. See you tomorrow.

— I'm staying here tonight. I'll sleep on the sofa.

— You are not! The sofa isn't made for sleeping on.

— Yes I am! You're going to need me tonight.

— You are not staying the night, Elias said, his voice cutting through the air.

— Yes! I am!

— No! I'm saying no!

— And I'm saying yes!

Silence. Elias breathing fast, his body trembling, his eyes wide.

— You can't just... decide! he cried.

— I'm only trying to help you, Lovisa whispered.

— Help? You're taking over! You... you're deciding! I... I hate it!

— Elias... calm down.

– CALM DOWN?! You have no idea! I... I...

– I'm staying because you need me.

Elias drew a sharp breath.

– This is **my** home. **My** house. **I** decide here. You are **not** staying the night!

– I don't care what you say! I'm staying! Throw me out if you want!

– I am not going to let that happen!

– And I'm not leaving either!

Elias looked genuinely furious. For a moment Lovisa thought he was going to hit her, but instead he just growled angrily, turned sharply on his heel and went into the bedroom. The door slammed shut with a hard, decisive bang.

Lovisa was really worried now. Had she gone too far? Was this the end of their relationship? She tried lying on the sofa and realised it was going to be an uncomfortable night. There were no pillows, no blanket, nothing. But she was too stubborn to back down now.

Suddenly Elias came out of the bedroom with his arms full. Without a word he dumped a sheet, a duvet cover, a duvet and two pillows with pillowcases on the sofa, turned on his heel and went back. Surprised, she made up the sofa and lay down to sleep.

She thought: I really hope Elias has calmed down by tomorrow, because I really don't want to lose him now. She tossed and turned but eventually fell asleep.



11



A few hours later she was woken by the bedroom door opening and Elias coming out in his dressing gown, his face completely blank and his whole body shaking. She went to him and threw her arms around him, and he hugged her back, much to her relief.

— I had the most terrible nightmare about yesterday.

— Breathe, Elias darling. I'm here and everything's all right now.

Elias's breathing was jerky and strained at first, but gradually grew calmer. Eventually he let go of Lovisa and went back to the bedroom without a word. Lovisa went back

to the sofa with mixed feelings. It was wonderful that Elias had sought her arms, but he still seemed irritated.

The following morning Elias was unusually quiet. Lovisa hesitated, unsure whether to apologise. She thought: *If he doesn't bring up what happened yesterday, neither will I.* Instead she said:

— Elias darling. You really should tell your manager what happened yesterday.

— There's no reason to, he replied, with unexpected sharpness.

— I think there is. It's serious enough that he needs to know. Perhaps he can offer you some support.

— I don't need any support!

— I only mean that he simply has to know. If you don't tell him, I might ring him myself.

— You will **not**, he snapped. It's none of your business. Shouldn't you be going? You're working today, aren't you?

Lovisa glanced at the time and realised he was right. She had to leave now to get to work. She felt quite wretched as she got into her car. For one thing, she wasn't sure whether Elias was cross with her and, if so, whether it would pass. Then she was worried about what had happened to him the day before. Most of all she was deeply concerned that Elias was suppressing some kind of panic and could break down at any moment. His ASD made it harder for him to cope with everything that was happening right now.

She couldn't shake off the worry, so at lunchtime she tracked down whoever was in charge of the children's unit at social services and rang him. She simply said that something serious had happened the day before and that she was worried about Elias. The result was that Anders drove round to Elias's to check on him. Elias grimaced when he saw who was at the door, but let him in all the same.

— Hi, Elias. How are you? Your girlfriend was worried about you, so I thought I'd pop round and find out what happened yesterday.

— Prospect. She's just a prospect. Or perhaps not even that any more. Everything's fine. You can go.

Anders looked at Elias thoughtfully. He knew about his diagnosis, so he wasn't going to give up that easily. Besides, the tone had been quite clipped, which he found particularly worrying.

— Can't you just tell me what happened yesterday? Lovisa didn't really say anything, only that she was worried about you.

Elias irritably recounted everything that had happened during the police operation and showed the photos Lovisa had taken of his wounds. True to form, he left nothing out, not even what had happened in the bathroom. When he had finished, Anders was in complete shock and genuinely troubled by everything he had heard.

— Elias, this is dreadful. I thought you were going to collect the twins at the police station, or perhaps outside the

flat. I will absolutely be making a complaint to the officer in charge. But right now it's about you. I know you're strong and brilliant with children, but this is extreme, even for you.

— I can handle it.

— That may be so, but I have to follow our procedures. I need to put you on hold as an emergency foster carer until you've spoken to a psychologist and we know you're all right to continue. We have a very good psychologist at occupational health called Petra. I'll book an appointment with her, and until you've had that conversation I'll find someone else to look after the children.

— No problem, Elias said tightly. Give me a few minutes and I'll print out my resignation. Problem solved.

— Hang on! Resignation? That's absolutely not what I want.

— You don't trust me. I'm certainly not going to talk to Petra. And if I can't work until I've done that, then I can't work for you any more. Consider this my notice!

Elias struggled to his feet and began to limp towards his study. Anders was completely taken aback. The conversation had taken a very different turn from anything he had anticipated, and it was not at all what he wanted. Elias was the best he had, so he had to find a way to keep him.

— Hang on a moment, he stopped Elias. Let's just take this slowly. Can you help me understand why you can't talk to Petra? You know she's bound by absolute confidentiality?

Elias took a few deep breaths to calm himself down a little.

— She's a stranger. And a woman. I won't open up to her. Which means she won't be able to assess me.

— But you've worked with psychologists before, haven't you? There must be someone you've opened up to in the past?

— Yes, Hugo Jeppsson at the adult psychiatric unit. But that's not an open clinic you can just book.

Anders took out his phone and rang the hospital switchboard. After various transfers he got through to Hugo, while Elias listened in astonishment and sat back down.

— Hi, Hugo, thank you for taking the call. My name's Anders and I'm a unit manager at children's social care. We have a matter concerning Elias Niklasson, one of our emergency foster carers, who has been through a traumatic incident in the course of his work. He's mentioned that he was admitted to your unit at some point.

— I hope you'll understand that I'm unable to confirm or deny that for reasons of confidentiality.

— Of course, and I'm not asking you to. Just one moment. Anders put the phone on speaker and continued:

— Elias, I have Hugo on the phone, as you requested. Would you like to speak to him?

— Yes, Elias said.

Hugo took over immediately:

— Elias, I can hear that something difficult has happened. I can offer you an urgent appointment. Could you come in on Wednesday at ten o'clock for a conversation and an assessment?

— Yes, that works, Elias said.

— Good. I'll book you in for that time. It's a clinical assessment, one hour.

Anders put in:

— Could you at the same time carry out an assessment of his wellbeing and functioning, given that he works with children? He finds it difficult to reach out himself, but has indicated that he trusts you.

— I'll carry out a medical assessment at the appointment. You can then choose for yourself how it's used, Elias.

— Thank you, we appreciate that, Hugo, Anders replied.

— See you on Wednesday then, Elias, Hugo concluded.

— All right, Elias replied.

Anders hung up and turned to Elias.

— You've got an appointment with Hugo. Now we just need to sort out the situation with the twins. I trust you, I really do. But I owe it to the children to make sure they're safe. It's not a question of trust. It's a question of process. What would you say to having someone here, someone you yourself choose, who doesn't need to do anything other than be on hand in case something unexpected happens? Anyone at all from us at social services that you feel comfortable with. Anyone at all.

— I can't have a stranger in the house.

— Can you help me find a solution here? I'm completely open to unconventional suggestions. Is there really no one at all? Perhaps a man, Stefan, for instance?

— No. The only person I can think of is Lovisa.

— She's the one who rang me, isn't she? She's a nursery teacher and works for the council?

— Yes. Willow Tree Nursery.

Anders picked up his phone again and rang the head teacher at the nursery. He explained the situation and asked to borrow Lovisa for the week. The head teacher was surprised at first, but Anders explained that everything would be arranged without disrupting the nursery's operations. Eventually, she gave her approval.

When Lovisa found out that Anders was requiring her to stay at Elias's, she felt anxiety tighten in her chest. She would be there around the clock until at least Wednesday, and he had been furious just because she had stayed over a single night.

Her heart was pounding in her chest when she rang the doorbell. Elias opened without even looking at her, turned his back and disappeared into the living room where Anders was still waiting. Anders extended his hand to her and greeted her.

— Thank you so much for being willing to come. You really don't need to do anything at all here, just be ready to step in if Elias breaks down again, as he did yesterday. I

don't think it will happen, but I can't risk it. I'm afraid I do need to ask you to spend the nights here as well.

— No problem at all, I'll do that. But only if it's all right with you, Elias, she said, looking at Elias, who looked away.

— I've made this decision, and he does as I say, Anders said simply.

Then Anders walked to the door and Elias followed quietly and locked the door behind him. Then, without a word, he walked past the living room where Lovisa was sitting and went in to the twins. In there he chatted cheerfully and started playing with them as though nothing had happened.

Lovisa stayed in the living room and didn't dare speak to Elias right now. He had treated her as though she were a cockroach or worse. At least that was how it felt. She was beginning to fear that her relationship with Elias was permanently destroyed. But she was here at any rate, and made up her mind to wait him out.

Before long it was lunchtime and Elias went out to the kitchen without so much as glancing in her direction. Lovisa began to wonder what she was going to eat. At nursery she always ate with the children during the shared mealtime. She took out her phone and looked for somewhere that could deliver food. She was quite convinced that Elias would simply let her go hungry, given how angry he was with her. She couldn't find anything appealing, mostly because the whole situation had killed her appetite.

She sat listening, and then she heard Elias call to the children to come into the kitchen and eat. *I probably need to find something to eat, though*, she thought. Then, quite unexpectedly, Elias came into the living room with a tray. On it was a plate, cutlery, a glass, her favourite drink, apple juice, and a very generous portion of food. He set the tray down on the table with a clatter and walked away without a word.

— Thank you, Elias darling, she called after him, but got no answer.

The rest of the day passed painfully slowly, because Elias didn't say a single word to her or bother to look in her direction. She watched as a police inspector came to visit and Elias spoke with him in the kitchen. Lovisa couldn't hear everything, but gathered it was about Anders having complained that Elias had been put in danger like that. It was perfectly obvious that the police inspector was upset about what had happened.

In the evening she lay down on the sofa again. The bedding and pillows were still where she had left them. Tuesday passed in much the same way and she was beginning to despair of the relationship entirely. Even so, he brought her food three times a day, not uttering a single word.

On Wednesday morning at half past nine he suddenly appeared in the living room doorway and said curtly:

— You're in charge of the children now.

Then he went out through the front door without another word. Lovisa went in to the children and kept them entertained, and herself too. These children really were wonderful.

Just before twelve she heard the front door and understood that Elias was back. He came into the children's room with a piece of paper in his hand which he practically slammed onto the table in front of her.

— All clear! You know where the front door is!

— Elias, please...

He pointed towards the door and she walked out with heavy steps. The drive home was silent, but her eyes were so full of tears that it was hard to see the road ahead. The night was long and restless; she could barely sleep, overwhelmed by her thoughts.

The next day she went to work, but it was obvious to all her colleagues that she was utterly broken. She tried not to show it, but everyone could see her tears. At lunchtime her supervisor told her to go home and take the rest of the week off to try to pull herself together.

On Friday evening she was lying in bed trying to motivate herself to cook something. She had barely eaten anything since Wednesday morning, but her appetite had completely vanished. Suddenly her phone pinged and she saw that it was her mother wanting to video chat. She answered on instinct.

— Hi, Mum.

— Hi, Lovisa, darling. You haven't been in touch for over a week, so I just wanted to have a chat. Oh God, what do you look like? Have you been crying?

Lovisa couldn't hold back her sobs.

— Has something happened?

— I've ruined everything. Everything, everything, everything. Elias doesn't want anything to do with me any more, and it's my fault! Why can I never learn to control my feelings!

— But what happened? Last time we spoke it all seemed to be going so well. You were grumbling a little about not making progress in getting through to him. But how could everything fall apart in just one week?

— I... I can't bring myself to talk about it... but I ran roughshod over him. As usual. He said no and I just... carried on. I always have to take over and decide everything! This time... this time I went too far, and he doesn't even want to talk to me any more.

Her voice broke and she began to sob.

— You mustn't give up now, darling. Your dad and I have had our share of confrontations and rows, but we've worked through them every time. Go and find Elias, apologise and see where it leads. And if he refuses to listen, then maybe he's not for you after all.

— Do you think it can work, given his ASD?

— I'm sure of it. Because of his ASD he responds well to logical explanations, and that makes things easier.

Lovisa thought a great deal about what her mother had said during the night and decided she had to try.



Early the next afternoon Lovisa rang Elias's doorbell, feeling almost sick with worry. Her stomach was in knots. She could hear sounds from inside the house, but he didn't answer. Her finger trembled as she pressed the doorbell again, and she held her breath as she waited. Eventually he opened the door. He looked at her with a completely blank expression, as though she meant nothing to him at all.

— Hi... please, Elias... please... can I come in and explain? I don't want to lose you. I... I love you.

He simply turned his back to her and walked into the house. But he didn't close the door. She hesitated for a second before following him into the living room. His face was utterly cold as he looked past her towards the switched-off television.

— Elias darling. I'm so terribly sorry for all the stupid things I've done. First I hugged you even though I know you don't want that. Then I stayed the night even though I know it's **your** house and home. Not just one night, but three whole nights. And then to ring your manager is completely unforgivable. I'm so stupid, stupid, **stupid**.

Elias didn't even look at her, but she carried on talking anyway, in desperate hope that he was listening all the same.

— Everything I do goes wrong, and I understand if you can't forgive me. But what can I do for us to be able to move forward? I love you so much and I don't want to lose you. Please... is there anything I can do now? Please... talk to me. Even if you're angry and have every reason to be.

Elias finally turned his face towards her and met her eyes for a few seconds before looking away again, as he always did.

— I'm not angry with you. I was furious.

— I understand that, and it's my fault that you're angry and furious with me. What can I do for you to want to stay with me?

— The first thing you need to do is listen to me.

— I promise I'll listen. Oh, how I'll listen!

— Right, so what did I just say?

— You said you're furious with me.

— No, I didn't.

Lovisa felt uncertain and tried desperately to understand what he meant and what he had said.

— Past tense, Elias said.

— What?

— Past tense. The tense was past tense.

Lovisa tried to control her breathing and think.

— Hang on! You said: "I **am** not angry with you, I **was** furious." Past tense. So you **are** not angry with me now.

— **Now** you're listening. You're wrong, by the way, when you say you're stupid. You're probably the most perceptive

person I've met. It was what you did that was stupid, not you. As for what you said about hugging me, we've already talked about that, haven't we? Are you scared of me? You're sitting so far away.

Lovisa was surprised by the last comment, but was quick to move over to the sofa beside him. He shifted closer to her and put his arm round her shoulders, to her surprise and delight. Lovisa's phone pinged, but she ignored it.

— I owe you an apology, Lovisa. Yes, it was wrong of you to say you were going to stay the night when I didn't want you to, but it was my fault that it went from a disagreement to a row. I have ASD, which means it's **me** who should have backed down. Started a discussion, calmly put my views across and then listened to yours. Then we probably would have reached an agreement. Instead I stamped my feet and started shouting. Will you forgive me, Lovisa?

— Of course I will, Elias darling. But it was me who was in the wrong, and I'm the one who needs to apologise.

— I forgive you, especially since you were right. You know what happened in the night after that. I probably would have got through that night without you, but it would have been a great deal harder. But you were there with one single intention: to help me through what had happened.

— You're used to dealing with things on your own, of course, but sometimes a bit of support doesn't hurt.

— Evidently not, and I'm grateful for it. But then you rang my manager, despite me explicitly telling you not to.

— Yes, that was completely unforgivable. I know. I should have discussed it calmly with you instead and tried to persuade you with logic.

— Well, perhaps it was unnecessary to ring him. But what if I had collapsed again, as I already had once? As it turned out I didn't, but what if I had? What if the children had come to harm because of it? I could never have forgiven myself. So again, what you did was right. I was wrong. Just as it was my fault that it turned into a row. Again. I have no explanation, and any excuse feels pathetic. Perhaps I was simply traumatised. Will you forgive me?

— Wow, you have nothing to apologise for. Of course I forgive you, without a second thought. But the worst thing I did afterwards was to come back and stay here for two more days, even though I knew you didn't want me to. I should have told your manager he needed to find someone else.

— There's something you don't know. I actually handed in my notice, partly because he was insisting that someone had to be here to keep an eye on me. Anyone would do, he said. That's when I suggested you. He agreed, even though you don't work for him. If you hadn't gone along with it, I probably wouldn't be working there any more.

— What! It was you who wanted me to stay over again?

— Mm. I knew you wouldn't disturb me if you were staying over, so...

Lovisa was so astonished she couldn't find anything to say. Her phone pinged again. Elias had heard it several times, and this time he commented on it.

— Your phone's pinging. Aren't you going to check who it is?

— It's probably Mum, worrying about me. She rang yesterday and could see I was upset. I told her we'd had a row, but not the details.

— Well, I don't think you should keep her waiting.

— I know, but I'm so enjoying finally sitting here in your arms and I don't want it to end.

— Whether you step away to talk to your mum or stay here, my arms will still be here. I'm enjoying this too and I'd very much like to carry on holding you.

Lovisa smiled and shifted slightly to one side and took out her phone.

— I'm going to play a little trick on Mum, she smiled, and rang her mother.

— Hi, Lovisa, darling. How are you feeling today, you poor thing? Have you managed to talk to Elias yet?

— Yes, and at first he looked at me as though I was nothing. Then he said he wasn't angry with me; he was furious.

— Oh, that doesn't sound good.

— Then he said I needed to listen. Did you hear what he actually said, Mum?

— Yes, that he's furious.

— Nope. “Past tense,” he said. Which means it’s past tense. So he’s not angry, but **was** furious. In other words, he **isn’t** any more. And then it was he who apologised, because it was he who caused it to become a row instead of a discussion.

— So what does all this mean? Are things all right between you now, is that what you’re saying?

— Well, what do you think?

Lovisa snuggled closer to Elias, who put his arms around her again so that her mother could see them embracing.

— Good afternoon, Karin, he said. I assume you already know that your daughter has a very fiery temper, but is also very forgiving and considerate.

— Oh yes, I know that. Wow, that looks cosy! Does this mean everything is back to how it was before?

— No, absolutely not! Elias said. Not even close!

— But it looks as though you’ve forgiven each other.

— We have, but our relationship now is much **better** than it was before. We hug and talk about deep things, and I don’t want to go back to how it was before.

— Oh, is that what you mean? It’s almost too good to be true.

Lovisa smiled and confirmed that what he said was true, then hung up to show Elias that he was her focus. She pressed closer to him and enjoyed the fact that he no longer pulled away.

— I'm just wondering one thing, Elias darling. What was it that I said earlier that made you forgive me?

— Well... this sounds like a cliché, but it's true. You had me at "hello."

Lovisa laughed with delight.

— Do you really mean that?

— Mm. I'm hopeless at reading faces, but it was obvious you'd been crying a lot. And the simple fact that you came here was enough.

— Of course, Elias darling. I came here to ask for forgiveness.

— Well, if you had tried to blame me, it would have been an uphill struggle to come back from that. Even worse if I'd had to seek you out and apologise without you accepting your part in it. I would have done it, but I don't think we'd have managed that hill. But you came here and took the whole blame yourself, so it was incredibly easy to forgive you.

— Wow, do you mean that? But when you opened the door you looked so serious, as though I meant nothing to you any more. And it took a long time before you opened up.

— Yes... I had to concentrate hard on keeping a neutral face, because what I actually wanted to do was fling the door open and beg for forgiveness. But my ASD brain wanted to hear first how you were going to handle things. Once you'd done that... done, finished!

— You calculating wretch! God, I love you for that. So typical autism spectrum, isn't it?

— Probably. Though this business of enjoying the warmth of your body is rather the opposite of the spectrum.

— Perfect. Then let's stop talking and go to the bedroom and have sex.

— No! Elias said, in a panic, and pulled away.

— Calm down. I could eat you up right here and now, if I'm honest, but I understand you're not ready yet.

— Right, he sighed with relief, and snuggled closer again. Do you know something I've come to understand through all of this?

— That you love me?

— Nope, I've known that for a long time. No, more that you're an expert in emotions and social interaction. So the best thing for me is to always do what you say when it comes to that sort of thing. Even if, yes, especially if, it seems wrong to me.

— I wouldn't exactly call myself an expert.

— You are, at social interaction. I'm an expert on computers, so I'm better than you there, but socially, you're the best.

— Well, I'm probably better than you at any rate. Possibly.

— Can we put this behind us now and watch Shaun again, like before?

— Nothing would make me happier. How many episodes have you watched since we last watched together?

— None. This is **our** series that we watch together. What about you? Have you watched it?

— No, not at all. I agree that I only want to watch the series together with you.

They watched a few episodes together as they had done so many times before. The big difference was that when Lovisa laid her head in Elias's lap he didn't pull away, but simply stroked her hair gently and let her stay.

After a few episodes Elias suddenly paused the programme, looked at Lovisa and said seriously:

— Do you know what? I'm almost glad we had that row.

— What! I thought you hated rows and conflict.

— I do. But the thing is, I'm still convinced that you're going to leave me. We'll start having rows, and then they'll get worse and worse until you give up. But we've already had one row now, and nothing got worse. On the contrary, it got better. On top of that, we've already agreed that next time we disagree about something, we'll just talk it through rather than row. That feels good to me.

— Sometimes you're so wise. No, most of the time you're so wise. Never forget that. You're better at feelings than you think.

— I don't know, maybe. It's interesting that Anders actually rang Hugo, the psychiatrist at the adult unit who I've

seen before, just because I asked him to. Would you like to hear what we talked about?

— I need to be careful here. Of course I'm interested in everything that concerns you, but if you're in therapy you **have** to be able to speak freely. If you feel you have to report back to someone else about what you've said, you don't open up fully. Everything you say to a therapist is completely private.

Elias didn't reply, but started the programme again. Lovisa simply enjoyed being close to him. That morning she hadn't had the faintest hope that anything like this was even possible. The day passed far too quickly for her liking, but she understood that she really did need to go home as usual. In the doorway she asked:

— I hope it's all right with you if I come round tomorrow as usual, Elias darling.

— No, it's not all right, he replied.

— What do you mean? I thought we'd made up?

— It's not **all right** if you come. It's **wonderful**. Though if you want to come in you'll have to pay me.

— Oh, she said with a smile. And what do I have to pay?

— It'll cost you a hug.

— My goodness, that's steep, she laughed. But didn't you just say you'd think it was wonderful if I came? So if you want me to come, you'll have to pay me as well.

— So what will that cost?

— A hug, of course.

Elias laughed with delight. She didn't hear him laugh very often, so when he did it was like music to her ears. She drove home and could barely wait until the next day. *Can it get any better than this?* she thought before she fell asleep.

★ ★ ★

12



The next day Lovisa arrived earlier than usual and walked with a light step up to the door and rang the bell. Elias opened it and Lovisa tried to step inside, but was stopped by Elias, to her surprise.

— Pay first, he said sternly.

She was a little uncertain at first, but then remembered and held out her arms to him and gave him a hug.

— There we go, that's better, he said contentedly. Does my payment count for coming round as well?

— Without a doubt, she smiled, and went in.

The twins were gone, but she already knew that. They spent time together now in a much more relaxed way. When they sat on the sofa watching their series, “The Good Doctor”, everything felt as it had before, only cosier and better. After a number of episodes Elias paused the programme and sat quietly for a moment, then suddenly said:

— Right, so the first thing Hugo asked was why the person who had rung him was from social services and not Intetra IT.

— Oh, are you going to talk about it anyway, even though you don’t have to?

— Yep, because **I** want to, not because **you** want me to. Well, I explained everything about my breakdown when I had left the adult psychiatric unit a few years ago, the thoughts about destroying everything, but how I had then chosen to work with children to forget instead. He thought it was a brilliant idea. Then he wanted to know what had happened on Sunday, and I had to tell it all **again**. But it was useful, because as you’ve probably heard, that’s exactly what therapy is about: talking about the difficult things over and over until they stop feeling difficult. So, thanks to you and what you did, I’ve been forced to tell it four times, and it actually feels a great deal better now.

— Wow, so what I did was good even though it was wrong?

— Exactly my point. Anyway, he asked questions about the whole police incident in a different way from everyone else, more about feelings and so on, but as you said, I don't need to talk about that. But I told him everything, including what happened afterwards in the bathroom. He then asked what I feel for you, and I mentioned the thing your father reacted so strongly to, if you remember?

— You mean the bit about possibly ending up in the psychiatric unit again if I leave you?

— Exactly. That's when he started talking about love, to help me understand what it is. He cited Sigmund Freud, who said that libido is a fundamental life drive in human beings, connected to, among other things, care and reproduction. That's why we love our children so deeply and are prepared to die for them. So if you lose your children it's extremely painful and can drive you to depression or worse. When I lost Karl and Sonja, I had developed paternal feelings for them, because those feelings can be projected onto children who aren't your own, which is why it was such a catastrophe for me.

— I can completely understand that, Elias darling.

— The love for a partner is of a different character, however, since it's largely driven by the search for a suitable partner to start a family with. According to Hugo's interpretation of Freud, at any rate. So if I were to lose you, it wouldn't be as devastating as when I lost my children.

Besides, he said, I can always contact him and get antidepressants again if needed.

— Wow, did he really say exactly that?

— Maybe, more or less. But what I took away from what he said is this. I should go all-in on you, or on my relationship with you. Because if it falls apart I can manage it, in the worst case with his help. Besides, if I **don't** go all-in, and carry on keeping you at arm's length because I'm afraid of losing you, it easily becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. You'll eventually get tired of it, because you won't be able to reach all the way through to me. Am I wrong?

— I can't say you're wrong, Elias darling. It's true that I get frustrated when you still keep me at arm's length. Even so, I'm nowhere near giving up.

— Good to hear. Right now I feel terrified of what I'm about to do, but I just have to do it.

— You don't need to be afraid of...

Lovisa stopped when Elias went down on one knee in front of her and took her hands and looked her straight in the eyes for the first time. *Surely he's not going to propose? Am I ready?* she had time to think before Elias said:

— Lovisa Emilia Larsson, I understand now that I love you. Will you be my girlfriend?

— Oh... wow... is this real? Wait, you said "girlfriend", didn't you? Yes, yes, Elias darling, I don't want to just be a prospect any more. I want to be your girlfriend. And I want you to be my boyfriend. Come here.

Lovisa stood up and pulled Elias to his feet and hugged him hard, and to her enormous joy there was not the slightest hesitation when he hugged her back.

— A kiss to confirm it all? Lovisa ventured.

— Oh God... wow... Exchanging bodily fluids? That does seem genuinely frightening, but I suppose it's part of going all-in.

Lovisa took his face in her hands and kissed him for the first time. He seemed hesitant at first and went stiff, but then relaxed and returned the kiss.

— You know what, that wasn't half bad, Elias said. Again?

Now it was Elias who took the initiative, and Lovisa's heart beat so hard it almost hurt, and tears of happiness filled her eyes. At last it really seemed to be opening up between them. After a long while of hugging and kissing, Elias said with a smile:

— Do you know what, Lovisa darling. All of this has made me hungry. How about I get us something to eat?

— That sounds lovely, Elias darling, Lovisa replied, her heart full of happiness when she heard him call her "darling" for the first time.

After a while Elias let go of the hug and went to the kitchen and cooked. Lovisa wondered whether she should offer to help, but didn't want to push too hard too soon. So she waited until Elias called that the food was ready. While they were eating, Lovisa couldn't help saying:

— Do you know what, Elias darling? I admire you so much for giving me food before, while you were angry with me. And for giving me pillows and a duvet for the sofa, even though you didn't want me sleeping there. It was absolutely incredible!

— Well, even though I was furious with you at the time, that doesn't mean I'd stopped loving you.

— Wow, it's remarkable how you can keep your feelings so separate like that. Is that part of the autism spectrum?

— Yes, it actually might be.

Elias sat quietly for a moment. Then he suddenly asked:

— I'm thinking of introducing you to my parents next weekend. What do you think?

— I'd love that, Elias darling. I'm sure it will be absolutely wonderful to get to know them.

— It will **not** be wonderful, but it's probably time now, Elias replied in a strained voice.

— Elias darling. I've already gathered that something difficult is going on between you and your parents, but it doesn't matter. You're no more responsible for them than I am for mine. So don't worry now. I promise to be my best self.

— Impossible, you're always perfect, he smiled. How could you be any better?

Lovisa laughed happily and then the day continued pleasantly. The rest of the week went as it usually did. Elias

took in a little boy for a few days and was naturally occupied with him.

Lovisa's heart beat so hard it almost hurt, both from watching him with a small child and from the fact that even so he didn't forget about her. She could hardly wait until the weekend when she would get to meet his parents. *I wonder what the problem is between them, she thought. I'd better be ready for the worst... drink, drugs, a bad atmosphere... or something even worse that I can't even imagine.*



The weekend arrived and Lovisa began to wonder where Elias's parents lived. Would they have to drive a long way, or did they live in the same city? Elias said nothing and seemed to have almost forgotten about the whole thing. After Sunday lunch he suggested a walk outside and Lovisa happily joined him. At last he was the one suggesting an activity! First he showed her the clearing where he had found Karl and Sonja. She could see his mood dip a little, so she hugged him and his smile came back. On the way home they passed a cemetery. Elias turned in and carried on walking, and Lovisa was mildly amused.

— It's so peaceful here, isn't it? he said. Not too many people, but lots of trees and greenery.

— Yes, it is, Elias darling.

They walked along what seemed to be a random route down several paths. Lovisa then noticed that Elias was

walking more and more slowly, until he stopped altogether. She turned her head and looked at him, and got a shock when she saw the tears running silently down his cheeks.

– What’s the matter, Elias darling? You look so sad.

– I was thinking about the fact that I promised to introduce you to my parents this weekend.

– You don’t have to do that, if it makes you sad, Elias darling. Honestly!

Elias sighed deeply, hesitated for a long while, and then turned towards the grave beside which they were standing. He drew a breath and wiped his eyes before saying:

– Hi, Dad and Mum. I just want to introduce you to my girlfriend. Her name’s Lovisa and I love her very much. I really hope you can accept her.

Lovisa was completely stunned. She looked at the gravestone and tried to read the names on it.

– May I...? she said at last, and held her arm out towards the grave.

– Of course, you can step up. I don’t think they’re in any position to object.

Lovisa walked up to the gravestone with a solemn expression and crouched down beside it. She ran her hand over it as though it were alive.



— Let me see... 2011... that means you were, goodness I'm terrible at maths. Fifteen?

— 16, actually. My birthday's in late August.

— Foster care?

— Mm...

Lovisa stood up and put her arms around him. He was still crying quietly, the tears running steadily. She thought about what she could do to comfort him, but was too surprised to come up with anything. This was the last thing she had expected. They stood in silence and looked at the grave.

— Do you know what we could do, Elias darling? I'm not criticising you or anything like that, but it looks a little bare. What would you say to me helping you feel a bit better by brightening it up a little? Perhaps plant some flowers and add a few grave decorations.

— I suppose I'd say "thank you." But I have one condition.

— You want the final say on what I put here, don't you?

— Nope, you decide. The only thing is that I pay for everything you want to buy and you don't look at any price tags. I mean, in the worst case I can always take it all away again. Though I very much doubt that will happen.

They went home and Elias drove to a garden centre where Lovisa went round and put together a selection of flowers for planting, patterned stones and a couple of solar-powered grave lanterns. She managed to avoid looking at the price tags, but saw the total at the till. She was shocked at how

much it had come to, but Elias didn't seem to care. Then they drove back to the grave and Lovisa planted and arranged everything round it. Elias dug where she pointed. Eventually she was done and they stood looking at the grave with their arms around each other. Elias said nothing at first, but then suddenly took Lovisa by the back of the neck, leaned forward and gave her a soft, warm kiss.

— There you are, Elias darling, she whispered as he drew back. I'm glad you appreciate what I've done.

— It's wonderful. It actually feels a little better now.

— If you ever want to talk about what happened when they passed away and you ended up in foster care, I'm listening.

Elias didn't answer. He simply turned round, still with his arm around her waist, and they walked away. He drove home and they settled on the sofa again. Both were a little tired from all the digging and arranging, so after just a few episodes of their series Elias paused it and said:

— Thank you for today, darling. But I'm really tired now. Now that you know about my parents and the foster care, I hope you understand why I've always felt alone.

— Yes, but I'm here now, and I'm not going anywhere, Elias darling. Today has really been full of things I've learned about you. I'm quite tired from it all too, and it really is time for both of us to sleep. You can barely keep your eyes open.

— You're quite right about that.

— I assume you don't want me to sleep here, on the sofa?

— Nope.

— Even though I've already done it several nights?

— Yep. I hope you're not thinking of starting a discussion again that might lead to a row?

— Nope, Lovisa echoed. No more rows, ideally. It's work tomorrow anyway, so I'll drive home now.

— Aren't you going to ask whether you can come back tomorrow?

— Why would I ask when I already know the answer?

Elias smiled and gave her a kiss at the door on the way out, much to her delight. She was prepared to bide her time. Sooner or later he would give in and let her sleep there; she convinced herself of that. She also wanted to know more about him, about his parents, about the foster care, but understood that she would have to wait until he was ready.

The very next weekend Elias opened up completely and told her about his parents' death and everything that had happened during his time in foster care.



13



Elias sat at his desk on a Wednesday evening towards the end of September. He was methodically going through his notes for the German test, memorising vocabulary, grammar and word order while trying to connect each one to the bigger picture. It was his first test at sixth form, and he really didn't want to fail.

His parents had gone out to do the shopping, but the doorbell rang before he had finished studying. He looked out through the window and saw a police officer standing on the driveway. Next to him stood a woman in plain clothes.

Elias recognised the scenario. Police officers had knocked here before, always in connection with his half-brother's petty crimes or drug problems. Sometimes they had come together with a social worker, depending on what trouble his half-brother had got himself into that time. His parents always gave the same weary looks. Then they would often disappear somewhere to sort it out. Afterwards, the atmosphere at home would turn sour, sometimes for days, sometimes for weeks. He was so tired of it that he did not want to open the door. Also, his parents had always told him not to let strangers in, and these were not people he knew.

The officer rang the doorbell again, but Elias did not open it. Since he could see the officer and the woman, they could see him too, and the officer waved at him to come to the door. He was always careful to do as he was told, especially by police officers, so he eventually walked over and opened the door.

— Good evening, the officer said pleasantly. May we come in for a moment?

— Um... I... I'm not allowed to let anyone in...

— That's a good rule. But I'm a police officer, and I need to talk to you about something important. That's why it's all right to let us in.

— No... you can't come in...

— I understand you're being cautious. But right now we need to talk to you, and for that we need to come inside for a moment.

— I... I'm not... allowed...

— I'm afraid I must insist.

Elias was growing tired of her persistence.

— Do you... do you have a search warrant?

— No, but that's not what this is about.

— Then... then you can't come in.

He took a breath.

— And if you're going to arrest me... you can do that out here.

The officer leaned towards the woman beside her and they had a brief, whispered exchange. He realised they were not going to be let in, so he said, gravely:

— Your parents have been involved in a car accident.

Elias felt a surge of anxiety. He reached for his jacket, pulled it on, and said quickly:

— Can you... can you drive me to the hospital?

The officer showed no sign of intending to let him come along. Elias hesitated and stood on the threshold while the officer spoke. He kept his voice low and even, without any change of expression, and tried to explain calmly what had happened.

But Elias's brain seemed to have half shut down. The words fell as nothing more than disconnected police terminology he could not quite take in, especially when he heard that his parents had "not made it". *Not made what?* he thought. Eventually, the officer realised he had not understood, and said, with deliberate clarity:

— Your parents are dead. They died in the accident. I'm very sorry for your loss.

Elias's brain shut down entirely. He crumpled in front of them like a rag doll, with no way to stop himself. The woman was startled and bent down towards him. When he noticed this, panic seized him. He managed to scramble backwards like a crab. He collided with the furniture and eventually made it into the living room and up onto the sofa. The officer and the woman followed, quiet but watchful. In an emergency like this, no permission was needed to enter. Every movement was registered by Elias as fragments of a chaos he could not interpret.

Both the officer and the woman spoke to him and tried to calm him down, but he heard nothing. All he could hear was an intense ringing in his ears.

After a while, the woman stepped out, came back with two empty trunks, and headed down the hall with them. Elias did not dare protest, as the officer was sitting directly across from him and appeared to be watching him. When the woman returned, the trunks were visibly heavy. The officer hurried over and took them from her.

He gestured to Elias, a clear signal to follow. Elias saw it and understood, despite the ringing in his ears that made everything else incomprehensible. His heart was pounding as he followed. The woman pulled the front door shut behind them; the lock clicked. The officer loaded the trunks into the car, opened the rear door, and Elias climbed carefully in.

Everything was moving too fast, but inside he was certain of one thing: he had been arrested. His thoughts spun, fragmentary, and the world felt impossible to make sense of.

Elias did not dare protest as the officer drove away. When a police officer tells you to do something, you do it. His heart was thudding and he was struggling to draw breath. The officer glanced at him in the rear-view mirror, and the panic only rose. He wondered: *Maybe my half-brother has done something and blamed it on me?* He was surprised, then, when the officer did not drive towards the city-centre police station but instead headed round the city towards a terrace of houses.

He pulled up outside a house where the woman had already arrived. The officer waved for Elias to follow her towards the door. It opened, and a young woman stood in the doorway. Elias registered her body reflexively; the weight of her breasts and the curves of her hips hit his senses.

The woman in the doorway looked at him and understood at once that he was in total shock. He stood rigid and silent, almost as though he were not really there, and she instinctively drew him into a comforting embrace.

But Elias's brain exploded the moment he felt her body against his. Her breasts against his chest, her groin against his. His hands shot up instinctively, and he shoved her away with all his strength. BANG! She flew backwards, her legs lifting, and she fell helplessly to the floor.

Elias regretted it immediately and spun round to flee. But the officer was standing there, dropping the trunks and moving towards him. He curled into a ball on the floor, convinced he was about to be struck with a baton and then perhaps handcuffed. He was shaking with fear, certain that everyone in the hallway was about to grab him any second now.

The ringing in his ears was intense, impenetrable. Everything else became fragmented sounds and shadows. In the middle of the chaos, he heard a scream, sharp and clear above the ringing:

— STOP! DON'T DO ANYTHING! BACK OFF! BACK OFF! BACK OFF! I'M FINE! LEAVE HIM ALONE!

Elias looked first at the woman he had hit, who was screaming at the top of her voice. Then at the officer, who raised his hands and stepped back. He turned his head anxiously back to the woman on the floor, who was getting to her feet and swaying with a sudden dizzy spell. Elias could not understand why she had defended him after he had just assaulted her.

She gestured with her hands for him to stand up and come towards her, making calming movements he could barely take in. The ringing in his ears made everything incomprehensible and impenetrable. He got to his feet carefully, panic-stricken, and managed to make his legs hold him up.

She took a step back and beckoned him forward. Elias hesitated, and she stepped back again. He took a step forward. She took another step back, and he took another step forward. The whole thing lasted perhaps a minute, but in his head it felt like hours.

It continued, step by step, until the woman was finally standing at the far end of the corridor and Elias was at an open doorway. He peered in and saw a normal room: a bed, a table, a few chairs, and a wardrobe. He took a careful step inside to get away from everything. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the woman moving towards him, so he went further in. He sat on the bed, as far from the door as he could get.

The woman stopped at the doorway and said something he couldn't hear. Then she waved at the officer. Elias saw him behind her, flinched, but the officer stayed put. He slid the trunks into the room without stepping inside. He said something that Elias could not hear above the ringing in his ears. At the same time, he raised his hand in a clear signal, which Elias read as an order: stay in the room. The woman also said something and gently pulled the door towards her without closing it fully.

Elias lay down on his back and stared at the ceiling. The ringing in his ears held him trapped in a vacuum of noise and chaos. He tried desperately to get his brain working again.

It was like a bad film where the hero needs to drive off quickly, but the car won't start: rrr-rrr-rrr... splutter-splutter...

— *What's happened? I've been arrested!*

rrr-rrr-rrr...

— *No, then I'd be at the police station!*

splutter- splutter...

— *My brother's pointed the finger at me!*

rrr-rrr-rrr...

— *No, then they'd be questioning me right now!*

splutter- splutter...

Nothing added up. His brain refused to cooperate. His thoughts lurched back and forth like a car without a driver. Elias just wanted to switch off, to press pause, but he couldn't. All the noise, all the sound, all the chaos pressed down on him like a ceiling he couldn't lift.

He lay there all evening. The ringing held him captive. The woman checked on him from time to time without coming in.

When the woman came in carrying a tray of food, Elias pressed himself against the wall of the bed. He had no appetite, so after an hour or so she came back for the tray. He could see that she was speaking, but he could not make out what she was saying.

Elias desperately needed the toilet, but the officer had signalled that he should stay put. Only late at night, when the house had gone quiet, and he assumed everyone was asleep,

did he creep silently out to the bathroom. He urinated without a sound, draped towels over the toilet cistern when he flushed, and then restored everything to exactly how it had been so as not to raise any suspicion. He slept only in short bursts that night, tossing and turning, but his brain kept racing and refused to settle.



The following morning, the phone rang at the school office.

— Cavendish Sixth Form College, this is Linda.

— Hello, it's Anna Taverner from Children's Social Care. I need to report Elias Nicholson as absent. He's not well today.

— Of course, let me just find him here... There we go. Could you repeat your name?

— Anna Taverner.

— Right, we do have a strict rule that only a parent or guardian can report a pupil absent, so either Martin or Margaret. Perhaps you could ask one of them to ring in and authorise you?

— As you may have gathered, I'm ringing from Children's Social Care, which means...

— That doesn't really change things, I'm afraid. Only a parent or guardian may report a pupil absent.

— I'm perfectly aware of that rule, and I think it's entirely reasonable under normal circumstances. But please listen carefully: the situation this time is anything but normal.

Elias has been taken into the care of Children’s Social Care following the tragic death of his parents last night.

– But, even so... Wait, did you say “death”?

– That’s right. You may have read in today’s paper about the serious collision between a car and a lorry in which both the driver and the passenger in the car were killed. Those were Elias’s parents. He has no family left.

– Good God, how dreadful! Has he no other family at all?

– There is no one else who can look after him. You should certainly verify what I’ve told you with Children’s Social Care. His caseworker is Jessica Clarke. He moved in with my husband, Peter, and me last night. The plan is for us to look after him going forward, but everything is still very new.

– Of course, I’ll do that. How is the poor boy?

– Confidentiality prevents me from going into any detail, but he is not well. That much is obvious. My feeling is that he won’t be able to manage coming to school for some time yet. Please make sure that all absence notifications, homework reminders and the like are suspended, so that he doesn’t feel any worse.

– I’ll see to that. I assume you’ve been in touch with a psychologist.

– I’ve been in contact with the CAMHS.

Linda thanked her and rang off, then called Jessica Clarke to confirm the details before going to the Principal. He was initially irritated at being interrupted, but when Linda

showed him the front page of the newspaper and explained the situation, he grasped the gravity of it immediately. He activated the school's crisis plan at once.

He then contacted the Head of Year and the school counsellor to brief them. Together, the three of them went to Elias's classroom, where the German teacher was about to start the lesson.

— I need to tell you something sad about one of your classmates. Where does Elias sit?

The German teacher pointed to an empty desk and replied:

— He's not here today. He's been reported absent.

— I need to tell you why Elias isn't here.

The class sat in silence. No one whispered, no one moved; everyone just looked ahead.

— His parents... they were killed in a car accident last night.

The pupils looked at one another and tried to take in what they had just heard. Agnes drew her hands over her face and began to sob.

— What about Elias? she asked, her voice full of panic.

— He was at home, so he's physically unharmed, the Principal replied calmly. At the moment, he's in an emergency foster placement and isn't doing very well.

The school counsellor then took over:

— We know this is very hard to hear, and it's completely natural to feel sad or worried. We're here to support both

Elias and all of you. If any of you would like to talk to an adult at school, whether on your own or together, please do come and find us.

The silence was palpable. The silence was so complete that the hum of the air conditioning filled the room.

— At the same time, Elias needs someone who cares about him, someone who can be there for him when and if he comes back to school. So... is there anyone in this class who's a friend of his, someone who'd like to go and see him this evening?

Everyone in the class looked at one another, looking uncomfortable.

— Is there really no one he has any kind of connection with? Someone he's spoken to, eaten with, or perhaps become friends with?

No one answered. A few shook their heads, looking troubled.

— This is awful, said the school psychologist. Does he really not have a single classmate who could be there for him?

Eventually, Daniel leaned over towards Agnes and nudged her gently.

— Agnes, you've got a thing for him, haven't you? Come on, let's go together, yeah?

Agnes blushed and sobbed a little more.

— Oh... I mean, I love him! she sniffled. But he just... said no and basically didn't even want to talk to me.

— Come on, said Daniel. You and me. We'll go round and show him we care.

— O... okay... Agnes said quietly.

And so it was decided. Through the school caretaker, Daniel and Agnes were given access to Elias's locker, so they would have a reason to go round and drop off his textbooks.

In the meantime, Anna was trying to get Elias to eat something. When he hadn't come out after she called, she had left breakfast in his room, without success. Lunch was also left untouched, and she was growing increasingly worried about him.

That evening, Daniel and Agnes came to visit. Anna was pleased when they rang the bell and hoped that the visit might cheer Elias up a little. She showed them into the room, where Elias was still lying on his back on the bed, staring up at the ceiling.

— Hey, Elias, said Daniel. Me and Agnes have brought your textbooks. We heard what happened... it's just awful. I mean... I don't know... But everyone in the class is with you.

He kept trying to get through to him, and Agnes tried to take his hand, but he just pulled it away without turning his head. Eventually, they left the room. Anna asked how it had gone.

— God, it's awful... he's like a zombie, Agnes sniffled. It feels like there's nothing left of him. Just a shell. I like him so much, but he doesn't even see me.

— We'll definitely come back next week, Daniel added. Really hope he's doing better by then, because this is just wrong.

The days passed, and Elias left the bed only to use the toilet. When Anna smiled and nodded as he made his way back, he eventually understood that it was actually permitted. He still ate nothing. By the weekend, the ringing had gone, and he was beginning to think that it was not he who was in trouble with the police, but that his brother had led his parents into some sort of trap. At the same time, it dawned on him that he had a sort of obligation to attend school: even though there was no legal requirement at the sixth form level, you were expected to turn up if you had accepted a place.

So on Monday morning, he gathered up all his textbooks. He couldn't find his school bag, so he carried everything tucked under his arm. As he passed through the kitchen where Anna and Peter were having breakfast, Peter called out:

— Hey, where are you off to?

Elias lifted his textbooks and pointed towards the door.

— Are you heading to school? Anna asked gently.

Elias gave a brief nod.

— You need to have breakfast first, Anna said. You haven't eaten anything since you arrived.

Elias tapped his watch.

— I'll drive you to school, said Peter. That way you'll have time for breakfast.

It sounded like an order, so he sat down and was given Cornflakes with milk. Anna also put out a glass of milk to drink. He took two spoonfuls only because they expected it and nearly gagged. His stomach was completely empty, and he disliked both maize and full-fat milk. Anna noticed the problem and let him leave the rest.

Peter drove him to school and walked with him all the way to the classroom. When Elias walked in, the class was surprised to see him, and everyone wanted to pat him on the back or hold his arm. He simply shrugged it all off, shuddering with discomfort, and sat down in his place.

When the teacher came in, maths was on the timetable, something happened in his brain. Suddenly, everything was normal. Daniel and Agnes watched him in astonishment; he seemed like himself again, in sharp contrast to how he had been during their visit. He opened his book, wrote in his exercise book, and worked at his own pace, without waiting for instructions or looking round.

At lunch, he went to the canteen and joined the queue. When he saw that his favourite food was being served, he immediately helped himself to a generous portion and ate it eagerly. He got up to take a second, just as large. When he went back for a third, the canteen supervisor raised an eyebrow, and he wasn't sure whether three helpings were allowed. He picked up some granary bread, salad, and

vegetables instead, and made several large sandwiches, surprised that his stomach still had room for them.

After school, he went outside to cycle home, but his bike was not where it usually stood. He looked round in confusion for a moment and then set off on foot. Without hesitation, he headed in the direction of his childhood home, along the same route he had always taken, and didn't stop.

— Hi, I'm home, he called as he came in.

The house was quiet. He was alone, but he was used to his parents being out. Far too often, there was some trouble with his half-brother that they had to deal with. He went to his room and got his textbooks out to catch up on what he had missed.

Anna grew worried when he didn't come home after school. During the day, she had been given login details for the school portal and knew his timetable. She rang him, but the call dropped. She tried again; the same thing happened.

What she didn't know was that Elias found talking on the phone deeply uncomfortable. When his mobile rang from an unknown number, he didn't answer the first call and cut off the second. Eventually, a stranger sent a text asking where he was. "Home", he replied briefly.

Anna automatically assumed he meant with them and asked:

"Which room?"

"In my room," he replied.

He kept his answers to a minimum, but he was too used to complying to stop altogether.

Anna looked into his room, but he wasn't there. She wrote:

“Can you go out to the kitchen?”

“Why?”

“Please, just do it.”

“I'm in the kitchen now.”

“Are you alone?”

“Yes.”

Anna was in the kitchen herself. Then she understood. Out of old habit, he had gone to the only home he truly knew. She went straight to Peter.

— Peter, love. It seems Elias has walked to his childhood home instead of coming here. We'll have to go and fetch him.

Peter was already irritated by the time they got in the car, and they drove over together. When Elias saw a car pulling into the driveway, he felt a flicker of hope. *At last, Dad and Mum are home*, he thought. But he didn't recognise the car. When the doors opened, he saw Anna and Peter get out and walk towards the front door. The switch in his head flipped to the dark setting again, and he understood that he had done something wrong. He walked over anxiously and opened the door for them.

— What do you think you're doing, Elias? Peter said, his voice sharp. You know perfectly well you're supposed to be with us, not here. I know you're bright and that you

understand what's right, and that's exactly why I'm disappointed when you get it wrong. We expected better from you than to blatantly ignore what you know is right.

Anna patted Peter on the arm to settle him down, and he fell silent.

— We're not angry with you, Elias. We understand you're having a hard time right now. Would you mind getting your things and coming with us?

Elias went to his room without a word, found his school bag, packed up his school things, and left the house. Peter was standing by the rear door of his car with a stern expression. Elias didn't look at him but went straight to the garage and pulled out a bike. Peter seemed about to object, but Anna got in first:

— Are you sure you know the way to ours?

Elias gave a brief nod and cycled off. He was fast and could take shortcuts, so he arrived before them. Anna said gently that he should put his bike in their storage shed. Two bikes were already in there, so he put his alongside them, went inside, and lay down on his back on the bed, staring at the ceiling again. He tried to work out what had happened and why he had to stay with these strangers.

The following day, Elias had three spoonfuls of Cornflakes and cycled to school. Once there, the switch flipped back to the normal setting. After the last lesson, he cycled home as usual, to his childhood home. Soon, a text

from Anna pinged on his phone. This time, the switch flipped straight away, and he replied briefly:

“Got homework.”

“Can’t you do it here?”

“No.”

“All right, finish your homework and come over afterwards. Don’t leave it too late, okay?”

Elias hurried to finish and then cycled to the other home, even though he didn’t understand why or who this woman really was. The rest of the week, the same routine repeated: cycle to the wrong place, get a text, argue about homework, then go to the foster home to lie on the bed and stare at the ceiling.

Friday was no exception. The switch was in the light setting; he cycled home and got a text almost immediately:

“Hi Elias. You can’t have any homework today. Please come straight home.”

He read it. The switch flipped, and he thought: *What do you mean, “home”? I am home.* But he cycled to the foster home anyway. When he arrived, Peter was in the hall and told him sternly that they wanted a word. Elias walked anxiously into the living room and sat down across from Anna and Peter. He noticed Anna patting Peter’s arm steadily, as if to calm him. Then Anna began instead:

— Elias, we’re both worried about you. You’ve probably realised by now that we’re responsible for you and for what happens to you. When you’re at your childhood home, we

don't know whether you're safe. We've talked it over, and we understand that you feel more comfortable there, so we're going to let you be there during the day if you'd like. But first, you'll need to agree to two conditions. All we ask is that you're here between eight in the evening and eight in the morning, except when you have school or if you want to do something like go to the cinema with some friends.

Elias thought about what she had said. He had no idea who they were or why he had to be here, but understood that for some unfathomable reason, he did.

— Right then, Elias, here's my condition, Peter began. I want you to agree to installing cameras in every room of your childhood home, except the bathroom, of course. Then we should both be able to monitor everything through an app or similar.

Elias took out his phone and started tapping at it. Peter grew irritated at what he took to be inattention and raised his voice, while Anna patted him all the more insistently.

— You need to understand that if you don't agree to our conditions, we will hire a locksmith and change the locks. After that, you will never be allowed in there again.

Anna tried to interrupt while Elias focused more and more on his phone.

— Peter...

But Peter went on, agitated:

— I'm trying to solve a problem here, and it's important that you...

Elias suddenly put his phone down on the table, turned it round, and slid it across to Peter. He looked and found that Elias hadn't been tapping aimlessly but had pulled up a shop page for a set of four security cameras.

— Right, okay. So if I buy these, will you put them up?

Elias nodded, and Peter was satisfied. He took a photo of the screen with his own phone and nodded to Anna.

— That's brilliant, Elias, Anna said, her voice calm. My condition is that you see a psychologist called Elda at the clinic. I've booked an appointment for Monday. We know you don't want to open up to us, and we understand that, so I'd like you to talk to her instead.

Elias began shaking his head frantically, and Anna spoke in her gentlest voice, almost a whisper:

— This is because I care about you and want to make sure you're all right. I'm afraid I must insist that you speak to the psychologist, so that we don't have to change the locks.

Elias sighed, dropped his head, and eventually nodded. Anna thanked him warmly and let him go to his room. Peter drove off and returned about an hour later with two boxes containing a total of eight cameras. Elias was slightly surprised; they were not cheap cameras. He unpacked them, paired them with the app, then went to Anna and Peter with a note containing the login details and the name of the app. He took their phones and set everything up for them.

The next day, Peter drove him to the house, and he mounted all the cameras in the various rooms. Peter was

surprised at how capable he was. He hadn't asked for any help at all. Peter then drove Elias back, and he lay utterly miserable for the rest of that day and all of Sunday.

On Monday, Anna collected him from school, and they drove to the CAMHS clinic, where the psychologist Elda Forsyth received them. When she asked whether Anna could sit in, Elias shook his head. Anna was shown out to the waiting room.

Elias sat stiffly in the chair, and Elda tried to catch his eye. For a fraction of a second, their eyes met before he quickly dropped his gaze as usual. A tremor ran through him; a flush spread across his cheeks, and his eyes skittered to one side. His hands rested clasped in his lap, but his fingers twisted restlessly.

— So, Elias, how are you feeling today?

Elias flinched and mumbled something inaudible.

— You understand that you can speak completely freely here. I'm bound by total confidentiality.

He gave a brief nod and stared intently at his hands.

— Don't you want to talk to me? Elda asked carefully.

— Have to, really... Elias mumbled.

He lifted his gaze to her for a second, then it slid away again. Elda noted the pattern. Each time he looked at her, he reacted: the flush spread, and he looked away quickly. It wasn't ordinary shyness. It wasn't her as a person. It was the fact that she was a woman that seemed to be blocking him.

Elda sat quietly for a moment, observing his body language: the small twitches, the brief eye contact, the redness in his face. She realised she would need someone he could feel at ease with. A man.

— Wait here a moment, Elias. I'll go and fetch a colleague who's on placement here.

Elda went out and returned with Erik, who took her chair. She sat herself in a corner and let Erik lead the conversation, occasionally giving small, discreet signals to him. Elias relaxed considerably and answered Erik's questions briefly but straightforwardly. Eventually, Elda was satisfied with the session and said:

— Thank you, Elias. I have three questions I'd like to ask. I already know the answer to the first, and the third question depends on the answer to the second. Is that all right?

Elias's eyes widened slightly at her words and he nodded after a brief pause.

— First question. Are you doing well today, mentally?

— No, Elias mumbled, staring down at his hands.

— That was expected. How long have you been struggling?

Elias hesitated, his gaze drifting. Elda rephrased.

— Have you been struggling for days, weeks, months, or years?

— Years.

— There we are. Not unexpected either. Third and final question. Would you like us here at the clinic to help you feel better by carrying out a thorough assessment?

— Yes.

She nodded and brought Anna back in. Elias continued to stare at his hands. Anna came in calmly and leaned towards Elda, keen to know how the session had gone.

— Can you say anything about what I asked when I booked the appointment? she said.

— I understand what you're referring to, Elda replied. At this point, I see no signs that Elias has any destructive thoughts.

Anna gave a slight nod. A relieved smile played on her lips.

— You can't imagine how glad I am to hear that, Elias. What do you think, Elda, does he need further contact with the service?

— I see it as an important next step, Elda replied. A full psychological assessment would give us a much clearer picture of how he's doing.

— That sounds reasonable. Could you put him on the waiting list? There's just one more thing I'd like to ask... Elias doesn't talk to us at all, not even a word. That's completely fine, Elias, I understand. But has he talked to you?

— We've had a clear and direct exchange, so yes, Elda replied. I have a certain idea as to why he finds it difficult to

talk to you, but confidentiality prevents me from sharing that.

Anna was satisfied with the answer. To show Elias that she meant what she had promised, she dropped him off at his childhood home. Elias was content knowing he could now be there alone without anyone objecting. He set an alarm on his phone so he wouldn't forget to head back to the foster home in time to be there by eight in the evening.

The week went on, and he cycled home after school, then, when the alarm went off, cycled to Anna and Peter's so as to be there before eight. Now the switch in his head flipped when the alarm sounded.

At the weekend, he cycled off at exactly eight o'clock in the morning, without breakfast. Anna and Peter were not happy with the arrangement, but he was visible on the cameras and was scrupulously punctual about arriving by eight. Once he had adjusted his alarm, his timekeeping was exact.



On Monday, Anna began talking to Elias about a funeral that Thursday. He couldn't understand why he should attend a funeral on Anna's account. Then it suddenly struck him whose funeral it was. It was like a punch to the stomach. That meant his half-brother must be dead, and the reason his parents hadn't come home yet must be that they had killed him.

Elias tried to work out how it could have happened. The best outcome would be if it had been a fight that ended in an accident in which his brother had died. That would be manslaughter, and his parents would probably be home soon. Because if it was unlawful killing or, worse still, murder, they would likely be in prison for a long time.

Anna and Peter collected him from school, and soon he was walking nervously into the chapel of rest. *Why are there two coffins? Did my brother have a girlfriend, or even a wife?* Then he saw a large photograph of his parents and felt a surge of rage. *What the hell! Have they actually staged this whole charade just to control me?* He ran up to one of the coffins and began hammering on the lid with his fists, screaming:

— OPEN THIS! OPEN THE COFFIN! OPEN IT! OPEN IT!

Elias kept screaming and hammering on the coffin. Anna was completely shocked and didn't know what to do. Elias was out of control and was screaming with increasing hysteria. A man in a suit, white shirt and tie came forward and produced a tool from somewhere. After a glance at Anna, who nodded, he began unscrewing the lid. Elias realised he must be from the funeral home. When the coffin was opened, he saw his mother lying inside. He shook her to try to wake her, but she was ice cold.

He turned to the other coffin, which the man had already opened by that point. His father lay inside, and it was clear

he was dead; his head was badly damaged. Elias threw himself forward, flung his arm around him and began to weep loudly. He clung on desperately as he cried. He could hear the chapel beginning to fill with guests, but he simply could not control himself.

Anna had come forward and was desperately trying to calm him down. She was utterly helpless and didn't know what to do. She had only ever cared for young children before, and this was something else entirely.

Eventually, she more or less forced Elias to leave the coffin and sit down on a chair by placing herself between him and it. That left him with only two choices: touch her or follow her. Soon he was sitting in a chair, still weeping loudly, while the coffins were closed again.

The ceremony could now begin, and Elias was completely out of control. Anna passed packet after packet of tissues, which were handed to her from others in the group.

Eventually, the ceremony was over, and the coffins were to be carried out. Elias was instructed to walk directly behind the coffins, which were carried by several of the guests. Two roses were placed in his hands, and Anna said softly that he was to lay them in the grave when she told him.

Soon, the whole group stood at a graveside with two freshly dug holes. The coffins were lowered carefully, and the priest said a few last words before nodding to Elias to lay the roses down. He was still crying loudly, but he had heard and understood everything that had happened.

He walked unsteadily towards the graves, threw one rose hard into each, then spun round and ran off as fast as his legs would carry him. Not because he was frightened, but because he knew exactly what would happen next. Everyone else would come forward, lay down their roses, and then approach Elias to offer their condolences, take his hand, or worse still, try to hug him. He knew he couldn't cope with that, and so he ran. Peter made to go after him, but Anna stopped him.

— I know where he's headed. Let's check the cameras.

It was a long way home from there, but he ran flat out the whole way without stopping. Anna felt a wave of relief when she saw him come into the house and throw himself down on one of his parents' beds. Peter told Anna he could keep an eye on Elias while she looked after the guests. She had found all the names in an address book she had come across at Elias's home.

Then a text arrived on Anna's phone from Elias. She read it with surprise:

— Can I sleep here just tonight? Please? PLEASE?

Anna smiled quietly to herself. It was clear that Elias had understood they were watching him on the cameras. She sent back an "OK" and carried on talking with the guests. Many were worried about Elias, but Anna assured them she knew exactly where he was and what he was doing.

There was a wake with refreshments after the funeral. Elias's half-brother had been invited but had not attended

the funeral, and was not here now either. Several of the guests gave speeches, and Anna and Peter slowly began to understand just how difficult Elias's life had been before, and felt deeply saddened by it.

Afterwards, they both drove to Elias's childhood home. Anna said it was best if Peter drove back to theirs, while she stayed to help Elias. Peter agreed. Anna was, after all, the one who had the better relationship with Elias, even if that was still fairly limited.

Anna went into the bedroom and lay down on the other bed. She looked at Elias. He had stopped crying, but the pillow was soaked through. His eyes were red and swollen, his face blank and rigid. He was looking in her direction without appearing to see her.

She struggled to find something to say, but felt the knot in her chest tighten and couldn't think how to reach him. Elias looked as though he was about to say something, but stayed silent, as he so often did.

Since she had never heard his voice before today, she was especially at a loss for what she might do to comfort him. How do you comfort someone who doesn't even speak?

She knew almost nothing about what was going on inside him. Not what had made him so withdrawn and quiet, how long it had been going on, or how deep it ran. Yet she felt certain that this was only the beginning. Before long, she would understand just how deep Elias's trauma went.

Elias opened his mouth and began to speak for the first time.

★ ★ ★

14



Elias pressed closer to Lovisa. His grip round her waist tightened, as though something inside him might fall apart if he let go. He said nothing. When the tears came, he didn't seem to notice them at first. She did. She took a tissue and gently wiped them away without pulling back.

— You don't need to wipe my tears as though I were a small child, he mumbled.

— I know, she said softly. But that's the sort of thing girlfriends do.

— It's illogical. But I suppose girlfriends aren't logical. I'll have to get used to it.

— Some of them might be, Lovisa smiled. But not this one.

It was almost a full minute before he spoke again.

— It still hurts. Even though it's more than ten years ago.

— Mm.

— Right up until that day, when my parents were buried... I understood nothing. Everything carried on round me, but my brain wouldn't take the information in.

— Like being in a fog?

— Yes. As though it had switched off. I knew something was missing, but I couldn't reach it.

Lovisa ran her hand gently through his hair and said nothing. He didn't need any more questions just then.

— But now there's something else to do. Something far more important than this.

— And what's that? Something serious?

— I'm hungry. Will you help me cook?

— Of course, Elias darling. I never thought you'd ask me for help in the kitchen.

They went through to the kitchen. Elias began preparing the food as he always did. Lovisa stood ready to chop vegetables, waiting for a signal from him. He gave a brief nod and pointed to the vegetables. She began rinsing and cutting them while she quietly enjoyed the fact that yet another barrier between them had come down.

Soon they were sitting at the kitchen table eating together. Elias was his usual self, as though he hadn't just

been so upset talking about his parents' deaths. The food was excellent, as always. As Lovisa chewed, her thoughts drifted to a mundane problem. She knew Elias was interested in technology and thought a new topic might give him a welcome distraction after their intense conversation on the sofa.

— Elias darling, said Lovisa. I need a new laptop. My old one has really started to give up the ghost. And I found such a good deal! It's £699 outright, but according to the sales assistant, they have a brilliant payment plan.

Elias looked up.

— Brilliant, how?

— Only £37 a month for two years! Lovisa exclaimed enthusiastically. It's nothing! It means it doesn't all hit at once, you know. Perfect for spreading it out!

Elias chewed slowly and calculated for a few seconds.

— Right, said Elias. The monthly instalment for the laptop is £37. But there's also a setup fee of £29.50. And an admin fee of £4.90 per month. The actual monthly cost, including all mandatory charges, comes to £41.90. Multiplied by twenty-four months, that's £1,005.60. Add the setup fee of £29.50, and the total you end up paying is £1,035.10.

Lovisa dropped her fork onto her plate with a clatter.

— £1,035? But the laptop is only £699 outright! That's a difference of... of...

— £336.10, said Elias immediately. That's about 48% more than the cash price.

— But how can you just work that out in your head, that quickly? Lovisa asked. It's unbelievable!

— It's just mental arithmetic.

Lovisa shook her head.

— I don't know how you do it.

— I'm not entirely sure either, he smiled. It just works.

Lovisa saw him smile for the first time all evening. It warmed her to see him looking a little brighter. The story he had told was a sad one, but she hoped he would have the strength to carry on. She was longing to hear what came next and hoped it would be at least a little lighter.

After the meal, they went back to the sofa. Elias prepared himself to continue his story. Putting his past into words for Lovisa had been a relief, and at the same time, one of the hardest things he had ever done.

He took a breath. With her beside him and her quiet support, he found the strength to go on.



15



Peter came home from work earlier than usual the day after the funeral. He was still preoccupied with the previous day as he stepped into the hall, and he felt a vague unease. When he leaned in to kiss Anna, she returned it, but her body was tense, and her eyes were subdued.

— Hey, love, he said carefully. How's Elias doing today? Yesterday was really hard on him. I left work early to be here for you both. Should I try talking to him as well?

Anna drew a breath.

— That's kind of you, she said quietly. But Elias is at school.

Peter stopped. He stared at Anna in astonishment.

— At school? Is that really wise? He was completely beside himself yesterday at the funeral.

She finally looked at him, and now the sadness on her face was impossible to miss.

— You look upset yourself, as though you've been crying. Why?

— It's about what happened with Elias last night, when I talked to him. You probably saw it on the camera.

— Was he unkind to you? Peter asked, alarmed. I saw you talking to him, but I couldn't tell whether he was responding. Did he raise his voice at you? Did he say anything at all? We'd never heard him speak before, not until in the chapel.

Anna shook her head.

— No, he wasn't unkind at all, so calm down. I went in and lay down on the other bed. I'm fairly sure it was his mother's bed, judging by how the rest of the room was arranged, while he was in his father's. I tried to think of something to say to comfort him, but drew a complete blank.

— I can understand that. What do you say to a teenager who's had a day like that?

— I have no idea. He seemed to want to say something, but he wouldn't meet my eye, which I'm sure you've noticed before. I waited for him to speak, but at first it felt as though he couldn't manage it. Eventually, he said quietly:

“I didn't understand until today that I'm an orphan.”

Anna fell silent and looked at Peter.

— Think about what that means, Peter. Really think hard about it.

— That’s devastating. So he hadn’t understood before that his parents were dead. And yet it explains why he was so distraught in the chapel.

— Exactly. I tried to reassure him and said everything was under control and that he could ask me anything. What he asked next is what made me cry, Anna continued.

— What was that, then?

— He simply asked: “Who are you?” I was completely taken aback and tried to take in the full weight of what he had said. I eventually asked who he thought you and I were. He said: “I don’t know... something to do with the police, maybe... connected to my criminal half-brother... who got my parents mixed up in something.”

Peter visibly paled.

— Now think carefully about everything you and I have said and done up to this point. He didn’t even know he’d been taken into care, that he’d been placed with a foster family, or even what the two of us are called. He’s been living in complete darkness.

— God... I mean, that’s just awful.

Anna nodded and was struggling to hold back tears as Peter went on.

— But wait. So when he kept going back to his childhood home, it wasn’t because he was being disobedient; it was the opposite. He thought that’s where he was supposed to be.

And I tore into him for it. Then I demanded cameras and all the rest of it. I've been awful to him because of this. What we've done is completely unacceptable. And yet he's done everything we've told him to do. God... now I understand why you're upset. What did he say after that?

— First, I told him everything: our names, that we're a foster family, that Jessica is his caseworker, all of it. And then, carefully, about his parents... that they died in a car accident caused by a drunk lorry driver. He barely seemed to be listening before he responded.

— What did he say?

— After a silence, he asked: "What happens now?" When I asked him to say more, he said:

"Well, when I turn eighteen, I'll be an adult. Then I'll have to move out of yours. I can't even apply for a flat until I'm an adult, and it takes years to get one. So I'll end up homeless like my brother and have to stay in some shelter with people who are alcoholics or drug users. I can't cope with that.

Then I'll have to find a job straight after sixth form, but the course I'm on is A-levels, not vocational, so I might have to switch. But I don't want to. Everything just falls apart after that."

Peter looked completely shocked.

— I was speechless, Peter. This torrent of words, in such total contrast to before. He spoke in one long, logical chain about what would happen when he turned eighteen. I realise now just how sharp he actually is, even though I'd previously

assumed he had certain mental challenges. And yet, for all his logic and clear thinking, there was panic in it. Desperation. A kind of quiet terror.

— What a chain of consequences to have worked through. And his reasoning isn't entirely wrong either. What did you come up with to say?

— What could I say except that it would all work out? It's two years away, after all. He was quiet for a moment and then asked, to my surprise: "Who am I supposed to obey now?"

— Obey? Did you hear that right? What did he mean by that?

— I asked him to explain, and he said:

"Well, when you're a minor, you're supposed to obey your parents. But now, Children's Social Care is basically my parents, so I'm supposed to obey that. But how do you obey an institution? Is it Jessica I'm supposed to obey, or is it you and Peter?"

— Good grief, what a complicated way of thinking.

— Everything he says is logical and rational, but I don't have any answers. I told him he doesn't need to obey anyone, but that I'm his point of contact with Jessica and Children's Social Care. He lay quietly for a while, then suddenly sat up and said he couldn't sleep there. He asked if he could go to his room, and when I said "yes", he asked if I needed a phone charger. I said "no", but he came back with one anyway.

“You’ll probably need power when you’re watching me on the camera all night.” Then he went to his room.

— You’re right, he has a genuinely sharp mind. He’s thinking one, two, three steps ahead.

— Well, I did watch him on the camera. He dropped off after a while, and eventually so did I.

— I imagine you slept badly, too?

— You can be sure of that. In the morning, I was woken by him moving things round in the kitchen. When I came in, he looked over at me and asked in a completely calm voice, as though nothing that had happened the night before had taken place at all: “You do eat scrambled eggs for breakfast, don’t you?”

— “Yes,” I said, “but I can sort breakfast later.” But he was already at it, cracking eggs into a frying pan, adding some bacon, peppers, onion and I don’t know what else, then seasoning it all. It was done so quickly, and then I had the best scrambled eggs I’ve ever eaten.

— But did he eat anything himself? Here, he barely touches breakfast at all.

— He did, actually. He had a big bowl of muesli with raisins and low-fat yoghurt. He noticed me looking at the packets and reeled off a load of facts. I can’t remember it all, but the gist was that his breakfast, compared to what I’d been giving him, Cornflakes with full-fat milk, had roughly the same number of calories, but the oats made his version more nutritious and more filling. Low-fat natural yoghurt

contains live cultures that can help calm the stomach, which he needs, and the higher sugar content generates more dopamine, which he desperately needs.

— That sounds perfectly logical. Not entirely accurate, perhaps, but convincing enough.

— I thought so too, so I've bought his breakfast now. Then I suggested he come back here with me rather than going to school, and he reacted straight away: "Do you really think it's better for me to sit with you and brood instead of being at school where everything is normal, and schoolwork occupies my mind?" So I let him go to school, again because it's logical.

— How did he seem when you left him? Was he still upset?

— He was his usual self. Except that he was actually talking. He said: "The office is that way. Through that door and up the stairs."

— Why did he say that?

— I asked, and he said: "Did you think I wouldn't realise you'd need to go in and tell them what happened to me yesterday?"

— Good grief. So present and, despite everything we've seen before, so perceptive.

— My thoughts exactly. So I went to the office and explained what had happened yesterday so they could keep an eye on him. I also asked Linda to contact his personal

tutor to arrange a progress review meeting for him. Then I took the bus home.

— I suppose if the school hasn't rung, he must be all right, all things considered.

— Probably, but I'm worried right now. He should be at the childhood home by now, but I can't see him on the cameras. It's a shorter walk there than here. I really hope he hasn't...

Suddenly, they heard the door, and Anna and Peter went out to the hall in surprise to find Elias coming in.

— Oh, hello, Elias! Anna exclaimed. I didn't think you'd be back until eight.

Elias looked at Anna, or rather, past her.

— I assumed you'd be worried about me, given yesterday.

— It's wonderful that you thought of that, Elias, Peter said. I'd like to have a word with you, if that's all right.

— Have I done something wrong? he asked, anxious.

— Not at all. It's Anna and I who have done wrong. Anna told me what you said yesterday. I'm truly sorry for the way I've treated you. You haven't done anything wrong, based on what you understood. And yet I shouted at you and made unreasonable demands.

— I don't accept your apology.

— Thank you... wait, what did you say? You **don't** accept it?

— No, because you didn't do anything wrong **based on what you understood**, so you have nothing to apologise for.

— Fair enough. Then I apologise for not making sure you understood the situation you were in. Anna and I are responsible for you, and we should have ensured you had all the information.

— **That** apology, I accept. I just want to ask...

— Yes?

— Am I... am I still allowed to be at the house until eight?

Peter looked at Anna, who nodded.

— You've handled everything admirably, given the circumstances, so I see no reason to change that arrangement.

— Can I go to my room now?

— Of course. Just one last thing. You asked Anna who you were supposed to **obey** yesterday. The truth is, you don't need to obey us. Think of us as your protectors instead, and you can ask for anything, and we'll do our best to help you.

Elias nodded uncertainly and went to his room. Peter and Anna went through to the living room and sat down on the sofa.

— I really hope Elias starts feeling better soon, said Anna. I think about him constantly, worry about how he's coping with everything, and I genuinely want to be there for him, especially now that he knows what's happened.

— Yes, we'll have to take it one step at a time, said Peter. He needs time, and we have to be here for him, the whole time.

— We do. But isn't it wonderful that Elias has finally started talking to us?

— Yes, not a day too soon.

— I'm not entirely comfortable leaving him at his childhood home until eight every evening, as we've promised. But I suppose he needs it for his own sense of security.

— I understand the concern, but with the cameras, you can keep an eye on him, and I'm always close by if needed.

He looked at Anna, who whispered:

— You know what, Peter? We simply **have** to find a way for him to keep the house. He needs that security.

— I agree, but it seems impossible. The house is almost the entire estate, and his brother is entitled to half.

— I know, but we have to think of something, even if it's not entirely by the book.

— Let me have a think and see if I can find a way.



Elias brooded over what would happen now that his parents were gone. He read up on it and understood that under the rules of intestacy, with no will in place, the estate would be divided between him and his half-brother. When he

ran the numbers, the house was essentially the only thing of any value.

His half-brother was, like himself, a direct heir and would therefore inherit half. Either they would own the house jointly, but if his brother moved in, Elias felt he would be forced out, and the house would eventually be lost to his half-brother's debts. Or Elias could buy him out, but even with a loan, he did not see how he could keep up the payments and would eventually lose the house anyway. Selling the house and splitting the proceeds was the final option, which would also leave Elias homeless.

Whatever happened, in his mind, he ended up without a home.

A few days later, Elias realised that Peter was also working on the estate. He came round with tradesmen, had them measure up, knock on walls, and talk in numbers about what it would cost to "make the house ready to sell." Elias knew the house was run down, but only now did he understand what Peter was planning. To sell it. Split the proceeds between him and his half-brother. It was the only logical thing Peter could do.

The thoughts dragged him into a downward spiral. Without the house, there was nothing left. He pictured himself with no roof over his head, nobody to turn to, nobody who would help. The sense of loneliness became suffocating. It felt as though his entire world had caved in.

He began to prepare in silence. He got a VPN. Searched. Read. Wrote a farewell letter to Anna. Bought what he needed. He put it all in a plastic bag and hid it in the bathroom where no one would find it.

He thought: *When the house is gone, I'll carry out the plan.*



Elias received a notice for a progress review a week after the funeral, which came as a surprise. It was almost a month early, according to the schedule the school had provided at the start of the term. He said nothing about it at the foster home, as he simply assumed he would be expected to go alone. He was quite used to sitting by himself at school meetings.

When he arrived at the staffroom to meet his personal tutor, he was surprised to find Anna sitting there too. He sat down and let his gaze move uncertainly between the tutor and Anna. The tutor noticed his unease and opened the meeting.

— Welcome, Elias. I hope it's clear to you that the school has called this as a routine progress review, nothing more.

— Um... I have a question... Elias said, stumbling over the words.

— What's your question, Elias?

— I'm just wondering whether it was you or Anna who asked for this progress review about a month early. That doesn't sound routine.

— I asked the school to call you in, Elias, Anna replied. I'm worried about you, and I've realised I know nothing about you because you don't talk much at home. That's fine. I understand your hesitation.

— Here's the thing, Elias. The school has a procedure: when a pupil changes guardian or experiences another kind of trauma, we're supposed to call a meeting with the personal tutor. I'm genuinely sorry we missed that. My intention, though, is to run this as a straightforward progress review, given how well you're doing.

Elias didn't respond, but seemed satisfied with the answer.

— Right, I've gathered feedback from all your subject teachers, so let's go through them. Starting with maths. It's quite clear you find it easy. Your teacher says you're about... two chapters ahead of the rest of the class?

— Three.

The tutor raised an eyebrow.

— There you go. He was actually a little concerned before the first assessment, precisely because you're so far ahead. But there were no problems at all. You're predicted an A star comfortably.

He glanced at his notes.

— Computer science is going just as well. You're ahead of the coursework schedule, and your teacher says you clearly have prior experience. Chemistry is strong, too. You're very well regarded in practicals; you take responsibility and get things to work.

He paused briefly.

— German was the big question mark, though. Your teacher was convinced it would go badly. The first test fell the day after your parents' tragic passing. When you then sat it the following week and got full marks, she honestly thought it had to be cheating.

He looked at Elias.

— But after the speaking assessment, there was no doubt left that you didn't.

— That's incredible, Anna said. What sort of grades are we talking about overall?

— In all likelihood, A stars across the board.

He leaned back.

— I should also mention enrichment. All our sixth-formers do games on Wednesday afternoons. Now, a student as academically minded as you doesn't usually shine on the football pitch. Your games teacher said at first that you'd miss an open goal from three metres out.

A wry smile.

— But then he told me something interesting. You nearly always position yourself correctly on the pitch and receive passes when you're completely unmarked. Then you draw

the defence onto yourself just to play it on to someone else who scores.

He nodded.

— Apparently, you read the game better than anyone in the year group. Can't kick a ball straight, but you don't need to.

The tutor paused and looked at Anna for a long moment before continuing.

— Then there's the social side. You don't really have any friends you spend time with, do you, Elias? You always seem to be alone at school. It's... a little sad to see. Does that bother you?

Elias thought. Not about the question itself, but about what was actually true.

— I prefer being on my own.

— Mm, perhaps. Do you mean that's an active choice, or... is it that you're being bullied and that's why you keep to yourself?

Elias shook his head, quickly. Too quickly.

— Are you quite sure? Is there anyone who treats you badly or says unkind things about you?

— Um... no. I mean... Gaz sometimes calls me a nutter. But... it doesn't matter. So...

The tutor frowned.

— That does actually sound like a form of bullying, all things considered.

— Well, I was bullied at primary and secondary school, so... this isn't really like that...

— Would you like to have more friends?

The question landed wrong. Elias stared at the tabletop.

— I'm not entirely sure what that means. I just... I don't want more problems. People talk a lot. It gets... messy.

The tutor drew in a slow breath.

— Elias, school isn't supposed to feel messy or lonely.

— It's quiet sometimes. That's good.

— I'll definitely have a word with this Gaz, said Anna when Elias fell silent. It's not on for him to call you names.

— No... I mean... I don't want to tell tales... it won't help...

The tutor and Anna had nothing more to add, and the conversation dissolved into silence. Anna walked Elias back towards his classroom. The whole way there, he was afraid she might make a scene. In the corridor, Gaz came walking towards them. He broke into a wide grin when he spotted Elias.

— All right, Nutter. Been swotting hard then?

Anna reacted immediately and spoke to him.

— Excuse me, who are you?

— Gaz, love.

She took him aside at once. Elias stood frozen while the other pupils filed into the classroom. He tried not to look, but could still hear the voices, low but sharp. After a moment, Anna let go. Gaz walked back into the classroom, noticeably quieter than before.

After the lesson, Gaz came over to Elias, which alarmed him.

— Your mum... foster mum, that is, had a word with me. I didn't know about your parents. What happened is awful.

He scuffed his foot along the floor.

— I don't mean anything bad when I say Nutter. You just do things your own way. It's... cool, actually. I'll lay off, yeah?

Elias walked away, his thoughts spinning round and round. Anna had requested the progress review. She had confronted Gaz and got him to apologise. What had actually happened today? He couldn't stop trying to work it out for the entire weekend.



Directly after the weekend came the day Elias had been dreading. Peter had booked a meeting with a solicitor to go through the estate and carry out the preliminary division of inheritance. He was collected from school, but his thoughts were scattered. School felt pointless. Today, he would find out that the house was gone. So why bother with lessons?

The solicitor received them, and Elias walked in alongside Peter as though in a haze. He drew a breath. Every fibre of his body was braced against what was about to happen. He knew exactly how it would end. Today was almost certainly the last day of his life.

— Welcome, both of you. Christopher, your brother, appears to be running late. We'll begin when he arrives.

They waited a long time, and Peter began to grow impatient. After half an hour, he objected.

— We can't wait any longer. He was notified, and I have proof he collected the letter. If he doesn't want to come, that's his choice. We need to start now.

— Noted. We'll record that Christopher is not present and proceed with the estate.

Peter presented the estate accounts and handed Elias a copy. He noted the adjustments made to the valuation of the house, along with several other deductions recorded as part of the estate administration. In monetary terms, the property came to a much smaller proportion of the total estate than he had initially assumed. He did not dwell on it and signed the acknowledgement.

Then Peter began to lie.

— I'd suggest we deal with the division of inheritance at the same time. It's clear that Elias and Christopher's parents' final wish was for Christopher to be disinherited. He has never taken any responsibility for his own life. He is unemployed, homeless, a petty criminal and a drug user, and yet Elias and Christopher's parents sent him money time and again. He has never shown any gratitude, any independence. He didn't even attend his own parents' funeral, and he hasn't appeared here today. I know he was notified, and I have proof that the letters were collected, yet he has shown no interest whatsoever.

— Your observations are noted, but they do not affect the legal position, the solicitor said. Do you believe the deceased truly intended to exclude Christopher from any benefit under the estate?

— The bank statements here clearly show that the parents had stopped supporting him. It's plain that they had turned their backs on him. The phone records show the same thing: they simply stopped ringing him. These documents show that they cut contact with Christopher and no longer wished to help him. Furthermore, he himself has made no effort to reach out even since their passing. I know there is no will, which is almost certainly explained by their sudden and unexpected deaths. I am personally entirely convinced that had they written one, Elias would have been the sole heir. I look after Elias every day and know what a remarkable young man he is. That should be sufficient grounds for what I've argued.

The solicitor looked uncertain and turned to Elias.

— Your observations are noted, but they do not affect the legal position. Do you believe it's true that your parents wished for Christopher to be disinherited?

Elias felt his anger rise. *Peter is lying. There is absolutely no chance my mother would have disinherited her firstborn. He knows it. I know it. It's a complete lie.* He was screaming, but only inside his head.

Instead, it was Peter who said, calmly but firmly:

— Elias is placed with us through Children’s Social Care. It’s my responsibility to ensure he is not subjected to questions of this kind.

The solicitor leaned forward, persistently.

— I must establish whether either party wishes to contest the suggested distribution.

— Then you may record that he declines to answer.

The solicitor gave a brief nod, but then turned directly to Elias regardless.

— You only need to indicate whether you object to the estate being administered on the suggested basis, as reflecting what is understood to have been the parents’ intentions. No pressure.

Elias swallowed hard. The words stuck in his throat. He could not tell the truth. *I cannot lie. I have to stay honest.* At the same time, he wanted the solicitor to believe what Peter had said. He drew a breath and managed:

— I... I don’t know, he mumbled at last. We never talked about inheritance...

Peter cut in, brief and firm.

— And that’s quite enough questions. My conclusions stand uncontested.

— Very well. Christopher will be formally notified of the estate administration. If no objection is raised within a reasonable period, the estate may proceed. That process does not prejudice his entitlement, nor does it prevent a future claim should he choose to contest the distribution.

The solicitor asked everyone to sign the estate distribution document, then announced that he would submit the estate to HMRC and send Christopher a copy of the document before closing the meeting.

Since school was already out, Peter drove Elias home to his childhood home and left him there as usual.

— See you at eight as normal, I expect? Peter said.

Elias thought: *you probably won't see me again* and gave a non-committal reply.

He went into the house and walked straight to the bathroom. He took out the plastic bag and laid its contents out in front of him, arranged exactly as he had planned. This was it. This was how he had decided it would happen. His thoughts were calm, almost still, as though everything were already settled. He went through every step in his mind and pictured Anna reading the letter and understanding that this was the best thing that could happen.

But he couldn't stop thinking about what Peter and Anna had done. Peter had manipulated everything, broken rules, lied and worked around the system in ways that had made the impossible possible. His half-brother should have got half. Should have. And yet the house was his. It shouldn't be possible. It couldn't be what Peter actually wanted. And yet he had done it.

At the same time, Anna had arranged the meeting with the school the week before. She had been there. Listened

with genuine interest. Even acted when he had hinted that he was being bullied.

Peter was trying to help him. Anna was trying to help him. They had only been hired by Children's Social Care to look after him. And yet... it was strange. And yet true. Illogical. But true.

He stared ahead of him. Then a thought struck him hard: his whole life, he had been alone. Always alone. Always overlooked. His entire life had proved that nobody had ever cared.

And now... now they did. They had done everything for him. No logic. No rules. No system. Just... care.

He couldn't silence the thoughts. Eventually, he put everything back in the bag.

— Not yet, he said quietly to the bag. Not yet.



The weeks that followed passed with agonising slowness for Elias. Every day when he came back to the foster home, he was anxious that Peter might have received some news about his brother, causing trouble again, as had happened so many times before.

After what, in his opinion, felt like too many weeks, the thing he had been dreading happened. Peter stopped him when he came in that evening. He had an envelope in his hand. Elias looked at him warily. *My brother has complained*, he thought. Peter said nothing but handed him

the envelope. With trembling fingers, he opened it and pulled out a sheet of paper headed “Official Copy of Register of Title”. At the top were the words “HM Land Registry”. He scanned down the dense blocks of text until he saw it:

“The land is held on trust for Elias Nicholson”

— What does this mean? he asked.

— It means that from now on, you are the owner of your childhood home, Peter said. You’re still under eighteen, so the adults helping you will look after the practical side of things for now. But the house is yours.

Elias was flooded with a rush of joy but showed nothing. He couldn’t meet Peter’s gaze as he said:

— Thank you.

He held the document to his chest and went to his room. There, he read every single word on it and tried to take it in. That night he laid it beside him on the bed and lay looking at it until he fell asleep.

The next day was Saturday, so he went to the house as usual. He fetched the plastic bag from the bathroom and looked at it for a long time.

— I don’t need you any more, he said to it.

Then he took it into town. He threw it into a skip. Then he bought a gilt-coloured picture frame, went home, framed the document, and hung it on the wall of his room.

At exactly eight o’clock that evening, he returned to the foster home as usual. He normally had a knot in his stomach when he came home, whether to the foster home or, before

his parents died, his childhood home. There was always something to worry about, some new kind of disaster waiting on the other side of the door.

To his surprise, that knot was gone now. He was completely calm when he crossed the threshold. It was the first time he hadn't been bracing himself for something to go wrong, and that alone made him almost more alert than before.

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— So... yeah. That's how I got this house, said Elias. Then I stayed with Peter and Anna until I turned eighteen. It was... quiet. Nothing much happened, really. I knew the house was mine, and that was... a relief.

He gave a slight shrug.

— On my eighteenth birthday, I just packed up my things and moved in here full-time. Turned off their login to the camera app, of course.

— Do you mean you didn't even say goodbye?

— Well, not exactly. I was so anxious about turning eighteen. I counted the months, the weeks, the days. Then I

lay awake the night before my birthday watching the clock. When it hit midnight, I started wondering whether I had to leave them at that exact moment. I absolutely did not want them complaining that I hadn't left yet. Maybe they knew what time of day I was born, and that was the deadline.

Lovisa smiled crookedly.

— Wow. That's... extremely pedantic. But also very **you**.

— Anyway. I couldn't sleep, so I put my bedding in the laundry basket, cleaned the whole room, wiped down the wardrobes, the floor, the bathroom, everything. When I finally heard Anna and Peter wake up, I picked up the last bag and headed for the door. I looked into the kitchen and said: "Goodbye, time to go." Because that's what was expected.

He paused.

— They both seemed surprised and followed me out. I said clearly, "Thank you for everything", and cycled off.

— You do understand that "thank you for everything" can come across the wrong way?

Elias frowned.

— Not really, no. Everything is everything. Nothing left out. How can that be wrong?

— For someone who doesn't work the way you do, it can sound sarcastic rather than grateful. But I understand you, Elias darling. You meant no harm by it, and I hope they understood that, too.

— Anyway, for the first few months, I cycled round looking for cardboard and polystyrene in skips and dragged it all home to insulate the whole house. Then I turned the heating down to a minimum everywhere, except a little in my room. I had to wear outdoor clothes indoors on cold winter days because I couldn't afford the electricity bill. I switched off everything else: the fridge, the freezer, my phone contract, the internet, anything that wasn't strictly necessary. I looked up which foods give enough nutrition to survive at the lowest possible cost. A lot of oats and potatoes. I allowed myself nothing nice to eat. Then I was at school and the library practically all day, because it was warm there, and there was internet and a microwave. It got a bit better at university because of the student loan, but it still wasn't enough.

— Wow, what a sparse life. Did you have any fun at all?

— What life? I **had** no life. Just study and sleep. But I got top marks in everything, so eventually I was done and applied for four jobs in total. Got called to interview at all of them. I played two off against each other to maximise my starting salary, and Intetra IT won. Suddenly, I had considerably more money than before. I took down the cardboard and polystyrene and turned the heating back up. Switched everything back on, started eating properly again, got my driving licence and then bought a car.

— Just like that? You can't have been on that high a salary straight away?

— Ah, it took many months. First, I paid off all my debts; that took about six months. Then I started treating myself to things, like a new computer and so on. I could see the house was very run down, so I started renovating. I began with my parents' bedroom, which my half-brother had cleared out, because I thought: I'm the owner now, so the master bedroom is mine.

— What do you mean your brother cleared out the bedroom?

— Well, he did complain about getting too little from the estate, but it took him over half a year to do so. He rang the doorbell and was quite aggressive. I explained that I was a minor in care, so he'd have to speak to social services, which he hates, so he calmed down. Then I suggested that if he promised never to ask for anything more, he could clear out the master bedroom. I imagine he thought there'd be something valuable in there, jewellery perhaps, but I already knew my parents didn't keep valuables in their bedroom because it's the first place a burglar looks.

— Yes, I've heard that too. But why that particular room?

— I couldn't bring myself to go in there any more; it was like an invisible wall. The memories were too painful. So he came with a friend in a van and started carrying things out. I think Peter broke every speed limit, because he was there within minutes and started tearing into him. But I said it was fine, that I couldn't bear looking at my parents' things any more. So he stood there with a stern expression and crossed

arms, watching the whole thing. Then he drove off and came back with Anna, who went in and cleaned the room out completely, and after that, I could bring myself to go in again.

— I hope you thanked them for that.

— Yes, I did. Probably not enough, but I hope they understood.

— Probably, Elias darling.

— As I said, the bedroom was where I started renovating. I ripped out the old wardrobes and built new ones with sliding doors. I put up boarding on the ceiling, hung new wallpaper and laid laminate flooring.

— Wait, you did all of that **yourself**?

— Yes, so I got it exactly as I wanted it.

— Wow, Elias darling. You're really handy as well. I love you more and more the better I get to know you.

— Right... yes. When I finished the bedroom, it felt like **my** room, not my parents'. I bought a new bed and a new bedside table and moved in. Then I carried on room by room, and it was absolute chaos everywhere for quite a long time. The bathroom was a nightmare; I had to buy a portable loo to get through it. For a while, the garage was full of windows, because I replaced every window in stages with modern triple glazing. You've seen them yourself. The garden got a complete overhaul eventually too. Out with all the old shrubs, in with new ones. It took well over a year to finish

everything, but in the end, I was happy with it. Most of the furniture, appliances and everything else I replaced as well.

— I did think everything here looked new.

— Anyway, when it was all done, I went round the house and liked what I saw. I was exhausted, but it was worth it. Before, I'd spent all my time in my own room, maybe a little in the kitchen. But now it felt as though the whole house was open to me. Got a telly and enjoyed lounging on the sofa.

— Mm, I've noticed. You still do.

— Well, you know what happened next. I missed the sound of little footsteps and tried dating, as you already know. And how I eventually ended up with Children's Social Care, and you came crashing into my life like a hurricane.

Lovisa laughed.

— A friendly hurricane, I hope?

Elias smiled warmly at Lovisa.

— The best hurricane there's ever been.

They both laughed, and something in the air released.



The days passed, and Lovisa noticed her feelings for Elias simply growing. She visited every day, as though her heart pulled her there of its own accord. Elias always welcomed her, but there was a wariness about him she couldn't quite read. He didn't seem to dislike her company; if anything, he seemed uncertain how to handle her being there so often.

Sometimes he became more withdrawn than usual, almost as though something was troubling him. When that happened, she stepped back immediately, worried about pushing him too hard. At the same time, she couldn't ignore the feeling that the relationship was standing still while everything inside her wanted to move forward.

One Saturday morning, they were curled up together on the sofa. Elias was a little tired but happy after settling some new children the previous evening and through the night. The children had been upset after a row that had ended with their parents being taken in by the police and the children placed with him. They could be heard laughing in the children's room, and Lovisa was struck by how Elias had managed to calm a pair of children in under a day. She gathered her courage and asked:

— Elias darling. There's something I've been thinking about. I'm here every day, and I think you like that. I love it because I love you. At the same time, it's starting to get a bit wearing, driving home every evening and then coming back early the next morning. How would you feel if I slept here just on Saturday nights?

— Today is Saturday. Were you thinking of staying tonight?

— Oh no, I'd never be that cheeky. Not before you've agreed to it. I'd bring an overnight bag and sleep on the sofa. It's not very comfortable, but it'd do for me.

Elias was quiet for a moment.

— The thing is... I've been worried about exactly this. That you'd start wanting to sleep here, and everything that comes with it.

— It's not a demand, Elias darling. I just want to calmly discuss the possibility of staying over one night a week.

— You're not being entirely honest. Of course, it's a demand. I know you; you're just easing in gently.

— All right, you're right. It is a bit of a demand, but we can go at whatever pace you want.

He drew a breath.

— But I've already thought about this, and all I can see are problems. I do like solving problems. But every solution I find just leads to new ones, and I can't find a way through that doesn't cause more.

— Elias darling. I understand you don't like change, but...

— Could I possibly finish? I know I can ramble, but you'll survive. My problem is that things are out of balance between us. You always come here, but I never go to yours. You spend more time here than at home, but this is my home, not yours. So you tiptoe round here, not quite daring to do anything without asking permission. That's not balance; it's wrong. The solution would be to do what couples do during courtship. But which of us is courting which? Normally, it's the man who courts the woman, but here it's really more you courting me. Not that I have anything against that; I'm not hung up on gender roles. But we've barely been on dates. Well, yes, one date when you

took me to McDonald's, but I was, to put it mildly, a little reserved.

— That wasn't really a date, was it?

— You arranged the time, the place, and paid. By definition, that makes it a date you took me on.

— Yes, well, you're probably right about that in a way.

— Really, what should happen is you stop coming here every day and start courting me properly instead. Taking me out to restaurants, the cinema, for walks... whatever it is couples do.

— That doesn't actually sound very good. I wouldn't like that.

— No, that's the problem. We'd be going backwards in our relationship. The solution is to move things forward, and that means you staying here sometimes. But you can't sleep on the sofa; I won't have that. My study has a decent bed, but I may need that room if I get more than two children. And I'm sometimes on call, with my computer in there, so how could I respond to an alert in the middle of the night if you're in there? So that doesn't work either. Should I put a mattress in the utility room? I'm not that heartless. So the only solution is for you to sleep... well, come with me.

Elias stood up, walked to the bedroom and opened the door. Lovisa followed and saw it for the first time. It was large, with a single bed in one corner, which he then pointed to.

— That bed is too small for two. It's actually smaller than yours, the one you kicked me out of at your parents'. So that's the problem with you sleeping here. I can only see one solution to all of this, and it creates other problems. The solution would be for us to buy another bed, or perhaps replace the one I have with a double, or maybe two singles. Then I'd need to move them to the middle of the room, otherwise you'd have to climb over me if you needed to get up in the night. We'd also need an extra bedside table.

— Do you really mean we'd sleep together in a bed here in the bedroom?

— Well, it solves the bed problem. But it doesn't solve the main problem, which is that you're only ever a guest here and don't feel at home. The only solution I can think of for that is for you to bring your things here and try to make this house your home. I can move my things from those four wardrobes into one, so you can have three. Women have far more clothes than men, from what I understand.

Lovisa looked at Elias with astonishment, almost shock, written all over her face. Did he really mean...?

— Elias darling. This sounds as though you want me to move in here permanently, and for us to live together. That sounds wonderful, but... won't that be quite hard for you?

— No, it won't.

He took a deep breath, and Lovisa looked at him.

— It will be **very** hard for me. That's the problem.

— Have you thought of any solution to that problem?

— Yes. If I'm going to have any chance of managing this, we need some ground rules. I've come up with three. We'd need to discuss them, of course, and agree on them together.

— What rules did you have in mind, Elias darling?

— I'll start with number one. You do whatever you need to do to feel that this is your home. You bring your things in, your clothes, whatever. Plants, perhaps. Jewellery and ornaments. Clutter up the bathroom with your things. In short: you do everything you need to do to feel at home here. Rearrange the furniture, maybe. The important thing is that you do it without asking my permission. You'd never ask my permission to change things in your own home, your flat, would you?

— You've said yourself that I'm transparent to you, so I think I have a fairly good sense of what you'd be willing to let me do here. So there probably won't be any problems.

— That's exactly the point. You mustn't even think about what you imagine I might or might not like. You just do everything you need to do to make this your home.

— Without giving you a single thought, Elias darling?

— Precisely. Now, rule two.

— Right, here comes the exception, Lovisa smiled.

— As I said, you do everything without asking me or thinking about what I want, **until I say so**. If I find something too difficult, I'll say so, and then we discuss it. The only thing you have to promise is that you'll listen, and then we'll find a solution together. For example, if you want a

very large plant in the living room and I think it's in the way, perhaps the solution is that we move the sofa a bit, and the telly with it, and you move your plant so it's no longer in the way. You get what you want, and I get what I want. But the important thing is that you never ask in advance; you wait until I raise an objection. That's rule two.

— Wow, so I just come at your house with everything I've got, without asking you or even thinking about what you want, as long as you don't complain under rule two.

— Exactly. Like the hurricane you are. Finally, there's rule three, which you probably won't like, but it matters to me.

— Tell me. I really do want to hear it.

— Rule three means you keep your flat. I can pay the rent for you if you like. But you don't give it up until I feel comfortable enough for you to do so.

— Why? Lovisa said sharply. Is that so you can just point at the door and tell me to leave whenever you feel like it? That doesn't sound like you're going all in on me.

— That's not what I mean. What I mean is: if things fall apart with you living here and you've nowhere to go, you'd have to stay here anyway. Then we might start arguing, and the relationship could fall apart as well. You can't find a flat here in under several years, so you'd be forced to stay with me. It's not that I **want** to send you away; it's just a valve, a pressure-relief valve.

— I think I understand, Elias darling. You're right that I don't like rule three, but you need it to feel safe about me

being here permanently. Is that it? You have absolutely no intention of ever using that rule?

— You understand me so well. The rule is just to make me feel secure. What do you think of my three rules? Can we talk them through and agree?

— There's nothing to discuss. You've already decided what the rules are. What I understand is that if we follow them, especially rule one, it will end with us living together. There's nothing I want more. I'll agree to any rules that can lead there.

— There is one more rule, actually. It's the most important of all, and it's not negotiable.

— Wow, all right. What rule is that?

— Well, it's not really my rule. This house is my home, as you know, but it's also a workplace of sorts. So, Children's Social Care naturally has quite a number of requirements regarding the safety of children in this house. I imagine you have the same kind of rules at your workplace, so none of this will be strange to you. No toxic plants or anything that children could hurt themselves on.

— That's the most obvious thing of all. I want to have children with you, so our shared home simply has to be safe for children. But thank you for reminding me.

Lovisa threw her arms round Elias and kissed him. He held her and kissed her back. At the same time, she felt a deep worry that everything was moving too fast for him.

— Are you absolutely sure about this, Elias darling? You don't want to take it one small step at a time?

— Rip off the plaster!

— What do you mean?

— You know, when you need to take off a plaster, you can either peel it away little by little. It hurts less that way, but for longer. Or you rip the plaster off. It hurts a lot, but for a much shorter time. So I'd rather rip the plaster off than feel a bit rotten for six months or more.

— You can look at it that way, yes. Well, I am absolutely not going to complain if you go from baby steps to tiger leaps.

— So we're agreed?

— Of course we are. Now I don't want to wait a single second longer! We're going now! We're buying a double bed, Elias darling.

— Blimey... I wasn't quite ready for that. I suppose this is the new normal: you just decide things without me getting a say. All right, let's go and have a look. Shall we go to IKEA?

— If it's all right with you, I'd rather go to Dunelm. I think the quality is better.

— Of course, love. We'll have to take my children, but I'm sure that won't be a problem.

Soon they were walking round looking at the beds. Lovisa stopped at one she liked the look of. Elias preferred another and made his case: it had legs, so you could store things

underneath. Lovisa felt that a bed going all the way down to the floor looked better.

— Lovisa, go and fetch a shop assistant so we can get his opinion.

When Lovisa came back with the assistant, Elias pointed to the bed she liked and said:

— This is the one we'll have.

— Elias darling, we don't have to do it my way. Your opinion matters just as much as mine.

— I know. But right now, my biggest problem is that my children have disappeared. Have you seen them, Lovisa love?

— Have you lost the children? You don't usually do that.

Lovisa called the children's names, but to her surprise, Elias was completely calm and not the least bit alarmed. Suddenly, there was a knocking sound from inside the bed. Then a panel in the base swung open, and the children scrambled out, laughing.

— Here we are! We were hiding in the bed!

— There's my point. You want a certain look; I want storage. The bed you liked has drawers underneath where you can keep things. That's why we're getting your bed.

Lovisa smiled and turned to the assistant, who had followed her over.

— Right, we've decided. We'll take two of this one. Do you have them in stock?

— We'll need two bedside tables as well. The children and I found one over there that looks nice.

Lovisa looked at the table Elias was pointing to and said to the assistant:

— Two beds and two tables, please.

— The beds are a week's delivery time; the tables we have in stock. Come to the till and pay, and I'll put the order in for the beds.

When it came to paying, Lovisa said:

— Elias darling, we should pay for one bed each.

— Could we please talk about that at home? I'll pay for everything here, and we'll sort it out later.

— Of course, Elias darling. But if we're going to live together, we'll need a joint budget. But, as you wish. We'll talk about it later.

They went home with the bedside tables and sat down in the living room after Elias had set the children up in the playroom.

— So I'll pay you back half of what you paid at Dunelm, yes?

— Maybe. But Lovisa, how much do you earn?

Lovisa told him her monthly salary, and Elias continued:

— So I earn roughly twice as much as you. In that case, I think the fair thing is for you to pay one third of our shared expenses and me two thirds. We could set up a joint bank account with a card for shared costs, and each month we put in an appropriate amount, with me putting in twice as much as you. That way, we have a joint budget that's fair.

— There we are: that's what happens when you love someone who's brilliantly logical. All right, Elias darling, I'm on board with that; it sounds sensible. So I pay one-third of the bed furniture, yes?

— Don't sell yourself short, love. You're logical too. One third of the bed is perfectly logical. The plan sounds reasonable, doesn't it?

— It does, Elias darling. Right, I think we have a plan for the finances.

— Precisely.

— If I'm going to move in here, I'll need to spend most of this week at my flat packing my things into boxes. I'd love to ask you to help, but you've got the children to look after, and I know the children are always the most important thing for you. That's one of the reasons I love you so much.

— Um... said Elias, blinking several times.

He felt almost paralysed by the speed at which she moved. Buy a bed, pack boxes, move in... all at once.

— Okay... I'll miss you all week when you're not here. But perhaps I can help with a box or two when I get the chance, as long as it works round the children.

And so it was. Lovisa stayed at her flat and began packing a great many moving boxes she bought on the way home. She thought carefully about what to take. Most things weren't needed; there was already plenty there. But all the plants had to come. And curtains. Elias had no curtains at all. Then ornaments, pictures, and all her bathroom things. There was

a lot to pack, and she was busy the whole week. Just as Elias was busy on his side with the children.

On Saturday, she hired a van and got Teddy to help her load all the boxes. The plants came too, and a few pieces of furniture, including a dressing table with a mirror. Once everything was loaded, she thanked him for his help and drove to Elias on her own. When she got there, Elias helped her carry the boxes in. The children had moved out the day before, so there were just the two of them in the house. It took a long time, and it was late in the evening before they were done. Both were completely shattered by the time they finally collapsed onto the sofa side by side.

— Elias darling... I'm done in. Please, can I sleep here on the sofa tonight? I'm too tired to drive home, and I've nowhere to leave the van in town.

— I've already told you that you're not sleeping on the sofa here, so the answer is no.

— Elias, please, just tonight, Lovisa begged.

— Nope.

Lovisa sighed deeply but didn't want to risk another row, so she made ready to drive home after all.

— But I have another idea, Elias continued. Come with me.

Elias got up and headed for the bedroom. Lovisa followed but stopped dead in the doorway.

The two new beds had been assembled and were standing side by side. The bedside tables were in place. It was even made up.

— It's considerably better if you sleep here. The sofa is, as you know, rather uncomfortable, he said with a slight, almost apologetic shrug.

Lovisa struggled to take in what he was suggesting.

— The beds arrived yesterday, he continued. I drove and collected them with the children, and then they helped put them together. Mostly, they just handed me tools and screws. So I hope you have a handle on your boxes and can find what you need over the next few days.

— I had planned to wait a couple of weeks before moving in here properly, to give you time to get used to it. Do you really mean we're moving in together for real today?

— Rip off the plaster!

Lovisa smiled, but wondered whether she herself was ready to move in here and now.

— I was going to buy some nighties first.

— Don't you already have some?

— No, I sleep in just my knickers, but I thought it would be so awkward and difficult for you that I was planning to buy a few nighties to make it easier for you to sleep next to me. A bit like at my parents'.

— I see. But under rule one, you're supposed to do what you need to do to feel at home here. If you have to sleep differently from how you usually do, it's not really like being

at home, is it? So if you're used to sleeping in just your knickers, you should carry on doing that.

— I was only thinking of you and wanted to take small steps, not push too hard.

— I understand, and I appreciate that you think that way. But rule one still applies: you're not supposed to consider what I think; you just do whatever makes you comfortable. And I am a man as well... I have to admit, the thought of having a half-naked woman next to me at night is both appealing and terrifying. I've actually never seen a naked woman before.

— Don't lie, Elias darling. You've looked at porn like every other bloke.

— Yes... well... I meant... three-dimensionally.

Lovisa laughed warmly at his dry way of putting things.

— Right then, Elias darling. As long as you promise to remember rule two and speak up if it becomes too much. That only means we talk about it, nothing more. I can always buy nighties later if it comes to that.

— I promise, love. If it gets too much, you'll be the first to know. At the same time, I hope you understand that I want this too, so my threshold for complaining will probably be fairly high.

— One more thing. I know how men work when they look at women. Please don't be embarrassed if something happens down below. Just because you get an erection

doesn't mean we have to have sex. I'm prepared to wait until you're ready.

Elias looked a little uncomfortable.

— At the same time... let me put it this way: I'm giving you the same thing you're giving me with the house. You're free to do what you like with my body without asking permission, without even thinking about what you imagine I want, until I say no. If that happens, we'll talk about it calmly. And lastly, I'm aware that men always get erections at night and in the morning, so please don't worry about that.

Elias went completely scarlet. Eventually, he managed to stammer:

— Let's take it one step at a time, and it'll be fine. But you have to stop talking about my erection; it's embarrassing, and you know it. We've already discussed this.

Lovisa smiled and hugged Elias again. It was remarkable how he seemed to remember everything they had ever talked about. What an extraordinary man he was, she thought. Then she began rummaging through some of the moving boxes to unpack her bathroom things before she could go through her evening routine.

Soon they were lying side by side on the bed, dressed in nothing but their underwear. It was exactly as difficult for Elias as Lovisa had feared. But he didn't complain; he simply said "goodnight" and turned his back to her.

— Goodnight, yourself, Elias darling. Sleep well!

— You too, love, Elias replied without turning round.

Both of them struggled to sleep, though for different reasons. Elias lay rigid and miserable at being so close to a woman with so little on, while Lovisa was giddy with the knowledge that for the first time she was sharing a bed with the person she loved in this way. She pictured a home that would slowly become theirs.

What she didn't realise was how each step in that direction would wear on Elias, bit by bit, until he could barely keep up the pretence.



17



Lovisa unpacked her moving boxes with energy and enthusiasm. Her clothes soon filled the wardrobes Elias had emptied for her. Flowers were placed on windowsills and floors. Pictures and ornaments appeared everywhere. Before long, she was hanging curtains in every window. All the while, Elias watched without saying a word.

— Are you all right, Elias darling?

— Yep. Absolutely fine, he said, far too quickly. It's nice to see you so happy.

Lovisa looked at him thoughtfully and realised he was not happy at all. Days passed, and Elias seemed increasingly

uncomfortable as he moved round his house, which was being transformed beyond recognition. Lovisa had to stop herself from asking, knowing he would simply refer her to rules one and two. *He'll get used to it soon enough*, she thought, and carried on decorating and arranging the house.

Weeks passed, and Lovisa felt she could see Elias suffering every single day. He looked miserable when he looked at everything Lovisa had brought in. Her hairbrush, the kitchen knives, the decorative cushions. But he said nothing to her. *This has to work*, he thought, *because if it doesn't, I'll never be able to have a family of my own*. So he gritted his teeth and tried not to show Lovisa how unsettled he was. He was managing fairly well, he thought, but as usual, Lovisa saw straight through him. She kept quiet all the same.

Lovisa regularly met up with her girlfriends, and it was her turn to host. She realised she needed to be careful, though, so she asked a friend to hold the evening at her place instead. It was a lovely evening, which went on very late. When Lovisa checked the time on her way home, she thought: *Oh, it's so late. Elias is usually asleep by now*. So instead of going back to the house, she stayed the night at her flat so as not to wake him and disturb his routine.

The next morning, she drove back to Elias, who seemed angry, to her surprise. At first, she ignored it, but eventually she could not hold back.

— Elias darling. You seem cross today. Have I done something wrong, or has something else happened?

Elias sat quietly for a moment. Lovisa was patient and waited him out. She had learned that he sometimes needed time.

— The thing is, I'm furious with you right now, but I'm even more furious with myself for being furious with you.

— Goodness, why is that? You know, we can talk about anything without a filter and just calmly discuss each other's faults?

— Yes, I know. The thing is, I'm so irritated that you always move about in bed and wake me up, but I didn't want to say so. You kick as well. I've had so many bruises. But last night, when you slept at the flat, I couldn't sleep. That made me even more irritated with you.

— Why?

— Because you were **not** lying next to me, moving about the whole time. I'm irritated that you chose to sleep somewhere else. At the same time, I'm angry with myself for being angry with you, because, of course, you're allowed to have your own private life. Besides, I understand that you slept at the flat so as not to disturb me. So I'm mostly angry with myself right now.

— Wow, darling. So you missed me last night after all? I've been feeling as though you're mostly just put out by me being here, turning your house and your life upside down.

— The thing is, I haven't activated rule two yet.

— I know. At the same time, I've realised you're suffering because I'm disrupting your home and your life like this. Why haven't you complained about it?

— Well... the thing is... I can explain why. At night, as I said, I keep being woken by the bed moving, and I turn over, feeling thoroughly irritated. Then I suddenly see... that the pillow is on fire.

— What! On fire?

— Yes, it's your red hair spread all across the pillow. I don't know why, but then I feel happy instead, and I lie there looking at you while you sleep, with my heart pounding, until I fall asleep again.

Lovisa felt a small thrill when she understood that Elias had been looking at her body in secret. He continued:

— Then in the morning, I go into the bathroom to shave, but I can't find my razor. It irritates me enormously, until I see the brush lying there, full of red hairs that I realise are yours. Then suddenly everything feels calm again. Then I go to sort out breakfast, but I can't find the knives, and I start looking for you to complain, but you're nowhere to be seen. Then I suddenly spot a burning bush, a flower really, and I realise it's you watering your plants. And yes... then I lose it, but in a strangely peaceful way. When I go into the living room and look at the sofa, I see these decorative cushions that feel completely pointless, and I get irritated and think about removing them. But then I see a few red hairs on them, and I think: "*This is my beloved's hair.*" So I leave them be.

— You mean you get frustrated by my chaos, but then you see my hair, and suddenly everything is fine again. Interesting.

— The thing is... what I'm trying to say is that well, of course it's hard having you here and disrupting my house and my life, but then I feel... I love you. And so... I love everything you do. So, darling... I haven't given up yet on being able to get used to having you here. So you mustn't give up either. Not yet.

Lovisa moved closer, and Elias gratefully accepted her embrace. He felt a warmth in his body that far exceeded her body heat. She thought to herself: *I need to learn to adapt to him as well. There are two of us in this relationship, and we both need to change.*

She quietly stopped moving things about and instead began organising everything carefully, which stood in contrast to her usual spontaneous disorder. To her surprise, it actually felt really good for her too, to have a bit of order and structure. She realised she could now find her own things without having to spend ages searching, as she used to. She also began following his routines more and more, and found, to her surprise, that they made it easier for her to relax.



Weeks passed, and their evenings watching their series continued. Elias began to relax more and more. Lovisa

stopped rushing about and waited him out when he spoke, never pressing for answers. In fact, Lovisa found she enjoyed taking things more slowly and not placing so many demands on herself and those round her. Her girlfriends noticed, and began joking about the new “Laid-back Lovisa.”

The nights, however, were still difficult for Elias. He could not bring himself to look at her when they were settling down to sleep, and turned his back instead. Lovisa was a little sad about that, but then again he had already explained that he used to look at her while she slept, and the knowledge of it gave her a thrill. So she began to challenge him, waiting to pull the duvet over herself so that she lay topless, smiling at him before he quickly turned away. But his curiosity was too strong, and he began sneaking glances at her body when he thought she had fallen asleep. His inability to let her truly close was growing increasingly frustrating for her, but she bore her patience without complaint and waited for him to find the courage to reach out himself.

One evening, something happened that she was not prepared for at all. She was drifting off to sleep when she felt him rest his hand against her, first by accident, then with intention. Just the warmth. Just the contact. She opened her eyes but did not move. He waited, ready to pull back, but nothing happened. Her breathing remained steady. That gave him courage.

The touch was careful, tentative, as though he were still asking permission. Lovisa looked at him without saying

anything. She stayed still, let him continue, and in her stillness there was a clear answer. His hands grew bolder as they explored different parts of her body.

She began to moan softly at his touch, and then suddenly she pushed him aside and rolled him onto his back in one motion. Elias barely had time to react before she was on top of him, and all the carefulness was gone.

Before he had time to react, the closeness became overwhelming, and his body reacted faster than his will. It was over quickly, and when it was done, he felt shame hit him before he had even caught his breath.

Lovisa lay down beside him again. He looked at her and thought he could sense a disappointment he could not bear. Without hesitating, he turned back towards her. This time, he was calmer, more present. He let everything take as long as it needed, until her body was no longer still, until she drew a sharp breath and clutched him as though she wanted to stay inside the moment.

Afterwards, they lay pressed close together, with no space between them. Lovisa held him tight, as though she needed to make sure he was there.

— Sorry, he said quietly.

She looked at him, puzzled.

— For what?

— For it... ending so quickly.

Lovisa smiled faintly and laid her hand against his cheek.

— It didn't, she said. Everything counts. You didn't stop until I was satisfied.

Elias smiled a little, but she could still sense he seemed slightly worried.

— Is this how you planned to start a family?

She was momentarily unsure what he meant. Then she gave a quiet laugh and said softly, still with him close against her:

— No, not like this. Not yet. I have a coil, so you don't need to worry.

Then she noticed clearly how he relaxed. She smiled and felt something between them genuinely release, as though a barrier he had carried for a long time had finally collapsed, silently.

Now a wild time began for both Elias and Lovisa. He was completely captivated by the thrill of novelty, of finally daring to let go and open up to her physically, whilst she felt how Elias had at last opened up entirely, both physically and emotionally.

Her naturally strong libido found free expression, and she threw herself at him like a tigress, hungry and impatient. At the same time Elias was completely relaxed in her company, caressing her in return and often taking the initiative himself, almost playfully, as though their desire had its own rhythm.

And every time she was satisfied. Elias was not finished until she was. His calm presence and attentive hands ensured that her intensity was always met with equal care and presence, so that she felt seen, desired, and completely satisfied.

The only thing missing now was a ring on her finger, but she was ready to wait for that for several years if it came to it. She convinced herself it was only a matter of time.

Soon...



Several months passed without their passion for each other diminishing or turning into a habit. Lovisa's friends, and even her parents, were struck by how much calmer she had become, without her former mood swings, and above all, considerably more predictable. It was a thoroughly welcome improvement. At the same time, Elias became significantly more spontaneous and could come up with things for them to do on his own. No one could doubt that they were drawing ever closer to each other.

But one morning Lovisa suddenly felt a strange dizziness and nausea came over her. It passed quickly. When it happened again, almost every morning, she began to worry. *Can it really have happened? Impossible!* Everything she thought she had under control fell apart. On a Friday she bought a pregnancy test at lunch. Then she sat on the toilet at work and held her breath, staring at the stick, feeling her

heart race as two lines slowly showed that the result was indeed positive.

Lovisa had very mixed feelings. It was completely wonderful that she was pregnant, of course, but at the same time she was not quite ready yet. And Elias, how would he react? This would definitely be an enormous change for them both, and she already knew how difficult he found change. On top of that, her father would not be pleased, and would insist they get married. She struggled to focus for the rest of the day, turning over in her mind how to tell Elias so that he would not react too strongly.

When she got home, Elias did not meet her at the door as he always did. Instead he was pacing back and forth in the living room. Lovisa saw at once that he was already in a state of panic. *How can he know?* she thought.

— Elias darling. You look terrible. What's happened today?

— It... it's the social. There's a new manager there now, John, who clashed badly with me in a meeting. He... he seemed angry with me. Going on about my fee being too high, sort of thing. He wanted me to stand up in front of everyone to "explain why I was better than everyone else," as he put it. I didn't want to, of course, so when he became threatening... at least it felt that way... I just walked out. Th... then he rang loads of times and sent messages and... and... he's terminating the contract... and... and I'm not allowed to look after any children either, and... and...

Lovisa wrapped her arms round him and he gratefully accepted the hug. She felt how tense he was and realised this was not the moment to add to his burden by telling him she was probably pregnant.

— Elias darling. Calm down, it's not the end of the world. I'm here and we'll sort it out together. Do you mean you've actually spoken to this John on the phone?

— No, you know I can't do that. That's another thing he had a go at me about in his texts, that I hadn't answered the phone.

— He has absolutely no right to carry on like that. You need to contact the union, because this seems completely wrong. You are a member, aren't you?

— Yes, I'm with the Prospect Union, but I don't know how to contact them. I can't ring them, and... and...

Lovisa pushed her own anxiety aside. She helped Elias over to the sofa and then picked up her phone and looked up the number for the Prospect Union. After various transfers she got through to the right person and explained what had happened. But when they found out Elias was an emergency foster carer and not an employee, they explained they could not help him. Lovisa then rang Elizabeth instead, an employment solicitor she had met previously through the union.

— Hello, Elizabeth. I don't know if you remember me, but we met last year. My name is Lovisa Lawson, and I work at Willow Tree Nursery.

— Hello, Lovisa. Yes, I do actually remember you. You had a great many questions at a meeting, if I recall. How can I help you today?

— It's not me who needs help; it's my boyfriend Elias, who works as an emergency foster carer for Children's Social Care. He's come into conflict with a manager who's threatening to terminate his contract, reclaim his fee, and goodness knows what else, because he didn't speak at a meeting or on the phone. Unfortunately, Elias isn't employed, so he can't get help from a union.

— This is, unfortunately, a problem that can arise when one lacks a formal employment contract, Elizabeth said. That's also why the union cannot represent him. However, as I no longer work for the union, I can take him on as a private client and ensure his rights are protected. There will, unfortunately, be a fee. My rate is £220 per hour.

Lovisa had had the phone on speaker throughout, so she looked at Elias, who nodded.

— That's fine for him. How do we proceed?

— My recommendation is that, as long as this remains at the level of statements from the contracting party, he tries to weather the situation, particularly given the costs that might otherwise arise. I would therefore suggest the following: if he is called to a formal meeting concerning his contract, or if they take similar steps, you can contact me again, and we will arrange a meeting at that point. In the meantime, you can ask Elias to gather and prepare all documentation related to

what has occurred, including any text messages and, if possible, transcripts of telephone calls. His contract is also of great importance. Does that seem a reasonable way forward for you?

— That sounds excellent, Elizabeth, Lovisa said, after glancing at Elias. With any luck, it will all blow over on its own.

Elias sat for a long time holding Lovisa before he slowly began to calm down. She decided to be completely certain of her pregnancy before telling him. So over the weekend, she bought another test of a different brand, which, to her dismay, also gave a positive result. On Monday, she rang the GP surgery to book an appointment with a midwife and was given a slot on Wednesday.

When she got home from work on Wednesday, via the GP surgery, Elias did not meet her at the door again. She called into the house:

— Hello, Elias darling. I'm home now. Sorry, I'm late, but you have to hear this! It's big news, important news, and it's going to change **everything!**

She stopped short when she saw Elias sitting on the sofa in the living room, panic on his face again. He pointed at the table with a trembling finger. On the table lay an opened envelope and some papers. Lovisa sat down beside him, put one arm round his shoulders, and examined the papers. One was a formal written warning with a threat to reclaim the fee

already paid. The other was a summons to a meeting with the manager on Friday at two o'clock.

— Calm down, Elias darling. I'm ringing Elizabeth here and now. She can go with you on Friday.

— It... it says I have to come alone.

— Let Elizabeth deal with that.

Lovisa rang Elizabeth and they agreed that Elias would come to her office at one o'clock on Friday, and then they would go together to see John. Elias slowly began to calm down, but was still filled with anxiety.

— Thank you, darling. I... I don't like conflict or problems I can't solve myself.

— I understand, Elias darling. I'm here, and I'm not going anywhere. We'll sort this out. Do you want me to come to the meeting on Friday?

— It feels embarrassing. I'm still in a panic about the meeting, but you're probably right. I'll go myself. Well, with Elizabeth, of course.

Elias slowly began to regain control of his breathing. Lovisa kept holding him and he let her warmth settle him. Then he remembered something and asked:

— Didn't you say when you came in that you had big news to tell me?

— Yes, but that can wait. You're more important to me.

— But you said it was important. If it's important to you, then it's important to me. You know that.

— All right, then, I'll tell you. You should know, Elias darling, that what I have to tell you is actually good news, though a little unexpected. The thing is, darling, that I've just had it confirmed that I'm pregnant.

— What? Impossible. You have a coil! Are you sure it's not a false positive?

— I thought so too, at first, on Friday. So I took another test over the weekend, which was also positive, and I saw a midwife today. It's confirmed now. I even got to hear the foetus's heartbeat, so there's no doubt any more. They removed my coil so as not to risk harming the foetus. What's wrong, Elias, what on earth...

Elias had gone chalk-white and began to hyperventilate. Lovisa was terrified when it looked as though he could not get air.

— Breathe, Elias. Breathe calmly! You're frightening me! Come here, my darling, take it easy. This is not the end of the world! It's even good news, in a way.

Elias began to breathe in short bursts, a little more slowly, but was still in a state of panic. Lovisa watched him struggling to hold himself together, but she needed to know whether she was facing this alone.

— Just answer me first, Elias. What do you want? Shall I have an abortion?

— The... ans... answer to th... that is obv... obvious. Your body... your choice.

Lovisa was completely taken aback. Elias looked as though his entire world had collapsed, and was in total panic. And yet he had answered with extraordinary maturity, perhaps entirely against his own wishes.

— Wow, what an incredible answer. I love you so infinitely for that. But can you tell me what you **want**, regardless of what you think I want?

Elias took a few deep breaths to gather himself for an answer. Lovisa waited him out.

— The thing is, I think the best outcome for me would be for you to have the baby, even though I know it's difficult, and then leave the child and me so I can bring it up on my own.

Lovisa was completely shocked by the answer. How on earth could he reason like that? She felt rage building inside her, but understood all the same that there must be some logical explanation behind his answer that she was missing. She controlled her voice when she replied.

— Why do you say that, darling? It's **our** child.

— The thing is, I understand that. But I don't believe in **us**. If we carry on like this, we'll start arguing sooner or later. Then it will get worse and worse, and the child will suffer, caught between us. You know very well that I've seen exactly that countless times in my work. In the end, you'll leave me, and the child will be miserable. I want children, but I don't want a child to have parents who can't stand each other and split up. It always goes badly for the child.

Lovisa saw how his hands were shaking violently and realised he was genuinely in shock. She took hold of his hands to steady them.

— But why on earth don't you believe in **us**, Elias? I do, and I would never leave you.

— Surely you must see it, though? I can't see how it's possible for a perfect ten like you to put up with a weak two like me in the long run. It's completely illogical.

— What on earth are you saying, darling? You're not a weak two! And I don't see myself as a ten either, more like a mediocre average at best. We clearly need to talk now about what we think of each other, to clear the air.

Elias made an effort to pull himself together and understand what Lovisa wanted.

— How... how do we do that?

— First, you can tell me why you think I'm so perfect!

Elias was surprised, but answered quickly all the same.

— For a start, you're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen.

— Hold on... beautiful? With my body, how can you think I'm beautiful with all my flaws?

— I don't know... you just are...

— Help me understand. What's the first thing you look at when you check out other women, because you do? Remember, straight lines and no filter.

Elias took a few deep breaths and managed, despite everything, to focus on the task, and began speaking reasonably calmly.

— The first thing I notice is the hair. I like it when it's a bit different, and brown is the most common. Black hair, really black, almost with a blue sheen, is lovely, but that's becoming increasingly common, too. I have absolutely nothing against immigrants, not that it even needs saying. Anyway. Blonde hair is lovely as well, but there are all those stereotypes about blondes. If it's not to be dyed, that really only leaves red hair, and you know I prefer what's natural. Your hair is so intensely red, and long and wavy on top of that. It's completely extraordinary.

— To think I hate my hair. Bad colour and frizzy.

— Absolutely not. Then there's the face. Everything sits in perfect balance: the eyes neither too close together nor too far apart, the mouth a good width, lovely cheekbones, a defined chin. Yes, everything is balanced and wonderful.

— Apart from my skin, which is all blotchy. You can't claim you haven't noticed.

— Yes, I have. It reminds me of a girl with freckles running across a summer meadow. I know it's psoriasis, but it makes no difference to me. It looks good all the same.

He shrugged slightly, as though the matter were self-evident. Lovisa was completely overwhelmed by his words.

— Everything else is perfectly proportioned. You're slim without being skinny. You have a fantastic bum that I love

watching when you rush ahead of me, and a defined waist as well. Everything is natural. A clear ten.

Lovisa shook her head.

— But what about my breasts? I'm so self-conscious about them being too small. I've actually seriously considered having them made bigger.

Elias looked almost offended.

— What, are you mad? Do you really think I want to hug silicone bags? Large breasts might be considered attractive, but if they're natural, they sag. Small ones don't. Yours are perfect, both in shape and size.

— Wow, you genuinely mean you like how I look. I can't quite believe it. But what about my temper? Am I not too fiery for you, really?

— Yes. You're fiery. Spontaneous. And yes, I've had a certain amount of trouble with that at times.

He paused, as though adjusting his reasoning.

— But you've also rubbed off on me. And I like that. Above all, you just... get people. I've never met anyone as considerate and as understanding as you. And you're the first woman who has ever truly understood me. Wait a moment...

He fell silent mid-sentence and stared intently at his hands, as though seeing them for the first time.

— Carry on, Elias darling.

— This. This is exactly what I mean. Look at my hands! A moment ago, they were shaking, but now they're completely

steady. This is exactly what you do to me. You make me relax regardless of what's happening round me.

Lovisa nodded slowly.

— Right, I think I'm beginning to understand how you see me. I suppose it's time for you to explain why you think you're a weak two, when I think you're a ten.

— The thing is, there's so much. Just the way I get wound up by any change. Small things as well, not just big ones. Like when plans change, or when something doesn't go as I expected. And work... the whole situation there. The fact that I avoid conflict and so let things go on for too long.

He drew breath, as though the list were actually longer than he cared to admit.

— And my inability to say that I love you. Or even to look you in the eye when it's something important. Your eyes are extraordinary, by the way. I'm hopeless at all social interaction, full stop. Small talk, groups, all of that. The phone is the worst. I just can't manage it.

He touched his fingers, sorting them almost methodically.

— Then there are all my peculiar routines. The way things have to be. And how I get stressed when you move my things, even when it's perfectly reasonable and I actually understand that. It just... grates.

He shrugged.

— I can carry on with the rest as well. But isn't that enough to explain why I'm a weak two?

— Hmm, I see. Do you know what, Elias darling... I think I need to file a complaint with EHRC.

— The Equality and Human Rights Commission? Why?

— Because you're discriminating against yourself! Everything you're bringing up is about the fact that you have ASD, isn't it? I know you have ASD, and I love you for it.

She took a deep breath, almost as though steadying herself.

— Like how you've given me routines as well, the fact that you have such order and structure. Your conflict avoidance made you mediate between me and my mother. Then you rarely get irritated, and if you do you don't show it outwardly but deal with it internally. You can focus on what truly matters, like when you're caring for children, and completely disregard things that don't matter in the moment.

She continued without pausing, almost with a laugh in her voice.

— Then your fanatical insistence that everything must be in order and in the right place has made me adapt in a way that means I can now find all my things without searching. And finally, your extraordinary ability to separate the action from the person, like when you were angry about what I'd done but were still kind to me. All of this is **because** you have ASD.

— Wow, I've never looked at it that way.

— Elias darling. Stop thinking that your ASD makes you worth less. You're simply different, and yes, just like

everyone else, you have good sides and bad sides. But your good sides... they're something like a thousand times stronger, and they mean everything to me. The few bad things? I barely give them a second thought. You're also good-looking and a wonderful lover. So I genuinely don't understand what you're worried about, dear Elias.

— Good-looking? I'm not that. What I'm worried about is that some hunk with a six-pack, a V-shaped chest, big muscles, and a face like Adonis will come along and sweep you off your feet with romance and sweet nothings, and then you'll forget me.

— Do you know what? Elias darling. I've already met him. He's so incredibly manly and handsome and romantic that my knees go weak.

— You can't seriously be talking about me.

— No, his name is Hank, and he's my ex. But there was a downside. When I wanted to snuggle up with him on the sofa like this and lay my head on his stomach, it was like lying on a brick wall, rock solid. And when he hugged me, it was like being hugged by tree branches. He also always hugged me hard, to show how strong he was. It hurt. He also loved to wander round the house with his top off, flexing his muscles in front of me.

— Did he really?

— Yep, and then I had to say how sexy he was, otherwise he'd get angry. When I wanted to cuddle, he didn't have time. I think he was more in love with the gym than with me,

because he always wanted to go there to pump iron. He'd say "these don't come for free, baby", and flex his biceps. But he was so handsome, and I was so in love that I put up with it.

— So why did you break up?

— Well, I started talking about us having children together. He stood up in front of me, ripped off his T-shirt, flexed his muscles, and said:

"You definitely want more of these genes. But forget about me wiping snotty little brats' noses, because looking after children is women's work."

— That sounds completely warped.

— Exactly. When I protested, he carried on, just as coldly:

"You should be grateful I want you. On your own, you're just a flat-chested, skinny bloody witch with blotchy skin and fire in your hair."

Elias gasped.

— He said exactly that.

— God, that's a horrible thing to say, especially when you've said you're self-conscious about your breasts, your psoriasis, and your hair colour?

— He made me so sad, and he'd get angry the moment I brought up children. And when he got angry, he said things he knew would hurt me, deliberately. He never hurt me physically, but the words he said... oh God, how much they hurt.

— I would never want to hurt you like that.

— That’s exactly my point. When I then held firm about having children and told him he’d need to be involved, because children need a father too, he said: “If you don't like it, don't let the door hit you on the way out”. So I didn't wait for the door to hit me. So, Elias darling, I’ve met my hunk, I fell for him, and I rejected him. You’re his exact opposite, and that’s why I love you.

Elias was silent for a long while. Lovisa decided to give him time, understanding that what had just happened was overwhelming for him. Eventually, he said:

— Do you know what, my darling Lovisa? I now understand two things. The first is that you’ve given my self-esteem a real boost, and perhaps I’ve given yours one too.

— Yes, I promise you have. Beautiful... wow!

— The second is that it doesn’t matter whether I think I’m a weak two, or completely worthless, or whether you think you’re mediocre or utterly hopeless. That doesn’t affect **us**. The only thing that matters for whether we’ll want to stay with each other is what **I** think of **you**, and what **you** think of **me**. Since we apparently both see the other as a ten, I’m beginning to believe in **us** now. But you still can’t claim I’m particularly good-looking.

— Well, you have a nice face, lovely glasses. And you keep in shape, without being excessively bulky. But I’m still struggling to take in the fact that you think I’m beautiful.

— Well... when I saw you in the shop, I lost my breath. I thought you were so beautiful. At McDonald’s, I was mostly

terrified of you, but you were just as... breathtakingly beautiful then, too. Your smile is hard to defend oneself against. When you then didn't get in touch, I hoped at first that you'd realised I wasn't interested. It seemed simpler that way. At the same time I couldn't stop thinking about whether you might be the answer to my wish for a relationship.

— Yes, you had tried to date before, after all.

— Mm, so... part of me was relieved when you turned up again. And now I know that your personality is extraordinary. You've already changed me, more than I thought possible. After this conversation, I actually think we suit each other. Not in everything. But in what matters.

— Elias darling, you can't imagine how long I've been waiting to hear you say that. So what does all this mean for the baby?

— I suppose it means we're going to become a mother and father together, and make a child very happy. It's just that...

Elias fell silent again and grew serious.

— What is it, Elias darling, Lovisa asked after a moment.

— Well... the thing is, there's still the problem with my job.

— Not at all. Your job is not a problem, because we'll sort it out together. You and me! We can manage anything we set our minds to. Is the job the only thing you're worried about? Aren't you worried about becoming a father?

— That part doesn't worry me in the slightest. Well, I'm a little curious. Will it be a boy or a girl? Will it have colic? But worried? Not in the slightest.

— Wow, this is why I love you so madly. I'm absolutely terrified of becoming a mother myself. Will I be able to cope? What happens if, say, I come home from work completely exhausted, and our baby won't sleep? How will I handle that?

— That's simple, Lovisa. You put earplugs in and go to bed. I'll take care of the baby at night and calm it down. If I can't manage it, I'll just have to take the pram and walk round outside all night so you can sleep in peace.

— Wow, triple wow. You genuinely mean that, and I believe you. You're incredible! It really doesn't seem as though there's anything at all for me to worry about.

— Well, there is one thing. You should worry about not getting any time of your own with your child, because I'll always want to look after it. But I suppose we'll have to draw up a schedule.

— Right, I'm taking maternity leave first at any rate. You can go to work for at least six months while I look after the baby.

— Then we'll start arguing again, because the baby is mine and mine alone. Forget about it coming from your womb. I'm going to want to look after my child every single day and every single night. You're welcome to watch if you like.

Elias smiled broadly, a rare sight. It was obvious he was joking. Lovisa could not help laughing, and Elias joined in. But she noticed something else as well.

— You're laughing, but I know you're nervous about Friday, she said quietly.

Elias blinked, shrugged, and tried to carry on smiling.

— Nervous? Maybe a little...

Lovisa nodded, as though she had heard it a thousand times before, but was not fooled. And Elias knew she was right. The thoughts of the solicitor, the letter, and the meeting sat in his stomach like a heavy stone. Friday. Suddenly, it was very hard to feel truly calm, no matter how hard he tried.



18



Lovisa came home on Friday with careful steps. Even Elias noticed that she seemed to want something. She hesitated, knowing the day had been hard for him.

— Elias darling... I'd like to ask you something. But first... how are you feeling? Are you calm, or still worried?

— Right now I'm completely calm, Lovisa darling.

— Wonderful. Do you think we could go to my parents'... like, now? It's three hours in the car, so you'll have time to tell me everything. I want to hear absolutely all of it.

— Why do you want to go to your parents' now?

— Because I really want to tell them in person. That I'm pregnant.

— I assumed you'd already told them, by phone.

— No, I want to say something like that face to face. I know it's a bit sudden... but please...

Elias turned his back on her without a word and walked into the bedroom with jerky steps, as though irritated that his plans had been upended.

— Are you cross, darling? We don't have to go if you don't want to.

— No... no, I'm not cross. But if we go now we'll almost certainly be staying the night, so we'll need to pack some clothes and things, won't we?

Lovisa was surprised but pleased, and helped to pack for a few days. Soon they were in the car with Elias driving.

— So, Elias darling, what happened at the social services?

— Shouldn't you ring your mum and let her know we're coming? What if they have other plans for the weekend?

— You're right as usual. I'll ring, but I don't want to say why.

— Just say you have some news you want to share.

Lovisa rang her mother.

— Hi, Mum, it's Lovisa. I was just wondering whether you've got anything on this weekend?

— No, nothing at all. Why?

— Elias and I are in the car on our way to you now. Something important has happened and we want to tell you in person.

— Oh, is it serious?

— We'll go through it when we get there. See you soon, Mum!

— Of course, you're always welcome!

Lovisa hung up and turned back to Elias.

— There we go, darling. I've rung. So, tell me everything about today. How did the meeting at work go?

— They pulled my contract, Elias said calmly.

— What? Pulled your contract? But Elizabeth was there! How are you so calm? I'd have hit the roof!

— Well... technically, I terminated my emergency foster care contract myself, but I felt I had no choice. Perhaps I should start from the beginning?

— Absolutely! I'm all ears, I promise!

Elias took a deep breath and began telling the whole story from the start as the car rolled on.



At one o'clock, Elias sat in Elizabeth's office. She sat up straight and worked methodically through every document and letter Elias had brought with him. She nodded approvingly at how carefully he had organised everything, and asked precise questions to get the full picture. Once she had the information she needed, she asked him to step

outside for a moment while she made some calls. Then they drove to the Social Services office.

When they arrived at reception, Nadia, the local union branch chair, was waiting for them. She showed them to John's office, and Elias knocked nervously; he was supposed to come alone, but now there were three of them. John extended his hand towards him. Elias ignored it, as usual.

— I thought I'd been clear that you were to come here alone, John said, irritated.

Elizabeth stepped forward immediately and took control of the situation.

— That's noted. It's also irrelevant. He has the right to representation, which is why I'm here.

She took John's outstretched hand, but released it quickly.

— Elizabeth Shaw, solicitor. I represent Elias. What you are attempting here amounts to a disciplinary procedure in all but name, and if that is the case, proper procedure applies. The union should have been notified, and the correct process followed. That has not happened here. That is why I asked the chair of the local union branch to attend.

John stood there, visibly caught off guard and speechless. They went into the room and Nadia fetched an extra chair. Once everyone was seated, Elizabeth produced her papers, laid them methodically in three piles on the table, and tapped lightly on the first.

— Text messages and calls. This is fundamentally a question of communication. You have not had the right to use the language or the approach evident in your calls and text messages. Furthermore, there is no contractual obligation for a contractor to answer the phone or respond to texts, particularly when contact is made via a personal mobile.

John tried to say something, but was cut off.

— I am speaking now. You will listen.

Elizabeth tapped on the second pile.

— Emergency foster care contract, letter regarding fee adjustment, and demands for constant availability. A contractor does not have the same obligations as an employee, and fees and terms set out in the contract cannot be altered unilaterally. These terms may be unusual, but they are valid and binding, and you cannot simply disregard them or demand repayment.

Elias sat quietly, marvelling at the torrent of words. *She's not holding anything back*, he thought. He relaxed and simply enjoyed watching John's discomfort. Elizabeth tapped on the final pile.

— Warning and reclaim of fees. You assert there are grounds to reclaim the fee and issue a formal written warning. All of this on the basis of poor communication and difficulties with cooperation. John, let me be clear: a formal warning issued to someone who is not an employee is completely meaningless, particularly as HR was not even

consulted. And the problems you claim, those of communication and cooperation, do not exist. None of it exists.

John opened his mouth again, but closed it when he met Elizabeth's gaze.

— I have spoken with every caseworker who has worked with Elias. Not one of them has reported any difficulties in cooperating with him. On the contrary, he has been described as unusually easy to work with. Several use the nickname "MiracEli" because he performs miracles. Against that background, there is no factual basis whatsoever for your assessment. If any difficulties with cooperation exist in this context, it is hard to see how they could be attributed to anyone other than yourself.

When Elizabeth was finally done, she leaned back. She demanded that John humbly apologise to Elias. If he refused, the matter would be formally escalated to the head of social services and documented with the authority, with legal support. John refused.

They stood up and walked out of the room.

Elizabeth disappeared down the corridor and came back with a man Nadia said was Claes, the head of social services. He went in to John and closed the door behind him. It became rather loud inside, but the three waiting outside could make out no words.

— Now we wait here for a bit, said Elizabeth, with a smile.

The door soon opened again, and Claes came out. His parting words to John were heavy with consequence.

— You know what's required: produce an apology, or start packing your things.

Claes turned to Elias.

— I apologise on behalf of this department. This has not been handled in accordance with our procedures. I want you to know that we take the situation extremely seriously. Might I ask for a little extra time for John to formulate his response?

— Fifteen minutes from now, Elizabeth said firmly.

— I'm grateful for that.

Claes nodded to them and withdrew. After only five minutes, they were called back in to John. He looked tightly wound as he said:

— I've been informed that I've acted incorrectly, so I apologise.

— That sounds pathetic, Elizabeth said drily. Do you accept his apology, Elias?

Elias shrugged and simply nodded.

John placed a sheet of paper in front of him on the table. Elias pushed it across to Elizabeth without looking at it.

— Regardless of everything, I hope you can see that this situation isn't working. If you voluntarily terminate the contract today, you'll receive this month's fee plus two extra months as a settlement. It's all in that document.

— This is completely unreasonable, said Elizabeth. Elias has done nothing to justify this and can perfectly well continue as before. The caseworkers have, as I said, no issues with him.

John produced another sheet of paper. Elias pushed it across to Elizabeth again without raising his eyes.

— Let me make it more attractive, said John, in a strained tone. Under this agreement, you receive three months' additional fee, and everything currently in your possession passes to you. That might include, for example, clothing, changing tables, child car seats, and toys. These items may, in my estimation, prove fraught with considerable value.

— I see nothing here that makes any sense. Elias, there is no reason to sign any agreement. Your placement is entirely secure, Elizabeth said.

Then John took the document and crossed out “three,” writing “four” in biro instead, on both copies. For the first time Elias opened his mouth, turning to Elizabeth.

— Is it legally binding when he alters it like that to four months' compensation in biro?

— Yes, with ink and both parties' signatures the amendment becomes valid, particularly as he has initialled the change. But let me be clear. I still recommend you do not sign. This agreement is nothing more than a piece of paper from a hostile manager. It may be formally valid, but it is completely pointless. You can and should ignore it, Elizabeth said drily.

Elias read carefully through the entire agreement. Elizabeth continued to object, but he registered her words only as sound at the edge of his attention. He studied each clause in turn, exactly as they were set out.

Then, to everyone's astonishment, he reached for a pen and signed. The room fell dead silent. Even Elizabeth said nothing. Elias broke the silence with a cool certainty that made John lose his footing entirely.

— I'm signing because I have no wish to work for a manager as obtuse as you. You take the children away from me as punishment for not answering the phone and issue warnings as though I were an employee. Yesterday I sent enquiries to several neighbouring councils. This morning, I met with one of them and received a concrete agreement. The others also wanted to meet with me, and two have already sent over their contracts. On Monday, I begin working for a manager who actually has a brain. The only thing I regret... is that I won't get to see Claes's face when he realises you've paid far in excess of £20,000 just to lose your best carer.

Elias rose on surprisingly steady legs and walked out with Elizabeth, without giving John a single glance. Out by the cars, he turned to her.

— I apologise for signing the agreement against your recommendation.

— You don't need to apologise. What matters is that you're satisfied with the outcome and with my work, Elizabeth said.

— I genuinely am. Thank you for your help.



He kept his eyes on the road, a faint smile still lingering from the memory. But underneath it, a quiet unease remained. Lovisa nodded at him from the passenger seat.

— What did you mean by £20,000?

— I can get about £1,300–£1,500 per child per month, he said. I almost always have two or three children, and they're high-needs, so there's an additional allowance on top of that. If you add it all up over five months, it comes to well over £20,000.

— Goodness... and you worked that out on the spot?

— Yes, just a bit of mental arithmetic. I hope Elizabeth understood that I'm grateful to her. It was thanks to her that I got such a generous offer.

— I'm sure Elizabeth understood.

— I've also already contacted Intetra IT about going back to full-time hours, and I'm meeting them on Monday. There'll probably be considerably fewer children in future, but that suits me well. In less than nine months, I'll have my own little angel to look after, so I won't need the therapy of taking children from social care any more.

— Goodness, so you no longer have any conflict with social services, and you still have more than enough work. I understand better now why you're so calm despite everything.

— Yep. It's a little nerve-racking to change contractors, but with you at my side, I'll manage it easily. I've just thought of something, by the way.

— What is it, my dear Elias?

— We could have a bit of fun with your mum. When we arrive, she'll probably ask what's so important that we've driven all this way tonight. You take your time answering, and I just slip in something like "I've lost my job" as though that's the news. Then I tell her what happened, but pretend to let slip and call her "Grandma." Then we wait and see how she reacts.

Lovisa laughed happily. *Oh God, look how much my darling has changed*, she thought. *All that's missing now is a ring on my finger, but there'll be time for that too*. She realised she would probably have to propose herself in the end. But she intended to wait at least a year and ignore her father's inevitable demand that they marry before the baby arrived.

After several hours, they arrived and went inside. Both kept straight faces, and sure enough, Karin soon asked what was so important. Elias jumped in and told her animatedly that he had been forced to leave Children's Social Care. Karin and Kenneth were shocked, and Elias ran through the whole

story again in a shorter version. When he was done, Karin asked whether they would like some coffee.

— I'm not terribly keen on coffee, Ka... gran, Elias said. Especially not this late in the day, but perhaps a cup of tea?

Karin put the kettle on and soon returned with tea and a plate of biscuits.

— Thank you very much, Grandma. That's very kind.

— Would you like sugar or milk in your tea?

— No, thank you, Grandma. It'll be perfect as it is.

— I assume you'll be staying the night?

— If that's all right, Grandma. It's a bit late to drive home now.

Karin looked at Elias, smiled, and then said:

— I've noticed something about you, Elias, that I find rather amusing. Sometimes you can't quite find the right word, and the wrong one comes out instead. It doesn't matter in the slightest, but it can be quite funny. Like this evening, when you've kept calling me "Grandma." Don't be upset now, I just mean it kindly.

— Not to worry. I have no objection to people laughing at my little slips, like when I can't find the right word. However, that isn't what's been happening this evening, Grandma.

— Hold on, what do you mean? I'm not actually a grandma, am I?

— Are you quite sure about that, Grandma?

— Well... I only have one daughter, and she doesn't have any children!

— Do you really think we'd drive all this way just to tell you I've switched fostering council?

Karin stared at Elias in confusion for several seconds before her expression changed. She turned to her daughter.

— Just a moment! Lovisa, darling... are you pregnant?

— Ding ding, the penny's dropped! said Lovisa, laughing.

Karin stood up and went to Lovisa and hugged her happily.

— This is absolutely wonderful news, isn't it?

Karin glanced over at Kenneth, who sat with his arms crossed and did not look entirely pleased. Elias recalled that Kenneth had turned out to be quite strictly religious.

— I want to be very clear, said Elias. This baby is unexpected, unplanned, and unforeseen, but it is in no way unwanted. The child will understand that from day one. Lovisa said on the very first day we met that she wanted to marry me and start a family with me, in that order, and I was entirely on board with that plan. It just hasn't quite worked out that way.

— Yes, said Kenneth, it is, of course, wonderful to be getting a grandchild. But you really ought to get married now, rather than living in sin as so many people do these days.

— The most important thing right now is what is best for our child, Elias continued, to Lovisa's surprise. We need to give it a safe and stable home environment. Marriage can provide that, but there are other options, such as drawing up

a cohabitation agreement. We haven't had a chance to discuss the matter yet, so it's difficult to know what's right for us, but I want, in fact, I actually insist, that we must prioritise what is right for the child, even if that's uncomfortable for us as parents.

— Dad, I hope you understand that I agree with Elias completely. Our focus must be on our child, not on your beliefs.

Kenneth nodded slowly.

— I understand that. And I agree with much of what you're saying. At the same time, one doesn't have to exclude the other. As I understand it, Elias, you've previously been uncertain about whether you truly wanted this. By marrying the mother of your future child, you show clearly that you're here for Lovisa, for life.

Lovisa grew angry and was about to defend Elias, but was not quick enough.

— The fact is, you're right that I didn't believe in us, but that's no longer the case. When Lovisa told me she was pregnant, I went into genuine shock. I didn't believe in **us**, because she is so perfect and I am so inadequate. But then, Lovisa, you forced me to have the most difficult conversation I've ever had, and it ended with me finally understanding **us**. You calmed me down, Lovisa, because you understand me better than anyone. That's why you're so perfect for me. When I ran into trouble at work, you supported me

brilliantly, and during the incident with the police, you helped me decompress and return to reality.

— “The incident with the police?” asked Kenneth. What’s that about?

— I’d be grateful if I could finish while I still have the courage, Elias said, without turning towards Kenneth. Lovisa, darling, you are the best thing that has ever happened to me. I am transparent to you, and you are the first woman who has ever truly understood me. You are my perfect ten, and so, darling...

Lovisa gasped as Elias went down on one knee in front of her and produced a small box, which he opened to reveal the ring.

— Lovisa Emilia Lawson. I want to spend the rest of my life making you happy. Will you make me the happiest man on earth? Will you marry me?

For the first time, Lovisa was lost for words. She simply stared at Elias in astonishment, until he finally said:

— Please don’t leave me hanging here. My knees are hurting.

— Yes, Elias darling. The answer is yes. I’ll marry you! Come here, you big, romantic lunatic!

Elias stood up, and Lovisa threw herself into his arms and kissed him deeply. Both Karin and Kenneth sat watching with delight. Lovisa had no wish to let go of her future husband, and Elias was equally engaged. When they finally released each other and settled on the sofa, Lovisa made eye

contact with Elias, and to her delight, he did not look away this time.

After a moment, Kenneth spoke.

— This is an excellent decision, Elias. I am so pleased that you are ready to marry my daughter. You have my full support.

Lovisa tore her eyes from Elias and looked at her father. Then back to Elias. Then suddenly she said:

— Elias, could I have a quick word with you in private?

He was surprised, but followed Lovisa to her room, where she closed the door.

— Elias darling, I'm absolutely delighted that you proposed to me. I just want to make sure it's for the right reason.

— What do you mean, darling?

— It just feels like a bit too much of a coincidence that Dad was going on about us needing to get married, and then suddenly you propose. Are you sure you're not just trying to keep Dad happy?

— Having happy in-laws matters, but what's on your left ring finger right now?

— An engagement ring, obviously.

— Where did it come from? Has your father given it to me? How could he possibly have known he needed to get a ring before we arrived? And another thing: does the ring fit?

— It fits perfectly. How is that possible?

— Do you remember a while back when you were polishing your jewellery, and I was playing with your rings? I tried different rings on different fingers. What I was actually doing was measuring your ring finger.

— Wait, that was well over a month ago. Have you been planning to propose for that long?

— Yep, and actually longer than that. I'd already had my eye on a ring in a shop for some time. After what happened on Wednesday, every last trace of my doubt about this disappeared. So I bought the ring yesterday and decided to propose this weekend. I already knew where. A romantic spot in the woods, you know the one. When you disrupted my plans I brought the ring along and decided to find a romantic spot up here instead. Then your father started talking, and I just thought: "now is as good a time as any," and, well...

Lovisa kissed him again and he returned the kiss, looking intently into her eyes.

— Wow. I'm sorry I doubted you for a moment.

— You're spontaneous and intense, but I've got used to it.

They went back to Lovisa's parents, who had been waiting anxiously.

— You're not falling out, I hope, said Karin.

— Not at all, smiled Elias. My fiancée just wanted to be sure of my honest intentions, in case I'd only proposed because Kenneth wanted me to.

— “My fiancée!” repeated Lovisa happily. Wow, how wonderful to hear that, my dear fiancé.

— Now, this is the situation, said Kenneth. I believe that children should always be born within the bonds of marriage, but I have absolutely no wish to force you into anything. But now that you’ve decided to marry, I have a suggestion. Why not get married at the parish church here in town, the same one we were married in? I can arrange everything. I know the vicar well.

— Now, this is the situation, Elias echoed. Since Lovisa and I have naturally not had time to discuss the details, nothing has been decided beyond the fact **that** we are getting married. But **when**, **where**, or **how** have not been decided yet. I do hope, however, that you can accept that the two of us have the final say. I am, and I can certainly speak for myself, open to wishes and suggestions, but ultimately these are our decisions. Isn’t that right, Lovisa darling?

— That’s right, Elias darling. You and I need to be in agreement.

— As for **how**, there are several alternatives to a church wedding. You can get married at a register office or at any number of approved venues, such as a hotel or even a converted barn. It could be a civil one, conducted by a registrar. It doesn’t have to be in a church or even be religious at all. We could even have a humanist ceremony if we wanted something more personal. And given my

particular challenges with ASD, it's important to find a way that I can get through without having a complete breakdown.

— Well... I understand that you have your needs. But do you have any thoughts on what will work for you?

— I already know I'll find the ceremony very difficult. Everyone will be looking at me and Lovisa. Even if the focus will naturally be on her, thanks to the fact that she will look absolutely stunning, I'll be standing next to her feeling dreadful. What I need is predictability. Someone who has done this before, many times. Someone who can explain in advance exactly what's going to happen. Then I can learn it by heart and feel calmer when I know what I need to do and when. That way Lovisa won't have to feel embarrassed on my behalf.

— So who might that be? wondered Karin. Perhaps a registrar from the council? They tend to conduct a great many ceremonies and know exactly how they go.

— Not quite. Someone with real experience. Who am I thinking of, Lovisa darling? You can see straight through me.

— Let me think, Elias darling... A vicar, is that it? They do this sort of thing all the time.

— There you are, Lovisa understands me so well. A vicar, yes. On the way home from the jeweller's I walked past the Cathedral, and I realised the parish office is right next door, so I went in. I got to speak with a vicar and asked whether one could get married in the Cathedral, and he said it was

quite common. So I booked an appointment for us with him on Thursday... if you'd like that, of course.

— Oh God... I've created a monster! Lovisa exclaimed.

— What do you mean by that? Karin asked. Elias is the very last thing from a monster!

— Not a real monster, Lovisa said quickly, laughing again. I mean he's actually arguing now. Properly. Before, Elias was always so cautious, always wanting to check absolutely everything with me before he decided anything. As though I were the only thing that mattered. Now not only has he decided we should play that joke on you about my pregnancy, he's also gone and got the ring, proposed, argued back at you quite firmly, Dad. And now he's already decided how and where we're getting married, and he's already booked a meeting. All of that before I'd even said "yes" yet. Don't misunderstand me, my dear Elias, I love this! And that you've chosen the Cathedral of all places is just extraordinary!

— Thank you, I suppose. But we still need to be in agreement.

— Of course. All right, Mum, Dad. We've now decided we're having a church wedding. It will be in our home city, and most likely in the Cathedral. It makes more sense for the guests to travel to the couple's home city than the other way round. Besides, I have more friends there than here.

— Of course, my darlings, said Karin. We have no trouble coming to you for the wedding.

— The only thing left is **when**, then, continued Elias, to Lovisa's delight. As I see it there are three main options: either we do it quite soon, before Lovisa's bump becomes too large for it to be plausible that she became pregnant on the wedding night; or round the middle of the pregnancy, before it becomes too unwieldy for you and physically difficult; or finally after the birth. With options two and three it will be obvious that she became pregnant before the wedding. So, what do you think, Kenneth? Even though the two of us have the final say, I imagine you have views you'd like to share, which we'd genuinely like to hear. Isn't that right, darling?

— Wow... and Elias just keeps going. Wonderful. Yes, what do you think, Dad? Not that I'm going to let it sway me.

— I do have views, rooted in my faith. I don't think anyone wants to rush a wedding, so option two feels the best. Looking back, it was not uncommon in rural communities for the bride to already be expecting when she walked into the church, and people would think: "That's not ideal, but now they're both doing the right thing and making an honest woman of her." That's not something many people would say today, of course. But it would mean a great deal to me if you were married before the birth, so that the child is born into a marriage and is not, as the phrase goes, born out of wedlock.

— As I said, Dad, I don't care about your old-fashioned ideas about marriage and children. But I do agree it would be best in three or four months' time, because I don't want to wait any longer, but I don't want to rush either. But what do

you yourself think, Elias darling? I want to know what you think, regardless of what the rest of us have said.

— Option one would have been very difficult. I need time to take it all in. Option three would also have been hard; a baby arrives and takes my complete focus. Option two works best: not too early, not too late. It's right for Lovisa, right for me, and right for everyone round us.

— So, darling, Dad, Mum. That's it, then: **that, when, where, and how.** We're getting married in the Cathedral, in three to five months' time, with a vicar. Haaa... haaa... right, done and dusted," Lovisa yawned out. We can sort out the details later.

— I think it might be time for bed, young people. You'll sleep in Lovisa's room, I assume? said Kenneth.

— Have you already forgotten my last visit? asked Elias. I struggle with physical contact and ended up sleeping on the floor.

— Oh, of course, no problem, you can have the guest room. I just assumed that... I mean, Lovisa is pregnant and so...

— Pregnancy, in principle, requires only a combination of sperm and egg. Physical contact beyond that is superfluous, said Elias drily.

— You're joking again, aren't you, Elias? said Karin. I can see Lovisa struggling to keep a straight face.

— I'll concede that. There are methods of becoming pregnant without physical contact, but hardly for it to

happen by accident, Elias continued, in a completely serious tone.

— You're extraordinarily good at taking the mickey without it showing on your face, Elias.

— Just one of his superpowers that come with ASD, Lovisa laughed.

— There will still be the issue of Lovisa kicking in her sleep, but I'm used to it by now and wouldn't have it any other way.

Elias and Lovisa walked hand in hand to Lovisa's room. Karin and Kenneth watched them go, quietly delighted. They had never seen them hold hands before. Now it was only a matter of time before they would have both a son-in-law and a grandchild.

Elias felt anxious about the wedding ceremony. Almost frightened, even. He was certain it would be extremely hard for him. At the same time, he understood it was necessary. It was the only way to be married to this wonderful woman. There was a warmth in that thought. Actually, being married to Lovisa.

But a small part of him gnawed away persistently. How on earth would he get through the ceremony itself, with all those eyes on him, all that commotion, and the total absence of control, without collapsing completely? Even when he tried to think it through logically, a cold shiver ran down his spine.

Something in him was bracing itself for things to go wrong. Terribly wrong.

★ ★ ★

19



KLAR PÅ SVENSKA– Jag tyckte du var underbar förra helgen, sa Lovisa när de satt i soffan på lördagsmorgonen. Som du körde över min pappa var helt otroligt!

– Jo, jag blev nog lite för mycket där. Kan det vara att en viss rödhårig tjej har smittat av sig?

– Det stämmer nog, skrattade Lovisa. Men nu borde vi börja planera för bröllopet, inte sant? Du gjorde ju helt klart för pappa och mamma att det är vi två som bestämmer allt.

– Korrekt, men samtidigt bör vi kolla ifall de har några önskemål, och ta hänsyn till dem.

– Får jag föreslå att vi bjuder hit dem någon helg för att diskutera vad de har för förslag?

– Hm, jag gillar verkligen inte tanken på gäster, men nu har jag fastnat för en underbar tjej som är utåtriktad, så jag får bara gilla läget. Inte så svårt med dig i närheten.

– Stämmer nog, men först måste vi själva vara överens om vad vi vill. Kommer du ihåg samtalet med prästen i torsdags, om vad vi bör göra först?

– Jodå, den *andra* prästen. Kommer du ihåg den första, unga och arroganta prästen? När jag försökte förklara att jag behöver extra hjälp under ceremonin och blev hon bara aggressiv, i alla fall som jag kände det.

– Hon blev direkt respektlös mot dej, det håller jag med om. Sedan var det ju en ung kvinna, så det störde dej nog också.

– Alltså, jag har ingenting emot kvinnliga präster, eller kvinnliga något alls. Men du vet att jag lätt blir obekvämt med kvinnor. Som tur var hade jag dig med mig. När du tog min sida... din mun sprutade lava som om elden i ditt hår fick ett utbrott. Fast jag kunde inte låta bli att känna av värmen från dig, och älskar dig för det!

– Jodå, hon fick veta att hon levde, skrattade Lovisa. Det var kul när kyrkoherden kom in och undrade vad som hänt. Nåväl, han insåg att det skurit sig mellan oss, och hämtade den där äldre prästen som var super.

– Det var han verkligen. Han insåg att allt jag behövde var att få reda på alla detaljerna runt ceremonin i förväg, och han hade inga problem med det.

– Samtidigt så tog han upp att vi måste börja med en grov uppskattning om hur många som kommer, så vi kan hitta en lämplig lokal för mottagningen. Så vi kanske ska börja med en preliminär gästlista?

Elias höll med och snart satt de och började skriva ner namn. Lovisa pratade mest medan Elias hade tagit fram sin dator och antecknade namnen. Han hade blivit rätt tyst och plötsligt avbröt Lovisa sig och sa:

– Elias älskling. Vad är det som är fel? Du ser så ledsen ut, och det är det sista jag vill.

– Vad håller du på med, Lovisa? Är jag verkligen så genomskinlig för dig? Jag har inte sagt något alls.

– Du behöver inte säga något, jag ser att du blivit lite nedstämd. Vad är det du tänker på?

– Det är bara det att du har så många att bjuda, familj, släktingar, vänner medan jag har ingen. Men det är lugnt, det har varit mina egna val.

– Det stämmer inte. Du har dina vänner både på Soc och på Intetra IT, och dina gamla klasskamrater från gymnasiet.

– Alltså, de är kollegor, inte vänner. Och klasskamrater, tja, jag har liksom inte hållit kontakten.

– De har aldrig mobbat dej, inte sant? Så vare sig de eller dina kollegor är dina fiender, eller hur? Jag kan följa med dej

till dina jobb. Baka en kaka så får du en väg in. Sedan får du inte glömma Anna och Peter. De har säkert...

– Nej, Lovisa, reagerade Elias oväntat häftigt. Jag kommer **inte** gå dit. Aldrig i livet. Du kan inte tvinga mig!

– Jisses, Elias älskling. Hur kan du veta vad jag tänkte fråga dej?

– Det vet du väl! Du är genomskinlig för mig. Nej, vänta, det är ju tvärtom. Vad där det som händer?

– Något fantastiskt händer. Du börjar förstå mej på riktigt. Men varför vill du inte hälsa på i familjehemmet? Jag är säker på att de saknar dej.

– Alltså, som jag uppförde mig där... För att inte tala om att jag har ghostat dem i tio år. Och något blev fel när jag lämnade familjehemmet och dem, men jag förstår inte vad. De är säkert arga på mig.

– Jag lovar att de inte är arga. Okej, vänta, jag ska vara tydlig på ett sätt som funkar för dej. Det är kanske runt åttio procents chans att de blir glada att se dej, säg femton procents risk att de blir lite arga eller sårade, och kanske fem procents chans att det mest blir konstigt i början, som att de inte riktigt vet vad de ska säga. Men oavsett vilket tar jag det. Om det blir jobbigt pratar jag med dem. Om det blir för mycket för dej kliver jag in. Du behöver bara vara där. Resten är mitt ansvar. Hundra procent.

– Alltså... jag vill ändå inte... Sluta göra det där med ögonen, Lovisa. Du vet att jag inte kan motstå dig när du tittar på mig så där.

– Du vet att jag kommer att få dej att åka dit, inte sant? Vi åker här och nu. Snälla, älskling. Gör det för mej?

– Kan vi inte vänta tills imorgon i alla fall? Eller kanske nästa vecka?

– Nej, vi åker dit nu idag. Du har själv sagt att det är bäst att hantera sånt här direkt.

Elias suckade djupt. Han hade lärt sig vid det här laget att protestera mot Lovisa var lönlöst. Hon var en naturkraft som inte gick att stoppa. Och han hade lärt sig att det oftast blev bra ändå.

– Alright, älskling. Du får som du vill, men du måste lova en sak till, annars kan jag verkligen inte klara av det.

– Vad är det, Elias älskling?

– Du måste hjälpa mig tolka vad de säger, eller rättare sagt, vad de känner. Jag är så dålig på att läsa ansikten.

– Jag lovar, Elias älskling. Du behöver bara säga ”tolk” så läser jag situationen åt dej. Oberoende vad som händer hos dem så är jag med dej och stöttar dej fullständigt.



Elias var helt skräckslagen när han styrde sin bil mot sitt gamla familjehem. Han visste inte ens ifall de fortfarande bodde kvar där, och hoppades nästan att de flyttat. Alltför snart stod de framför den så välbekanta dörren och Elias frågade oroligt:

– Vad skall jag säga ifall de öppnar?

Lovisa log men skrattade inte. Hon förstod så väl vad han behövde.

– Ifall det är Anna eller Peter som öppnar så säger du bara ”Hej, Anna. Kommer du ihåg mig?” eller ”Hej, Peter. Kommer du ihåg mig?”. Inget annat. Och om någon annan öppnar så är du tyst och jag tar över.

Elias sträckte fram handen mot ringklockan, men drog snabbt tillbaka den igen. Han bad Lovisa ringa på men hon bara skakade på huvudet och pushade honom. Det gick flera minuter och Elias försökte flera gånger ringa på men vågade inte. Plötsligt tog Lovisa tag om hans huvud och gav honom en bestämd kyss.

– Ring på nu, älskling. Jag är här för dej.

Elias skakade av oro, men till sist ringde han ändå på.

– Kom så springer vi, sade han i panik till Lovisa.

Hon bara log och skakade på huvudet. Efter vad som kändes som en evighet så öppnades dörren och en man tittade på dem med ett frågande ansikte.

– He... hej, Peter. Ko... kommer du ihåg mig? stammade Elias fram.

Peter såg först osäker ut när han tittade från Elias till Lovisa och sedan tillbaka. Plötsligt lyste han upp och sa:

– Vänta nu. Det är Elias, inte sant? Anna, Anna, kom hit. Du kan inte ana vem som ringde på dörren nyss.

Anna kom gående och kände genast igen Elias. Hon rusade fram och sträckte fram armarna mot honom men hejdade sig när hon märkte att han backade undan.

– Nej, jag minns att du inte gillar kramar, Elias. Men åh, du ska veta att jag är så otroligt glad att se dej igen, efter alla de här åren! Kom in, kom in, för all del.

Anna gick före in till vardagsrummet och hon satte sig i en soffa tillsammans med Peter medan Elias och Lovisa satte sig i de två stolarna som också fanns där. Det var helt uppenbart för Lovisa att Elias var orolig på gränsen till panik och inte visste hur han skulle inleda.

Det blev tyst en stund. Elias satt stelt och såg ut som om han letade efter något att säga men inte hittade någon början. Lovisa harklade sig lätt, som för att ge honom tid, och såg sedan på Anna som alltför väl kände igen situationen och visste att det bästa var att vänta ut Elias.

I stället var det Peter som började:

– Jag håller med Anna om att det trevligt att se dig igen, Elias. Det är dock en sak jag velat prata om...

Anna klappade honom på armen och avbröt:

– Peter, älskling. Vi är glada för att han är här, eller hur?

– Tolk? sade Elias vänd mot Lovisa.

– Peter, sa Lovisa. Det känns som om det finns något du vill säga eller kanske kritisera Elias för. Jag vill att du ska förstå att han är här just för att han vill reda ut eventuella missförstånd, så du behöver inte hålla tillbaka.

– Du har rätt, det finns något som gnagt inom mig. Fast Anna har också rätt att det är dags att släppa det nu.

– Peter, sade Elias, om det är något som gnagt under så många år, så är det nog bäst ifall du får lätta ditt hjärta. Jag

lovar att inte bli arg eller springa iväg, även om jag inte skulle tycka om vad du säger.

Peter tittade på Anna som nickade. Han tog några djupa andetag för att samla sig, sedan började han:

– Det handlar om hur du lämnade oss på din 18-årsdag. För det första verkade det som om du tänkte gå utan att ens säga ”hej då”. Och väl ute kunde du knappt vänta med att ge dig iväg, som om vi inte betydde nånting. Anna hade stått i flera veckor och slavat i köket för att laga mat till dig. Hon hade köpt en massa matlådor som hon fyllt med mat du tycker om och lagt i frysen. På så sätt hade du haft mat i flera månader. Men du brydde dig inte överhuvudtaget. Och kalaset som Anna hade förberett på din dag, med bjudna klasskamrater och allt, det ville du inte ens veta av. Du ville inte ens ta emot presenten hon köpt för sina egna pengar, en helt ny laptop. Visserligen var det en PC och du gillar visst Mac, men ändå. Du bara skakade på huvudet och åkte iväg och till råga på allt sa du bara ”tack för allt”. Det var det som gjorde mest ont. ”Tack för allt helvete vi orsakat dig”, tänkte du.

Peter blev alltmer upprörd, och Anna klappade honom frenetiskt på armen för att lugna ner honom. Men han var helt uppe i varv och fortsatte.

– Anna blev helt förtvivlad och sprang in i köket med tårarna sprutande. Hon tog all maten hon lagt ner så mycket arbete på och kastade i en stor sopsäck. Samma sak med tårtan som hon bakat för kalaset. När hon försökte kasta

datorn i samma sopsäck så stoppade jag henne och sa: "Låt oss lämna tillbaka den i alla fall."

Peter var för upprörd för att märka Annas försök att lugna honom.

– Jag förstår att du inte uppskattar mig, med tanke på att jag alltid varit rätt strikt mot dig. Jag hade tänkt följa med till huset och hjälpa dig att komma igång, kanske hjälpa dig med några månaders räkningar tills du landat ordentligt. Men att du inte bryr dig om mig, det accepterar jag. Men att du gjorde Anna ledsen, med tanke på att hon alltid varit snäll mot dig, det är helt oförlåtligt.

Elias satt ganska länge och funderade. Anna hade till slut fått Peter att lugna ner sig lite. Efter ett tag sade Elias:

– Jag förstår att du är arg Peter, men jag förstod inte då att det jag gjorde var fel. Jag vill gärna få en möjlighet att förklara mig. Det var så här att jag var både livrädd över att behöva lämna er samtidigt som jag längtade efter det. Men framför allt visste jag att lagen tydligt säger att jag måste lämna ett familjehem när jag blir myndig, oberoende om vad ni eller jag tycker. Och det jag ville minst av allt, var att ni skulle bli arga på mig för att jag inte lämnade frivilligt. Eftersom ni har varit så snälla mot mig, så jag tänkte bara på att göra det som är rätt och riktigt, för er skull. Detta trots att jag egentligen helst ville stanna här, i tryggheten.

Peter tittade på honom med chock över hela ansiktet. Det var helt oväntat att Elias tänkt så. Men när han tänkte efter

lite, så var det så otroligt typiskt för Elias att tänka på det sättet, särskilt som har AST.

– Så jag städade ut mitt rum för att Anna skulle slippa det, och jag minns tydligt att jag sade ”hej då, dags att lämna nu” när jag gick förbi köket. Och när jag där ute sa ”tack för allt” menade jag verkligen allt. Tack för maten. Tack för husrummet. Tack för rena kläder. Tack för stödet i skolan. Och så vidare. Men i stället för att räkna upp allt och riskera att glömma något viktigt, sa jag bara ”tack för allt”. Det var enklast och mest korrekt.

Peters blev alltmera lång i ansiktet. Han hade helt uppenbarligen missförstått det mesta, och inte tagit någon hänsyn till Elias speciella sätt att tänka. Elias fortsatte:

– Anna, jag hade ingen aning om att du lagat mat och bakat tårta till mig. Och datorn, jag kunde inte ens drömma om en sådan dyr present. Sak samma att det var Windows, jag hade kunnat installera till exempel Ubuntu och haft stor nytta av den. Jag ber så mycket om ursäkt för att jag gjorde dig ledsen, det var det sista jag ville göra. Jag hoppas att du kan förlåta mitt okänsliga uppförande, och att du vet att jag verkligen uppskattar allt du gjort för mig.

– Det är helt okej, Elias, jag förstår, svarade Anna.

Han tittade osäkert på Lovisa och sade ”tolk?” igen. För att sedan lägga till:

– Det räcker inte, eller hur? Måste jag...? Trots att...?

– Jag tror nog det vore bäst, svarade Lovisa.

Anna och Peter tittade på dem och undrade vad de menade egentligen. Plötsligt ställde sig Elias upp, gick fram till Anna och bad henne ställa sig upp. När hon gjorde det tvekade han ett ögonblick, spände sig, och med en inre suck slog Elias armarna om henne i en kram.

– Jag vill att du skall förstå att jag verkligen är ledsen för att jag fick dig att gråta den dagen. Du har alltid varit snäll mot mig, mycket mer än jag förtjänat, ändå fick jag dig att gråta. Kan du förlåta mig? Tolk?

Det sista ordet var menat till Lovisa som svarade:

– Anna, jag kan verkligen se att du är lika delar förvånad som lycklig just nu, och visst förlåter du Elias nu? Jag kan även se på hans ansikte nu, att han är sjukt besvärad av att krama dej.

– Det stämmer tyvärr, sade Elias. Får... får jag släppa nu?

– Självklart, wow, Elias, sa hon och släppte honom. Det här var helt underbart, att du gav mej en kram så här. Naturligtvis förlåter jag dej!

– Jag förlåter dig också, sa Peter. Jag såg också hur jobbigt det där var för dig, men också hur lycklig du gjorde Anna. Ursäkta mig för att jag skällde nyss. Jag har helt klart missuppfattat det mesta, och det är mitt fel.

– Självklart, Peter. Jag är faktiskt glad att du lättade på dig så där, och jag blev inte alls ledsen över det. I själva verket har jag väldigt länge velat komma hit för att prata om fyra olika händelser, och det här var en av dem. Men jag har inte vågat, av rädsla för att ni båda är arga på mig. Det var

faktiskt Lovisa som nästan släpade mig hit, inte för att jag inte ville utan för att jag var rädd.

– Rädd? frågade Anna. Vad är det du är rädd för?

– Konflikter. Jag har förstått att jag misskött mig här, och var rädd att ni är arga. Lovisa lovade att ni troligen inte var det, och hjälpa mig ifall ni var det. Nåja, nu är jag glad att vara här, och vill gärna prata om de här fyra händelserna. Är det något som jag får göra?

– Självklart, Elias, svarade Anna. Berätta du bara!

– Du kommer väl ihåg vad som hände när jag kom, inte sant? Du försökte krama mig, och jag puttade bort dig. Hårt. Slog dig egentligen. Du landade så hårt och slog huvudet i golvet, minst måste du fått en hjärnskakning. Det jag gjorde mot dig har plågat mig sen dess. Jag bara måste få reda på hur det gick för dig, skadade jag dig?

– Bekymra dej inte, Elias, det gick bra, svarade Anna.

– Tolk?, sa Elias, vänd mot Lovisa.

– Anna, sa Lovisa. Jag råkar veta att Elias alltid vill höra sanningen även om den är jobbig. Det känns som om nånting hände men du vill inte berätta det.

– Du förstår, Elias. När jag säger att det gick bra så betyder det att jag inte blev skadad. Kanske fick jag en lättare hjärnskakning. Jag hade definitivt en bula i nacken. Men som jag sa redan då, jag anser att det var mitt fel. Jag borde förstått bättre än att försöka krama en tonårspojke, oberoende av eventuella diagnoser.

– Jag undrar en sak, Elias, sa Peter. Du har flera gånger sagt ”tolk” och tittat på Lovisa. Vad menar du med det egentligen?

– Jo, för att jag skulle våga komma hit, lovade Lovisa att tolka åt mig vad ni säger.

Han märkte att deras ansikten spärrades upp lite och att de rynkade pannan. De verkade förvirrade.

– Det är ju så här, som ni säkert redan vet: forskningen säger att när människor uttrycker känslor består bara 7% av det faktiska ordet. Resten är tonfall, kroppsspråk, gester och ansiktsuttryck. I ren fakta-kommunikation är orden förstås viktigare, men jag märker ändå att jag missar det mesta. Jag förstår bara orden, så jag har bett Lovisa hjälpa mig att tolka de 93%.

– Då förstår vi, sa Peter. Jag hoppas du förstår Elias att du är bland vänner här. Du kan säga vad du vill, och vi kommer inte att bli arga.

– Kan du försöka beskriva för oss, Elias, vad som rörde sig i ditt huvud den första tiden? Vi förstår båda två att du var djupt, djupt traumatiserad, för du kommunicerade inte överhuvudtaget med oss. Du behöver inte säga någonting om du inte vill, vi är bara nyfikna och lite oroade över dej.

– Jo alltså, så här var det. Min hjärna fungerade inte. Den var helt avstängd när jag kom hit. Det pep mina öron och jag hörde inte vad någon sa och jag förstod inte något av det som hände. På något sätt trodde jag att allt hade med polisen och göra, men du vet du redan, Anna. Och att jag åkte hem till

huset efter skolan på måndag, ja hela veckan, så var det inte för att jag var olydig, utan det var för att när jag var i skolan så hamnade min hjärna i nån sorts läge där allt var normalt igen, och då ska jag ju hem till huset. När jag sedan fick syn på er, eller när du började messa Anna, då kopplade strömbrytaren i min hjärna om till andra läget där allting var kaos.

– Wow, självklart, sa Anna. Fast det förstod vi faktist den där kvällen när du äntligen började prata med mej. Jag blev så ledsen för din skull den dagen, ja du vet vilken dag. Men särskilt från vad du berättade, vilket mörker du hade levt i tills då! Jag ber om förlåtelse för vad jag tvingade dej göra den dagen, det var grymt.

– Hm, begravningen, ja. Det var en annan sak som jag ville prata om. Jag accepterar inte din ursäkt. Låt mig förklara varför. Även om jag hatar floskler, så måste jag ändå använda en nu. Det jag vill säga är att tacka dig så mycket för begravningen. Den var värdig, vacker, och... ja, man säger att den ger ett avslut. Exakt. Otroligt att du fått tag på alla gäster som kom!

– Jo, jag hittade din mammas adressbok. Så du tycker inte det var fel av mej?

– Inte alls. Fast ”avslut”, tja, vad menas med det? Jag är ledsen än idag över det som hänt. Lovisa fick faktiskt torka mina tårar när jag berättade om den där dagen. Men då äntligen förstod jag vad som hänt. Om du bara sagt det till mig tidigare... hade jag ändå inte kunnat ta in det, min

hjärna hade inte accepterat det. Så det var helt rätt att låta mig gå igenom begravningen.

– Om du visste hur lättad du gör mej, Elias. Menar du att det började bli bättre sedan?

– Det skulle bli mycket värre innan det blev bättre, vilket är den sista av de händelser jag velat prata om. Jag kom i en nedåtgående spiral som bara accelererade. Ni kommer inte att tycka om det här, men nu är det jag som måste få lätta mitt hjärta för det här har legat och gnagt för länge.

– Självklart, Elias, ut med det bara, sa Anna.

– Alltså, när jag förstått att jag var föräldralös så läste jag på det där om bouppteckning och arv och började jobba med dem. Jag insåg att du redan börjat, Peter, så jag hackade mig in i din dator, Peter, och läste vad du kommit fram till.

– Hackade dig in? utropade Peter förvånat.

– Jo, alltså, jag är ju bra på datorer. Du borde ha ett annat lösenord, det är för lätt att gissa. Nåväl jag insåg att jag skulle förlora huset, och därmed min sista trygghet. Så jag... alltså... jo... köpte saker för att ta livet av mig. Skrev ett självmordsbrev till dig, Anna, ett riktigt fint brev där jag lovordade dig för att du inte skulle bli ledsen. Sedan hade jag bestämt att den dag jag visste att huset var förlorat så skulle jag exekvera.

Anna stelnade till. Hennes hand for upp mot munnen och blicken låste sig vid Elias. Peter drog efter andan, och hans ögon blev stora av förvåning.

– Herregud, Elias, utropade Peter. Nu skall jag tolka åt dig. Anna är fullständigt chockad över det här, och jag är väl lika chockad.

– Jisses, Elias, och jag missade alla signaler, sade Anna. Så uselt av mej!

– Ta det lugnt, Anna, en som har självmordstankar blir expert på att dölja det, och jag har dessutom AST, så du var chanslös att se något. Nåväl, det som hände var, som du vet, Peter, att du ljög, och dina lögner tog aldrig slut. Men resultatet blev att jag fick behålla huset. Vad som hände var två saker. Dels förlorade jag inte tryggheten som huset gav, dels insåg jag att du verkligen brydde dig. För ärligt, Peter, du hade väl föredragit att jag tvingats bo här?

– Jo, jag måste erkänna att jag inte tyckte om att du alltid var i huset, men insåg att du behövde det.

– Alltså, Peter. Du räddade mitt liv där. Inte vara bildligt, utan på riktigt. Jag... jag hade legat bredvid mina föräldrar i en grav annars. Du... jo... Lovisa, snälla, måste jag?

– Det vet du redan själv.

Elias ställde sig upp och gick fram till Peter som ställde sig upp och fick en kram han också till hans chock.

– Oj, oj, sade Elias. Det här var ännu jobbigare.

– Det är lugnt, Elias, sa Peter och släppte honom. Jag förstår och är rörd till tårar.

– Tur bara att min bror aldrig dök upp, för då hade det inte fungerat alls.

– Tja, jag hade en plan B, men den behövde jag inte. Fast det är Anna som du ska tacka för att din bror inte kom...

– Det stämmer, Elias. Det här måste stanna mellan oss. Jag kontaktade din brors handläggare och förklarade situationen så att hans försörjningsstöd ändrades för en dag. Sedan lade vi mötet på samma dag han skulle få det, så han var nere på kontoret just då och missade mötet. Jag ville bara se till att han inte skulle kunna sabba för dig.

– VA! Anna! Så otroligt förslaget. Jisses, kom hit får du en kram till!

Elias kramade Anna igen till hennes förtjusning.

– Hm, det där kändes inte lika jobbigt som sist. Alltså, anledningen till att jag ville berätta det här är att ni skulle förstå hur väldigt mycket det ni gjorde betydde för mig. Från den dagen kände jag så mycket stöd från er, både huset och vad du gjorde i skolan, Anna. Resultatet blev att jag fann mig själv i en uppåtgående spiral i stället och satsade till hundra procent på skolan. Ni gjorde det. Ni räddade mig. Ni var anledningen till att jag tog mig vidare. Ni är orsaken till att jag är så lycklig idag, för ni puttade mig i rätt riktning.

– Wow, vilken chock, flämtade Anna.

– Jag ber så mycket om förlåtelse för allt som jag utsatt er för. Hoppas att ni förstår hur ledsen jag är.

– Det finns ingen anledning att be om ursäkt, svarade Anna. Vi förstår båda två hur dåligt du mådde av vad som hänt, och att du var så traumatiserad av det som hänt dej.

– Nu vill jag vara väldigt tydlig. Jag ber inte om ursäkt för det jag gjorde fram till arvsskiftet, för jag var inte mig själv. Men sedan förstod jag hur mycket ni brydde er om mig, men jag höll er på avstånd. Det jag borde gjort under dessa tre år var att släppa in er, och det gjorde jag aldrig.

– Vi förstår, Elias, att det var svårt för dej, med din diagnos och allt annat. Det hör till att förändring är jobbigt.

– Jodå, det stämmer. Samtidigt har jag drabbats av så många stora förändringar sedan dess. Den senaste var när Lovisa flyttade in. Det var sjukt jobbigt. Men efter några månader blev det bättre och sedan blev jag nästan arg när hon inte kom hem en natt. Vad jag menar är att om jag hade ansträngt mig mera, så borde jag kunnat vänja mig vid det nya, och släppa in er. Men jag försökte inte ens. I nästan tre hela år! Det ber jag om ursäkt för.

– Vi förstår båda att du inte mådde bra, Elias. Både Peter och jag såg det, och med tanke på vad du gick igenom så är det inte underligt.

– Dessutom, fortsatte Peter, är ansvaret delat. Jag håller med om att du kunde ha försökt hårdare, men vi borde också ha arbetat mer för att hjälpa dig att känna dig bekväm här.

Elias satt tyst en stund och processade vad Peter hade sagt. Han kände hur spänningarna han känt så många år lossade till slut.

– Det är möjligt, svarade Elias slutligen. Nu kanske det är dags för den verkliga orsaken till att jag ville komma hit. Eller... jo, jag **ville** komma hit under många långa år som jag

sade. Men orsaken till att jag och Lovisa började diskutera det, och fick henne att tvinga mig att göra det. Jag älskar dig för det, Lovisa, tro inget annat. Saken är den, Anna och Peter, att Lovisa inte är min flickvän.

– Men jag trodde att... började Anna.

– Jo, hon är väl fortfarande min flickvän, men hon är också min fästmö. Vi ska alltså gifta oss med varandra.

– Vilken fantastisk nyhet, Elias. Grattis till er båda.

– Tack, Anna. Jag blev verkligen överraskad och lycklig när Elias plötsligt gick ner på knä framför mej för en vecka sedan och höll fram en förlovningsring.

– Tja, som du har uppvakttat mig, så tyckte jag det var dags, log Elias. I vilket fall som helst så satt vi idag och började göra gästlistor, och Lovisa såg att jag blev ledsen. Anledningen var att jag inte har någon att bjuda, och hon har så många. Det ena ledde till det andra, och... jo... jag undrar ifall ni två vill komma till vårt bröllop som mina gäster. Det är helt okej ifall ni inte vill...

Peter avbröt och sa med ett mycket bestämt, nästan strängt tonfall:

– Du ska veta, Elias, att inte ens vilda hästar skulle kunna få mig att inte komma på ditt bröllop, om vi är bjudna. Det spelar ingen roll när eller var.

– Jag håller helt med Peter, sa Anna. Det finns absolut inget som skulle göra mej lyckligare än att få vara med på ditt bröllop. Helt underbart att du vill bjuda oss, trots allt som hänt här. Tack, Elias!

– Jag skulle vilja ge dig ett råd... om det är okej för dig... alltså, om du vill höra det, sa Peter försiktigt.

– Visst, Peter. Jag lyssnar alltid på råd.

– Eftersom du har den diagnos du har, så har du vissa problem med kroppskontakt. Men en flickvän, fästmö och senare en fru kommer att vilja bli kramad då och då.

Elias ställde sig upp och såg panikslagen ut.

– Vad säger du Peter! Måste jag krama Lovisa?!? Hur ofta då? Räcker en gång per månad? Inte? En gång i veckan? Oftare? Lovisa, älskling, stämmer det här verkligen?

– Jo, Elias älskling. Peter har nog rätt, jag vill ha kramar av dej, kanske flera gånger om dagen till och med.

– Jisses, vilken chock! Det blir jobbigt för mig, tror inte jag klarar det. Wow, varför har du inte sagt något om det innan? Kom hit, jag måste nog undersöka hur jobbigt det blir.

Elias ställde sig framför Lovisa som också ställde sig upp, och försökte hitta rätt position runt Lovisas midja.

– Så här, eller?

Lovisa nickade och kramade tillbaka. Först försiktigt sedan allt hårdare och Elias såg till en början besvärad ut med snart drog han sig närmare och strök Lovisa mjukt över håret. Det blev allt mera klart för Peter att det här inte var första gången de kramats. De möttes i en kyss, och efter en lång stund så satte de sig ner, denna gången i samma stol med Lovisa i hans knä.

– Du skojade nyss, eller hur Elias?

– Jo... det gjorde jag nog. Alltså det är riktigt skönt när det är Lovisa jag kramar. Antar att det är det som menas med kärlek. För information så kan jag nämna att vi faktiskt gjort mer än bara kramats, för Lovisa är faktiskt gravid.

– Gravid, utropade Anna. Vilken fantastisk nyhet! Visst håller du med, Elias? Du var alltid barnkär förut.

– Det är underbara nyheter, jag vill verkligen bli förälder till mina egna barn. Jag är inte bara barnkär, jag älskar...

Plötsligt hördes barngråt från en annan del av huset. Det var hjärtskärande. Elias stelnade till för ett ögonblick, och Anna ryckte till, hjärtat slog ett extra slag, innan hon reagerade:

– Oj, nu har lilla Johanna vaknat och är ledsen igen. Tyvärr har hon varit det sedan hon kom igår. Hon är nog också hungrig, fast jag inte fått henne att äta än. Jag hade tänkt laga mat när du kom, Elias.

– Har du blivit jourhem också, jag trodde ni bara var ett familjehem? frågade Elias.

– Normalt sätt, men Johanna skulle tas hand om en som heter Mireka eller något, men som visst har slutat. Ni får ursäkta mej, snälla gå inte härifrån än. Det blir kanske lite rörigt här en stund, men vi kan fortsätta lite senare.

Anna ställde sig upp och började gå mot dörren. Lovisa kom med ett förslag som Anna tyckte lät helt skruvat:

– Vad säger du, Anna, om att Elias går in och tröstar Johanna medan du och jag lagar mat?

– Det går tyvärr inte. Johanna har haft flera väldigt dåliga erfarenheter av män, så hon blir nog livrädd om Elias kommer in.

– Det stämmer, flikade Peter in. Jag har försökt själv och hon bara skriker när hon ser mig. Dessutom är jag värdelös på att laga mat, om jag skulle koka ägg skulle jag bränna vid dem.

Lovisa ställde sig framför Anna och tog hennes händer och tittade intensivt in i hennes ögon.

– Anna, jag är säker på Elias kan trösta Johanna. Du känner inte mej, men jag har sett vad Elias kan göra. Det kommer att fungera. Lita. På. Mej.

Anna blev osäker av Lovisas tvärsäkerhet. Hon tittade mot Elias, som börjat pillra på sin telefon.

– Vad tror du Elias? Klarar du av att trösta ett litet barn?

– Jag tror inte det, jag vet det.

Elias gick ut i korridoren och in i rummet från vilket gråten kom. Han rös till vid tröskeln, det här rummet var alltför bekant för honom. Han stängde dörren bakom sig och Anna blev orolig. Först hördes ett gallskrick från den lilla flickan men det blev tyst direkt. Lovisa föste Anna framför sig in i köket och Anna började laga maten. Det var en komplicerad sorts gryta. Det var mycket grönsaker och kött att hacka, och Lovisa satte igång med liv och lust. Anna sneglade hela tiden mot rummet där Elias och Johanna var. Men Louise försökte hela tiden lugna henne.

– Det går bra därinne, Johanna gråter ju inte längre.

Det var sant, det var helt tyst från Johannas rum, men det gjorde Anna om möjligt ännu mer orolig.

Till slut var ändå maten nästan klar, när Anna hörde dörren till Johannas rum öppnas. Elias kom ut med Johanna på sin arm. När Johanna fick syn på Anna blev hon rädd och gömde sitt huvudet mot Elias axel. Anna blev förvånad nästan chockad när jag såg att Johanna verkade finna tröst i Elias och inte var det minsta rädd för honom.

– Johanna och jag tyckte luktade så fantastiskt gott från köket, sa Elias. Går det att få ett smakprov eller är det för tidigt?

– Ja, det luktar jätte jättegott, sa Johanna.

Anna var jätteglad att hon äntligen fått höra Johannas röst utan gråt. Hon tog fram en liten sked som hon doppade i grytan. Elias tog skeden med andra handen och sa strängt till Johanna:

– Nu får du hjälpa till med att blåsa för det här är jätte jättevarmt, min ängel, men blås inte för hårt för då blåser allting bort.

Tillsammans blåste Elias och Johanna försiktigt på skeden och sen fick Johanna smaka. Hon klappade glatt med händerna och sa:

– Det är jättegott. Jag vill ha. Jag vill ha nu!

Elias bar henne bort till en vägg där det stod flera höga barnstolar, och låtsades försöka sätta Johanna i en av dem. Den var uppenbart för liten och Johanna skrattade:

– Jag är ju för stor för den där stolen, Favvo Eli. Det förstår du väl!

– Ja, det är klart du är. Du är redan stora flickan, min ängel. Men om du tar vanlig stol får du näsan i höjd med bordskivan och kan inte få någon mat, men vad säger du om den här?

Med ena handen tog han fram en stolinsats som man kunde sätta på en vanlig stol. Han satte en stol vid bordet ställde stolinsatsen ovanpå och satte sedan Johanna i den.

– Nu får du sitta helt stilla medan jag spänner fast den här för annars trillar du i golvet, min ängel.

Elias spände noga stolinsatsen och gick sedan och hämtade en plasttallrik, glas och bestick till Johanna. Under tiden hade Anna satt fram grytan med maten på bordet tillsammans med potatis och mjölk. Även Peter hade kommit in och snart satt alla och njöt av maten. Både Anna och Peter var fullständigt förbluffade över hur bra Elias tog hand om Johanna och hur snabbt hon knöt an till honom redan efter mindre än en timme.

– Bli inte förvånad om Elias helt ignorerar oss vuxna, viskade Lovisa till Anna. Han kommer att fokusera helt på Johanna. Det gör han alltid.

Mycket riktigt så satt Elias och fokuserade fullständigt på Johanna, såg till att hon fick mat, torkade hennes mun när hon spillde och hjälpte henne på alla sätt och vis att äta. När sedan alla ätit färdigt så ställde han sig och lyfte upp Johanna igen, som sa glatt till Elias:

– Tack så jättemycket för maten, Favvo Eli. Den var jättegod!

– Du måste tacka Anna för maten för det var hon som gjorde den med viss hjälp av Lovisa. Du får ge henne en kram också för maten var så god.

– Tack så jättemycket för maten Anna, sa Johanna. Den var jättegod.

Hon gav Anna en varm kram till hennes stora förvåning.

– Glöm inte Peter, som är den som köpt denna goda maten han borde också få en kram.

Till Peters stora överraskning gav hon honom också en kram, fast inte lika hjärtlig som till Anna. Sedan gick alla tillbaka tillbaka vardagsrummet och satte sig ner, denna gången satte sig Elias i soffan tillsammans med Johanna och Lovisa. Anna känner sig djupt förvirrad och frågade ivrigt:

– Så underbart Elias hur du hanterar Johanna. Jag hade ingen aning om att du var så duktig med barn, hur har du lärt dej det?

– Peter, har du någon Soc-enhet? Telefon, padda eller dator med Outlook, frågade Elias?

– Ja, jag har iPaden från Soc, svarade Peter. Den är kopplad till mitt konto som familjehem. Vad vill du att jag ska göra?

– Gå in i Outlook, öppna adresstabben till vänster, och sök efter mitt namn.

– Nej, Elias, det är helt fel. Du är inte här. Man ser de som varit omhändertagna i en annan app.

– Men gör det ändå, insisterade Elias.

Peter följde hans instruktion och sökte upp namnet. Ögonen vidgades när han såg resultatet.

– Wow... vad är det här? frågade han.

– Vi är kollegor, sade Elias med ett snett leende. Typ.

– Vad menar du, Elias? utbrast Anna.

– Det står i kontaktboken, svarade Peter. Elias Niklasson: jourförälder. Han jobbar alltså med socialtjänsten med att ta hand om akut placerade barn, som Johanna här.

– Just det, fortsatte Lovisa. Och han är helt otrolig på sitt jobb. Det är därför jag älskar honom så vansinnigt mycket.

– Du har hört fel, Anna. Det var inte Mireka som var tänkt att ta hand om Johanna, det var MirakEli, alltså jag. Problemet är bara att jag har slutat, eller rättare sagt tvingades sluta på grund av en konflikt med Johan. Ja, du vet, chefen som tagit över efter Anders.

– Vad, är du MirakEli? Jag har hört det namnet cirkulera på kontoret. Vad är det för ett namn?

– Mirakel-Elias. Tja, det är inte jag som kommit på det, svarade Elias med ett snett leende.

Anna höjde ögonbrynen och Peter drog efter andan, som om de just fått reda på en hemlighet de borde ha vetat.

– Du ska veta, Anna, att Elias gör mirakel med små barn. Jag har sett det flera gånger tidigare. Se bara på Johanna här.

– Min lilla ängel, sade Elias. Fast egentligen din ängel. Jag kollade upp henne i den där andra appen för att förstå

varför hon var så ledsen. Soc glömde ta bort min åtkomst till Johanna, som egentligen skulle ha varit hos mig först.

Elias strök ett hårstrå ur ansiktet på Johanna som redan hade somnat i hans knä, helt tillfreds och harmonisk.

– Nu ser jag allting tydligt, sa Peter. Dels hur du så snabbt kunde få Johanna trygg, hur du kunde vinna Lovisas hjärta och varför du är så lugn och uppspelt av att få barn.

– Apropå det, så har jag tänkt på en sak rörande bröllopet. Som ni kanske vet finns inga fasta platser i kyrkan, utan man sitter var som helst. Förutom fyra platser längst fram som är reserverade för bruden och brudgummens föräldrar. Det är bara så att två av dem kommer att vara tomma. Så jag undrar...

Elias pausade och samlade sig innan han fortsatte.

– Jo, jag undrar om ni vill komma till vårt bröllop inte som mina gäster, utan som mina föräldrar. Alltså sitta på rätt platser, hålla tal och så. Samtidigt vill jag att ni ska känna er helt bekväma, så ni får själva avgöra hur mycket ni vill vara delaktiga.

Anna och Peter tittade på varandra som i chock. Det här var helt oväntat! Peter var den som svarade först:

– Menar du verkligen att du ser på oss som dina egna föräldrar? Trots allt elakt som främst jag gjort mot dig, skällt ut dig utan orsak, krävt än det ena än det andra. Självklart är vi båda smickrade, men också förvånade.

– Jag håller med Peter här. Vi har båda förstått hur mycket du älskade dina föräldrar, som gick bort så tragiskt.

– Jo, alltså. Jag vill inte vara respektlös och så...

Elias sneglade på Lovisa som direkt förstod vad han menade och svarade.

– I det här sällskapet är det inga problem, Elias älskling. Anna kunde inte låta bli att flika in.

– Det är helt otroligt hur synkade ni är, och verkar läsa varandras tankar. Helt underbart att se.

– Jo, jag har varit genomskinlig för Lovisa sedan länge, och på senare tid har jag, till min egen förvåning, börjat förstå henne också. Alltså om mina föräldrar. Jag har ett väldigt starkt minne av dem, det sista som verkligen etsat sig fast. Det var när jag gick i nian och hade skolv Slutning. Med andra ord sista dagen i grundskolan.

Elias tvekade lite, osäker på ifall han skulle fortsätta.

– Berätta, Elias, sade Anna. Var inte orolig!

– Det. Därför bestämde jag mig för att göra mina föräldrar stolta genom att ha bra betyg, så jag höll hela tiden på med skolarbete. Läxor, läxor, läxor, plugga, plugga, plugga.

– Det var så här... jag blev väldigt mobbad i grundskolan. Fula ord, öknamn, knuffar, någon som tog min mössa eller mina skolböcker. Jag fick aldrig vara ifred, inte ens från tjejerna. Mina föräldrar hade fullt upp med problemen kring min halvbror. Men jag kunde göra något annat, visa att jag var bättre än han. Därför bestämde jag mig för att göra mina föräldrar stolta. Jag kastade mig över skolarbetet: läxor, läxor, läxor... plugga, plugga, plugga.

– Jag har själv sett det, Elias, infogade Anna.

– På sista skolavslutningen satt alla vi elever på madrasser på golvet, klassvis. Jag satte mig med tjejerna, för de brukade mest retas verbalt och inte hålla på med knuffar eller tjuvnyp. Då fick jag höra från killarna att jag var loser, mes, fjolla... ja, ni vet. Men jag brydde mig inte, utan njöt faktiskt av alla amatörer som uppträdde på scenen. Sedan gick rektorn upp och höll sitt årliga tal. Han avslutade med att ropa upp mig på scenen.

– Ropade han upp dej! utropade Anna. Med ditt namn?

– Just det. Benen skakade så jag knappt kunde gå, till mina plågoandars stora glädje. Han ropade upp ännu en elev, en tjej från en annan klass. Sedan sade att att vi två var de enda på hela skolan som fått full pott på betygen, alltså A i alla ämnen. Sedan fick vi var sitt diplom och han hängde en medalj runt våra halsar. Jag tittade bort mot min klass. Ingen mötte mina ögon. Alla tittar ner i golvet och jag tänkte *”Ha ha, jag vann till sist”*. Jag letade bland publiken efter mina föräldrar men de var inte där. Jag var helt säker på att jag hade påmint dem samma morgon.

– Det måste ha gjort ont, Elias, att de inte var där på din stora dag.

– Inte så farligt, jag var van. De brukade aldrig komma på avslutningar eller utvecklingssamtal eller några andra samtal. Nåväl vi gick till klassrummet, jag fick betyget och cyklade hem. Så fort jag kom in i huset så hörde jag upprörda

röster i vardagsrummet, som vanligt. Jag vet inte vad det handlade om men det var någonting om min bror, pengar och att vi inte hade råd. Jag tänkte *”Nu ska jag muntra upp dem och visa att de har **en** bra son”*. Så jag gick in i vardagsrummet med medaljen på bröstet och diplommet och betyget i handen.

– Visst blev de stolta över dig så duktig som du är?

– Pappa sade tyst: ”Inte nu Elias”. Men jag var envis denna gång. Jag ville visa hur duktig jag var. Så jag upprepade: ”Ni kanske vill titta på mitt betyg”. Mamma vänder sig om mot mig och skriker: ”Ser du inte att vi är upptagna, din odugling? Att du alltid ska vara till besvär! Du är helt hopplöst omöjlig. Gå in i ditt rum och kom inte ut mer idag. Du får ingen kvällsmat. Det har du inte förtjänat”.

Anna och Peter såg chockade ut. Tårarna började rinna och Elias gnuggade sig i ögonen, generad över att de kom. Lovisa svepte armarna om honom och tröstade honom, och han kände hur hennes värme gjorde allt lite lättare.

– Jag rev sönder betyget och diplommet och kastade dem i papperskorgen tillsammans med medaljen. Sen grät jag mig till sömns den natten. Dagen efter lämnade jag huset innan frukost och jag kom inte tillbaks på en vecka. Jag sov i skogen, en liten bit från huset, hämtade mat i grillkiosken, och tänkte att aldrig vill hem igen. Men det började regna och jag insåg att jag måste hem. Det var min värsta sommar någonsin.

Alla tre tittade medlidsamt på Elias.

– När jag sen slutade gymnasiet första termin så cyklade jag hit direkt efter sista lektionen. Du Peter kom springandes och krävde att få se betyget.

– Ja, jag vet Elias. Jag är ledsen för det, svarade Peter. Jag kan vara lite barsk ibland och det är mitt fel.

– Jag visade dig mitt betyg och du visslade och ropade på Anna och ni tittade på det tillsammans och ni öste beröm över mig. Ni sa ni var stolta över mig. Jag tackade och gick in i mitt rum och grät mig till sömns igen.

– Men varför då, Elias, frågade Anna? Gjorde vi dej ledsen?

– Nej, självklart inte. Men jag mindes skolavslutningen i nian och tänkte *”varför kunde inte mina egna föräldrar gjort det här”*. Just den dagen visade ni mig hur föräldrar borde vara.

– Menar du verkligen det, Elias? frågade Peter.

– Det gör jag. Minns du förresten den där utskällningen du gav mig när jag gick hem till huset första dagen i skolan istället för att komma hit?

– Ja, jag minns och jag ångrar den bittert, svarade Peter. Jag tror att jag förlorade dig där.

– Jag blev alltid utskälld av mina föräldrar, för saker jag inte förstod. När något stulit vid mössa var det jag som slarvat bort den, jag blev kallad till skolan för att någon mobbat mig så är det mitt fel, när fått en blåtira för att någon slagit mig var det jag som var busen. Alltid fick jag skäll hemma, och jag förstod oftast inte ens varför. När jag tittade

ner i golvet var jag ”omöjlig”, när jag tittade min mamma i ögonen så flackade blicken och jag var ”hopplös”. Jag förstod sällan vad som var fel.

– Kan det bero på din AST, möjligen?

– Antagligen. Men Peter, när du skällde ut mig så visste jag vad hade gjort som var fel, till skillnad från när mina föräldrar skällde ut mig. Och den utskällningen, eller snarare tillrättavisningen, du gav mig var den snällaste jag nånsin fått. Du kallade mig inte för omöjlig, hopplös eller odugling, utan tvärtom. Du sa att jag är så duktig så att jag vet vad som är rätt. Du skällde på mig inte för att jag var hopplös, utan för vad jag gjort. Handlingen jag har gjort var fel, och du förklarade tydligt varför. Det är exakt det som en **bra** pappa ska göra, korrigera sin tonåring när han gör fel.

Peter såg lättad ut. Han förstod äntligen varför han inte fått mothugg, utan att Elias faktiskt lyssnat.

– Och du, Anna, krävde ett utvecklingsamtal i skolan. Mina föräldrar kom inte ens när de blev kallade. Och när du fick höra mig andas om att jag kanske var mobbad av Gaz, så kunde du inte vänta med att ta honom i örat. Jag vet inte exakt vad du sade, men Gaz bad om ursäkt efteråt. En sådan underbar mamma hade jag aldrig ens vågat drömma om att få.

Anna tog sig för bröstet, djupt berörd av vad han sagt.

– Mina egna föräldrar fanns aldrig där för mig. När skolan kallade in dem för att reda ut en mobbningsincident satt jag ensam, mitt emot busen och hans föräldrar. Oftast

när jag kom hem, var det något strul med min halvbror. Antingen var de inte hemma alls, eller så var det bråk. Ofta fanns det ingen kvällsmat, eftersom de var ute någonstans och försökte lösa ännu ett problem kring honom. När jag var tio började jag laga mat själv, bara för att slippa gå hungrig. Då blev jag utskälld för det också. De förstod aldrig att jag gjorde det av desperation. Så jag fortsatte, men såg till att inte bli upptäckt.

– Wow, flikade Lovisa in. Det är därför du är så duktig på att laga mat.

– Här fick jag alltid mat. Regelbundet. Jag fick allt stöd med skolan som jag behövde. Ni såg till att kontakta BUP när det behövdes. Ni tog mina problem på allvar. Ni två kommer aldrig kunna bli mina **biologiska** föräldrar... men ni är, och kommer alltid att vara, mina **riktiga** föräldrar.

Anna fick nästan tårar i ögonen av glädje.

– Så om ni vill komma till vårt bröllop som mina föräldrar, så blir det som mina **riktiga** föräldrar. Inte som nån sorts tjänstemän som har anlåtats av socialtjänsten att ta hand om mig. Utan föräldrar som visat att de älskar mig och som jag misslyckades med att visa att jag älskar tillbaka. Jag kommer alltid klandra mig för det.

– Du ska inte känna så, Elias, svarade Anna med bruten röst. Vi förstod redan då att du inte mätte bra, och att du egentligen är en fantastisk person.

– Hm, jag känner mig inte särskilt fantastisk.

– Elias, du är fantastisk, protesterade Lovisa. Jag kan så väl förstå med tanke på din AST och allt som hänt dej, att du hade svårt att hitta någon sorts balans där och då.

– Håller med Lovisa, fortsatte Anna. Du var fortfarande ung, och många tonåringar kämpar med allt som har med puberteten att göra, och det kombinerat med AST, förlust av föräldrar, mobbing, framtidsoro. Ja, det är inte underligt alls att du mådde som du gjorde då. Jag är bara så ledsen att jag inte lyckades få dej att må bra under tre år.

Hon tvekade ett ögonblick, sedan fortsatte hon tystare.

– För att vara ärlig... jag har ibland trott att du hatade mej. För att jag tog dej till BUP. För att jag såg din blick när du fick din diagnos, du anklagade mej för det.

Elias skakade långsamt på huvudet.

– Nej. Aldrig dig. Jag hatade diagnosen. Etiketterna. Allt som plötsligt fick ett namn. Men inte dig. Det var dessutom jag som sade till psykologen att jag ville ha en utredning. Du var på min sida och gjorde som jag bett om.

– Åh, Elias... jag är ledsen för alla gånger jag inte visste hur svårt allt var för dej. Men det betyder så mycket att du berättar allt det här för oss.

– Alltså, Anna. Jag måste berätta en sak till. Varje dag när jag kom hem från skolan hade jag en klump i magen av oro. Jag menar i grundskolan. Ibland ville jag inte ens gå hem, för jag var rädd för vad som skulle hända. Första tiden här hos er var det ännu värre, och jag fick kämpa bara för att inte springa till skogs. Jag vet inte exakt när det ändrades, men

den där dagen med första avslutningen... då var klumpen helt borta. Jag kände nästan en iver att komma hit. Det var därför jag åkte hit den dagen, inte till huset som jag brukade.

– Du kan inte ana vad glad jag blir av att höra detta!

– Ni kan nog inte riktigt föreställa er hur svårt det har varit för mig att inte berätta det här tidigare. Jag vill att ni förstår en sak: även om jag inte mår särskilt bra när jag till slut åkte härifrån, så mår jag ändå betydligt bättre än när jag kom, efter att mina föräldrar dött. Det ni gjorde var att sätta igång en process, en uppåtgående spiral, där jag gradvis började må bättre. Så den lycka jag känner i dag är i grunden ett resultat av det. Ni satte mig i rörelse, i rätt riktning.

– Så det var ni som satte honom på rätt spår, sa Lovisa. Tack för det. Nu är vi lyckliga tillsammans, tack vare er.

Anna sitter stilla ett ögonblick, rörd till tårar, innan hon ler mjukt:

– Ni ska inte tacka oss, säger hon. Det där har ni gjort själva, särskilt du Elias.

Elias ler lite, nickar:

– Jag har också fått mycket push från Lovisa. Men ni har inte svarat om ni vill komma till bröllopet som mina föräldrar.

– Wow, Elias, vi kommer med stolthet komma som dina föräldrar, sa Peter. Jag kan inte förklara varför, men på något sätt känns du speciell för oss, som vår egen son. Ja, det låter kanske konstigt, men så är det.

– Jag håller med Peter, inflikade Anna. Du har alltid haft en speciell plats i mitt hjärta och jag känner likadant.

Elias lutade sig bakåt i soffan, strök Johanna över håret och lade sedan armen runt Lovisa som lutade sitt huvud mot hans axel. Han hade nog aldrig känt sig så avslappnad förut, och aldrig i detta hus.

För ett ögonblick kändes allt fullständigt under kontroll, men någonstans i bakhuvudet låg en nästan omärklig gnista av oro, som om hans hjärta visste att verkligheten sällan är så perfekt som man önskar



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KLAR PÅ SVENSKA– Visst håller du med om att det gick bra igår hos dina familjehemsföräldrar, Elias älskling?

– Du menar mina riktiga föräldrar? Jovisst, det gick bra, precis som du förutsåg, älskling. Allt med dem har legat som ett ok över mig tills igår, så tack så mycket.

– Då håller du med om att det är dags att leta rätt på flera du kan bjuda till bröllopet? Vill du jag skall följa med dej till ditt jobb imorgon med en kaka?

– Jag vet inte... på ett sätt, men...

– Elias älskling. Du vet att jag ser igenom dej. Vad det handlar om är att det finns motsägelser, inte sant? Bara säg vad du tänker.

– Om du följer med... då ser det ut som att jag inte klarar av det själv.

Elias tystnar ett ögonblick.

– Men om du inte gör det så kommer jag säga fel saker. Eller inget alls.

Lovisa lutar huvudet lite på sned och funderar.

– Okej. Då gör vi det enkelt. Hur är ditt rykte som kock på jobbet?

– De har ingen aning om att jag är bra i köket. Vi pratar inte så mycket alls, utanför det vi jobbar med.

– Bra. Då följer jag med och du säger att **jag** har bakat kakan. Därmed blir det inte konstigt att jag är med.

– Det låter bra, fast då måste du också vara den som faktiskt bakar en kaka. Jag har aldrig sett dig baka än.

– Det är lugnt, jag kan baka. Jag bakar åt dej. Klart jag gör det för min älskling.

Och så blev det. Dagen efter bakade Lovisa en kaka och sedan åkte de tillsammans ner till Elias arbetsplats. Han var inte riktigt bekväm där, men inte heller främmande. De kom lagom till eftermiddagsfiket och alla satt samlade i fikarummet med kaffekoppar.

– Hej. Jag tog med kaka till fiket.

– Har du med dig förstärkning? sa Patrik retfullt.

– Nej.

– Jag är Elias fästmö. Och jag har gjort kakan. Vad väntar ni på? Ska ni inte smaka?

Alla tog för sig av kakan och berömde Lovisa. Elias hämtade kaffe till sig och Lovisa och tog också för sig en bit själv. Han satt tyst medan samtalet runt honom flöt på, stilla i bakgrunden. Lovisa kastade sig däremot in i samtalet, visade sin sociala sida och lyste upp rummet. Han blev osäker, funderade på när han skulle hoppa in i samtalet. Han tittade på Lovisa som förstod.

– Nu får ni alla hålla tyst ett tag era pratkvarnar, för Elias har något att säga.

– Jo... alltså, om ni lyssnar så finns chans till gratis mat på slutet.

Det tog skruv. Ett ögonblick senare var rummet tyst.

– Som sagt, Lovisa är min fästmö. Vi ska gifta oss, och ni är ju alla mina vänner... typ... så jag undrar... jo... är det någon som vill komma till vårt bröllop som min gäst? Ni behöver inte...

Patrik svarade direkt:

– Visst, jag kommer, om jag får.

– Räkna med mig också, sa Mikael och Simon nästan i kör.

– Jag kan vara din bestman! utbrast Patrik. Det vore ju kul att hjälpa till med allt före och under bröllopet.

– Eh... tack, det låter snällt. Jag uppskattar det verkligen. Det känns tryggt att ha någon som kan ta ansvar för sådant.

– Toppen! Då kör vi på det praktiska... och sen fixar jag en fantastisk svensxa, flinade Patrik. Du behöver inte bekymra dig, Elias, jag håller koll.

– Ni andra som vill komma kan väl messa mig på Teams, så skickar jag inbjudningskort, avslutade Elias.

Elias kände sig nästan lättad när han gick därifrån. I vanlig ordning hade Lovisas blotta närvaro fått honom att känna ett visst lugn. När han kom hem hade alla tre skickat meddelanden till honom, liksom Daniel, Fredrik, Axel och Emma. Han hade arbetat tillsammans med alla fyra och satt dessutom just nu i samma projekt som Patrik, Fredrik och Axel.

Han hade ingen aning om att Patrik planerade en galen svensxa. Elias såg fram emot skratt och roliga upplevelser, men innerst inne hoppades han att det inte skulle bli alltför vilt. Vad han inte visste var att katastrofen redan låg på lur, redo att slå till och rubba hans humör helt ur balans.



– Hej, Elias älskling. Hur var din svensxa? Du är hemma tidigt. Vänta, vad har hänt, du ser arg ut?

Elias slog igen dörren hårt efter sig. Det brukade han inte göra. Han såg verkligen rasande ut. Han började skrika åt Lovisa, något han aldrig gjort förut, inte ens under deras stora bråk.

– Den där förbannade Patrik! Ja, även Mikael och Simon och hela jävla patrasket från mitt jobb! Jag har mailat dem

att de inte är välkomna på vårt bröllop. Och försök inte övertala mig att, typ, förlåta dem, för det kommer inte ske!

Lovisa höll fram armarna mot honom och sa:

– Kom hit, Elias älskling. Du är väl inte arg på mej, hoppas jag? Ta några djupa andetag och berätta vad som hänt för mej.

Elias blundade och andades djupt. Sedan sökte han Lovisa famn och intygade:

– Naturligtvis är jag inte arg på dig, Lovisa. Du har inte gjort något fel. Ursäkta att jag skrek på dig, det var opåkallat. Det är den här så kallade svensexan som jag är rosenrasande på.

– Kom och sätt dej, Elias älskling, och berätta allt från början. Visst var det Patrik, Simon och Mikael som var med? De andra fyra från ditt jobb kom inte, eller hur?

– Det stämmer. De hade bjudit mig till en bar och jag var redan misstänksam där, med all rätt. Men som min älskling / flickvän / fästnö lärt mig så tänkte jag göra mitt bästa att anpassa mig för att verka mera social. Vi satte oss vid ett bord och Patrik hämtade dricka till oss alla från baren.

– Alkohol, gissar jag.

– Självklart. Jag berättade så snällt jag kunde att jag inte dricker alkohol av personliga skäl men att jag kan köpa något att dricka själv. Men Patrik sade att det inte var något problem och att han skulle byta ut den. Så han tog mitt glas tillbaka till bardisken.

– Byta ut drinken? Det finns väl inget öppet köp i en bar!

– Jag tänkte detsamma, så när han kom tillbaka med en cola så var jag misstänksam och luktade på den i smyg. Den luktade definitivt etanol, så han försökte helt klart lura mig att dricka alkohol, troligen för att få mig full.

– Då förstår jag att du blev så arg.

– Nja, jag tänkte på dig och behärskade mig. Det fanns en blomma bredvid min stol, så jag hällde ut drickan där. Sedan försökte jag vara social. Jag har ingen aning om hur det gick, men jag försökte lyssna och prata så avslappnat jag kunde. Det var faktiskt rätt trevligt, trots allt.

– Det förvånar mej inte. Du klarar det mesta.

– Kanske det. När Mikael såg att mitt glas var tomt så gick han bort till baren för att köpa mer. Jag försökte titta på vad han gjorde, men såg bara att han fick två glas, ett litet och ett stort. Sedan kom han tillbaka med bara det stora. Gissa själv.

– Han hade troligen spetsat din cola igen.

– Säkert, det luktade så. Denna gång tog jag lite längre tid på mig att hälla ut glaset i blomman. Då gick Simon bort till baren. Den här gången fejkade jag att jag letade efter något och tog några steg bort. Jag kunde tydligt se vad han gjorde. Mycket riktigt spetsade han min cola.

– Wow, så alla tre försökte lura i dej sprit. Var det nu som du blev arg?

– Jag var nog rätt arg på insidan, men kontrollerade mig. Jag lät det tredje glaset stå kvar, hällde bara ut lite grann. Hoppas att blomman överlevt, förresten. Sedan kom det en

kvinnan fram till bordet. Hon hade... stora behag, om du förstår vad jag menar, och väldigt lite kläder. Hon tittade på

Patrik som pekade på mig, och då gick hon fram till mig. Först stod hon bara där, väldigt nära, utan att röra mig.

– Vad gjorde hon?!?

– Jag tryckte mig bakåt och protesterade. Då började hon långsamt gunga framför mig, nästan rytmiskt. Jag försökte glida undan, men hon satte händerna mot stolsryggen, över mina axlar, så att jag inte kunde resa mig. Hennes bröst var typ några centimeter från mitt ansikte.

– Det där är helt jävla sjukt!

– När hon sedan försökte sätta sig i mitt knä fick jag nog. Jag gled ner på golvet och ålade mig ut under bordet. Jag ställde mig upp när jag kommit ut på andra sidan. Nu gick det inte längre att hålla tillbaka. Jag skrek åt dem: ”Vad i helvete håller ni på med?”. Patrik skrattade bara och sade: ”Ta det lugnt, grabben. Det är din svensxa. Släpp loss lite.”

– ”Släpp loss lite”, sa han det? Vilket svin! Har han ingen aning om hur du fungerar?

– Tydligen inte. Men han var själv rätt full. Jag fortsatte skrika åt honom: ”Du är härmed sparkad som min bestman. Och ni kan alla glömma mitt bröllop. Jag kommer att hyra en vakt som kastar ut er om ni dyker upp.” Sedan gick jag därifrån och tog bussen hem. På bussen skickade jag ett e-mail till alla sju från jobbet och drog tillbaka min inbjudan. De är inte längre välkomna.

Lovisas ansikte hade blivit spänt och Elias kände så väl igen rynkan mellan hennes ögon.

– Du ser... arg ut? Gjorde jag fel?

Lovisa drog in andan och skakade på huvudet.

– Elias älskling... du gjorde rätt. Punkt. Han beställde en jävla lap dance åt dej. Vad tänkte han med? Jag är inte arg på dej, utan på dem. Det handlade inte om att du gjort något fel, utan om att de andra fullständigt struntade i dina gränser.

Hon tog ett djupt andetag.

– Det där var alla tre som fullständigt misslyckades med att respektera dej. Och jag respekterar dej så vansinnigt mycket för att du sa ifrån och gick därifrån. Men...

– Nu kommer det. Du tycker att jag överreagerade, inte sant? Att jag inte borde ha skrikit åt dem. Och absolut inte åt dig.

– Du hade all rätt att skrika. Och jag är faktiskt glad att du till slut lyckades visa dina känslor så tydligt. Nej, Elias älskling, det är inte alls det.

Hon tvekade en aning.

– Det är bara det att du har bjudit sju personer till vårt bröllop. Det var bara tre som var med i baren. Det känns lite som en kollektiv bestraffning.

– Jag har svårt att tro att de andra fyra inte visste om vad som skulle hända, och som minimum kunde förvarnat mig.

– Det kan stämma, men min magkänsla från när jag träffade dem är att de kan vara lika introverta som du, och

helt enkelt inte visste. Men din reaktion är hur som helst helt och hållet rättfärdigad.

– Tack för att du förstår mig, Lovisa min älskade. Det börjar kännas bättre nu. Jag är bara lite orolig hur de kommer att reagera imorgon. Oberoende av allt så är det ju mina kollegor, och jag jobbar tillsammans med flera av dem, inklusive svinpälsen Patrik.

– Jag hoppas att du förstår att jag stöttar dej oberoende av vad som händer härnäst. Min kärlek till dej har om möjligt blivit ännu starkare nu.

Elias kramade Lovisa länge och började långsamt lugna ner sig. Hon hade alltid haft den inverkan på honom.

– Ja, ja. Ifall de andra anser sig illa behandlade så får de kontakta mig, men Patrik, Mikael och Simon är bannlysta.

– Det håller jag med om, Elias älskling. Om jag ser dem igen får de se upp. Jag klöser ögonen ur dem!



Elias jobbade som vanligt hemifrån dagen efter. Efter några timmar kom ett inkommande samtal på Teams och han gjorde en grimas. Det var Fredrik som ringde, och Elias blev genast orolig att det hade med gårdagen att göra. Men de jobbade ju i samma projekt, så det handlade troligen om något arbetsrelaterat, och han svarade med video.

– Hej, Elias. Hur är det med dig idag?

– Det är väl bra, antar jag.

– Jo, angående det där mejlet du skickade igår. Jag har frågat Patrik om vad som hände på svensexan, men han säger bara att du blev arg utan anledning och drog. På något sätt tror jag inte på honom, så jag vill höra det från dig. Men också, alltså...

Fredrik tvekade och såg besvärad ut.

– Jag tänkte att Daniel, Axel och Emma kanske också vill höra... och kanske ställa några frågor. Men bara om det är okej för dig, vi vill inte kritisera eller pressa dig på något sätt. Vi är mest nyfikna. Vad säger du?

Elias kände hur oron började krypa i honom, men minnet av vad Lovisa sagt kvällen innan om kollektiv bestraffning fick honom att tveka. Han förstod att han måste lyssna på dem trots allt.

– Alright, du kan ringa in dem. Men bara de tre, och ingen diskussion, okey?

– Visst, självklart.

Snart dök de andra tre upp på skärmen. Alla hade kameran på, som de visste att Elias ville, utom Emma.

– Så, Elias, fortsatte Fredrik, vad hände egentligen igår kväll på svensexan som Patrik, Mikael och Simon ordnade?

Elias berättade ingående vad som hänt och hur han själv hade reagerat. Han uteslöt ingenting, inte heller att Lovisa var på hans sida och var rosenrasande.

– Jag har nästan väntat mig en reaktion från er fyra som inte deltog. Jag är ledsen, men jag har svårt att tro på att ni inte visste vad som skulle hända.

Alla satt tysta. Elias kände hur paniken nästan växte i honom. Till slut fortsatte han:

– Allt jag berättat är sant, oberoende vad Patrik påstår.

– Jag tror på dig, Elias, sa Fredrik. Det där är inte alls vad vi fick höra, och det han gjort är helt jävla oacceptabelt. Jag hade verkligen ingen aning om det här, och efter det här vill jag inte ha något med honom att göra. Jag kommer ta det vidare. Jag tänker fan inte jobba med någon som betar sig så.

Elias blev orolig över hur chefen skulle reagera på allt det här. Det blev en pinsam tystnad innan Daniel frågade försiktigt:

– Jag menar... om det är okej, alltså, skulle vi fyra kunna närvara på ditt bröllop trots allt, Elias?

– Jag har bara hört vad Fredrik sagt än. Ni andra får säga vad ni anser om svensexan också.

– Alltså... började Daniel. Det är fullständigt oacceptabelt vad Patrik har gjort. Jag känner honom inte, och därför ville jag inte ens komma på svensexan. Hade jag anat hans planer hade jag sagt till dig direkt.

– Håller helt med de andra, fortsatte Axel lågmält. Jag vet att Patrik är galen och vill inte ha något med honom att göra. Du behöver inte bjuda mig längre, Elias, jag borde ha förvarnat dig om hur han är. Jag är riktigt ledsen och förstår hur du känner.

– Du då, Emma? utmanade Elias. Du har inte ens vågat sätta på kameran. Vad anser du?

Emma tvekade innan hon slog på kameran. Hennes ansikte var rödgråtet, och hon snyftade högt:

– Det är fruktansvärt det som hänt dig, Elias. Jag menar... om min pojkvän hade accepterat en... ja... lap dance från... ja... wow. Jag skulle ha gjort slut, jag svär. Att Patrik ens kan få för sig något sådant... nej, det hade jag aldrig kunnat ana. Jag är verkligen ledsen för dig, och hoppas att din flickvän förstår.

– Jodå, hon förstår, svarade Elias.

Han tystnade och alla fyra väntade nervöst på vad han skulle säga. Till slut fortsatte han:

– Nu kommer jag att göra så här: jag har spelat in hela det här samtalet, och jag kommer att be Lovisa titta på det. Hon är expert på att läsa ansikten och röstlägen. Efter hennes bedömning, så kommer jag att skicka ett e-mail, troligen ikväll, med mitt beslut. Ni får helt enkelt vänta tills dess.

– Det är fullständigt okej, Elias, sa Fredrik. Vi förstår och accepterar. Oberoende av allt kommer jag inte att jobba med Patrik mer.

Samtalet avslutades och Elias började slappna av igen när dörrklockan ringde. Han tittade i kameran, det var Teddy, Lovisas kusin. Han gick och öppnade dörren.

– Hej, Elias, har det lugnat ner sig nu? Ja, Lovisa har berättat om svenssexan igår. Jag tänkte bara meddela att jag är din nya bestman.

– Nej det är du inte. Jag behöver ingen bestman.

– Spelar ingen roll. Tvinga mig inte att ta fram bazookan.

– Bazookan?

– Japp, jag övertygar Lovisa, hon är min bästa vän, att gå till dig och fladdra med ögonfransarna. Då smälter du som choklad i solen. Tro mig, jag gör det om jag måste!

– Jisses, du är lika jobbig som Lovisa kan vara!

– Nope, mycket jobbigare. Fast inte lika snygg.

– Ja, ja, kom in då så får vi diskutera vad du kan göra.

Teddy kom in och de satte sig i arbetsrummet.

– Det här kan du göra, Teddy, ifall du nu måste vara min bestman. Jag är skräckslagen inför bröllopet, så du får stötta mig.

– Vad menar du? Är du rädd för att gifta dig med Lovisa?

– Inte för att **vara** gift med henne, det låter underbart. Det är själva ceremonin som skrämmer mig. Du får lära dig utantill hur den går till, sedan läsa av rummet. Lyssna på prästen, kolla vad Lovisa gör för att sedan tvinga mig att göra rätt i varje stund. Jag vill inte skämma ut mig på mitt eget bröllop inför Lovisa.

– Det fixar jag! Inga problem. Jag kommer att hålla ordning på ringarna också, antingen bära dem eller se till att du har dem med dig. Sen måste jag hålla tal efteråt på mottagningen, det gör en marskalk. För att inte tala om att fixa en **riktig** svensxa åt dig.

– Nej tack. Det räcker med **en** som försökt suppa mig full.

– Ta det lugnt, jag kommer att kolla av med dig innan jag gör något. Vi kanske kan gå på ett Escape Room, eller biljard. Varför inte bowling? Du bestämmer, jag fixar.

– Jag är usel på sport, men bowling? Varför inte?

Elias jobbdator ringde igen och han såg att det var chefen som sökte honom på Teams. Stressad sade han:

– Du får gå nu, Teddy. Jag måste ta det här samtalet. Det är trots allt arbetstid.

– Alright, Elias. Vi får höras senare om detaljerna. Ha det bra så länge!

Elias vände sig mot datorn utan att svara Teddy och tog emot samtalet från sin chef. Under tiden så lämnade Teddy huset.

– Hej, Elias. Har du tid för ett samtal?

– Självklart!

– Tack för det. Fredrik kontaktade mig och berättade om svenssexan som Patrik ordnade för dig igår, och att den tydligen spårade ur.

– Jo, det hände något igår.

– Jag vill vara tydlig: vad du eller Patrik gör på fritiden är ert ansvar och angår inte mig. Jag kommer inte att kritisera någon eller vidta åtgärder. Men nu har Fredrik varit tydlig med att han vägrar jobba i samma projekt som Patrik, ett projekt som du leder. Även Axel har antytt samma sak.

– Jo, jag har hört det, men det är väl ändå deras sak?

– Det stämmer. Men vad jag inte vill se är att något drama utanför arbetstid påverkar arbetet. Med tanke på vad som hänt så antar jag att du också vägrar jobba med Patrik.

– Nej, det stämmer inte, svarade Elias. Jag kan skilja på arbete och privatliv. Patrik är en mycket duktig, som programmerare, och vad som hände på svensexan har inget med arbetet att göra.

– Menar du det? Det var oväntat. Fast jag har insett att du inte tänker som de flesta andra. Men Fredrik och Axel verkar inte kunna skilja på privatliv och jobb på samma sätt. Så om du måste välja mellan Patrik å ena sidan, och Fredrik plus Axel å andra sidan, vad skulle du välja?

– Patrik varje dag. Fredrik och Axel är bra, men de är fortfarande juniora. Så det blir lättare att vara utan dem än att vara utan Patrik.

Hans chef tystade av pur förvåning, ja nästan av chock. Det här var det sista han hade väntat sig. Hur kunde Elias välja Patrik, en person han måste avsky framför dem som försvarat honom? Samtidigt var det då typiskt för Elias att alltid tänka logiskt och inte låta sina känslor bestämma.

– Nåväl, då vet jag din åsikt. Jag får fundera lite och återkomma. Bara en sista sak. Ifall jag skulle lyfta ut Patrik ändå, finns det någon annan som du skulle vilja ha?

– Öh, jo... Alltså... jag har svårt med kvinnor generellt, men Emma är väldigt duktig också.

– Tack, Elias för att du varit så ärlig. Jag hör av mig.

Elias lade på och tittade på sina händer. De skakade av nervositet, och han började genast tänka på Lovisa och önskade att hon vore där för att lugna ner honom. Han drömde sig bort någon minut och såg Lovisa för sitt inre. Sedan vände han sig mot dator igen, med stadiga händer.

Han fick jobba ostört i flera timmar när det ringde igen på Teams. Den här gången var det Patrik, och Elias blev orolig på riktigt, men svarade ändå. De jobbade ju trots allt i samma projekt.

– Hej, Patrik, vad kan du vilja?

– Vad i helvete har du gjort, Elias! Jag skojade bara lite med dig igår kväll, helt oskyldigt. Och nu har jag plötsligt kastats ut från ditt projekt! Jag ska hamna i en förbannad helpdesk, det mest hjärndöda jobb som finns. Och det är ditt fel, din idiot! Hur kan du göra något sånt mot mig?

– Får jag prata?

– Kör hårt, din otacksamma tölp!

– Alltså, telefonen har gått varm här, eller Teams. Senast ringde vår chef och berättade att det finns de som inte vill jobba med dig. Jag förklarade för honom att jag hellre vill ha dig i projektet än de andra, du är ju mer kompetent. Tydligen har chefen valt en annan väg, och det kan jag bara beklaga.

– Vad! Du valde mig trots att du är så arg på mig?

– Jo... det du gjorde igår behöver väl inte påverka jobbet, eller hur?

– Oj... wow. Elias. Wow. Ursäkta att jag skällde, och... ursäkta för igår. Jag läste nog inte riktigt av rummet.

– Nej, du var korkad igår. Privat vill jag aldrig träffa dig mer, och mitt bröllop kan du glömma. Men jag hoppas kunna jobba med dig i något annat projekt i framtiden.

– Du är ju helt otrolig! Men oroa dig inte, jag har redan bestämt mig för att säga upp mig från det här skitjobbet.

– Lycka till i framtiden då.

Patrik lade på, fullständigt förvirrad och chockad över hur Elias kunde vara så lugn efter allt som hänt. Elias satt och tittade på sina händer, som var helt stadiga. *Lovisa, jag älskar dig så mycket, du kan till och med lugna ner mig på avstånd*, tänkte han.

Det dröjde inte länge förrän Lovisa kom hem, lätt orolig, och undrade vad som hänt under dagen. Elias berättade allt som hänt och bad henne titta på inspelningen med Daniel, Fredrik, Axel och Emma. Hon bekräftade att de menade vad de sagt, så Elias skickade ett mejl till dem, ursäktade sig, och skrev att de var välkomna till bröllopet.



Teddy höll sitt löfte så några veckor senare stod Elias för första gången i en bowlinghall. Teddy hade bjudit de fyra från jobbet och två av sina och Lovisas vänner så det var totalt åtta personer. Teddy förmanade alla:

– Kom ihåg allesammans, att vi är här för att spela bowling och ingenting annat. Visserligen finns det öl här, men av respekt till Elias så dricker vi ingen alkohol.

– Alltså, om ni andra vill dricka något så är det er ensak, svarade Elias. Mitt val behöver inte vara ert val.

– Sant, men vi håller oss nyktra, punkt slut. Elias är ju nykter, så då blir det ingen öl för någon. Jag menar, rättvisa först!

– Kan du bowla, Elias? frågade Fredrik. Så duktig som du alltid är så kommer du väl att äga ikväll.

– Jag vet allt om bowling, svarade han. Sökte upp alla regler och poängräkning, som är lite komplex. Kollade också upp bästa anfallsvinkeln för klotet mot kägglorna. Och hur man får till den utifrån olika utgångspunkter genom rotation på klotet.

– Det låter bra, kommenterade Fredrik. Men hur tror du att du kommer att mäta dig mot oss andra?

– Där tror jag ingenting där, jag vet att jag kommer att komma sist, för jag har en usel bollkänsla. Jag vet allt om bowling i teorin, men ingenting i praktiken.

De andra skrattade glatt, och Elias kände sig belåten av att kunna roa dem. Mycket riktigt så missade Elias för det mesta, men han blev allt bättre och kände en stor tillfredsställelse över det. När första serien var slut så låg han mycket riktigt sist.

De satte igång med andra serien så började han få till kasten allt bättre. Han satte flera spärrar och till och med en strike. Till slut kom han på fjärde plats.

Efteråt tackade han Teddy:

– Det här var riktigt roligt, Teddy! Jag hade ingen aning om att sport kunde vara så kul. Jag måste helt klart spela igen, kanske med Lovisa.

– Är du säker, trots att du inte fick så bra resultat?

– Jisses, vad spelar poäng för roll? Jag tävlade mot mig själv, och vann stort i andra serien mot första. Tack till er alla för att ni ville vara med ikväll!

Alla skildes åt och ansåg att det varit en riktigt lyckad kväll, och att Elias verkligen släppt loss som de aldrig sett honom göra tidigare.



Elias stod nervöst och väntade med Teddy, sin marskalk, i vapenhuset medan gästerna fyllde kyrkan. Han hälsade kort på sina kollegor, föräldrar och blivande svärföräldrar.

När organisten började spela en lugn melodi så signalerade Teddy till Elias att det var dags att gå in. Elias tyckte att det kändes som om alla stirrade på honom, men i själva verket var det ingen som ens vred på huvudet. Teddy hade gett noggranna instruktioner till gästerna att inte titta på Elias på väg in.

När han väl stod på sin plats och Teddy tog ett steg åt sidan släppte spänningen i bröstet lite och han tittade mot ingången och väntade på Lovisa. Han var fortfarande livrädd för att göra bort sig och sneglade på Teddy som såg helt lugn ut och nickade mot honom.

Bröllopsmarchen började spela. Först kände Elias lättnad över att gästerna slutade stirra på honom och istället vände sig mot ingången. Sedan kom en våg av oro. Nu börjar det som han bävat för. Tre små brudnäsor dök upp, först gick Sebastian sedan två till, fnittrande och ivriga, precis i början av kyrkgången. Elias log brett; han älskade ju små barn och deras energi fick honom att glömma nervositeten för ett ögonblick. Han vinkade försiktigt, och barnen vinkade tillbaka. Och sedan såg han henne. Lovisa kom, sist av alla, och allt annat bleknade. Hans hjärta slog dubbla slag och han fick svårt att andas. Hon var helt bedövande vacker, mer än han någonsin kunnat föreställa sig, och han förstod knappt hur en sådan underbar varelse kunde vilja gifta sig med honom.

Snart stod hon bredvid honom och allt som han trott skulle bli jobbigt sköljde över honom. Lovisa kände hans oro och tog hans hand fast det inte var planerat. Elias tittade på henne och försökte få ordning på sin andning. Teddy puttade honom i sidan och viskade ”Jag har dig”.

Bröllopet fortgick och ingenting av det som Elias varit orolig för inträffade. Han gjorde allt rätt, och det utan att Teddy ens behövde styra honom. På väg ut tillsammans med Lovisa kände han sig stolt, inte bara över sig själv, utan över Lovisa och hela situationen.

Efteråt följde fotograferingen framför kyrkan. Elias genomled den utan ett knyst och lyckades till och med prestera några lyckliga leenden som fastnade på bild. Det var

konstigt, tänkte han, hur småsaker som en kamera kan få en att känna sig så exponerad. Men Lovisas hand i hans gav honom styrka, och han kunde andas lite lugnare.

Mottagningen började och gästerna satte sig vid sina bord. Hedersbordet var längst fram, där Lovisa satt bredvid Elias, och de tre små brudnäbbarna satte sig runt dem. Alla borden var fulla. Människor överallt, några han kände igen, många han inte gjorde. Elias försökte hålla blicken fäst vid Lovisa, barnen och maten, men sorlet runt honom nådde ändå fram. Det fick göra det.

I bakgrunden rörde sig Teddy tyst mellan borden, nickade åt servitörerna, kollade att allt var på plats och log diskret mot Elias när han passerade, som för att säga att han har koll på allt, så Elias kan ta det lugnt.

När tiden kändes rätt höjde Teddy handen lite och bad om tystnad.

– Vi börjar med ett kort tal från Kenneth, sa han. Han vill säga några ord till brudparet.

Sorlet dämpades av sig självt när Kenneth reste sig. Hans ton var försiktig men varm när han höll sitt korta tal. Han påminde om att allt var ordnat ordentligt inför barnet i Lovisas mage och såg nöjd ut med hur bröllopet flöt. Elias kände ett litet sting av nervositet. Kenneths vaksamma blick gav alltid antydning av press, men han log lite mot Lovisa och kunde andas ut när hon log tillbaka varmt.

När Kenneth satte sig igen höjde Teddy åter handen lätt.

– Nu är det Peters tur. Han vill också säga några ord till brudparet.

Då reste sig Peter lugnt och höll ett varmt, personligt tal om Elias. Han berättade hur han och Anna sett honom växa, hur de fått följa honom genom svårigheter och alltid beundrat hans styrka och envishet. Anna flikade in med flera varma ord om hur fantastisk hennes son var som människa. Elias kände stolthet och värme, men också nervositet; det var märkligt att höra sina föräldrar från familjehemmet tala om honom som om han vore deras son i alla år.

Slutligen gick Teddy fram och tog ordet. Hans tal var lättsamt och humoristiskt, med små anekdoter om hur Elias hade lyckats förtrolla Lovisa. Några gäster skrattade, andra nickade uppmuntrande. Elias hörde också en av sina gamla klasskamrater viska något om att Peter måste ljuga eftersom Elias biologiska föräldrar ju hade dött när han gick i deras klass. Han kände hur tårarna hotade, inte sorg, utan blandningen av stolthet, nervositet och lättnad.

Till slut reste sig Elias själv, till många förvåning.

– Alltså... jag tänkte... det här är fel, för brudgummen förväntas inte hålla tal och så... Sedan är det helt omöjligt för mig, med min AST, att prata spontant inför så många personer. Jag har inte ens ett manus... ändå står jag här. Visst är det fantastiskt vad en kvinnas kärlek kan göra med en man?

Några gäster skrattade, andra nickade uppmuntrande.

– Lovisa, älskling. Min fru. Wow, det där lät konstigt att säga men det stämmer ju. Min fru. Så underbart. Jo, det jag ville säga, eller... rätta och så... jag tycker inte om att bli kallad lögnare, och jag tror jag hörde något sånt. Alltså därborta sitter min pappa Peter, bredvid Anna som är min mamma. Fast mina föräldrar är ju döda, har jag sagt. Ändå är de här. Håll med om att mamma ser fantastisk ut för att ha varit död i nästan femton år.

Flera gäster såg förvirrade ut. Några skrattade lite ansträngt, som om de inte riktigt visste om de fick.

– Jo, allvarligt. Mina döda föräldrar är här idag, jag lovar. De är här och tittar på hur deras enda gemensamma son gifter sig och blir lyckligare än någonsin.

Han pekade på ett stort fotografi bakom sig.

– Får jag presentera Bengt och Birgitta, mina **biologiska** föräldrar. Förresten, är allt bra idag, drickat smakar?

Förvirrade blickar efter hans snabba kast av ämne.

– Allt här idag är alkoholfritt. Lovisa insisterade på det, för min skull. Jag älskar dig för det, Lov... min fru. Alltså... för nästan femton år sedan bestämde sig en man för att dricka alkohol. Han drack rätt mycket. Och visst, det var väl inget problem egentligen... tills han satte sig bakom ratten på en 25-tons lastbil och körde iväg.

Elias tystnade och torkade irriterat bort några tårar från ögonen. Inte skulle han gråta på sin lyckligaste dag!

– Några timmar senare kom en polis och socialtjänst hem till mig och förklarade att jag var föräldralös och familjehemsplacerad.

Han svalde.

– Det var den värsta dagen i mitt liv. Och det orsakades av alkohol. Så ursäkta mig ifall jag inte vill se alkohol på min lyckligaste dag.

Gästerna nickade förstående och flera började mumla instämmande.

– Nåväl, det var Peter och Anna här som fick det svåra jobbet att lappa ihop mig igen. Och wow, vad de visade mig stöd, tröst, och, jo faktiskt kärlek. Så här sitter idag mina **riktiga** föräldrar. De som tog hand om mig när jag bara ville ge upp. Så tack, Anna och Peter, för allt ni gjort för mig. Jag vet att jag sagt ”allt” förut, men ni vet säkert vid det här laget vad jag menar med ”allt”.

Elias satte sig ner igen till gästernas applåder. Lovisa lutade sig mot honom och drog honom in i en varm kram. Han kramade tillbaka och lät handen vila på hennes mage.

– Snart blir vi kompletta, viskade han. Med vår lilla ängel på väg blir allt perfekt, eller hur?

Lovisa log och tog hans hand.

– Ja, min älskade make. Nu kan ingenting gå fel längre.

Elias log tillbaka, men lät blicken vila ett ögonblick för länge på hennes mage. Något inom honom rörde sig, en svag, oförklarlig oro som han genast försökte skaka av sig.

Runt dem fortsatte festen. Glas klirrade, någon skrattade högt, musik började spela igen. Kvällen gled långsamt mot sitt slut, och bröllopet lämnade efter sig en känsla av stilla lycka.

Ändå skulle Elias senare minnas just det ögonblicket.

Hur allt kändes fullständigt.

Hur nära de stod det liv de längtat efter.

Och hur lite de visste om vad som väntade.





KLAR PÅ SVENSKA Elias satt vid datorn när Teams plingade till på telefonen. Han klickade på "svara med video". När Ulrikas ansikte dök upp, försökte han le lite.

– Hej, Elias, det är Ulrika från socialtjänsten. Är allting bra med dig?

– Antar det. Vad kan jag hjälpa till med?

– Jo, vi har ett barn som behöver akut omvårdnad. Jag är medveten om att du vill ha barn i förskoleåldern, men vi har slut på alternativ.

– Hur gammalt är barnet då?

– Cirka en timme. Saken är den att omedelbart när mamman och hennes föräldrar kom in till BB så förklarade de att barnmorskan skulle ta hand om spädbarnet direkt. Det fick inte ens beröras av mamman. Och att sjukhuset fick ”göra sig av med oäktingen bäst det kunde” för att citera. Kan du komma in till sjukhuset här och nu och tror du att du klarar av ett så ungt spädbarn?

– Jag kommer. Men jag **tror** inte att jag klarar av ett spädbarn, jag **vet** det.

Snart var Elias på sjukhusets BB-avdelning och fick hålla den lilla flickan.

– Var försiktig med huvudet, hon kan inte balansera det själv än.

– Jag vet, svarade Elias. De berättade allt om det på föräldrautbildningen. Min fru är höggravid, nämligen. Var är mamman just nu?

– Hon ligger i sal 5 och förlossningen gick bra trots hennes ringa ålder. Hon är bara femton år.

Elias nickade och gick ut i korridoren. Men i stället för att gå till höger mot utgången så gick han vänster. Sedan gick han in till sal 5 där en ung kvinna låg i sängen och några som Elias antog var hennes föräldrar stod bredvid tillsammans med en sjuksköterska. Han tog spädbarnet och lade det i sängen bredvid dess mamma.

– Här är ditt barn, sade han kort. Du kan väl i alla fall säga adjö till det innan du kastar bort det!

Mamman slog genast armarna om babyen, log brett och pussade den. Hennes pappa blev ursinnig och rusade runt sängen mot Elias. Han knuffade hårt bort sjuksköterskan, som trillade baklänges, och grep sedan babyen utan att tänka på att stötta dess huvud. Hårt pressade han den mot Elias, som stapplade bakåt och gjorde sitt bästa för att hålla fast huvudet. Pappan vände sig mot sängen och slog den unga mamman i ansiktet med knutna nävar. En gång. Två gånger. När han lyfte handen en tredje gång röt Ulrika, som följt med Elias in, till och grep hans arm. Hon vände sig mot Elias:

– Det är bäst om du går nu, och tar babyen med dig.

Elias gick ut och letade snabbt rätt på en läkare som han bad undersöka babyen. De gick in i ett skötrum och läkaren klämde försiktigt på babyens nacke för att se ifall något skadats. Snart dök Ulrika upp och Elias blev orolig, men visade som vanligt ingenting utåt.

– Du vet att det där var dumt, Elias.

– Jo, jag vet. Ursäkta mig. Jag blev bara så provocerad av att ett barns föräldrar förkastar sin egen avkomma så där.

– Jag håller med i princip. Nåväl, gjort är gjort. Klarar du av babyen själv nu?

– Jodå, läkaren har förklarat att allt är bra med den, så jag kör helt enkelt hem.

– Har du babyskydd till bilen och annat du behöver?

– Vi har redan köpt allt inför vår egen ängel, så jag klarar mig. Får väl köpa BabySemp, blöjor och kläder åt den här ängeln på vägen hem.

– Gör det. Skicka kvittona till kontoret, så ersätter vi alla dina utgifter.

Efter några timmar så kom Lovisa hem. Elias mötte henne i dörren och berättade om nytillskottet. Lovisa blev också helt förtjust av att möta en sådan nyfödd baby.

– Har hon fått mat redan? frågade hon Elias.

– Japp, köpte BabySemp på vägen hem. Efter lite mjölk på läpparna så åt hon rätt intensivt, rapade och somnade igen. Jag köpte inga kläder, men vi kanske kan åka ut tillsammans och köpa lite kläder åt henne?

– Jag älskar dej, Elias, som väntade på mej. Det låter helt underbart att köpa babykläder till henne. Vi kan väl köpa till vår baby samtidigt?

– Visst, behöver bara separata kvitton.

Dagen efter ringde Ulrika igen på Teams.

– Hej, Elias, det är Ulrika. Hur går det med babyn, några problem?

– Inga problem alls. Både jag och min fru njuter i fulla drag och babyn är väldigt snäll. Visst, det är en hel del jobb och sömnlösa nätter naturligtvis, men det är ju normalt.

– Bra, skönt att höra att allt fungerar med babyn och att hon är trygg hos er. Jag vill också säga något annat. Julia, barnets mamma, är föremål för ett LVU-beslut efter det som hände på sjukhuset med hennes föräldrar, Mats och Lena. Pappan bedöms utgöra en risk, och sjukhuset anser därför att det inte är tryggt för Julia att stanna kvar där.

– Jag förstår. Men varför ringer du mig?

– Julia har själv uttryckt ett starkt önskemål om att få bli jourhemsplacerad tillsammans med sitt barn, och jag delar helt hennes uppfattning baserat på vår bedömning av situationen. Samtidigt har du varit tydlig med att du i första hand önskar ha barn i förskoleålder, och det är något vi självklart behöver ta hänsyn till.

– Är hon verkligen redan redo att bli utskriven från BB?

– Ja, det är deras slutsats. Hennes vitala parametrar är stabila. Hon är uppe och går och allt ser bra ut. Hon kommer dock inte att skrivas ut till hemmet, utan vi behöver ett jourhem åt henne. Vi har få alternativ, och det är därför jag frågar dig. Om du kan tänka dig det, kan jag köra henne till dig redan om några timmar.

– Vet Mats om vad jag heter eller var jag bor?

– Nej, inte alls. Han vet inte ens vilken stad du bor i.

– Ta med henne hit, så kan vi diskutera det.

Sagt och gjort, kort därpå kom Ulrika hem till Elias med Julia. Han var ensam hemma, förutom babyn förstås, för Lovisa var fortfarande på jobbet. Julia såg lite förskrämd ut, och verkade titta efter något. Elias visade in dem båda i vardagsrummet och vände sig direkt till Julia:

– Så här är situationen, Julia. Jag hörde från Ulrika att du vill bo här som jourhemsplacerad medan de utreder din situation.

– Det stämmer, svarade Julia, skrämmd av hans allvarliga ansiktsuttryck.

– Jag har ett ovillkorligt krav på dig för att gå med på det. Det är en sak du måste göra, förutom ditt skolarbete.

– Julia går på gymnasiet, flikade Ulrika in. Men vi har tillfälligt hittat en plats på en annan skola, för att få bort henne från sina föräldrar.

– Jag lovar att hjälpa till med matlagning, städning, tvätt och allt du vill, bara jag får bo med mitt barn.

– Glöm det! Jag blir ansvarig för dig, så hushållsarbetet är också mitt ansvar också. Jag pratar om ditt barn. Du ska inte bara leka och ha roligt med det. Du ska ta hand om alla dess behov: mat, promenader, nätter, nerbajsade blöjor, ja allt som det behöver. Är du redo för det, lilla mamma?

– Visst, fast... jag är inte säker på hur...

– Jag visar dig vad som behöver göras. Under skoltid tar jag över omsorgen av babyen. I övrigt är huvudansvaret ditt. Det är inte förhandlingsbart.

– Självklart, det gör jag, svarade Julia nervöst. Det är pappa som inte ville att jag skulle ta hand om babyen. Men jag vill det, definitivt.

– Nåväl, Ulrika. Då kan du gå nu och lämna mor och dotter under min vård. Vad blir nästa steg för dem?

– Mats och Lena har rätt att få beslutet om LVU prövat i förvaltningsrätten. Men det påverkar inte att flickan och babyen är placerade tryggt hos dig här och nu.

Elias följde Ulrika till dörren och gick sedan tillbaka till vardagsrummet där Julia satt kvar.

– Får... tvekade Julia. Får jag träffa min dotter nu?

Elias vände sig om och gick mot sovrummet utan ett ord. Julia följde osäkert med. Där fick hon se sin baby i samma spjålsäng som var tänkt för Elias eget barn. Babyn sov lugnt och Julia suckade djupt av lycka.

– Visst är hon det finaste som finns? utbrast hon.

– Det är alla barn, svarade Elias onödigt barskt.

Elias visade in Julia i barnkammaren.

– Här får du sova. Vi flyttar in spjålsängen hit när babyn har vaknat.

– Alva.

– Vem?

– Min baby ska heta Alva. Det har jag redan bestämt.

– Jaha, formellt är det din vårdnadshavare som bestämmer, men jag skall informera Ulrika om din önskan.

Elias gick in i arbetsrummet och satte sig framför datorn för att jobba. Han hörde hur Julia rumsterade om i rummet, men valde att ignorera det.

Efter någon timme började Alva att gråta och Elias avvaktade lite. Belåtet hörde han hur Julia gick till henne, lyfte upp henne och sedan gick in i sitt rum. Alva fortsatte att gråta och efter ett tag ropade Julia högt.

– Elias, snälla, kan du komma!

Elias gick in i rummet och stannade tvärt. Julia hade tagit av sig blusen och satt topless med Alva i armarna.

– Jag kan inte få Alva att amma, snälla hjälp mig!

Elias höll händerna för ögonen när han såg Julias nakna bröst och vågade inte gå in.

– Snälla Elias, kom in och hjälp mig. Jag bryr mig inte om att du ser mina bröst. Alva är viktigast för mig.

Elias tog ett djupt andetag, gick in och satte sig bredvid Julia. Han studerade Alva som skrek några centimeter från Julias ena bröstvårta.

– Alva förstår inte att det där har mat, sa Elias. Massera din bröstvårta lite och försök pressa ut några droppar mjölk så hon får lukta det.

Julia gjorde som han sa, men Alva fortsatte att gråta.

– Okej, håll nu Alva stadigt, glöm inte att balansera huvudet, och fukta hennes läppar med mjölken. Sedan måste du förbereda dig på att det kommer att göra ont!

Julia gjorde som Elias sa och när Alva fick smaken av bröstmjölk på läpparna högg hon till. Det var tur för Julia att hon inte hade några tänder än, för det kändes nästan som att bli biten av en haj.

– Aj! Aaah! Oooh... Min lilla, ta det lite försiktigt, du gör mamma ont.

– Hon lugnar snart ner sig när hon märker att hon får mat. Håll ut en stund bara.

Mycket riktigt lugnade Alva ner sig och började suga rytmiskt, och Julia blev så lycklig när hon kände det.

– Vet du hur man får henne att rapa efteråt?

– Jadå, jag har kollat på massor med videos på nätet när mamma och pappa inte såg.

Elias skyndade ut från rummet och gick tillbaka till sin dator. Han kämpade för att fokusera på jobbet och förtränga vad han just sett.

Dagen fortsatte och snart kom Lovisa hem från jobbet. Hon möttes som så ofta i dörren av en kyss från Elias. Det var uppenbart för Lovisa att han hade något att säga.

– Välkommen hem, älskling. Det har hänt saker här... som är... väldigt pinsamma...

Lovisa hängde av sig jackan långsamt och gav honom en leende och en sned blick.

– Okej. Den meningen brukar inte betyda småsaker när den kommer från dej.

– Den inkluderar nakna tonårsbröst och skrikande barn.

Lovisa stannade upp mitt i hallen. Hon såg på honom i några sekunder, som om hon vägde orden mot hans ansikte.

– Jaha, sa hon till slut. Det där behöver du förklara, som du säkert förstår.

Elias suckade tungt, och började berätta. Om Julia. Om Alva. Om amningen, paniken, hur han själv hade stått handfallen men ändå gått in. Lovisa lyssnade utan att avbryta.

Sedan gick de in i barnkammaren, som Julia vid det här laget hade gjort mer till en tonårslya. Spjålsängen var flyttad dit och Julia stod böjd över den och såg ömt på sin sovande baby.

– Hej, Julia. Det här är min fru, Lovisa. Jag har berättat för henne allt om dig och amningen och så...

Elias hejdade sig och blev alldeles röd i ansiktet.

– Glöm det där, Elias, sa Lovisa lugnt. Du hjälpte en nybliven mor att ge sitt barn mat. Inget annat.

Elias tog ett djupt andetag och lät axlarna sjunka. Han slappnade av igen.

– Hej på dej, förresten, Julia, jag har hört en del om dej. Fast jag trodde du inte ville ta hand om ditt barn?

– Alva heter hon, om jag får bestämma. Alltså, det är pappa som inte vill det. Titta på henne, så underbar!

– Jodå, jag vet, jag fick ta hand om henne igår kväll. Ja, som du ser så får jag snart ett eget litet knyte att hålla om och älska.

Lovisa lade en hand på sin gravidmage.

– En sak vill jag du ska veta, Julia. Det handlar om Elias.

– Vadå? frågade Julia och tittade osäkert mot Elias.

– Elias här är den snällaste personen i världen, och det finns ingenting han inte skulle göra för din dotter eller för dej. Han ser oftast allvarlig ut, men det är bara en mask.

– Stämmer faktiskt, sade Elias och försökte sig på ett leende. Fast för Lovisa är jag genomskinlig.

Julia log också, och slappnade av lite.

Under de följande dagarna började Julia vänja sig vid att ta hand om Alva, och hon var lyckligare än hon någonsin varit. Samtidigt oroade hon sig för vad hennes föräldrar skulle hitta på, eftersom hennes pappa hade blivit

fullständigt rasande när han fick beskedet om LVU och vägrade acceptera situationen.



Några veckor senare satt Elias i Förvaltningsrätten tillsammans med Julia, Alva och Ulrika. Även Mats och Lena var naturligtvis där, redo att argumentera för att Julia skulle flytta hem igen. Elias var lite orolig, men ändå rätt trygg eftersom han fått löfte om att vara anonym. Mats vände sig till honom med frågor efter att ordföranden hade tillåtit det:

- Så, du är alltså den som Julia bor hos. Vad heter du?
- Av sekretesskäl kan jag inte uppge mitt namn.
- Jag vill veta vem jag pratar med, ditt förnamn är?

Elias satt helt tyst. Mats blev irriterad och höjde rösten:

– Du måste säga det, jag kräver att få veta vem jag talar med!

– Jag har redan svarat på frågan, du kommer inte att få ett annat svar ifall du upprepar den.

Ordföranden lyfte handen och avbröt:

– Mats, rätten har beslutat att detta vittnes identitet ska skyddas. Du får ställa relevanta frågor om barnens vård, men du har ingen rätt att kräva hans namn.

– Nåväl, om du skall vara så ogin, fortsatte Mats irriterat. Anser du verkligen att det är rimligt att en femtonåring får och uppfostrar ett barn?

– Naturligtvis inte. Men...

– Så du anser alltså att Julia gjort fel.

– Herr ordförande, får jag avsluta utan att bli avbruten?

– Självklart, fortsätt, sa ordföranden med en sträng blick på Mats.

– Jag anser att man som förälder är ansvarig för sitt eget barn. Delvis juridiskt, men definitivt moraliskt. Barnet har inte bett om att bli fött, så föräldern är då skyldig att göra sitt bästa för att ta hand om det, även om det innebär en del svårigheter. Och även ifall föräldern är ung.

– Med det här är en oäkting som inte borde ha blivit född! Av en som själv är ett barn! Det är inte rätt! Vad skulle du ha gjort om din dotter fått barn så tidigt?

– Julia är omyndig, men uppenbarligen tillräckligt vuxen för att utföra det som krävs för att sätta ett barn till världen. Hon, eller hennes föräldrar, har gjort valet att, trots hennes unga år, inte genomföra abort.

– Mord, menar du?

– Abort enligt lagens bokstav. Om min egen dotter gjort något sådant? Jag har ingen barn än, men jag skulle självklart skällt ut henne och kanske gett rumsarrest i en månad. Sedan skulle jag förstå att en tonårshjärna inte är färdigutvecklad, och att konsekvenstänk inte är fullt utvecklat förrän runt 25 år. Jag skulle förlåta henne för att jag älskar henne, och sedan stötta henne på alla sätt så att hon kan ta hand om sitt barn, ert barnbarn. Ert eget kött och blod.

Mats blev alltmer irriterad ju längre Elias talade. Den enda anledningen till att han inte avbröt var de stränga blickarna från ordföranden.

– Jag skulle aldrig ta hand om en oäkting vars far inte ens är svensk och som har flytt landet. Det är uppenbart att du inte har något vettigt att säga, så håll bara tyst!

Elias log lite snett, ställde sig upp och lyfte upp Alva och gick över med henne till Julias mamma, Lena. Han sträckte fram Alva mot henne, och hon tog försiktigt och ömt emot henne. Mats vrålade till, ställde sig upp och rusade runt bordet, knytnävarna spända, ansiktet rött av ilska. Elias ställde sig i vägen och, till sin egen stora förvåning, sade:

– Visst, klipp till mig bara som du slog din egen dotter! Det kommer säkert att hjälpa dig i din önskan att återfå din dotters vårdnad och respekt.

Mats hejdade sig och Elias backade inte en millimeter. Ordföranden grep in och sa strängt:

– Jag avbryter er där. Förhandlingen ska genomföras utan bråk. Kan jourhemmet återta barnet och återgå till sin plats?

Elias tog Alva igen och gav tillbaka henne till Julia. Han kunde inte låta bli att tillägga:

– Det här nonsens om att Julia inte får röra sitt barn efter födseln, för att inte knyta an till det, visar på total okunskap. En mamma knyter redan an under de nio månader hon bär barnet i sin livmoder. Att därmed skilja henne från barnet vid förlossningen är osedvanligt korkat.

– Jag instämmer i sak, sa ordföranden, men dessa påhopp under förhandlingen är inte acceptabla.

Elias satte sig ner och tänkte: *Vad i hela världen håller jag på med? Jag brukar aldrig gå på så här. Men ibland måste man stå upp för barnen.* Han höll tyst under resten av förhandlingen som naturligtvis slutade med det väntade utfallet: både Julia och Alva blev kvar under LVU.

Dagen efter kontaktades Elias av Ulrika igen. Denna gång var det Lena som ville träffa sin dotter. Elias tvekade, men sade att han kunde ta Julia och Alva till stadsbiblioteket, under förutsättning att polis fanns närvarande. Några dagar senare satt han där med flickorna, polisen var på plats, och Ulrika höll sig tyst vid hans sida. Lena kom in genom dörren och möttes direkt av polisen:

– Jag heter Frida. Polis. Ni kan gå in och träffa er dotter.

Lena tog ett djupt andetag och steg in. Hennes blick mjuknade när hon såg Julia sitta med böckerna framför sig och läsa för Alva. Frida stod kvar, stilla, och lugnet hölls. Elias och Ulrika satt tyst och betraktade scenen.

– Hej, älskling. Jag är så ledsen för allt bråk med pappa. Men jag älskar dig så mycket... och... får jag hålla din baby?

– Hon ska heta Alva, mamma. Här, varsågod.

Lena tog försiktigt Alva i sina armar och tittade på henne kärleksfullt, bredvid sin dotter.

– Wow, Alva ser precis ut som du i den här åldern. Vilket litet underverk. Så oskyldig och obekymrad. Du verkar ta väl hand om henne.

– Jag har fått en del hjälp från Elias... Oj, jag skulle inte säga ditt namn. Sorry.

Lena vände sig mot Elias. Han blev lite orolig, men visade ingenting som vanligt.

– Elias, var det? Lugn, jag ska inte berätta för min man. Jag är så förvirrad just nu, och vet inte vad jag ska göra. Det här är min älskade dotter och hennes älskade barn. Jag förstår hur Julia känner, för jag har upplevt samma sak.

Elias tvekade lite innan han svarade:

– Jag antar att du behöver fundera över vad som är viktigast för dig. Ditt barn eller din man. Helst båda. Men om du måste välja... välj.

Lena blev tyst och funderade. Den här Elias verkade säga kloka saker. Hon fick verkligen tänka efter.

Ett par veckor senare hade allt ordnat sig. Elias tyckte inte om hur situationen hade utvecklats sig, särskilt eftersom han själv hade triggat händelseförloppet.

Lena hade återfått vårdnaden över Julia, och Julia fick vårdnaden över Alva, med sin egen mor som förmyndare, eftersom hon fortfarande var under 18.

Mats hade skrivit på skilsmässohandlingarna när Lena tvingade fram sitt ultimatum: skilsmässa eller Alva. Om han

ville behålla Lena, måste han acceptera Julia, och om han accepterade Julia, måste han acceptera Alva.

Elias kunde äntligen pusta ut och fokusera på Lovisa och deras kommande barn. Han var glad över att ha fått ta hand om ett spädbarn, men mådde fortfarande illa av dramat, fast inte lika illa som han brukade vid sådant kaos.



Lovisas mage blev allt större, och både hon och Elias såg fram emot att träffa sin dotter. Ultraljuden hade visat att allt såg bra ut, förutom att Lovisa började känna sig tung och otymplig. Elias fick hjälpa henne allt mera och tog över nästan allt arbete hemma.

En dag så låg de båda i sängen och slöade lite innan det var dags att börja arbetet. Plötsligt skrek Lovisa till:

– Aj, aj, det gör så ont. Vad är det som händer?

– Var gör det ont, kan det vara sammandragningar redan? Det är visserligen över tre veckor kvar, men vår lilla ängel kanske är lika otålig som vi.

– Nej, det känns annorlunda. Aj, aj! Och jag börjar bli yr också.

Hon lyfte på täcket och såg blod i sina trosor. Skräcken fyllde henne genast.

– Elias, mitt barn! Elias! Något är fel! Gör något!

Han rusade upp och klädde på sig full av skräck. Nu var det han som måste visa stabilitet och lugn. Han rusade ut och körde ut bilen från garaget och lämnade dörren öppen

medan han sprang in och lindade in Lovisa i filter och hjälpte ut henne till bilen. Han svettades av både nervositet och mest av ansträngningen att nästan bära henne. Han körde mot sjukhuset så snabbt han vågade. Lovisa stönade och kved, smärtan kom i vågor. Hon hängde framåtlutad över instrumentbrädan, kroppen nästan tung av trötthet och smärta, ögonen flackade och hon kämpade för att hålla sig vaken.

När Elias kom fram till BB var Lovisa för svag för att lämna bilen. Han rusade in genom dörren och skrek efter hjälp. Han högg tag i en rullstol som stod där och fick sällskap av en sjuksköterska som genast förstod allvaret. Tillsammans hjälpte de Lovisa över till rullstolen, och sjuksköterskan slog omedelbart larm. Snart svärmade personal runt henne och hon rullades mot en operationssal.

Elias blev lämnad i väntrummet, sjuk av oro. Han vankande fram och tillbaka på golvet. Efter några minuter så kom en sjuksköterska ut till honom med dåliga nyheter:

– Du är kvinnans make, inte sant?

– Det stämmer. Vad har hänt?

– Vi tror att det är abruption placenta, moderkakan har lossnat. Hon blöder kraftigt och är nästan medvetslös, samtidigt som fostret har syrebrist. Hon kan tyvärr inte fatta beslut själv just nu, som hennes medicinska proxy måste jag be dig välja om vi ska fokusera på att rädda fostret eller din hustru.

– Ni måste rädda Lovisa, jag kan inte leva utan henne. Vi kan alltid skapa ett nytt barn, tänkte Elias. Högt sade han:

– Vad skall jag välja?

– Det kan inte jag avgöra, svarade sjuksköterskan lugnt men bestämt.

– Jag menar... ska jag säga vad **jag** vill eller vad jag tror att **Lovisa** vill?

– Det senare.

– Då... rädda barnet.

Sjuksköterskan nickade kort och rusade tillbaka. Elias fylldes av skräck och tänkte *Valde jag fel där? Jisses, kanske, fast ändå inte. Jag sätter ju alltid barn först.* Minuterna tickade på. Det kändes som timmar. Men efter kortare tid än en halvtimme så kom en barnmorska ut med ett spädbarn i sina armar. Det såg fortfarande lite kladdigt ut med var ändå det mest underbara som han sett. Ändå frågade han oroligt:

– Och Lovisa då, hur är det med henne?

– Jag lovar dig, Elias, att vi har de bästa läkarna som gör allt de kan för att hon skall klara sig. Låt mig följa med dig till rummet dit de kommer att rulla in henne när de är klara, så kan du vänta där.

Elias lämnades ensam i ett patientrum med babyn. Han plockade handdukar från ett skåp och torkade metodiskt bort det som fanns kvar av födseln. Hon var oväntat stilla och lugn. Han höll henne i sina armar. Den lilla kroppen var varm och levande mot hans bröst. Elias hjärta slog hårt,

nästan sprängande. *Det här är mitt barn*, tänkte han. *Barnet som jag har längtat efter hela mitt liv.*

Och så slog det honom. Orden han hade sagt när Lovisa berättade om graviditeten. Att han ville att hon skulle föda barnet och sedan lämna honom. *Åh nej*, tänkte han. *Det har blivit en självuppfyllande profetia! Men det var ju inte det jag ville!*

Han försökte samla sig och tittade på babyen i sina armar och uppfylldes av glädje igen. Han lade henne ömt i den genomskinliga plastkorgen på hjul som stod i rummet, och tog några bilder. Babyen började gnälla, så han lyfte upp henne igen, och hon lugnade ner sig.

Efter en stund så somnade hon och Elias var tvungen att gå på toaletten. Han lade varsamt ner henne i den plastkorgen igen. Efter förrättat behov satte han sig på besöksstolen och kände sig eländig, med det vanliga uttryckslösa ansiktet trots att tankarna snurrade i hans huvud av oro för Lovisa.

Till slut så kom en läkare in till honom med ett allvarligt ansiktsuttryck.

– Hej, jag är läkaren som ansvarade för att stabilisera Lovisa efter komplikationerna vid förlossningen. Jag har både goda och dåliga nyheter. Hon lever, och kommer snart rullas in i det här rummet. Jag måste tyvärr meddela att hon just nu är i koma, men vi gör allt vi kan för henne. Hon kommer bli förflyttad till KIVA så snart som möjligt.

Elias blev helt kall inombords och hade svårt att ta in vad läkaren hade sagt. Han försökte säga något, men orden fastnade i kaoset i hans hjärna. Läkaren nickade kort åt honom och gick igen.

Snart rullades Lovisa in i rummet på en sjukhussäng. Hon var så blek att Elias nästan trodde att hon redan såg död ut. En barnmorska stod vid hennes sida och övervakade hennes vitala parametrar, medan en sjuksköterska höll dropp och blodtransfusioner igång. Elias vågade inte röra vid henne, varje minsta beröring kändes som om den kunde göra saken värre. Hans ansiktsuttryck var, om möjligt, ännu mer uttryckslöst när sjuksköterskan vände sig mot honom. Hon noterade hans synbara totala avsaknad av känslor, och insåg vikten av att socialtjänsten skulle agera snabbt. Lugnt men professionellt sa hon:

– Jag vill bara meddela att vi har kontaktat socialtjänsten med anledning av ert nyfödda barn. De kommer snart hit.

– Varför det?! svarade Elias häftigt.

– Det är rutin när modern får allvarliga komplikationer, sa sköterskan, lätt defensivt. De kommer hit snart, och du får acceptera det.

– Ja, ja, svarade Elias kort.

Sjuksköterskan tittade på honom ett ögonblick, bekymrad över hans häftiga reaktion och hans avstängda uttryck. Hon noterade allt och väntade otåligt på att socialtjänsten skulle komma.

Snart anlände en socialsekreterare. Sjuksköterskan tog emot henne i korridoren och bad henne vänta där medan hon gick tillbaka för att hämta pappan. När hon gick in i Lovisas rum igen så var Elias inte där. Hon kände hur oron steg, hade han avvikit? Hur länge hade han varit borta, hon hade ju fokuserat på Lovisa? Hon tittade runt och hittade honom till slut i ett skötrum, sittande med babyn i famnen och en nappflaska i handen.

– Du ger henne väl inte vanlig mjölk, hoppas jag!

– BabySemp. Den stod i kylskåpet. Jag kan köpa en ny om jag inte fick ta den. Min dotter är hungrig.

Sjuksköterskan kastade en blick på flaskan.

– Den är inte kall, va? Och flaskan är ren?

– Varför skulle den inte vara det? Skylten där säger ”rena nappflaskor och nappar”, så jag tog därifrån. Sedan värmdes jag mjölken till handledsvärme i mikron. Tror du jag är dum, eller?

– Ursäkta mig då. Nu är socialsekreteraren här och vill prata med dig.

– Vem är det?

– Från Socialkontoret. Jag hämtar henne.

Hon tänkte: *Han har inte förstått än, tur att soc är här nu.* Elias tittade mot korridoren, funderade och räknade snabbt i huvudet vilka av alla socialsekreterare han kände som kunde komma just nu. När han fick syn på henne blev han ändå förvånad.

– Men hej, Jessica. Vad gör du här?

– Jag letar efter en pappa vars partner har hamnat i koma... Åh, är det en ny liten som du har där? Vänta... är det du som är... Herregud! Är det Lovisa som har hamnat i koma?

– Tyvärr. Det är så. Det här är vårt barn.

Jessica vände sig mot sjuksköterskan och meddelade:

– Tack för att du kontaktade oss, men vi kommer inte att inleda någon utredning. Elias är högst kapabel själv.

Sköterskan såg förvånad ut.

– Hur känner ni varandra?

– Det är sekretessbelagt.

– Jessica var min handläggare när jag var placerad på familjehem för ett tiotal år sedan.

– Oj, vilket sammanträffande. Men det betyder väl ändå ingenting?

– Tja, men också...

En annan sjuksköterska passerade i korridoren. Han kände igen henne på det tvåfärgade håret.

– Fråga henne, förresten, sa Elias och pekade.

Sköterskan såg osäker ut men ropade efter kvinnan:

– Mira! Kan du komma hit?

Under tiden hade babyn släppt nappflaskan och Elias lade henne mot sin axel med ett vant handgrepp och klappade henne lätt i ryggen för att få henne att rapa. Mira kom in i rummet och fick syn på honom.

– Men hej! Elias, va? Tar du hand om ännu en baby?

– Min egen, faktiskt. Kan du förklara för sköterskan här, som inte sagt sitt namn än, att jag vet hur man tar hand om spädbarn?

– Visst kan jag det. Annika, det här är Elias. Han jobbar med småbarn åt socialtjänsten. Han tog hand om Julias baby, om du minns? Hennes pappa blev ju rasande och klippte till henne. Så även Julia blev omhändertagen.

– Han knuffade dig också, sade Elias. Jag hoppas du är okej. Förlåt mig.

– Jag fick lite omplåstring, men det var inte ditt fel. Det var hans, hundra procent. Hur gick det efteråt?

– Tja, ni omfattas väl alla av sekretess? Slutet blev att Alva, som babyn döptes till, och Julia lämnades över till sin mormor efter att hon begärt skilsmässa. Inte optimalt, men flickorna får det säkert bra.

Annika kände hur hennes antaganden om Elias total avstängdhet och inkompetens började skaka. Plötsligt stod hon inför verkligheten: Elias var inte bara kapabel, han var erfaren och trygg med barn, och känd på BB för det.

– Jag ber så mycket om ursäkt, Elias, sa Annika. Jag verkar ha totalt missbedömt dig. Du blir säkert en utmärkt förälder, med din bakgrund. Jag var bara så orolig att du verkade så ointresserad av vad som hänt här.

– Jag har AST, så jag är bra på att dölja mina känslor. Om du måste veta så är jag sjuk av oro över min älskade Lovisa och mår riktigt dåligt av att se henne så här. Men samtidigt

är jag vansinnigt lycklig över den här lilla ängeln här, och inte det minsta orolig över att ta hand om henne.

Vid det här laget hade babyn rapat färdigt, och Elias hade förflyttat henne till sina armar och tittade ömt på henne. Annika såg tydligt att Elias visste mycket väl hur man bär ett spädbarn och balanserar huvudet. Hon försökte komma på något att säga till tröst men kom inte på något. I stället var det Jessica som förklarade:

– Du vet vart du vänder dig ifall du behöver avlastning eller annat stöd, utgår jag från.

– Jodå, antar att det är här i staden då, för jag är ju skriven här.

– Precis. Jag kan vara din kontaktperson i så fall. Men någon utredning runt er blir det inte.

Elias hade redan börjat zooma ut, borta i sina tankar som snurrade runt, runt i hans huvud. Annika skyndade tillbaka till Lovisas rum medan Jessica gick mot utgången.

Elias tittade ömt på babyn och insåg plötsligt att han borde kontakta Lovisas föräldrar. Han plockade fram bilden på babyn i sin telefon och skickade bilden till Karin. Han hade fått hennes nummer just för det här tillfället. Sedan satt han kvar med telefonen i handen och tänkte att han också måste berätta vad som hade hänt med Lovisa. Vad var klockan? Han tittade upp på klockan på väggen. Det var fortfarande tidig förmiddag.

Telefonen plingade till. Det var Karin. ”Åh, vilken liten ängel! Gick förlossningen bra?” Elias skrev: ”Babyn mår bra

men Lovisa är döende”. *Nej, nej, det kan jag inte skriva.* Han raderade det och skrev istället: ”Lovisa har hamnat i koma”. *Nej, det kan jag inte heller skriva.*

Han satt med tummen över skärmen och kände hur tankarna fastnade, gick i cirklar. *Hur ska jag berätta det här? Ska jag be någon från avdelningen ringa upp dem? Nej, det här är mitt ansvar, tänkte han. Ska jag ta Lovisas telefon, för hon kan ju göra videosamtal? Nej, det skulle vara att kränka hennes integritet.*

Det fanns bara ett sätt kvar. Och han hatade det. Han tryckte på samtalsknappen.

– Hallå, det är Karin. Nämen... hej Elias?! Du ringer mig?! Jag kan knappt tro det! Är allting bra?

– Inte bra... sade Elias. Orden kom hackigt, som om de tog slut i halsen. Lovisa är... hon... hon kanske inte klarar det. Är i koma. Vet inte... Kan inte...

Rösten brast. Han började snyfta och fick inte fram mer. Karin förstod genast att det var allvar.

– Menar du att det blev komplikationer? Att Lovisa kanske inte kommer att överleva?

– Ja, sade Elias mellan snyftningarna.

– Du är inte ensam, Elias. Vi kommer ner så fort vi kan, och vi tar oss igenom det här tillsammans.

Karin lade på luren och ringde omedelbart upp sin man. Han svarade inte utan messade: ”Sitter i möte”. Karin svarade: ”Ring mig. Ring mig nu! Skit i ditt möte”. Kenneth

insåg att det var något allvarligt. Karin brukade aldrig skriva så. Han bad om ursäkt, lämnade mötesrummet och ringde.

– Vad handlar det om, älskling? Det här är ett jätteviktigt möte som jag haft väldigt svårt att få till, sa han.

– Lovisa har fått sitt barn, men det gick riktigt dåligt och hon kanske inte kommer att överleva. Elias ringde, och du vet att det ska mycket till för att han ska prata i telefon. Jag åker till dem här och nu, oavsett vad du säger!

– Jag plockar upp dig vid ditt jobb. Det är på vägen, vi åker tillsammans. Vår dotter är viktigare än det här mötet.

Kenneth gick in igen och sa, till allas förvåning, att han tyvärr måste avbryta mötet av personliga skäl. Snart var han på väg. När han hämtade upp Karin hade hon redan telefonen vid örat och försökte få tag på någon ansvarig på avdelningen. Till slut fick hon prata med en sjuksköterska, men fick inga flera detaljer.

Samtidigt på sjukhuset kom en transportör och rullade upp Lovisa till KIVA. Där fanns ingen säng för spädbarn, så Elias blev kvar vid hennes säng med babyen i famnen. Hon var oväntat lugn, och han kunde fokusera på att hålla henne varm och trygg medan personalen tog hand om Lovisa.

Efter några timmar plingade hans telefon till. Det var ett sms från Karin:

– Vi närmar oss, Elias. Har något förändrats sedan vi pratade sist?

– De har flyttat Lovisa till KIVA.

Vad är det, hann hon tänka, innan nästa sms kom.

– Kirurgens intensivvårdsavdelning, Centralblocket, hisshall A, våning 6.

Medan Kenneth körde snabbare än han borde, tänkte Karin på Elias. *Han måste vara helt förstörd. Ändå har han självbehärskning nog att skicka precis de detaljer som behövs. Så oväntat, men ändå typiskt honom!*

Snart kom de in i rummet och såg den bleka Lovisa i sin säng. Elias satt bredvid och såg ut som om ingenting hade hänt. Han hade lagt babyn intill Lovisa innanför sängens sidoskydd. Karin sträckte ut armarna mot Elias som bara ställde sig upp utan att närma sig. Karin gav honom en kram och han lät henne göra det, mest för hennes skull.

Sedan vände han blicken mot babyn och höll sig helt stilla. Karin lyfte upp henne och log:

– Titta på henne! Hon är som en kopia av Lovisa som baby, eller hur älskling?

Kenneth nickade men pekade diskret mot Elias. Han såg oberörd ut, men Kenneth förstod att det bara var en mask.

– Jag ska leta rätt på en läkare, så vi kan få lite besked om Lovisas tillstånd, medan du pratar med Elias, sa han.

Karin försökte nå fram till Elias, men han var mer än vanligt inåtvänd. Kenneth fick inte heller något direkt besked om Lovisas tillstånd. Det enda han förstod var att de närmaste dagarna skulle bli kritiska.

Karin och Kenneth stod tysta en stund och såg på Elias, som satt stilla bredvid Lovisa och babyn. En sjuksköterska

kom förbi och gav kort information om rutinerna och besökstiderna. Hon påpekade att högst två anhöriga normalt får vistas samtidigt på KIVA, men med ett milt leende gjorde hon undantag denna gång, med tanke på den nyopererade mamman och den lilla babyn. Elias lyfte knappt blicken.

Karin sträckte försiktigt ut handen mot honom, men han reagerade inte.

– Det är redan lunchtid, Elias, sa Kenneth. Följ med oss till sjukhusets restaurang och ät något. Vi bjuder.

Han skakade bara på huvudet. Kenneth nickade kort mot Elias och vände blicken mot Karin. De behövde inte säga något.

– Vi måste åka nu, sa Karin. Vi kommer tillbaka nästa helg, när vi inte jobbar. Ta hand om dig till dess, Elias.

Elias svarade inte och satt kvar. Tystnaden kändes tung. Tankarna snurrade snabbare än han kunde följa dem och trycket byggdes inom honom, en blandning av oro, skuld och hjälplöshet. *Jag vet inte hur mycket mer jag klarar*, tänkte han när han till slut lämnade sjukhuset.

★ ★ ★

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KLAR PÅ SVENSKA Elias körde till sjukhuset de närmsta dagarna och satt större delen av tiden vid Lovisas sida, så länge besökstiden tillät, från elva till åtta. Han hade med sig barnvagnen där babyn fick sova, och blöjor, nappflaskor, BabySemp och allt annat hon behövde. Efter några dagar utan förändring började humöret sjunka. Läkaren pratade bara om alla tänkbara komplikationer som kunde uppstå och han blev alltmera förtvivlad.

Han satt hemma i soffan en kväll och kände sig alltmer deppig. Det kändes som om det bara var en tidsfråga innan Lovisa skulle dö. *Jag kan inte leva utan henne*, tänkte han.

Om hon dör så tar jag livet av mig. Han insåg att det var destruktiva tankar och kom plötsligt att tänka på Jessica, som ju sagt att han kunde kontakta henne om han behövde stöd. Så han skickade ett meddelande till henne utan att tänka på att det redan var sent:

– Hej, Jessica. Jag mår inte bra. Vet inte hur jag ska orka. Om Lovisa inte överlever så ser jag ingen framtid för mig. Jag fungerar inte just nu och behöver hjälp.

Elias satt och tittade på sin telefon och undrade ifall hon skulle svara. Då hörde han hur babyn började gny. Det var inte hennes normala skrik när något är fel, utan något helt annat. Han gick in i sovrummet och kände sig nästan irriterad över henne.

– Vad är det för fel, min ängel? Du har just ätit, blöjan är torr. Varför gnäller du? Jag orkar inte just nu.

Han lyfte upp henne och konstaterade att han gissat rätt att hon var helt torr, varm och synbarligen inte hade några problem. Så fort han fick henne i sina armar så tystnade babyn direkt och tittade på Elias. Han blev förvirrad över det, och funderade vad hon ville. Plötsligt förstod han. Babyn ville helt enkelt ha **honom**. Inget annat. Honom.

Han bar babyn i sina armar till vardagsrummet och tittade ömt på den. Hela hans kropp fylldes av lycka och kärlek till henne. Det var precis det här han hade längtat efter under så många år. Ja, nästan sedan han själv var barn. Nu var hans liv äntligen komplett!

Hans blick föll på telefonen som låg kvar på bordet och han stelnade till. *Meddelandet till Jessica! Herregud!* Han tog upp telefonen och läste det igen. *Det här kan tolkas helt fel*, tänkte han vidare. Det går inte att dra tillbaka heller, för det är sms. Snabbt knackade han in:

– Hej igen, Jessica. Bry dig inte om mitt senaste SMS. Allt är bra här och jag är lycklig med babyen.

Han fortsatte att umgås med babyen, pratade och testade olika namn på den. När han gjorde lustiga miner sprattlade de små armarna, som om den försökte hänga med. Plötsligt kom han på namnet på babyen, och upprepade det flera gånger.

– Sonja, du vet att jag älskar dig, Sonja. Du är det bästa som hänt mig, Sonja. Ja, min ängel, det är du som är Sonja.

När han sade ”Sonja” så tyckte han sig se en respons från babyen, som om den gillade namnet. Han var helt och fullständigt fokuserad på Sonja när dörrklockan ringde. Han lyfte upp henne och gick till dörren. Det var Jessica utanför och Elias blev lite generad.

– Hej, du behövde inte komma hit. Särskilt inte så sent. Allt jag behöver just nu finns här i mina armar, sade han och gnuggade sin näsa mot Sonjas.

– Får jag komma in ändå, jag känner dig alltför väl?

Elias nickade och gick in till vardagsrummet och Jessica satte sig ner mittemot honom.

– Elias, hur är det med dig, egentligen? Jag förstår att du inte skickar ett sånt meddelande utan orsak.

Han tvekade länge och Jessica väntade tålmodigt på att han skulle förklara.

– Alltså det där messet... jag satt bara och grubblade över Lovisa som nog inte kommer att klara sig. Läkaren säger bara att även om "alla pilarna pekar åt rätt håll" så finns alla möjliga tänkbara komplikationer. Det känns som om det inte finns någon chans, och jag vet inte hur jag skall klara mig utan henne. Trots att jag har varit ensam i hela mitt liv så vill jag inte vara ensam längre. Samtidigt har jag Sonja här. Hon lyser verkligen upp hela mitt liv. Den här lilla ängeln är allt jag drömt om, så allt är bara fint, faktiskt.

– Jag förstår, Elias. Du har det svårt just nu. Litar du på mig? Kan du svara på några frågor, ärligt, och utan att bry dig om varför jag ställer frågan?

– Visst. Jag känner ju dig.

– Kan du beskriva hur du först träffade Lovisa?

Elias berättade livligt allt om första intrycket, paniken på McDonalds och sedan hur Lovisa inte gav upp. Jessica fortsatte fråga om hans bästa minne, värsta minne och hur han friade till henne. Elias var förbryllad, men svarade så gott han kunde på alla hennes frågor. Plötsligt sa Jessica:

– Vet du vad, Elias? Lovisa kan inte dö, det är omöjligt.

– Vad menar du? Läkarna...

Elias tystnade och kände sig förvirrad.

– Det jag menar är att jag fick dig att le lyckligt när du pratade om henne. Det betyder att oberoende vad som händer med henne på sjukhuset så kommer hon alltid att

leva vidare i dina minnen och i ditt hjärta. Inte sant? Titta sedan på babyn här! Du kallar henne Sonja, inte sant? Hon har bara några fjun hår än, men vilken hårfärg ser det ut som?

– Hm, det verkar lite rödaktigt.

– Just det, och varför? Jo, för att Lovisas gener finns i henne, och därför kommer Lovisa leva vidare i Sonja.

Elias bearbetade allt Jessica hade sagt. Det stämde ju på något sätt. Men Jessica var inte klar än. Inte ens nära.

– Sedan ringde jag till sjukhuset och fick prata med en ur nattpersonalen. Vad de menar med ”alla pilarna pekar åt rätt håll” är hon är på bättringsvägen. Hon är ung och stark och lär klara sig igenom detta. Sedan måste de nämna eventuella komplikationer för att inte tappa trovärdighet, men det betyder inte att dessa komplikationer är sannolika. De kan bara inte ge några löften, så de är medvetet luddiga.

– Jisses, wow. Luddiga sade du? Då är det ju upplagt för att jag missuppfattar vad de säger!

– Precis min poäng. Slutligen, Elias, så kommer du aldrig mera vara ensam. Du har Sonja, eller hur? Och Lovisas föräldrar kommer alltid finnas där för dig. Dels är du den man som deras dotter älskar av hela sitt hjärta, dels så har du gett dem ett barnbarn. Det betyder mer än du tror. Glöm inte heller att jag kom rusande så fort du andades om hjälp. Och Anna och Peter kommer självklart också stötta dig om du behöver det, eller hur? Du har ett supportnätverk numera. Ett som alltid kommer finnas vid din sida.

Elias satt tyst en lång stund och funderade *Alltså... hon menar det verkligen... Jag är inte ensam... Någon... några bryr sig verkligen om mig*. Jessica lät honom tänka i lugn och ro, hon mindes att han ofta behövde tid att processa från när hon var hans handläggare. Till slut sade han:

– Vet du var det värsta är? Med mitt logiska tänkande så borde jag ha kunnat räkna ut det här själv. Du har ju rätt i allt, och nu har jag dåligt samvete för att jag oroade dig.

– Det ska du inte ha, Elias. I själva verket är jag väldigt glad att du tänkte på mig när du sökte stöd.

Jessica lämnade honom efter att ha pratat lite mer om babyn, bara för att försäkra sig om att Elias var lugn igen.

Han hade fått en hel del att fundera på, med det var en sak som han insåg att han borde gjort för dagar sedan. Han tog med Sonja och körde hem till Anna och Peter. När han ringde på den välbekanta dörren så var hans ansikte helt uttryckslöst. Det var Anna som öppnade dörren.

– Nämen hej, Elias. Kul att se dej.

– Hej, ursäkta att jag kommer så sent.

– Det gör ingenting, vi har inte lagt oss än. Vem har du där? Är det en annan liten från soc, eller... vänta... är det din egen?

– Det stämmer faktiskt, du har blivit farmor.

– Wow, grattis. Får jag hålla henne? Peter, Peter, kom hit. Du har blivit farfar.

Elias lyfte över Sonja till Annas armar. Peter skyndade sig fram och blev också hänförd över babyn. Han sträckte ut

händerna mot Anna och fick hålla Sonja själv. Anna vände sig mot Elias:

– Gick förlossningen bra? Är Lovisa hemma och vilar?

Då brast allting för Elias. Han började storgråta och tog några steg framåt och slog armarna om Anna. Hon blev osäker men lade sina armar om Elias och enda reaktionen denna gång blev att han kramade henne ännu hårdare. Hans tårar blötte ner hennes axel medan Peter chockad stod bredvid och tittade som om han inte kunde förstå det han såg. Sonja började gny i hans armar.

– Elias, säg bara en sak, sa han. Lever Lovisa?

Elias nickade mot Annas axel.

– Då kommer allt bli bra, jag lovar. Hon är ung och stark, så hon kommer mest troligt att bli bra.

– Du har kommit helt rätt, Elias, förklarade Anna. Vi är här för dej. Kom in här och berätta allt.

Hon strök honom över ryggen och förvånades över att han inte ryggade utan verkade uppskatta det. Sen ledde hon in Elias med armen runt hans axlar medan han försökte kontrollera sina tårar. Snart satt de i soffan, Anna höll fortfarande sin arm runt Elias axlar, och han klagade inte till hennes förvåning. Till slut klarade han av att kontrollera sig:

– Jag är ledsen för det där, vet inte vad som flög i mig.

– Männsklighet flög i dej, svarade Anna. Du är en människa, och vi gråter alla när vi är ledsna. Berätta vad som hänt och hur vi kan hjälpa dej när du är redo.

Sonja låg kvar i Peters armar och gnydde fortfarande. Elias drog sig milt loss från Anna och sträckte ut armarna mot Sonja. Peter lade henne i hans armar. Hon tystnade igen. Elias drog några djupa andetag. Sedan berättade han allt som hänt på sin vanliga, sakliga sätt.

Anna blev förfärad över allt som hänt med Lovisa, och sa med sin mjukaste röst:

– Finns det något vi kan göra för dej? Elias. Vad som helst, för vi känner oss som dina riktiga föräldrar. Om du till exempel vill ha någon som passar Sonja, så säg till bara.

– Allt jag behöver har jag redan fått. Några som bryr sig, en axel att gråta ut mot till och med, sade han med ett snett leende. Med det jag verkligen behöver ligger här i mina armar. Hörde ni hur hon gnydde innan tills jag tog tillbaka henne? Det är hennes sätt att trösta mig.

Elias stannade flera timmar hos dem. Anna frågade om han hade ätit något på hela dagen, och när han skakade på huvudet lagade hon lite lättare kvällsmat åt honom. Sakta började han känna att det Jessica sagt faktiskt stämde.

Dagen efter gick han till sjukhuset som vanligt och bad att få prata med läkaren när han hade tid. Efter några timmar så fick han sitt samtal och inledde:

– Tack för att du tar dig tid. Jag behöver förstå hur stora Lovisas chanser är. Jag ber dig om två tal: det första talet är sannolikheten att hon överlever och det andra är, förutsatt att hon överlever, sannolikheten för bestående men.

– Jag förstår att du desperat söker efter löften, men som läkare kan jag inte lova några siffror, tyvärr.

– Jag har AST, så jag vill inte ha löften utan ren statistik. Jag vet att inte ens 99,5% säkerhet är samma sak som 100%. Ser du Sonja här? Statistiskt sett borde hon inte finnas. Vi använde preventivmedel med 99,5% tillförlitlighet. Ändå ligger hon här. Jag ber dig inte om ett löfte. Jag ber dig om en kvalificerad uppskattning, baserad på all din kunskap och erfarenhet. En gissning, inget löfte. Just nu tror jag att hennes chanser att överleva är under 10%. Allt över det skulle minska min stressnivå.

Läkaren funderade ett tag. Han hade aldrig fått den här typen av fråga förut. Men han kände till AST och försökte komma på det bästa svaret.

– Nåväl, låt mig göra mitt bästa för dig. Lovisa är ung och i övrigt i god fysisk form. Utifrån det jag vet i nuläget skulle jag säga att hennes överlevnadschans till någonstans mellan åttio och nittio procent.

– Okej, wow. Det var oväntat. Tack, doktorn. Och risken för bestående men då?

– Det beror helt på definitionen. Om man räknar in ärr och liknande skulle jag tyvärr säga 100 procent risk för bestående men. Men om du istället menar bestående, **invalidiserande** men, så är det något helt annat. Där bedömer jag att risken sannolikt ligger under tio procent. Eventuella kvarvarande men bör dessutom gå att träna bort i sådan grad att de inte blir livsförändrande.

Elias andades ut hörbart. Han tittade mot Lovisa och sedan på läkaren igen.

– Någon gissning på när hon kan vakna upp igen ifall hon gör det?

– Om allt går som vi hoppas, dagar till ett par veckor. Men inte heller här kan jag ge några löften.

– Tack, doktorn. Jag känner mig betydligt bättre nu när jag har korrekta fakta. Och jag vet att ni alla gör ert bästa.

– Det gör vi, och låt oss alla tro på att allt går bra till slut.

Elias fortsatte grubbla och satte upp tabeller i huvudet med alla möjliga utfall. Han satte in siffror i rutorna och försökte förbereda sig för alla tänkbara utfall. Han fortsatte låta Sonja ligga bredvid Lovisa, i hopp om att Lovisa skulle känna närvaron och därmed kämpa på.



Tiden gick och Elias var på sjukhuset nästan hela besökstiden varje dag. Lovisas föräldrar kom ner varje helg och stannade över natten. Han tyckte inte riktigt om deras närvaro, det kändes mest tungt och påträngande, som om deras egen oro fyllde rummet. Ändå insåg han att de troligen var där för hans skull i första hand. Själv hade han vant sig vid att åka förbi Anna och Peter varje dag på väg hem från sjukhuset. Anna nådde fram till honom på ett sätt som lugnade och gav styrka, och hon bjöd på mat som han nästan automatiskt tog emot. Peter var lika varm och stadig, och deras närvaro gjorde smärtan lite mer uthärdlig.

Trots allt stöd växte ändå förtvivlan inom honom. Kommer Lovisa någonsin att vakna? Han kände hur paniken smög sig på, trycket växte i huvudet, och för första gången började han undra om hans logiska förmåga kanske inte räckte den här gången.

★ ★ ★

23



KLAR PÅ SVENSKA En fredag eftermiddag satt Elias som vanligt stilla i besöksstolen, med sina egna tankar som enda sällskap. Sonja hade just fått mat och sov lugnt i barnvagnen. Plötsligt hörde han ett jämrande ljud. Först trodde han att det var Sonja, men när han insåg att det kom från Lovisa tryckte han genast larmknappen och greppade hennes hand.

– Var... var är jag? viskade Lovisa och försökte öppna ögonen.

– På sjukhuset. Du har varit sjuk. Väldigt sjuk.

Hon blundade igen. Några sekunder gick innan hon öppnade ögonen på nytt. Några sköterskor kom in i rummet,

lugna men vaksamma, för att undersöka varför Elias hade larmat.

– Vad... hände?

– Det blev komplikationer under förlossningen.

Hon rynkade pannan svagt. Förlossningen. Hennes hand rörde sig trevande mot magen. Den var platt. Det tog några sekunder innan insikten landade.

– Åh... min baby?

Hon höll sig om magen som inte längre var tjock, och insåg att hon inte var gravid längre.

– Det blev väldigt akut. Jag... jag tvingades välja mellan dig och babyn.

Lovisas ögon öppnades större. Andningen blev snabbare.

– Du... du valde...

Patientmonitorn pep, pulsen steg. För hastigt för Elias tycke.

– Lugna ner dig, älskling. Du får inte bli upphetsad.

– Var... VAR är hon!? Elias... du... du valde... VAR ÄR MITT BARN!?

Han gick snabbt bort till barnvagnen och lyfte upp Sonja. Med försiktiga rörelser lade han henne på Lovisas mage, ovanpå täcket, så att slangarna inte stördes.

– Här är vår dotter. Hon är femton dagar gammal nu.

Lovisas tårar började rinna. Hon försökte dra babyn närmare, men orkade inte mer än att låta handen vila där.

– Jag... orkar inte...

– Det behöver du inte, sa Elias lågt. Hon ligger bra där.

Minuter senare hördes snabba steg utanför dörren igen. Läkaren kom in, tittade på monitorerna och nickade åt Elias. Sedan vände han uppmärksamheten mot Lovisa.

– Du har vaknat, det är utmärkt, sade läkaren. Du har varit medvetslös och intensivvårdad i två veckor, på grund av blodförlust vid den totala moderkaksavlossningen. Det akuta kejsarsnittet gjorde situationen ännu mer kritisk, men nu är du stabil och vaken igen.

Han pausade, lät orden sjunka in.

– Låt mig göra en kort kontroll, så vi ser hur ni mår. Nej, nej, babyn får gärna ligga kvar.

När läkaren var klar med sin undersökning så tittade han på Elias och nickade.

– Kan jag få uppdaterade tal, doktorn?

– Jag skulle säga omkring nittiofem procent respektive några få procent.

– Tack, doktorn.

Läkaren och sköterskorna lämnade rummet och Lovisa tittade förvirrat på Elias och Sonja.

– Du... måste förklara, Elias älskling... viskade hon.

– Ett ögonblick, det är något jag måste göra först.

Elias tog fram sin telefon och slog ett telefonnummer. Lovisa blev häpen av att se Elias ringa, han som aldrig klarade av att prata i telefon! När den andra personen svarade, sade Elias.

– Hej, det är Elias. Jag lovade ju att höra av mig ifall Lovisas tillstånd förändrades. Idag hände det... Jag... Alltså kan inte... Här... lämnar telefonen till någon...

Karin ropade på Kenneth och fruktade det värsta. Något dåligt måste ha hänt, kanske det värsta. Elias höll telefonen mot Lovias öra och hon svarade svagt:

– Hallå?

– Hej, det här är Karin, Lovisas mamma. Har det hänt något?

Kenneth stod nu bredvid och väntade också oroligt.

– Hej... mamma...?

– Lovisa...? Älskling?! Wow, du har äntligen vaknat. Vi har väntat så länge. Vi kör ner direkt. Det ska bli så underbart att få prata med dig igen.

– Så trött...

Elias tog tillbaka telefonen och lyssnade en stund.

– Ni är förstas välkomna som vanligt. Messa när ni närmar er, så hjälper jag er att komma in.

Han lade på luren utan att säga "hej då" och Lovisa sa med en svag röst.

– Berätta allt... sen... måste vila först...

– Självklart, älskling, sade Elias och gav henne en kyss.

Lovisa somnade men Elias blev inte orolig. Monitorn visade andra värden och kurvor. Dessutom rörde hon på sig som hon brukade göra när hon sover.

Elias log när han tänkte på alla blåmärken han fått från hennes sparkande. För säkerhets skull lade han Sonja i barnvagnen igen.

Efter några timmar så slog Lovisa upp ögonen igen och tittade sig runt, inte lika förvirrad som innan.

– Känner du dig lite bättre nu, älskling?

– Jag... mår lite bättre... du... är kvar?

– Jag har suttit här varje dag under besökstiderna och hoppats att du skall vakna. Äntligen fick jag lön för mödan.

– Vårt... barn? Jag... vill... hålla det... igen.

Elias hämtade Sonja från barnvagnen.

– Här är hon, vår lilla ängel.

Lovisa fick hjälpa att lyfta armarna så att hon kunde hålla om babyen. Hon tittade länge på Sonjas ansikte och små kroppsdelar, med ögon som fylldes av både förundran och värme. Blinkade långsamt.

– Hon ser... välmående ut. Du har tagit hand om henne bra. Har det... varit jobbigt... ensam med allt detta?

– Nejdå, inte alls. Hon har varit jättesnäll. Jo, det är klart att hon håller mig vaken på nätterna, men du känner mig.

– Annars då? Inga... problem?

– Det har inte varit kul att du ligger här, som du förstår. Och, alltså... jag har... varit typ otrogen två, kanske tre gånger. Det känns inte bra alls...

– Otrogen...?

Hon blinkade långsamt. Hjärnan orkade inte forma resten av frågan. Elias tittade på sin telefon och skrev någonting på den.

– Vem... messar du?

– Din mamma. De har kommit fram nu, och när de kommit upp hit, måste jag släppa in dem.

– Varför?

– Det är långt över besökstid. Men jag har pratat med personalen här, och vi har en överenskommelse att så länge jag sköter mig så får jag vara här hur länge som helst, bara jag inte sover över här.

Lovisa blundade och försökte ta in allt vad Elias sagt. Har han vågat prata med personal om att bryta regler? Och otrogen? Hon blundade och försökte fokusera men hjärnan var inte riktigt med än.

Efter en stund gick Elias iväg för att släppa in hennes föräldrar. Snart satt de bredvid Lovisa och kramade henne varmt. Även Kenneth kramades. De pratade om hur oroliga de varit men hur tacksamma de var att hon äntligen hade vaknat.

– Vi har fått ständiga uppdateringar från Elias, som visst suttit här med dig varje dag från morgon till kväll.

– Ah, typiskt för min Elias...

– Nåväl, Lovisa älskling. Som jag förstått det hela, så är besökstiden över sedan mer än en timme, så jag antar att vi får lämna dig nu. Du verkar fortfarande trött. Men vi

kommer tillbaka imorgon. Med din tillåtelse så åker vi hem med dig, Elias.

– Självklart är ni alltid välkomna i vårt hus.

Som tidigare helger så bäddade Elias deras sängar i barnkammaren. Karin fixade en sen kvällsmat till dem alla och Elias lät henne göra det. Han var betydligt lugnare än tidigare och umgicks med Sonja. Snart gick alla och lade sig och sov bättre än på länge.

Morgonen efter gjorde Elias frukost åt Karin och Kenneth. Det var tydligt för dem att han var betydligt mera lugn och harmonisk nu.

– Visst ska vi åka in till sjukhuset snart? undrade Karin.

– Självklart, svarade Elias. Men Lovisa lär inte vara så mycket vaken i dag heller, enligt vad de förklarat för mig. Det kommer nog flera dit idag också.

– Jasså, vilka då?

– Jo, mina föräldrar så klart. Och Teddy ville hälsa på också.

– Men hur kan de veta om att Lovisa har vaknat?

– Jag berättade det för dem igår, så klart.

Kenneth tittade begrundande på Elias. Snart körde han in dem till sjukhuset. Lovisa sov när de kom in, så Elias satte sig ner bredvid henne och tog hennes hand. Som om Lovisa kände hans närhet så vaknade hon och sa:

– Hej, älskling. Här igen?

– Självklart. Dina föräldrar också.

Elias satt kvar vid hennes sida medan Karin lutade sig fram över sängen, pratade tyst men snabbt, ställde frågor och torkade ögonvrårna med baksidan av handen. Lovisa svarade kort, log svagt och slöt ögonen mellan orden.

Då öppnades dörren igen. Anna, Peter och Teddy hade redan kommit till sjukhuset. Elias reste sig direkt.

– Stanna där, sa han lugnt. Två åt gången. Resten väntar i hisshallen.

Rösten var låg men bestämd. Han vände sig mot Karin och Kenneth:

– Ni får gå ut en stund. Anna och Peter tar nästa pass.

Karin såg ut som om hon ville protestera, men Elias pekade mot dörren tills hon nickade. Kenneth lade handen på hennes rygg och följde henne ut. Teddy fick en kort gest från Elias.

– Du också. Ni får alla vänta i hisshallen.

Snart dök fler upp: Oskar, Viktor och Viola, och lille Sebastian, som inte förstod varför man måste vara tyst. Hisshallen fylldes av röster, frågor, skratt och små fötter som sprang. Elias gick ut till dem.

– Det här är intensivvård, sa han. Högst två i taget med Lovisa. Hon orkar inte mer än så. Dessutom sjukhusregel.

För att kunna hålla ordning följde Elias alltid med de personer han tillät komma in. Samtidigt såg han till att Lovisa fick lugn och ro, hon sov fortfarande mycket. När Sebastian blev otålig tog han honom i famnen utan att tveka och lugnade honom medan han systematiskt fördelade

turordningen. Besöken hölls korta och koncentrerade, så att Lovisa inte blev överstimulerad.

När det var dags för nästa grupp följde han dem ut till hisshallen och markerade lugnt:

– Nu byter vi.

Allt var kontrollerat och metodiskt. Kaoset i hisshallen, röster, skratt, små fötter och protesterande vuxna, var hans ansvar att hantera, men inne hos Lovisa var lugnet totalt. Samtidigt skötte han hela tiden Sonja, gav henne mat, bytte blöja, lät henne sova och framför allt lät Lovisa hålla henne så ofta hon ville. När hennes ögon blev tunga så såg han till att hon fick sova i fred.

– Nu måste hon vila, förklarade han och såg till att det blev tyst i rummet.

Kenneth hade svårt att ta in hur Elias uppförde sig. Så lugn, ändå med en bestämd ton som gjorde att alla lydde utan tvekan. Varje rörelse, varje ord verkade väcka respekt och ordning, och Kenneth kunde inte låta bli att förvånas över hur fullständig kontroll han utstrålade.

När besökstiden var över förklarade han lugnt att alla måste åka hem, även han själv. Han körde hem med Karin och Kenneth så att de kunde sova i barnkammaren igen, medan de övriga återvände till sina egna hem.

Dagen efter återvände Elias och Lovisas föräldrar till sjukhuset efter att ha ätit frukost. Lovisa var lite bättre och fick hjälp att ta några steg med stöd av Elias. Läkarna hade

sagt att det var viktigt att hon rörde på sig så mycket hon orkade. Smärtorna var fortfarande intensiva, men Elias såg till att hon inte överansträngde sig och pushade henne varsamt när det behövdes. Kenneth studerade Elias med ett tankfullt uttryck.

– Elias, jag har något jag vill säga till dig, sa Kenneth. Det är både allvarligt menat och lite djupt. Jag vill särskilt säga detta framför min hustru och min dotter. Det handlar om vad jag anser om dig som person.

– Det här kanske inte är nödvändigt, älskling.

– Jo det är det, menar jag. Elias, sedan den dag jag först mötte dig har jag burit på en tvekan inför din roll som Lovisas äkta make. Jag har uppfattat dig som osäker, stundtals vacklande, och jag har sett hur vår dotter ofta har burit dig när du inte orkat bära dig själv. Det har oroat mig. Ett äktenskap ska vila på ömsesidig styrka, och jag har tvivlat på om detta verkligen skulle hålla i längden.

– Pappa... sluta!

– Låt mig fortsätta. Du har under denna prövning, Elias, visat en styrka som är anmärkningsvärd. Detta är ett av de tyngsta kors en människa kan få bära, och du har burit det utan Lovisas stöd. Ändå har du gjort det med värdighet. Du har inte bara uthärdat sorgen utan också tagit ansvar för allt det praktiska. Vårt barnbarn är tryggt, välmående och väl omhändertaget. Du har besökt vår dotter varje dag, hållit oss underrättade om hennes tillstånd och till och med sett till att

hennes barn fått lära känna sin mor, trots att hon legat i koma.

– Pappa... det är därför jag ville ha Elias. Från början.

– Det förstår jag. Men han har också tagit hand om oss, dina föräldrar. Har jag fel när jag misstänker att du inte alltid har uppskattat att ha oss här varje helg?

– Jag medger att det har varit ansträngande för mig, men ni behövde det lika mycket som jag.

– Så min uppfattning om dig idag, Elias, är att vi inte kunde ha fått en bättre svärson. Du har visat en enastående förmåga att hantera denna svåra situation. Jag beklagar uppriktigt att jag inte såg det tidigare.

Elias blev generad och visste inte riktigt vad han skulle svara. Till slut sade han bara:

– Tack, antar jag. Det betyder mer än ni tror.

– Nu tänkte jag bjuda dig på lunch här på sjukhusets restaurang. Sedan åker vi hem och lämnar Lovisa i dina ytterst kompetenta händer.

Karin och Kenneth kramade Lovisa varmt farväl. Sedan lät han sig bjudas på lunch innan han återvände ensam till Lovisa. Hon var fortfarande trött, och sov en hel del.

Elias lät Sonja sova bredvid henne så mycket som möjligt. Närheten gjorde att hon kunde vila ostört medan Elias satt tålmodigt bredvid.

När han körde till sjukhuset på måndagen så var det med betydligt lättare hjärta.

- Hej, älskling, känner du dig bättre idag?
- Faktiskt, Elias älskling. Betydligt bättre.
- Här, jag antar att du vill hålla Sonja igen.

Elias lyfte försiktigt upp Sonja från barnvagnen och placerade henne i Lovisas armar. Hon höll babyen noggrant, studerade varje liten detalj, men Elias såg att hennes armar darrade svagt. Han lade snabbt en kudde under Sonja som stöd och lät Lovisa vila i lugn och ro medan hon tittade på sin dotter.

– Så underbar hon är, helt fantastisk. Har hon varit snäll mot dej?

– Jodå, Sonja är den snällaste som finns. Mycket att göra naturligtvis, men det är normalt.

– Vad kallar du henne? Sonja?

– Jo, ursäkta mig. Jag ville bara inte att hon bara skulle vara en anonym baby. Vi har inte pratat om namn, och om du vill ha ett annat namn så är det okej. Jag har inte skickat in anmälan till folkbokföringen än.

Lovisa smakade på namnet.

– Sonja... Sonja! Jo, hon ser ut som en Sonja.

– Jo, jag tänkte på mitt första barn. Du vet, Carl och Sonja som jag fick ta hand om.

– Wow... fantastiskt... Du ger henne namn efter barnet du förlorade...

– Det känns helt rätt för mig. Som om jag aldrig förlorat henne. Och Sonja verkade gilla namnet också.

– Och hon verkar... trivas med mej...

– Jag lät Sonja ligga bredvid dig varje dag för att lära känna dig. Vänja sig vid din lukt och så...

– Du tänker alltid framåt... Så logisk.

Lovisa blundade och kom på en sak som chockat henne tidigare.

– Men... du ringde mina föräldrar. Ringde! Vem är du och var är Elias?

Elias skrattade glatt. Det kändes så befriande att kunna skratta efter alla dessa veckor.

– Jo, du förstår, när läkaren berättat du hamnat i koma och kanske dör så satt jag bredvid dig. Hade redan skickat en bild på ängeln till din mamma, och hon undrade hur du mådde efter förlossningen. Så jag skrev att du är i koma och kanske dör.

– Oj, hjälp! Skickade du verkligen det?

– Nej, till och med jag insåg att det hade varit fel. Jag grubblade på vad jag skall göra. Be någon annan? Nej, jag är din proxy och deras svärson. Till slut kom jag fram till att jag inte hade något val, så jag ringde henne. Det var jobbigt på så många sätt. Men måste man, så måste man. De kom hit direkt.

– Förvånar mej inte. Har de... kommit ner flera gånger?

– Jodå, varenda helg har de varit här, lördag till söndag.

– Bodde de på hotell då?

– Vad tror du om mig? De bodde hos oss naturligtvis.

– Var det... jobbigt?

– Det var sjukt jobbigt. Din mamma rusade runt och städade och dammsög och lagade mat. Jag mådde riktigt dåligt av att hon höll på med allt i huset.

– Du klagade på... henne?

– Nej, jag gissade att det antagligen var hennes sätt att hantera oron för dig. Kanske var det också hennes sätt att stötta mig, fast jag inte behövde just det stödet. Nej, jag lät henne hållas. Din pappa pulade också med allt möjligt. Med det har bara varit totalt två nätter, så jag överlevde.

Lovisa blundade och funderade en stund. Då kom hon på en annan sak som han hade sagt.

– Men nu... alltså... du sa att du varit otrogen?!? Jag tror inte på det... Vad menar du?

– Jo, dina föräldrar kastade sig i bilen och körde hit när jag ringt dem, som jag sade. De måste ha lämnat sina respektive jobb. Så när din mamma kom in så hade hon tårar i ögonen och försökte krama mig. Jag lät henne göra det, mest för hennes skull. Fast det kändes som om jag svek dig där. Som om jag var otrogen.

– Nej, Elias älskling. Inte alls... Kändes det bättre?

– Jo, när hon släppte så kändes det bra. Men det blev värre. Några dagar senare satt jag hemma och mådde dåligt. Jag kände nästan att jag inte vill leva utan dig.

– Men... Sonja då?

– Det var just det. Alltså, jag tror inte på telepati eller några mystiska krafter mellan föräldrar och barn. Men varje gång jag är riktigt ledsen så börjar Sonja att gny. När jag

sedan lyfter henne så säger hon ”Pappa, var inte ledsen. Du har mig och jag älskar dig.”

– Hon kan väl inte prata.

– Alltså, inte med ord. Med det kändes som om det var just det hon sade när jag var ledsen. Nåväl, en gång när jag var riktigt nere så messade jag Jessica.

– Din gamla handläggare? Varför henne?

– Jo, sjuksköterskan på BB gjorde en orosanmälan till socialtjänsten på grund av att du var i koma och jag var... Tja... jag var jag. Gissa vem som kom?

– Inte Jessica, väl?

– Jodå. Rätt lustigt. I varje fall så fick hon dem att inse att jag är kapabel med barn, även utan dig. Men hon sade också att jag skulle kontakta henne om jag behövde stöd. Därför messade jag henne.

– Ja... det låter som du. Logiskt.

– När hon kom så gjorde hon tre saker. Dels fick hon mig att förstå att du inte kan dö, för du kommer alltid att leva vidare i mitt hjärta. Sedan förklarade hon att det som läkaren sagt innebär att du troligen kommer att klara dig, fast jag uppfattat det som du skulle dö. Förstår du nu på vilket sätt jag var otrogen med Jessica?

– Nej... min hjärna är nog inte helt igång än. Förklara?

– Är det inte uppenbart? Det är alltid du som lugnar ner mig när jag är orolig. Och det är alltid du som tolkar vad andra säger när jag missförstår. Men nu var det Jessica som gjorde det istället. Det ger mig dåligt samvete.

Lovisa skrattade högt, och gjorde sedan en grimas av smärta och höll sig mot magen.

– Snälla... få mej inte att skratta. Det gör ont.

Hon vilade en sekund innan hon fortsatte, lugnare.

– Det där med Jessica... det betyder bara att du hade någon som gav dej stöd. Det är inget svek. Men... tre gånger?

– Jo, Jessica sade också att Anna och Peter borde vara en del av mitt supportnätverk, eftersom jag kallar dem för mina **riktiga** föräldrar. Jag kom på att jag inte ens berättat för dem att jag blivit pappa. Så jag körde dit med Sonja och visade upp henne. När Anna frågade efter dig så bröt jag samman fullständigt. Totalt utom all kontroll!

– Hur?

– Jag kastade mig över Anna och kramade henne hårt, och hon kramade tillbaka. Det höll på länge, och det är nu som det hände. På något sätt rann det dåliga ut från mig och jag mådde bättre. Det kändes verkligen som om jag var otrogen. Att söka tröst hos en främling så där?

Lovisa såg på honom en stund. Hon log svagt.

– Åh, Elias...

Hon tog ett försiktigt andetag.

– Jag älskar hur du tänker. Men Anna är ingen främling. Hon är din mamma.

Elias nickade långsamt.

– Det är väl det mest naturliga som finns... att hon tröstar dej när allt rasar.

En kort paus.

– Det är inte otrohet. Det är en son som behöver sin mamma. Jag har kramat min mamma när jag varit ledsen.

– Så jag har inte varit otrogen mot dig, då?

– Inte alls. Du använde bara... ditt supportnätverk. Det är inget fel i det.

– ”Supportnätverk”? Precis som Jessica kallade det.

– Jag är stolt över dej, älskade Elias. Du håller ihop allt. Trots att du har två jobb också.

– Nåja, jag vet att vår plan var att du skulle börja vara föräldraledig, med med dig här så anmälde jag mig istället hos Försäkringskassan. Min chef och akuthemssekreteraren var inte glada, men när jag förklarat hur situationen var så accepterade de. Sedan sjukanmälde jag dig på ditt jobb också, och har hållit dem uppdaterade om vad läkaren sagt när de frågat.

– Wow, som sagt, vem är du och vad har du gjort med Elias? Hur klarade du allt?

– Tja, du låg ju här, så jag var tvingad. Och det känns faktiskt rätt bra nu efteråt, när jag tänker bakåt.

Lovisa blundade lite och Elias lät henne ta den tid hon behövde. Plötsligt kom hon på någon annat som hade känts konstigt.

– Förresten... läkaren och ”uppdaterade siffror”. Vad var det?

– Jo, läkaren pratade från början så luddigt om ”pilar som pekar rätt” så jag tvingade honom att ge mig två tal i stället. Dels sannolikheten för att du skulle överleva och

sannolikheten för att du skulle få bestående men. För två veckor sedan var det typ 80-90% respektive under 10% om man inte tänker på ärr och sådant. För det lär du få. Sedan har han uppdaterat siffrorna successivt, och idag är det alltså över 95% att du klarar det och runt 1% att du blir invalidiserad. Det låter som utmärkta siffror.

– Otroligt!

Lovisa tystnade och kände sig imponerad över att Elias faktiskt hade pratat så allvarligt med läkaren, och fått svar på ett sätt han kunde förstå. Då kom hon ihåg att Elias också sagt att han fått personalens tillåtelse att bryta mot reglerna och stanna över besökstiden.

– Och du har fått lov att stanna länge också...

– Jo, jag pratade med dem och frågade. Försökte vara artig och vänlig, som du lärt mig. Titta dem i ögonen och så. Tja... jag antar att jag skött mig, så de var okej med att jag kom och gick som jag ville.

– Jisses... inte ens det är ett problem för dej. Finns det något som är svårt för dej längre?

– Jo, att behöva vänta tills du kommer hem igen. Det kommer att vara jobbigt. Helst av allt skulle jag vilja bära ut dig till bilen här och nu och köra hem dig.

Lovisa försökte låta bli att skratta igen, för hon hade rätt ont i buken fortfarande. Hon tittade på Sonja som fortfarande låg i hennes armar och studerade hennes lilla ansikte.

– Sonja är helt lugn med dig också, sa Elias. När hon är med andra brukar hon gnälla tills jag tar tillbaka henne. Nu är hon lugn. Vi kan sitta så här en stund. Du behöver inte skynda.

Hon nickade och log svagt, tog några djupa andetag och kände hur värmen från barnet gav styrka. Efter en lång stund lät hon Elias lägga tillbaka Sonja i barnvagnen igen. Elias sa att hon borde gå lite igen så hon reste sig, med honom vid sidan som stöd, och tog några försiktiga steg i rummet. Hennes ben darrade, men varje steg var en liten seger.

När hon blev trött satte de sig på sängkanten, Lovisa lutade sig mot Elias, Sonja i barnvagnen framför dem, och de satt tysta en stund. Ingen behövde prata. Bara andas, titta på barnet och låta kroppen vila.

Sedan kom nya, försiktiga frågor. Lovisa ville veta mer om Sonjas rutiner, läkarnas bedömningar och allt som hänt de senaste veckorna. Elias svarade systematiskt, som han gjort tidigare, korta, exakta förklaringar, upprepade när det behövdes. Hon lyssnade, nickade och lade märke till detaljerna, men varje replik krävde energi. Snart blev det dags att vila igen.

Till slut åkte Elias hem. Huset kändes tomt. Snart skulle Lovisa och Sonja vara hemma på riktigt, bara han och de två. Hur skulle det gå med Lovisa fortfarande svag? Skulle nätterna bli sömnlösa? Skulle vardagen rasa ihop?

Tankarna snurrade, oförmågan att organisera allt kändes total. Något var på väg att hända, något som skulle förändra allt, även om han ännu inte kunde förstå på vilket sätt.

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KLAR PÅ SVENSKA Till slut kom dagen då Lovisa äntligen kunde lämna sjukhuset, efter ytterligare några veckor. Elias kom ensam, vilket gjorde henne både förvånad och lite nyfiken.

– Var är Sonja? frågade hon. Varför är hon inte med dej?

– Jag bad Anna passa henne en stund hemma, så att jag har båda händerna lediga för att hjälpa dig.

– Wow, du ber Anna om hjälp! Vad har du gjort med Elias? Du har ännu inte svarat på den frågan.

– Kanske försvann den gamla Elias när du hamnade i koma. Vad tycker du om din nyfödde äkta make då?

– Dags för mej att äntligen åka hem. Jag måste bara vänta på att läkaren kommer.

Snart kom läkaren och räckte över ett kuvert med information och utskrivningspapper. Hon fick instruktioner om hur hon skulle fortsätta träna upp sig. Elias lyssnade noga och antecknade allt i sitt huvud. Sedan var det slutligen dags att lämna sjukhuset.

– Då lämnar vi det här stället. Kan du hjälpa mej att ställa mej upp? Det gör fortfarande ont.

Elias hjälpte Lovisa på fötter och sedan följde han med henne ut med försiktiga steg. På vägen ut stannade Elias till vid expeditionen för att tacka alla. Han hälsade dessutom på alla han träffade i korridoren med namn och tackade dem också. Lovisa trodde inte sina ögon och öron!

Snart kom de hem och Lovisa ville direkt sitta ner i soffan. Där fanns redan Anna med Sonja i famnen. Det blev helt uppenbart för Lovisa att Sonja redan lärt känna Anna, så de måste ha träffats regelbundet. Lovisa satt och pratade med Anna medan Elias tog med Sonja för att mata henne.

– Hur har det varit för dej, Anna? Jag gissar att det inte bara var enkelt för er heller.

– Nej... Elias var ett vrak medan du låg i koma. Han kom till oss sent en kväll och... för första gången ville han själv ha en kram. Han behövde tröst.

– Jo, han berättade faktiskt det. Sa att det kändes som om han var otrogen mot mej, bara på grund av kramen.

Anna skrattade glatt.

– Det är så typiskt för vår Elias att tänka så. Logiskt men samtidigt så fel. Sedan kom han varje kväll. Jag tror inte att han åt något på dagarna, så jag såg till att han fick något i magen. Han stannade några timmar och bara pratade med oss.

– Det är helt underbart att han verkligen på riktigt släppt in dej och Peter i sitt liv till slut.

– Det är det sannerligen. Och samtidigt var han helt fokuserad att ta hand om både Sonja och dej. Han är otrolig på att lägga sina egna känslor åt sidan när något viktigare kräver fokus.

– Sådan är han, sade Lovisa mjukt. Min underbara Elias. När det gäller, då finns han där. Det visar också att han verkligen älskar mej och Sonja.

Elias kom tillbaka och sade mjukt:

– Jag gör bara det jag kan... och hoppas att det räcker. Men ni ska veta att jag verkligen älskar dig och Sonja.

Lovisa fick hålla sin dotter igen, med Elias vid sin sida. Sonja låg lugn i deras famnar medan de småpratade och skrattade lite med Anna. Snart somnade Sonja, och Lovisa kände hur tröttheten smög sig på efter allt hon varit med om. När Anna reste sig för att gå log hon mot dem båda och sade:

– Hej då, Elias och Lovisa. Vi syns imorgon.

– Hej då, Anna... mamma... Det gör vi.

– Vad menade hon med att vi syns imorgon? frågade Lovisa när Elias kom tillbaka efter att följt Anna till dörren.

– Jo, det blir nog lite kaos här i morgon, tyvärr. Dina föräldrar kommer ner, det är ju lördag. Sedan har jag bjudit in Anna och Peter till middag... antar jag, tillsammans med lite andra personer.

– **Du** har bjudit in gäster hit? Vilka andra personer?

– Inte så många, din lillebror Oskar med fru, Teddy, Daniel och Axel från mitt jobb. Jo, även Jessica och Anders från soc kommer faktiskt. Viktor och Alva tackade nej, så vi får inte träffa Sebastian.

– Jisses, det blir ju hela huset fullt! Hur kommer du att klara det, Elias älskling?

– Fråga mig igen imorgon kväll. Men visst är det något som luktar illa här? Sonja, min ängel, har du gjort i blöjan igen? Kom så fixar pappa det!

Elias gick iväg med Sonja till badrummet för att tvätta av henne och byta blöja. När han kom tillbaka hade Lovisa somnat på soffan. Han satt med Sonja i famnen en stund, höll henne stilla och pratade lågt, tills det var dags att mata och lägga henne igen. Med viss möda bar han sedan in Lovisa till sovrummet och somnade bredvid henne.



På kvällen dagen efter var det full rulle i huset. Lovisa försökte hjälpa till, men Elias ledde henne milt till soffan så hon kunde vila. Hon lade märke till hur både Anna och Karin, liksom Elias själv, tillbringade större delen av tiden i

köket. De övriga stod runt henne och frågade hur hon mådde.

Lovisa småpratade och skrattade som hon alltid gjorde, två veckor i koma och en månad på sjukhus hade inte fått henne att varva ner. Hon stortrivdes, skrattade lätt och njöt av stunden. Hon var övertygad om att det var just därför Elias hade bjudit hit så mycket folk.

När maten stod på bordet rörde sig alla mot köket och satte sig runt bordet. Det blev lite trångt, men samtalen och skratten fyllde rummet. Lovisa kände igen sin mammas köttstek, den gratinerade blomkålen som Anna brukade göra, och riset som var helt enligt Elias recept med lök och ingefära. Hon fascinerades av att Elias inte bara accepterat att andra lagade mat, utan att de faktiskt hade samarbetat i köket, helt olikt honom, som annars brukade gå fram som en enmansarmé.

Elias var oväntat pratsam under måltiden, nästan lika pratsam som Lovisa. Efter maten började Teddy och Daniel duka av bordet. Lovisa väntade på protester från Elias, men de uteblev. Han sade bara lugnt:

– Ställ bara in allt i diskmaskinen så sätter jag på den sedan. Låt mig hämta några burkar för resterna.

Teddy, Daniel och flera andra började packa in allt i diskmaskinen, fast på helt ”fel” sätt enligt Elias sätt att se det. Lovisa tänkte att han snart skulle klaga eller börja göra om, men han tittade bara in, flyttade en tallrik som stod snett och satte sedan på maskinen.

Efter maten samlades alla i vardagsrummet igen. Elias insåg att det inte fanns sittplatser för alla och sprang runt för att hämta stolar från andra rum. Vid det här laget hade Sonja vaknat, och han lade henne på en tjock filt mitt på golvet. Hon vandrade mellan händerna på dem som ville hålla henne. Några av gästerna satt runt filten och skojade och skrattade med Sonja, medan resten stod eller satt en bit bort och tittade på.

Lovisa tittade på Elias, nyfiken på om han skulle bli orolig, men han verkade mest stolt. Mitt i allt kaos höll han samtalet igång. Lovisa kunde inte låta bli att le. Det kändes märkligt, på ett bra sätt, att se Elias ta plats så här.

Det måste vara kaos i hans hjärna just nu, tänkte hon. Bara ljudvolymen är väldigt hög, han är känslig för sånt. Men hon sa ingenting eftersom Elias inte verkade det minsta bekymrad. Han hade full koll på allt, erbjöd dricka och kom med kakor. Samtidigt hanterade han Sonja, gav henne mat och skojade med gästerna. Och mitt i all röran glömde han inte bort Lovisa.

Plötsligt ställde sig Elias upp och åskade tystnad:

– Hallå, allihop. Jag skulle vilja säga något...

Rummet blev tyst och alla tittade på Elias. Han såg lugn ut till Lovisas förvåning, hon hade väntat sig att han skulle bli besvärad av alla blickar.

– Jag vill tacka er alla för att ni kom hit för att fira att min älskade Lovisa äntligen har kommit hem igen. Det här känns lite ovant, men... alltså, egentligen borde jag nog känna som

om jag är omgiven av främlingar och bara längta efter att ni åker hem. Men jag ser inte ett rum fullt av främlingar längre. Jag ser ett rum fullt av ett supportnätverk. Ni har alla stöttat mig på ett eller annat sätt, och det får mig att vilja ge tillbaka. Jag hoppas att ni förstår att det är dubbelriktat. Om någon av er någonsin behöver hjälp, kanske bara barnvakt eller vad som helst, så vet ni mitt nummer. Bara ropa, så kommer jag.

Han satte sig ner igen. Lovisa kysste honom intensivt till allas förtjusning. Inte ens det fick Elias att bli besvärad.

Efter ett par intensiva timmar började gästerna gå hem. Elias hjälpte Karin med att städa upp i köket, medan Lovisa satt kvar i vardagsrummet och småpratade med Kenneth, tillbakalutad i soffan och rätt trött efter all aktivitet.

– Är det inte otroligt hur fantastiskt Elias har hanterat dagen, pappa? frågade hon.

– Visst är det så. Jag har sett hur han har vuxit och blivit mer social. Så här har jag sett honom tidigare, när vi var här på besök. Han tog verkligen väl hand om både din mamma och mig. Detsamma gällde när Anna och Peter hälsade på. Han var inte alls besvärad, som jag sett honom förr.

– Han är som en annan man. En fantastisk man som inte bara är otrolig med barn, utan riktigt social.

– Det är som jag sa på sjukhuset. Han har verkligen växt under den här krisen. Det finns ingenting ont som inte har något gott med sig, eller hur?

– Så sant, pappa.

Snart mötte Elias och Karin upp igen, och de hade ett trevligt samtal under en stund. Lovisa satt bredvid, lutad tillbaka i soffan, med ett litet leende när hon hörde dem skratta. Hon småpratade ibland, men orkade fortfarande inte så mycket. Middagen med alla gäster hade varit fartfylld och alldeles underbar, precis som hon älskade, men nu kände hon hur tröttheten smög sig på. Hon tog små pauser för att samla kraft, samtidigt som hon njöt av att observera Elias.

Hon kunde inte låta bli att le inombords när hon såg honom fortsätta vara den som matade och bytte blöja på Sonja. På den punkten släppte han inte in någon annan än sig själv ännu. Lovisa hade aldrig varit så avslappnad. Att se sin älskade Elias ta hand om deras baby så kärleksfullt fyllde henne med värme och trygghet.

Hon kunde inte låta bli att kommentera det hela.

– Kommer du ihåg det allra första jag sa till dej, Elias älskling?

– Du menar det där om att gifta oss och bilda familj?

– Just det. Och vad är det som vi har här idag?

– En familj, precis som du ville. Är du förvånad, du får väl alltid igenom det du vill, inte sant?

– Å ja, du ville det lika mycket.

– Jag ville det nog mer än du, fast jag inte kunde tro på det. Men jag tänker inte bråka med dig om det, log Elias. Antar att vi båda ville det, och nu har vi båda fått det.

Elias satte sig närmare Lovisa och kysste henne. Hennes föräldrar log åt scenen. Ett sånt fantastiskt par de hade blivit!

Snart gick Lovisas föräldrar in i det som mer kändes som gästrum vid det här laget. De sa "godnatt" och gick och lade sig. Elias såg till att Sonja hade fått det hon behövde, och när allt var klart lade han och Lovisa sig i sängen, trötta men nöjda efter en dag full av intryck och småprat.

– Du har varit helt otrolig idag, så fullständigt lugn och hjälpsam i det som du bara måste uppfatta som kaos. Vad har hänt egentligen, och vad har du gjort med Elias som jag känner från förut?

– Jag har redan svarat på det, Lovisa. Men du svarade aldrig vad du tycker om Nya Elias.

– Han är den make jag alltid drömt om... jag trodde aldrig jag skulle få honom! Jag är så otroligt, oändligt, vansinnigt lycklig just nu, Elias den andre!

– Vad har hänt med "Elias älskling"?

– Du är så fantastisk, Elias älskling. Samma person men så mycket mer än jag någonsin drömt om. Du har gjort mej så lycklig idag.

– Dito, svarade Elias torrt. Det är du som fått mig att klara av, till och med tycka om, det här med en massa folk, full rulle och totalt kaos.

– Nej, det är du som gjort det alldeles själv, älskling.

– Jag tänker **inte** bråka med dig om en sådan bagatell. Vi kan väl bara vara överens om att vi båda har bidragit till att

jag känner ett fullständigt lugn. Du har pushat mig och hjälpt mig bli mer social, och jag har låtit dig göra det.

– Jo, det stämmer. Samtidigt har jag lugnat ner mej och blivit lite mer organiserad, tack vare dej. Du har lärt mej att inte vara så rörig och att hålla ordning runt mej, så jag hittar mina saker nu. Mina vänner tycker att jag är lättare att umgås med. Du är helt klart anledningen till det.

– Det var väl inget. Jag fungerar bara så.

– Jag har lugnat ner mig och blivit mer strukturerad medan du har blivit mer spontan och social. Vi har anpassat oss till varandra. Det är därför vi passar så bra ihop.

– Mm, så sant. Tur är det, för det är nu som kaoset börjar på riktigt.

– Vad är det kaos som du menar? Har vi inte haft nog med kaos för din smak?

– Vi har en baby att ta hand om, och jag kan inte ens fråga socialtjänsten om hjälp. En baby som växer upp och blir en trotsig tonåring. Wow... vad mycket kaos som väntar. Och jag... jag längtar faktiskt efter det.

– Jag älskar både att du säger det och allt annat. Men nu är jag trött, så godnatt, älskade Elias.

– Godnatt själv, älskade Lovisa. Det är så underbart att du är här nu.

Lovisa somnade, och Elias låg länge och tittade på henne. Sedan tittade han bort mot spjålsängen där Sonja låg och gjorde små lustiga läten. Hans hjärta slog som en stånghammare i bröstet av lycka.

Lovisa vände sig om och sparkade honom på benet. *Aj, det där gjorde ont*, tänkte han, men log brett ändå. Det här var i varje fall något som inte förändrats. Det var precis som vanligt. Som det nya normala.

Hans sista tanke innan han somnade var en grov svordom, ovanlig men djupt ärlig:

Fuck you, AST.

Jag vann till slut!

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