



A THOUSAND STEPS

BY CHRYS ROMEO

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Chapter 1

The vivid bunch of red petals in a flow of black lustrous hair went round and round as the swirls of her long dress would cut across the dance floor, in dazzling sharp moves that seemed to draw an invisible pattern in the air. The dancer kept the audience speechless. Her hands were rising graciously in the air, black swans drifting with the music.

Kevin watched the dancer captivated by her undeniable talent. She was, without a doubt, the most beautiful dancer he had seen up to that moment. He felt she had every chance to become the star of the pre-selections and the main attraction of the international contest ahead. He was lost in a daze, although he wasn't there to evaluate her dancing skills: he had come to investigate a series of events that had caused a suspicious unexplained accident for the dancing team before.

The team manager sat next to him.

“Good evening, detective. Do you like our dancers?”

Kevin nodded thoughtfully, while his head was actually blank like a computer on stand-by. He was too lost in the mirage of the leading dancer. Surrounded by other girls in bright colorful gowns with wavy folds, she still stood out, a black beauty with delicate gestures.

In hypnotized motion, Kevin raised his camera to take a picture. At that moment, as she was swirling round, her eyes noticed his intention. She immediately turned her back to him, drifting to the other side of the dance floor.

“Consuelo doesn’t like to have her picture taken too much”, the manager explained. “She’s a bit shy, though she’s Spanish – and Spanish girls are hardly ever bashful. But she’s very good at dancing; I’m sure she’ll make the pre-selections to the next level. However, she’s wary of too many photos.”

And the manager gave the detective a disgruntled stare.

The music stopped. The dance was over. The girls went behind the stage. Kevin stared after Consuelo absently, then he placed the camera on the wooden bench and looked at the manager, unimpressed by the Spartan beard and glaring eyes.

“Are you going to accompany the girls to the international competition?” he asked casually.

“Yes. Are you coming with us?” the Spartan-looking manager inquired sternly.”

“I think I will. I’m waiting for my colleague to join me soon. We must find out what happened the last time. Why did the bus crash?”

The manager shrugged, looking away.

“Nobody knows for sure. It might have been a technical fault, or human error, but neither was confirmed by the investigation. Aren’t you here to tell us what went wrong?”

“I intend to find out.”

The music changed to Oriental rhythm. The stage was filled by agile girls, swaying and jingling their shiny golden belts, their heads covered by colorful scarves.

“That’s Aysun in the middle”, the Spartan manager told Kevin, pointing to a beautiful girl with long brown hair and warm eyes glimmering behind the veil. “She’s the Turkish representative. She’s already been selected for the big competition. This dance is just a formality. She’s the best from her group.”

Kevin raised the camera again and the girl smiled as he took her picture. She seemed to enjoy it, and she threw off the scarf, unveiling the soft locks of chestnut brownish hair, in a charming flow. The next moment, she drifted away from the stage, disappearing mysteriously with the music.

A row of Slovenian folk dancers with flowery blouses and blonde braided hair entered marching rhythmically.

Kevin’s phone started ringing.

“Hey what’s up?” the voice at the other end seemed eager to get the news. “Where the hell are you?” she asked impatiently.

“Hey Jackie”, he answered calmly. “I’m in the dance hall, watching the pre-selections.”

“Why are you wasting time on that? We’re supposed to investigate the accident.”

“I’m also investigating.”

Kevin stood up and went to the back of the room, distancing himself from the Spartan manager, to discuss privately. His colleague was still rambling on the phone:

“How are you investigating anything? By watching the dancers? Get down here, I’ve got some files with details about the bus that went over the cliff.”

“I’ve spoken to the manager of the team that will go to Rio. I think we should keep an eye on him, he might know something that he isn’t telling.”

“Okay, but come outside. I’m in the car. You have to see these files from the technical analysis.”

“I know what it says. The brakes didn’t function.”

“Yes, but they had been previously checked by the mechanic. Something doesn’t add up.”

“I’ll be right there.”

He left the room.

Jackie was waiting in her small brown car. Her ginger hair and green eyes were flaring from the window. She opened the car door and extended a hand to him with a bunch of files.

“Here. Read it yourself.”

Kevin took the files and sat down on the edge of the sidewalk, next to the car. Jackie lit up a cigarette, staring nervously at her watch.

“We should be packing by now. Tomorrow morning we have a plane to Rio. Are those girls still dancing in there?”

Kevin nodded.

“Yes, they are.”

She glanced at him inquiringly. Her sharp intuition could see right through him. She knew he had enjoyed watching the show, but she didn't say a word. She just puffed the smoke away and stared at him, thinking of something he couldn't guess and didn't try.

“The brakes were messed up”, Kevin said after a while.

“Yes, definitely. But who did it – and why?”

“Well, the technical analysis says they were going downhill and the driver didn't adjust the speed so eventually the brakes heated and didn't function anymore. He lost control and the bus went over the cliff. ”

“I don't buy it. Four people are dead. It's the fourth accident with the dancers' team. I don't think it was random. Somebody has a grudge or an agenda.”

“I agree... but we have to see who it is. It must be someone who's been with the team the last four years.”

They stood in silence for a few minutes, staring pensively at the dance hall building that looked like an ancient temple.

Then Jackie's phone rang unexpectedly.

“Yes, lunch is on the table, I left it for you. Don't wait for me. You can go to sleep if you feel tired. Yes, I'll see you tonight. My son, Andrew”, she mentioned sideways after turning the phone off. “He's staying with his uncle while I'm away.”

Kevin didn't comment. He knew Jackie was a single mother, struggling between work and house chores. He also

knew she was a very energetic and active person who could face anything.

“He’ll be fine”, he said browsing through the files.

“He will, but he’s very attached to me and he’s a bit upset that I’m not taking him along. It’s a dangerous trip though.”

“He’s better off at home.”

“I told him I’m not going there for a vacation, just work. He understands, but he’s already waiting for me to come back.”

Jackie finished the cigarette.

“What do you think?” she asked.

It was a question about the files. Kevin slammed the pages shut and handed them back to her.

“It could be someone from inside. It must be someone who had access to the engine. Someone who was with them – someone who knew when and where they would be.”

“Maybe they were followed?”

“Maybe.”

They stared at the busy street.

Kevin was thinking about the dancers. The Spanish girl was still swirling round and round in his mind, her deep dark eyes turning away from his camera, in a delicate, defensive gesture. The Turkish swinger was waving her scarf charmingly, her almond eyes shining for a second and disappearing mysteriously behind the stage.

“We have to make sure it doesn't happen again this time”, he said, staring in the distance.

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On the plane, the two detectives were seated together at the back of the row. They requested the back seats to have a complete view of the passengers.

It was a small charter, not one of the bigger aircrafts. It was taking a special trip for the dancing team.

Kevin watched carefully every passenger. Most of them were dancers from many countries. He recognized Consuelo from Spain, Aysun from Turkey and a blonde slender girl with braided hair, accompanied by a tall man with features of a carved statue.

“Who's the blond dude with stiff jaws?” he asked Jackie.

“He's Boris - Natasha's boyfriend.”

“Who's Natasha?”

“Slovenia's representative. I thought you watched the dancers yesterday”, she added a bit ironic and amused.

“I did, until you called me outside. Is her boyfriend allowed to be here?”

She smiled.

“He's a dancer too.”

It seemed Consuelo also had company: a dark haired man. By the costume he wore, Kevin thought he must have been a dancer too... or a boyfriend. He wondered.

“That’s Miguel”, Jackie said, catching the direction of Kevin’s somehow worried glance. “Spanish dancer,” she added.

“Is he her boyfriend too?” he asked casually.

“I don’t know. I just got the list of dancers from the pilot. Actually, I have the full list of passengers. We’re taking one more passenger when we get to Brazil. Actually, two.”

“Who are they?”

“The former manager of the dancing team and someone else – they didn’t say.”

“Why is the former manager joining us?”

“It seems he was invited as a gesture of honor because he’s retired and the organizers thought he could have one more view of the contest before he fades out from the business.”

Kevin felt amused. The Italian representative, a slim agile girl, was seated between two male dancers.

“That girl will get in trouble if she doesn’t choose one of the boys soon. We’ll have to break up a fight on the plane. You know how jealous Italians are...”

“Shut up, Kevin. Don’t predict trouble. You always let your imagination wander a lot.”

“Not this time: it’s very real. What about those two?”

“That’s Steven from Romania and Eleftheria from Greece.”

“Yeah she really looks like one of those Olympian goddesses... Isn’t it poetic? Having to dance with someone like that. “

“I don’t like poetry”, Jackie said shortly.

Kevin glanced at Aysun, the charming mysterious Turkish dancer. He smiled.

“This is like Eurovision, with so many countries on board.”

He was enjoying the moment.

The Spartan manager was at the front of the plane. Kevin saw him turn around and glare across the seats. He wondered if the manager considered the detectives a threat to his authority, or if he had other reasons to keep looking persistently in their direction.

The plane took off.

Hours went by. Kevin had let Jackie have the window seat, so she was staring outside most of the time while he was glancing at the passengers. Who could have had a reason to mess with the bus? Who, on that plane, had some hidden purpose to undermine the dancing team and cause an accident?

At some point, he noticed Consuelo getting up and coming to the rear of the plane. She was walking in his direction. In the morning light she didn’t look like a black swan, as the day before, on stage; her hair was flowing freely and the

light blue jeans jacket made her look like a simple tourist – yet her steps were still gracious and she had a vulnerable allure about her. Kevin suddenly found her deep eyes staring at him directly. She smiled unexpectedly.

“Hi”, she said in a friendly voice, startling him.

“Hi”, he answered awkwardly.

She passed by to ask the flight attendant for a glass of water.

It left him speechless for a while: after having seen her dance, he felt intimidated by her presence, so close in front of him. He hadn't expected her to say anything. He certainly hadn't expected her to be friendly, after she had turned away and avoided his photos. He also hadn't expected her to be brave enough to initiate conversation.

He felt he was blushing like a teenager and suddenly became somehow angry with himself for letting a girl confuse his mind so easily. He told himself he was there to find out the truth about the bus – and to protect the team of dancers. He tried to switch his thoughts to a logical and rational trail.

He watched the fluffy clouds outside the window opposite his seat. The safety belt sign was suddenly lit on and turbulences started. The passengers were urged to sit down and lock their seat belts. As the plane was shaking and trembling unpredictably, Kevin wondered what was going on. He noticed they were losing altitude and making turns.

“Are we landing?” he asked Jackie.

She didn't seem too worried.

"I think we arrived at the point where we have to pick up the other passengers – the retired manager and the undisclosed person."

"Why isn't the pilot saying anything? If we're landing, he must announce it."

She shrugged.

"We can't get up and check."

"Why not?"

"Because it's not safe to walk along the plane while it's unstable."

The pilot delayed the announcement, but eventually the microphone buzzed and spoke:

"In ten minutes we'll be landing on a private property. Don't take off your seat belts until the plane has fully stopped."

The plane landed with a jolt.

Everyone unlocked their seat belts and looked out the windows: they were near a tropical forest, at the edge of what appeared to be a farm with a straw hut and a wooden fence.

"I don't think this is where we were supposed to land", Jackie said suspiciously.

The farm seemed deserted.

A bit confused, the passengers rushed to the door. The pilot spoke on the microphone again:

"We landed five kilometers from the airport, where we were supposed to pick up two more passengers for Rio.

Unfortunately, I don't have enough fuel to get there, so I landed the plane and I will contact emergency services to get me out of this place. However, it's a long way and we're in the middle of the forest. I know you have to be in Rio tomorrow, for a big show. The solution is simple: you can walk to the airport. It will take you less than two hours, if you follow the forest track. I can't come with you because I must wait for the technical service team."

Kevin looked at Jackie with doubt.

"This is not right. He's lying. The plane doesn't have enough fuel?"

"Someone has a plan again."

The pilot continued:

"You won't be able to take your luggage with you, because you must walk through the forest. I suggest you take your most important and valuable belongings – phones, wallets, passports and some bottles of water. Nothing more. Your luggage will arrive at the hotel after the plane gets to the airport."

Inside the plane people became agitated.

The Spartan manager was angry. He knocked his fist on the pilot's door.

"You can't leave us in the middle of nowhere! I'll file a complaint! You don't even show your face! Get out of there and face us in person, not through a microphone!"

Yet the pilot didn't show up. He continued in the speakers:

"I'm sorry for your inconvenience, but this situation is distressful for me too. However, I assure you nothing dangerous will happen. It will be just a nice walk through the woods and you'll get to the nearest village where you can take a ride to Rio. In the meantime, I'll contact help and get your luggage to the hotel. Stay calm and enjoy the trip."

"We want our money back!" yelled the imposingly tall Boris who was looking above everyone's heads.

Jackie took out the bulletproof camouflage vests from the upper compartment and threw one of them to Kevin.

"We should open the door. These people are getting restless. We have to get out, or it will get messy in here. They're losing their tempers."

"Don't panic", Kevin spoke loudly and moved through the crowd towards the plane front door.

Boris faced him, looking down and frowning.

"And who are you?"

"I'm the detective who's investigating the accident.

"We don't need investigations now. We need to get to the hotel."

"We'll get there, but not by standing here waiting. Why don't you let me open the door before more accidents happen?"

"Yes, get out of the way", Steven the Romanian dancer added, standing by Kevin's side.

"Thanks, Steven", Kevin told him.

Confronted by the two men, Boris stepped aside and Kevin opened the plane door. The distance to the ground was not high.

He jumped out.

“Come on!” he shouted to the passengers.

One by one, they got out into the sun. Jackie made sure nobody was left on the plane. From his cockpit, the pilot waved at them through the closed window, a pale image of a smile. For a moment, Kevin wondered if it was a person or a ghost.

At the edge of the forest, everything was quiet.

The group of dancers stood there, staring at the trail that went inside the woods.

“Does anyone know what’s in this forest?”

“Anyone has got GPS?”

“There’s no signal here. It must be blocked by the mountains.”

“Do we just venture into the unknown?”

Kevin looked at Jackie. She was smoking a cigarette again.

“Enough with the cigarettes”, he told her. “You’ll get sick. Why don’t you quit?”

“Habit”, she said and came closer, finishing the smoke.

“You’ll set the forest on fire.”

“Fine, I won’t smoke until we get to the hotel. I don’t have anymore cigarettes anyway”, she added with a grin.

Then she looked at her phone.

“Damn, there’s no signal here. I can’t reach Andrew. He must be waiting for my call.”

“You’ll call him later”.

“Yes, when we get to a more civilized place...”

They both stared at the trail that was getting lost through the trees.

“Are you sure we should go that way?” she asked with an uncertain tone.

“I don’t see any other way. If we stay here the dancers won’t reach the selection in time and none of them will participate in the main show. If we walk, at least we have a chance to get to the hotel faster.”

“Okay then, let’s get going.”

“I’ll walk ahead and you follow the group to make sure no one gets lost.”

“Sure, don’t worry.”

The farm where the plane had landed remained behind, empty and silent.

Chapter 2

Crossing the woods was not such an easy task, as it had seemed in the beginning. Wild plants, fallen logs and dry branches covered the trail. The group had to make way through the obstacles, stepping over, aside or bowing under vaults of high green foliage.

“It’s exhausting”, Natasha complained.

“How far to that village?” Boris grumbled.

Kevin was walking ahead, making a trail. The tall blond Slovenian was breathing down his neck and he didn’t like it.

“We have to keep going”, he replied without turning to look back.

In half an hour, he heard Jackie call from the rear of the group.

“Hey Kevin! Can we pause for a minute?”

They were so deep into the woods that it seemed they were lost. Kevin listened carefully. There was a sound, very near, like roaring water.

“We should have arrived at that village by now”, Jackie told him, passing by the group of dancers who sat down to rest.

Kevin felt they were getting somewhere regardless.

“Just one more step. I can see light beyond those bushes”, he said and pushed the branches away from view.

Something was indeed beyond the leaves.

Taking one more step, he found himself on the edge of a precipice. Down in the abyss there was a tumultuous river. There was also a wooden bridge made of logs and ropes, going across.

“We must cross this bridge”, Kevin concluded.

The Spartan manager came closer to examine the ropes and unstable logs that were suspended above the emptiness. The menacing river was roaring so far down.

“I can’t look, it makes me dizzy”, Jackie said and took a step back.

“What if the wooden bridge is not safe?” Aysun asked Kevin, almost whispering, a bit worried about the logical consequences. “Someone should check it out. I could go first, since I don’t weigh too much.”

Kevin was certain the Turkish girl had more courage than most in that group, yet he didn’t expect her to take the lead and be so brave to go first on the dangerously unstable bridge.

He looked in her eyes, uncertain. He didn’t want to risk her safety. He felt responsible for the dancers.

“Let me”, she insisted, staring seriously in his eyes.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I’ve done this before. We have many cliffs and heights in my country.”

Her serious tone and determined attitude convinced him. There was something completely trustworthy about her. She made him feel like everything she said was reliable and verified.

“Okay, you can go first.”

He realized she didn't seem to weigh much of anything, as her slender figure started stepping carefully on the discolored wooden bridge. It served her purpose that she wasn't wearing a long skirt, but plain navy blue jeans and a t-shirt. She could move easily along the bridge. She kept clinging to the side rope. Kevin felt his heart skip a beat as she staggered for a moment, above the roaring river, her long hair flowing in the air, a brown flicker of hawk wings. She regained her balance immediately and continued until she reached the other side.

She waved at the group, smiling as her almond eyes were shining warmly in the sun.

“You can cross, it's okay!”

“Wow! She really did it”, Jackie remarked.

“Yes, she did...” he said, staring admiringly after the Turkish dancer that looked like an experienced athlete.

Jackie glanced at Kevin for a moment, noticing he was charmed by the Turkish girl, but didn't comment.

“Who's next?” the Spartan manager inquired. “I'll go, if nobody wants to.”

And he crossed the bridge quickly, followed soon by Miguel, the dark dancer. Consuelo was standing on the edge, looking anxiously at the bridge in front of her. She wanted to follow her partner, but after a few steps on the swinging logs she stopped above the abyss.

"I can't go on", she said out loud with a scared voice, looking at the abyss and the river beneath her feet.

Kevin wanted to help her, but didn't have the choice of approaching the suspended dancer. Instead, he tried to give her encouragement.

"Yes you can", he spoke to her. "Don't look down."

She heard him and tried to advance. She took one more step. And then she stopped again.

"Come on, Consuelo!" the Spartan shouted from the other side.

His authority didn't seem enough to get her to move.

"I can't, sir!" she answered with an alarmed voice. "It's too hard, I can't do it!"

She started to cry. Kevin felt his heart cringe at the sight of her tears.

"Don't cry", he said trying to think of something to erase her fear. "It's just a few steps."

"It feels like a thousand", she replied between sobs.

"You can do it", he repeated, but she still didn't budge.

He felt helpless. Encouraging her didn't seem to work. He wanted to do something – anything, to get her safe on the other side.

He attempted to step on the bridge, but Jackie grabbed his camouflage vest.

"You can't be on that bridge, both of you at the same time. Let her be. She must do it on her own."

On the other side, the Spartan and Miguel were watching attentively, also helpless about Consuelo's conversation with Kevin. They couldn't do anything about it and couldn't help her either.

"It's not so difficult", Kevin spoke to her again.

"Consuelo, go back and let the detective pass", the manager shouted at her.

Kevin hoped that, by seeing him accomplish the task of crossing the bridge, she would find the courage to do it too.

She came back with small steps. She was still sobbing, which was heartbreaking to watch. She sat down on the ground and hid her face in her arms, with another vulnerable gesture. He knew she was disappointed with herself for not conquering her fear and not having the strength to face the abyss.

He stepped on the bridge, determined to show her that it was possible. The river was roaring fast beneath his feet, but it didn't trouble him. The wooden logs were shaking and swinging over the precipice. He realized it took some concentration, determination and muscle strength to keep balance at such a height, on unstable round logs, suspended in the air. He grabbed the rope, advancing steadily, not looking back. Aysun had made it seem so easy. He felt sorry for the gracious Spanish dancer that he had to leave behind, on the other side. He didn't like leaving her there, so desolate and disappointed, but the girl didn't react to any encouragement. She had to find the

strength to cross on her own. He understood it was the only thing he could do: let her be.

He joined the group on the other side and waited until the dancers crossed the bridge one by one. In the end, only two persons were left on the edge: Jackie and Consuelo. Kevin knew that Jackie would not cross until everyone was safe, so he waited patiently. In the meantime, it seemed that the Spanish dancer had finished crying, had gained some courage and was ready to try again.

Everyone watched anxiously as she took each step on the logs, determined and silent, not looking down, until she got near the end of the bridge and with one last step she jumped in Miguel's arms, relieved and proud that she had done it. People applauded her.

After that second, Kevin thought he saw another woman, like a dark green shadow on the bridge, falling in the abyss. The image vanished in the air and he thought it must have been an optical illusion from the blinding sunlight and his anxiety about Consuelo having trouble crossing it. He dismissed the vision by blinking several times.

The group started walking down the path, to the valley of the riverbank, where the track was heading.

Kevin waited for Jackie to cross the bridge too. She did it, though she didn't like it.

“I don’t know why I feel so dizzy today”, she said when she arrived by his side. “I didn’t use to have any fear of heights. Today is the first time.”

“It wasn’t an easy bridge to cross”, he said. “Don’t worry about it.”

They caught up with the others.

Kevin walked ahead again.

At some point, as they were approaching the riverbank in the valley, he heard Aysun speak to him. She had come closer and wanted to tell him something.

“Boris has a gun”, she warned him with a low voice, so that only he could hear it.

Her almond eyes were serious and her words had the imprint of rational thinking. It wasn’t something that panicked her, but something she had analyzed and examined in her mind.

“How do you know?” Kevin asked, surprised by the fact that she had noticed something he hadn’t seen.

“I watched him hide it in his pocket.”

“Is it a gun for sure?”

“Yes. It’s a gun.”

Kevin looked in her eyes.

She was still very serious, unafraid but worried and determined to solve the situation. She had obviously told him because she considered it was something he had to know.

“You should take it from him”, she added. “I don't trust him with it.”

“You're right, he might endanger the others.”

He went near the blond Slovenian, but just as he wanted to speak, they heard someone call to them from behind:

“Hello there!”

They turned around. They had been followed by two persons: an old man with a sly grin and a teenager with patient innocent eyes and sandy long hair, shining in the sun.

“I had to hurry to get to you”, the old man continued.

“Long time no see”, the Spartan said frowning. “I was hoping we wouldn't meet again.”

The dancers also seemed to know the old man.

“Who's that?” Kevin asked Aysun.

“That's the former manager. He's no longer a manager, but everyone avoids and dislikes him because he took advantage of his position when he was in the business. He always told dancers they couldn't do anything. He liked to discourage people and start quarrels among them, set them against each other. Now he's just an old man, but people didn't forget. He was called Smirk – because his face was always petrified in a smirk and he has a heart of stone...”

Kevin looked at the teenager.

“Is that girl the undisclosed person?”

Aysun shrugged. She knew nothing about the girl.

Nobody knew the teenager or why she was there. She glanced at them peacefully. She seemed fearless and calm, her deep thoughts unrevealed.

“I want you to welcome my granddaughter Sonia”, Smirk announced proudly. “I promised to show her the best dance selection in the world – where her mother also participated years ago.”

They joined the group. Kevin had some questions for Sonia.

“What are you doing in this dangerous valley?”

“I came with my grandfather.”

“Aren't you afraid of these wild places?”

“No”, she replied undisturbed. “I grew up around here. I know these places better than you.”

“Okay then, you'll be our guide. How do we get to the nearest village - or town? We need a ride to Rio.”

She looked up in his eyes. Her sleek hair was shining brightly in the midday light while her stare was comfortable and friendly. Somehow, Kevin had an unexplained feeling he already knew her well. The teenager spoke with ease:

“I'll tell you if you answer me one question too.”

And she smiled.

“Fine. Go ahead and ask.”

“Are you the detective who came to investigate the bus crash?”

“Yes, I am. What do you know about it?”

She said casually:

“It happened not far from here.”

“Anything else?”

She looked back at him, not answering immediately.

“Sonia, come here”, the old man called for her, discontent that she was speaking to Kevin.

“I have to go”, she told him simply.

Kevin wondered why her identity had been kept secret.

The old man frowned at him. In the meantime, Jackie came closer.

“Who are you?” the old man asked displeased by the two detectives staring at him attentively.

“I’m detective Kevin and this is my colleague Jaqueline...”

Jackie nudged an elbow in his ribs.

“Don’t call me that, I’m too volcanic for it,” she said jokingly. “I’m Jackie”, she introduced herself and extended a hand to the former manager who chose to ignore it, walking away.

“So much for an introduction,” Kevin commented.

“Don’t worry, he’s not worth it. So what did the girl tell you?”

“Nothing, cause the old manager interrupted us. But I think she knows more than anyone else here – except for the person who is behind the accidents”.

He added:

“It will take us a long way to uncover the truth.”

“We’ll take it one step at a time.”

“Yes, but we must be careful. Not everyone in this group is what they appear to be. I know Boris has a gun, for example.”

Jackie didn’t seem to believe it at first.

‘A gun? What for?’

“Maybe he’s afraid someone will attack us. Maybe he intends to attack somebody. Maybe he’s got hidden intentions.”

The group was waiting for Sonia to tell them where to go.

“What do we do about it?” Jackie wondered, staring at the tall Slovenian who was frowning menacingly at anyone who looked in his direction.

“We’ll ask politely – and if he doesn’t comply, we just take it from him.”

“This will cause trouble.”

“Trouble is inevitable anyway by now... Look where we are: in the middle of nowhere.”

“We’ll have to take the boats”, Sonia said to the group. “There’s a dock at the end of this valley. That’s the fastest way out of the woods. There’s no better solution but the river.”

“I can’t swim”, Jackie protested quietly to Kevin.

“I’ll save you”, he smiled.

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The dock was deserted, but there were many colorful plastic canoes stashed one on top of the other in piles, on the shore.

“We’ll use these”, Sonia told the group who stared in disbelief at the wavy river.

“She’s crazy”, Natasha protested. “I’m not getting in any of those!”

“The other option is to climb the ridge to go over the mountain, but the track is longer more dangerous than the river. Your choice”, Sonia replied undisturbed.

“I’ll go on the river”, Eleftheria said decisively. “Who’s with me?”

Steven took a step forward.

“I am.”

Sonia looked around at the doubtful faces.

“Anyone else? You must know only two people fit in a canoe. At least one of them must be stronger.”

“Sonia, why are you confusing these people?” her grandfather spoke in a sly voice. “They are better off climbing the mountain. I’ll show them the path.”

“I’m not going in those boats”, Natasha said. “I want to walk.”

“We’re walking”, Boris decided, standing by her side determined.

It seemed the group was splitting in two.

People started choosing pairs to go on the boats.

Consuelo was staring at the boats with doubt in her eyes. Kevin could guess her disinterest in the dangerous river ride. He feared she would choose to go across the ridge with the old man. She was already backing down. She turned to say something to Miguel. They looked around for a boat. Kevin breathed relieved. He didn't want to see the Spanish dancer get lost in the woods with the armed Slovenian and the sly old man.

Sonia looked at Kevin.

"Detective, my grandfather will go the longer way. I think canoes are better."

"I'm going with you", he said suddenly, thinking he would have time to ask her more questions about the bus.

Jackie went with the Spartan, while Consuelo was clinging to Miguel's arm, watching the tumultuous waters doubtfully.

Eventually, the old manager left with Boris and Natasha. Kevin stared after them. He hadn't taken the gun from the grumpy Slovenian. He didn't trust anyone in the group, but Boris seemed the most dangerous and short tempered. However, it was too late to stop them: they had already disappeared in the bushes.

"Are we the last ones?" he asked Sonia, as they watched the long colorful canoes float away rapidly, one by one, specks

of red, yellow, green and blue disappearing in the distant waves.

“Yes. Take this”, she said handing him the double oar. “I should be in the front. The stronger person rows behind”, she explained.

They got in the canoe. There was enough space for stretching their legs, but with each unexpected movement the plastic boat would swing menacingly, ready to flip over. The water was slow and peaceful at first, but as they advanced to the middle of the river, the waves gained speed and sometimes they would hit the rocks underneath, or pieces of logs floating down. Keeping direction became a difficult task. The current kept pushing the boat to the shores, or turning it round, so they were going backwards and had a hard time switching it back.

Kevin got the moves quickly, learning to adjust direction. As he was in the back, he had to tell the teenager what to do next.

“Left. Now right. Left again. I brake left, you row right. No, no, not that right. The other right!”

It was both funny and dangerous. He could feel the adrenaline rush of the challenge. The muscles in his arms were already sore after ten minutes. It was tremendous work, keeping the canoe on direction. Each time Sonia rowed, she threw water back in the boat. Each time he lifted the oar,

water would run down his arm, to his neck, then on his back. Soon, he was soaking wet, but still having a good time anyway.

“Look, that’s where the bus crashed”, he suddenly heard Sonia say.

She pointed with the oar to a slope on the shore. They both stopped rowing, staring at the remains of yellow metal pieces and burned rubber spreading in the grass. The current turned the boat around again, dragging them down backwards.

“Come on, let’s turn this back!” he said, snapping out of contemplation. “Push forward to the left, I’ll push back to the right. No, wait! Now together, forward to the right!”

They struggled to turn the boat, but the current was too powerful. They started laughing and gave up for a while, letting it take them backwards on the river. Kevin kept looking back – which was ahead – to warn of obstacles.

“Head down there’s a tree above the water!” he shouted.

They bent down their heads, passing under the vaulted branches.

“Big log across! Row to the right! No, to the left!”

They were heading towards a big log and a huge rock. The boat hit the log at full speed and was taken closer to the shore. The plastic canoe drifted and buried its nose in the muddy clay by the riverbank. Kevin breathed deeply, wiping water from his face.

“That was close. If we had hit the rock we would have blown up in pieces.”

“Now what?”

“Let’s push the boat back on track.”

They pushed with the oars against the ground on the shore. Slowly, the current made the canoe drift back towards the middle.

“So what else do you know about the bus?” he asked Sonia. “Be careful now, there’s another log stuck on the left.”

“Some witnesses say the bus had stopped on top of the hill and it’s possible the driver had ingested some alcohol.”

“It was mentioned in the file too, but the autopsy didn’t reveal any traces of alcohol. The driver wasn’t drunk.”

“The driver tried to use the emergency brake, but that didn’t function either. Instead, there was smoke coming from underneath the bus, just before they went on the curve and lost control.”

“Smoke? That’s something that wasn’t mentioned in the files. Are you sure?”

“Pretty sure. I know a girl who was on that bus and survived. We chatted online when she got out of hospital. She had minor injuries and a broken arm. She told me there was a strange sound under the bus while they were going downhill. Everybody panicked and thought they were going to die. The driver tried desperately to use the emergency brake, but it didn’t function and then the bus went rolling upside down.”

“Was the sound an explosion?”

“She didn’t have time to figure it out. Everything happened so quickly. But she says she remembered a sound, more like a metal clunking noise.”

At that moment the boat approached what seemed to be a short waterfall. Waves splashed against the plastic and the canoe almost flipped over.

“Careful! Don’t do anything” Sonia shouted at him.

“I can’t row now anyway! You didn’t say anything about waterfalls!”

“It’s not a waterfall, it’s... oops, hang on!”

The canoe went rapidly nose-down into the falling water. It jolted and regained direction in a few seconds. Kevin almost dropped the oar. At that moment, he thought he saw a silhouette of a woman in a dark green dress, high on top of the cliffs above the river, jumping down. He saw her fall and disappear into the water.

“Did you see that?” he asked the teenager in front of him.

“No. What?”

“Nothing... I thought I saw someone fall in the river.”

“There’s nobody in these mountains except us.”

They passed by the boat with Aysun and the Italian girl.

“Hey!” they waved to the red canoe.

The girls were smiling and having fun, though they were stuck backwards in the riverbank reeds, struggling to get out. The velvet dark blue butterflies flickering ashore were drawn to

the red plastic boat, surrounding the girls in curious fluttering wings.

“Do you need some help?” Kevin asked them, while passing by in unexpected speed.

“We’ll be fine, don’t worry”, the Turkish dancer replied, as the current took his boat farther and farther away.

He was certain they would manage to get out of there. Aysun was a strong athlete with a sharp mind, she would have the resources to find solutions to anything, he thought.

“It might not have been just an accident”, Sonia spoke, throwing another shovel of water in his face, as she was rowing unaware of the consequences of her moves.

“Was there anyone on the bus that wasn’t supposed to be there?” he asked, wiping the water from his eyelashes to clear the view.

“The bus was filled with dancers, dancing instructors and the drivers. Nobody from outside.”

“Did she see anyone near the bus, before starting on the road?”

“I don’t know. She didn’t say. Nobody saw anything unusual.”

He figured someone might have messed with the brakes in the garage. But who? And why?

The canoe was approaching another dock. There were many people on the shore, with cars and tents.

“Finally! Is that the place we should stop?” he asked Sonia.

He could see some colorful canoes tied ashore. Some dancers had already arrived.

“Yes, that’s the place.”

“Row to the right. We must get out of the main current.”

They stirred the canoe ashore and someone came to tie it to the riverbank. The man who owned the boats seemed to know Sonia.

“Where’s your grandpa?” he asked her.

“He went the other way, across the ridge.”

“Bad choice. Heavy rain is coming tonight.”

Getting out of the canoe, Kevin looked for Jackie: she wasn’t there yet. He realized he and Sonia must have passed by many boats without noticing. Looking up the river he saw a red patch of color advancing in the waves.

It was Aysun and the Italian girl.

They struggled to get ashore and eventually got closer to the riverbank and out of the boat, joining the group with happy smiles. It had been a long adventurous ride.

After half an hour, Jackie and the Spartan arrived too. She was tired of rowing and hadn’t enjoyed the river too much.

“Damn, I never cursed so much in my life”, she said throwing away the oar, as she climbed on the dock. “So now what?”

“I think we’re not going to wait for those who went separately on the ridge.” Kevin answered.

He was glad she had made it through the ride.

“Was the Spartan any fun?” he asked her amused.

“Don’t remind me”, she grumbled, shaking water from the camouflage vest. “The man knew as much about boats as I did. Imagine the pair of skills we had together...”

Kevin couldn’t prevent himself from smiling. He admired her energetic nature so much that sometimes he could overlook her emotionless practical actions that didn’t find resonance in his feelings. He knew she was a great road partner, despite her lack of sentimental inclination. Watching her in action was inciting. She was fast and adaptable to any situation. They made a good pair of detectives.

The owner of the boats pointed to a minivan, speaking to the stranded dancers:

“You can get in that car, I’ll take you to the hotel.”

The group marched towards the minivan, wearing wet clothes and tired smiles, relieved to finally see a way out. Their rescue was already reality. The salvation moment had come, after a very long day.

Chapter 3

They arrived at the hotel when it was getting dark.

Small round lamps arranged on its front veranda lighted the hotel building. The bright wooden shutters by the windows were eclipsed by the cloudy evening sky. Rain was getting nearer and the air felt humid.

"I'm going to take a shower and I'll meet you here on the porch in twenty minutes", Kevin said to Jackie, as they were getting their keys from the reception.

"Okay, I'll do the same", she answered with a tired voice.

Everyone just wanted to get into the rooms and sleep.

Kevin was hungry.

"Would you like to have dinner?" he asked randomly.

They hadn't eaten a meal the whole day, only biscuits and sandwiches. Jackie stared at him as if water from the river was still between them, blocking the view.

"Okay, sure. Dinner would be good."

"I'll see you later then."

"See you."

They went up to their rooms.

Kevin climbed the stairs, but stopped at the end of the first floor: a beautiful woman with porcelain features, shiny brown

hair, heavy makeup and a glamorous, long, silky dark green dress was watching him, smiling warmly and mysteriously, as if she knew the detective from somewhere. She whispered three syllables, something that seemed like “*el-cielo*”. He took a step towards her, but then she turned away with a shadow of sorrow in her eyes and went straight into the wall, vanishing completely.

Kevin blinked in disbelief. He knew the river ride had been exhausting, but he had never had hallucinations before. He was almost sure he had seen a ghost. He couldn't be absolutely certain though, even if he had seen the green dress three times already, in just one day.

He simply didn't think about it anymore. He went to have a shower, change his clothes and return to the veranda half an hour later.

Jackie was sitting in the lamplights on the wooden bench in front of the elegant hotel, smoking absently.

“Will you stop it with the cigarettes already?” he said, sitting next to her.

“Sorry. I'll finish this in a minute and we can go have some dinner. I succeeded in speaking to my son Andrew a while ago, so now we can do anything”, she smiled.

“Do you think we could try the restaurant in this hotel?”

“Why not? I'm too tired to go out anyway.”

Kevin didn't mention the ghost to her. He wasn't sure of what he had seen and of her reaction to it. So he remained silent about it.

However, when they entered the hall to go to the restaurant, he noticed pictures with photographs on the walls. In one of the images he recognized the lady from the stairs. It seemed she was on a stage in a show. He turned around and went to the reception immediately.

"Can you tell me something about that picture in the corridor? The second one to the left... who's in the photo?"

The girl from behind the desk smiled with a trace of sadness.

"That's Maggie. She was a singer, but she died years ago. She jumped from the fourth floor of the hotel. She used to sing so beautifully. Such a great talent... such a loss."

Kevin stood there for a while, thinking about the sudden death of the successful singer. He had a feeling her apparition in the hall had a reason – that there was more to it than declared.

"Was it suicide? Was there an investigation?"

"Yes, it was considered suicide. The case was closed."

The girl at the reception added politely:

"We can provide a DVD for you, with her last show."

"That would be nice, thanks."

"We'll send it to your room this evening."

"Thank you."

He returned to the restaurant. Jackie had chosen a table and was waiting for him.

“What was that about?” she asked curiously.

“I saw a singer in those pictures. She died many years ago.”

“Why are you concerned about her case?”

He glanced along the tables, not certain whether to tell her or not.

“I think I saw her ghost in the corridor earlier.”

Jackie stared at him silently. He continued:

“I think it wasn't suicide. She didn't die on her own.”

“And you believe she's trying to tell you that by showing herself to you?”

“Yeah, that's it.”

Jackie looked away.

“Damn”, she said. “I want another cigarette.”

“Do you believe me?”

“Maybe... I'm not sure. The old man and the Slovenians haven't returned yet. They're still in the mountains.”

They heard thunder and heavy rain started beating against the windows.

“She said something to me”, Kevin continued thoughtfully.

“What did she say?”

“I don't know. Two words in Spanish: *el cielo*. Or something like that.”

“It means the sky, right?”

“Yes. Why would she tell me about the sky?”

“I have no idea.”

They stared at the restaurant tables. The rain was raging against the windows outside.

“What would you like to eat?” Jackie asked him, changing the subject.

“Some soup would be good.”

“Okay, I’ll have some soup too. Where’s that waiter?”

*

That night, as the storm raged outside, he watched the DVD with the singer’s last show. Her smile was radiant but sad, as if she knew something would happen. Her voice had so much warmth and brightness, he couldn’t believe she was gone – and she had disappeared so soon. In the interviews that followed on the DVD, some of her closest friends confessed she had said goodbye to them before the show. At the moment they didn’t understand why. The words gained more meaning later, when the police came to pick up the body and look for clues. The case was closed as self-inflicted death by precipitation from the window of the fourth floor.

Kevin went to sleep with his mind full of questions. He didn’t know why or how the bus accident was connected to Maggie’s unfortunate end, but he was sure there was

something. He had a dream: he was up in a balcony in the hotel. Maggie was there, with a glass of wine. She placed the glass on the table and smiled at him, with a glimmer of sadness and affection. "*El cielo*", she said softly. "I didn't fall on my own", she whispered. "He pushed me."

Kevin woke up suddenly. He had the feeling she had been there and really spoke those words to him. He went to the window, looking at the city lights in the distance. Who had pushed her? Who was the man that had done that and why?

"Find the reason", he thought. "Find the reason and you find the answer. It will be revealed", he said to himself and decided to look for someone who would know more about Maggie's case. Someone from the DVD interviews - one of her closest friends.

It turned out the owner of the hotel was one of them.

The next morning, as he went downstairs for breakfast, he met Jackie on the way.

"Good morning. Did you sleep well?"

"Not so much. I was up on the phone with my son, then the guests made lots of noise.

"Are the Slovenians back?" he asked casually, sipping calmly from his coffee.

"Yes. They came late last night. Boris had a fight with Natasha. He left at midnight to get drunk downtown", Jackie said.

"How do you know that?"

"I heard them down the corridor. Their room is at the same level. They were so loud, you couldn't miss it if you tried."

Aysun came to sit at their table.

She spoke seriously:

"So where is he now? Don't forget he still has that gun."

"He must show up for the selection night. We'll ask about his gun when we see him."

Aysun got up.

"I must get my outfit ready for the show tonight, but later I'd like to go out and see the city. Would you like to come too?"

"First I need to discuss something with the hotel manager", Kevin replied. "But if you're going out later we'd be happy to join you, wouldn't we Jackie?"

"Sure", she said. "We'll come."

"Ok, it's settled then. I'll see you in two hours?"

"We can meet in front of the hotel", Kevin concluded, looking at Aysun's deeply serious and attentive almond eyes.

She had a reason to want to spend time with the detectives, he thought. She probably knew more about everything than anyone in the dancers group.

*

The owner of the hotel was a very kind Italian lady named Luz. She had long blonde hair and thoughtful eyes. She wasn't old, as Kevin had expected, but at most in her thirties. She had inherited the hotel from her aunt and had been running it successfully for more than five years.

"How may I help you, dear?" she asked Kevin when he entered her office at the end of the corridor.

"I'd like to ask a few questions about one of your guests who died here years ago."

"Sit down, dear. You probably refer to Maggie, the singer... am I right?"

She lit up a cigarette, watching him attentively, with worry and contemplation.

"Yes, it's about her. Anything you can tell me would be important to me. I must know details about her life and the circumstances of her death."

"Well, first I have to tell you that I was a little girl when I met her... I was twelve – a little child, you know, eh? I remember she was a very nice lady, very elegant, really warm and friendly. She was a guest in this hotel and she knew my aunt, they were friends. She was lively, yet often sad. Her sadness was caused by a dark fear, a premonition she had: she was certain she wouldn't live to reach past the age of thirty-five. I don't know who told her that, but it was her secret. She

knew she would die young. She tried to do everything, live like a comet, burn through life, you know? Because she felt she didn't have time. And she was right."

"Do you think she was depressed when she died? Could she have jumped? What would make her decide something like that?"

Luz shook her head thoughtfully.

"I wouldn't say she had a reason to end her own life. She wouldn't do that. She was very successful at the moment. She had just launched a new album and it was selling out. Everything she did was a success. She was a very emotional person, very affectionate – but she would never act on negative feelings. The only thing that could trouble her was the quarrel she had with the manager of the dancing team. She shared the show with a dancing team, you know? Like at present, we have a contest in town. The manager had a daughter who wanted to become a ballet dancer. I know he considered the singer a rival – he considered every person on stage a rival to his daughter's glory. His daughter quit the ballet team after Maggie's death. She actually left the country and abandoned a child she had."

"Sonia. You're talking about Sonia. And her grandfather was the manager of the dancers..."

"Yes, Sonia, I think that's her name, though he keeps her very privately away from the press and from the world. The poor girl lives like a prisoner. It's a wonder, with such an

influence, if she doesn't grow up to become spiteful, mean and sarcastic like her grandfather. But to return to Maggie... the last time I saw her was before the final show. That night she was splendidly bright. She was brimming with light, energy and talent. She was also sad, though she was hiding it well. Her show was a success, despite the menacing messages she had received previous to the evening. After midnight I was awakened by police sirens and the ambulance in front of the hotel. I could see the colorful blinking lights in my window. They were there for her. She was dead."

She sighed, puffing the smoke away and shaking her head.

"Such a loss. I was so sorry for her departure. She shouldn't have died. She had so much to do ahead of her – so much music to create. So many songs to sing... she was deeply regretted by people."

"I can understand that. I just found out about her and I already like her music a lot. She had a beautiful voice... So what happened to Smirk's daughter?"

"I don't know. She remained somewhere in Europe, but was never seen here again. Rumors say the old man wants to make a ballerina out of Sonia now... "

"Which means he's out to clean the path from other rivals too?"

She nodded.

“Probably. The man’s a psychopath. He enjoys causing trouble. You should be careful around him: he’s like a snake in the grass.”

“Do you think he could have pushed Maggie from the window?”

“I don’t know. He might as well have hired someone to do it. That he was capable of wishing or planning the deed? Yes, I’m sure he still is. He’s very devious. I don’t know how you could prove it was him. Police closed the case as suicide – they found no proof. Smirk had an alibi for that night. He was in the hotel, he was seen with people.”

Kevin wondered about it. No proof meant the old man could attack again. He had to find something. He couldn’t re-open the case, but he had to prevent anything like that from happening again. He had to keep the dancers safe from him.

“I have to go”, he suddenly said and got up. “Thank you for your time.”

“I’m glad if I could help you, dear. Have a nice stay at our hotel”.

Kevin went immediately to the reception.

“I need to know the numbers of the rooms for everyone in the dancers group.”

Just as he was getting the list of rooms and names, Jackie approached him.

“What’s up? What are you doing?”

He turned to her, still looking distracted at the list.

“Where are the dancers?” he asked, lost in thoughts.

“Most of them are in their rooms, preparing for the first selection tonight. The Slovenians are at the bar, having a drink. And I think Consuelo with Miguel and the Spartan have gone out to visit the city.”

Kevin raised his eyes, suddenly alarmed.

“Is the old manager with them?”

Jackie shrugged.

“He probably is. He promised to show them around.”

“No! We’ve got to find them fast! Has Aysun come down yet?”

“She’s coming now. Why? What’s happened?”

Kevin rushed to the front door, as Aysun was coming down the stairs.

“Hurry up, quickly!” he said and they followed him outside.

He looked along the street.

“What’s wrong?” Aysun inquired.

She was freshly arranged for going out, and her subtle Turkish perfume added to her exotic presence. She seemed ready for action, interested to know what was going on.

“I don’t have time to explain”, Kevin said. “Consuelo’s in danger.”

“The Spanish girl?”

“Yes. Smirk has taken them out. Where could they go?”

Aysun understood the situation quickly. From his alarmed tone, she knew they needed to act fast.

“I think they must have gone to the statue”, she said, following the logical trail in her mind. “That’s the first place to visit here.”

“You’re right. Let’s go there right now.”

On the way, Kevin tried to prevent himself from imagining scenarios: the old man attacking the Spanish men at the statue and throwing Consuelo off the cliff. He could see everything clearly: Consuelo was easily and predictably the glorious star of the show. She had most chances of becoming the best dancer and win the contest. That would be enough threat for the old manager to want to get rid of her. Kevin felt restless and worried.

“We’ll get there in time”, Aysun spoke with certainty, and her reliable tone was almost reassuring.

Chapter 4

Access escalators to Christ the Redeemer monument in Rio were already crowded, even if it was still early in the morning.

When they got closer they could see the immense height of the statue, the impressive arms spreading above the valley and the entire city, as if permanently watching and embracing life from above, palms turned up and head bent down to see the world spreading to the horizon.

As they went up the stairs, to the top of the hill, the bay revealed itself out to the ocean, with ships as small as matchboxes and the white cubes that were the buildings in the city. The distant cliffs and islands were majestically guarding the bay, but none taller than the imposing statue.

It was morning and the clear blue sky added to the serene atmosphere. "*El cielo*". Kevin remembered the singer's words. Maybe she had meant the sky knew the truth.

"How long to the top?" Jackie asked impatiently. "There are too many stairs, my feet are already hurting."

"Just a few more steps", he answered, looking preoccupied through the crowd.

Where was Consuelo? And suddenly it dawned in his mind about the singer's ghostly words: maybe she had said "Consuelo", not "el cielo". Maybe she wanted to warn him to protect the dancer. Was it *Consuelo* or *el cielo*? He couldn't be sure though.

He knew he had to find the dancer soon. She was in danger.

"They can't be far", Aysun spoke with the same certainty that had a reassuring effect.

Jackie gained speed, jumping over two steps at a time, until she arrived at the top.

"I made it!" she said playfully, leaning with stretched arms, like a flying bird, over the valley.

"Energetic woman", Aysun remarked, a bit amused, staring after her, while Kevin was also watching her admiringly.

Jackie surprised him most when she was in full action. Sometimes he would look at her with the same daze when she was driving, switching the gear on and off, left and right, making unexpected moves, shifting the car on the road – she was an expert driver.

Aysun noticed his glance. He turned to check the crowd that had gathered near the monument. His mind went back to the present situation: they had to find the Spanish dancer, and fast. "Consuelo... where are you?" he wondered anxiously.

He realized the old man would not attempt to harm her as long as they were mixed in the crowd. Smirk would want to get

them separate and isolated, and that could be done only at the back of the statue.

“Let’s go round”, Kevin said.

They walked on the edge of the terrace that overlooked the city, the mountains and the ocean to the horizon.

“Good morning”, they heard a familiar voice.

They turned to see Sonia and the group, including her grandfather, the Spartan and Consuelo.

Sonia smiled.

“Have you come to see *Cristo Redentor*? It’s impressive, isn’t it?”

The teenager wanted to play the guide. She started speaking easily, enjoying being the one with the most information from the group:

“The statue was restored after it was hit twice by lightning. Now it is waterproof. The monument is 30 meters high and it weighs 700 tons. By the way, it’s standing on the 700 meters Peak of Corcovado Mountains... how about that, huh? Makes you dizzy to look down. The interesting thing is it was built by an international cooperation: Brazilian engineer, Polish-French sculptor... and the face with the contribution of a Romanian sculptor as well. The four-month restoration in 2010 included installing lights in green and yellow at the base, so you can see it brightly shining at night. But the most important is the symbol of redemption that it provides.”

“Sonia, enough with the explanations”, her grandfather interrupted, frowning displeased. “Did they pay you for this? Let them hire a guide.”

Kevin glanced at Consuelo. She was apparently relaxed, but lost in thoughts, looking at the panoramic view of the valley and the ocean. Her long hair was fluttering slightly over the edge, as she was holding her small bag closely, almost being afraid to drop it over the cliff. He was relieved to see her safe, for the moment. He promised himself to not let her out of his sight again.

“Let’s take a picture together”, Aysun proposed.

They gathered next to the group. The old man stepped aside, not willing to appear on camera.

“I was here once when there were clouds over the city”, Sonia spoke again, taking advantage of the fact that her grandfather was out of sight for the moment. “You should have seen this at sunrise, with colors reflected over the clouds, and the monument emerging above them... it was splendid... it was magical. It was a once in a lifetime view.”

“I can imagine”, Kevin said. “Was your grandfather with you then?”

“No. I get out on my own sometimes. I don’t need to tell him everything”, she grinned.

“Let’s go get some lunch”, the Spartan said. “I’m hungry. We can call the others and have lunch together”, he said.

*

They occupied five tables in the restaurant. The dancers grouped randomly and sat wherever the impulse of the moment led them, or according to friendships they had established.

Kevin was glad to see that the old man hadn't joined them for lunch. However, Consuelo was sitting right next to the tall blond Slovenian, who suddenly had an interest to talk to her and be near her. His girlfriend Natasha was at another table, a bit upset.

"What's going on with Boris?" Kevin asked Aysun, who was sitting in front of him.

"He broke up with Natasha and is probably looking for a new girlfriend now."

"He seems to be interested in the Spanish girl..."

Aysun didn't comment, but her eyes glimmered, amused.

Kevin kept watching Consuelo. She was distracted and didn't take part in the conversation too much, even though in the beginning she seemed curious about what the Slovenian was telling her. Later, she took out her phone and started staring at it absently, probably choosing to browse the online connection instead of participating in the loud conversation between male dancers at her table. At some point, Kevin could almost believe she had raised her eyes for a second to

look at him. "Is she checking out what I'm doing?" he wondered. She was still preoccupied by her phone when the waiters brought the food.

It wasn't something unusual for people to be browsing their phones instead of talking to each other. However, Kevin could sense some melancholy in Consuelo's attitude. She had been absently staring away from early in the morning. Something was on her mind, he guessed.

"Mhmm, they brought the food. It's a lot of food", Aysun remarked, watching the big plate and wondering how to deal with it.

Then she took out her phone too and started touching the screen to write a message.

"What are you doing?" Kevin asked her casually. "Are you going to eat with that phone in your hand?" he said teasingly.

She looked at him and smiled, then she turned the phone off and placed it down on the table, next to the plate.

"There", she said. "Okay now?"

He hadn't expected her to take his words seriously, yet she obviously had more consideration about what he was saying than he had imagined. It suddenly made him trust her more. He felt he could tell her anything.

"I'm worried about Boris", he said. "He seems drunk and who knows what he'll do with that gun, if he gets the chance."

"We'll keep an eye on him", Aysun said. "Now let's eat."

People tried to eat the big portions of food that were brought on the plates. Some of them had some beers; conversation and laughter were getting louder each minute. Kevin noticed that Consuelo had retreated to the corner of the table and was leaning against the wall, still absently checking her phone. She had distanced herself from the male dancers. Then Boris asked her something. She shook her head and got up, leaving the room. He got up and followed her.

Kevin left his table too and went outside, following them.

Aysun came to see what was happening.

Consuelo had disappeared and two men were arguing outside: Boris and the Russian dancer. Aysun moved quickly behind the tall blond guy and in a swift gesture she turned his arm backwards, extracting the gun from his jacket.

Boris was surprised and didn't know how to react. He got angry and struggled to reach for the gun to take it back. Kevin intervened immediately, immobilizing him.

"What's this?" Aysun asked Boris, keeping the gun under his eyes. "You know you're not allowed to bring weapons in this contest. You could be disqualified for it – and you will be."

"It's none of your business! Who are you to decide? You have no authority here! You're just the Turkish representative!"

"Actually, I do have the right to take the gun from you", she said and took out a badge that glimmered in the light. "Now, you will go quietly to the hotel and remain in your room until the show tonight. You will not endanger any of the

participants and will not make a scene. I'll get you a Taxi if you can't go by yourself."

Boris staggered to turn around and leave, defeated by the agile Turkish dancer, who had suddenly become more than that. Kevin wasn't surprised to see she was so much more than a dancer. He had felt that about her from the beginning.

They returned to the table.

Consuelo had come back from where she had gone and was having some ice cream. The others hadn't noticed what had happened outside.

Kevin sat down, watching Aysun admiringly.

"So you're a detective too..." he said, with sudden complicity.

"I'm an undercover agent" she answered. "Now, let's see if this dessert is any good."

*

The frenzy of the up-coming show had flooded the hotel, overflowing in agitation on the stairs, out the front porch and in the restaurant. Dancers were running in every direction, making the latest adjustments to their outfits or trying to see their moves in the mirrors.

Kevin was dressed up for the night, waiting for Jackie. He was prepared to do anything in his power to make sure the event would unfold without incidents.

Aysun came down in a sparkling golden gown. Her subtle makeup made her eyes deeper, more mysterious and the scarf around her neck added to her charm.

Jackie arrived in her leather jacket, ready for action.

“Are we going to the dance hall?”

“Yes, the bus is waiting.”

The dancers entered the bus one by one, to be taken to a concert hall, where the contest would happen. Kevin was just about to get in when a man in a grey suit addressed him speaking with a rough accent:

“Can I have a word, detective?”

Kevin followed the man behind the bus.

“I’m a police officer, my name is Gustav Jones. Here is my card. I understand you’re here to investigate the bus accident from last month.”

“Yes, I’m trying to find out what happened.”

“Have you got any information about it? “

“Not yet”, he answered.

He could have told the officer about Maggie’s ghost and the evil Smirk, but something made him keep his reserve. He didn’t have any proof and he didn’t want to seem unprofessional, launching speculations. He was determined to find out the truth on his own.

"I expect you'll let us know as soon as you find anything", the officer added.

Then he vanished into the night.

Kevin returned to the bus. Jackie was inside, waiting, and she had kept a seat for him.

"What was that about?" she asked.

"Just a police officer. He wanted to know if there's any progress in our investigation."

"Did you tell him anything?"

"No. We must have proof before we do that. There has to be something in the archived files that we can find."

The bus crossed the city at night. Headlights and traffic flared by the windows, until it stopped in front of the dance hall. It was a big round building, with huge posters advertising the contest, hanging down the walls. Kevin smiled, seeing Consuelo on the poster, the red flower in her hair, as she stood halfway turned graciously like a black swan in a dance pose.

"Let's get inside", Jackie said, walking ahead.

The first round of the selection started. The first contestants were the Japanese, with their white porcelain painted faces, their delicate moves and elaborate kimonos, reviving the stage, spreading like petals from an ikebana vase.

"That was beautiful. They'll win this round", Jackie said, applauding at the end.

Other countries followed in the show. Kevin kept taking pictures of each entrance. When Aysun appeared on stage,

he switched his camera from photos to video and filmed the Turkish dance. Then it was Consuelo's turn. She appeared in a sparkling black dress with diamonds. Her every move was breathtakingly gracious. She had a dramatic pose that hypnotized the audience. Her big black eyes were glimmering brightly and mysteriously, as she turned round and round on the Spanish rhythm, in a swirl of blazing sparks.

After the show was over, Kevin went backstage.

He paused at the door of the dancers' dressing room. The door was open and he could see the makeup tables, the mirrors and the colorful clothes thrown around. Consuelo was there too, and she noticed him. She turned to look away, in a defensive gesture. He remembered she didn't like to be seen too much outside the stage. She hid behind Miguel.

Aysun saw Kevin too and came out, closing the door behind her.

"You dance amazingly well for an undercover agent", he said smiling.

She waved her scarf to cool off her face and her eyes sparkled discretely, hiding the delight of the compliment.

"Yes. I do my best" she answered simply and smiled.

"Look: I made a video when you were on stage".

And Kevin showed her the camera. She watched interested and amused.

"Good video. Perfect! Thank you, Kevin."

She seemed content that she had succeeded with the dancing task so easily.

“Have you heard the results?” she asked him.

“I think they said a list of names.”

“Was I on it?”

“I think you were.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m very sure. Congratulations! You’re up for the final round.”

“I have to tell you about Consuelo” she spoke more confidently, lowering her voice. “She got some messages when we were having lunch today.”

He felt the ground run from under his feet.

“What messages? Threatening messages? From whom?”

“She doesn’t know the number. The messages told her to quit dancing. They were brutal. It was a tough day for her.”

Kevin understood why she had been absently checking her phone at the table, lost in thoughts. It must have scared her, yet she had been so brave to appear in the contest, he thought.

“I must have a look at those messages”, he said.

“I’ll bring her phone later to you”, Aysun promised. “Now I must go back inside, or they’ll get suspicious.”

“See you later then.”

“See you.”

She went back inside and he returned to the corridor.

*

When the bus brought them back to the hotel it was past midnight. Everyone was tired, especially the dancers who had remained awake longer, to celebrate getting through the first selection.

Kevin made sure everyone went to their rooms. He watched Consuelo discretely from a distance, until she closed the door. Then he went up to the roof of the hotel, to read the messages that Aysun had forwarded to him on WhatsApp.

There wasn't any proof that the old manager had sent those messages, he thought. It could have been Boris as well, displeased that Consuelo had turned him down. Kevin couldn't guess who was behind the threats. It didn't matter anyway: they were more than enough reason to keep watching her closely.

He walked on the terrace. It was dark and he couldn't see anyone, but suddenly he noticed movement in one of the corners, by the edge.

"What are you doing up here at this hour?" he asked.

"Good evening detective", she replied.

It was Sonia. She was looking at the sky through a telescope.

“Check this out: you can see the galaxies”, she said, moving aside to let him sit by the edge, in front of the device.

He stared through the lenses and wondered at the sparkling stars that appeared closer than ever, spreading in purple, blue or pink lights over the night sky.

“Is this for real, or is it a toy that tricks the eyes?”

“It’s for real, detective. Look attentively: there’s Andromeda galaxy.”

“I don’t think we can see it from here, with this small telescope. It might be just a cluster from Milky Way.”

“I’m sure we can see much more”, she said calmly, as she stood there in the night. “But if you want to look closer, it’s worth seeing the monument lit up on the hill.”

She moved the telescope pointing it down to the horizon line. He stared through it at the statue that was shining brightly on the high cliff.

“Isn’t it nice?” he heard Sonia ask.

“Yes... but who’s that?”

He noticed someone walking around the pedestal. It was someone in a grey suit. He remembered the police officer he had met earlier.

“Gustav Jones... what are you doing up there?”

The policeman disappeared from sight, into the shadows.

Sonia was still standing behind Kevin.

He turned to look at her, suddenly thinking of something.

“Do you often come up here on the roof to watch the sky through this telescope?”

She nodded.

“It’s my hobby. You wouldn’t believe the things I can see from up above...” she smiled mysteriously.

“Can you tell me more about what you’ve seen recently?”

“It depends what you are interested in: galaxies, stars... people?”

“Whatever.”

“Okay.”

Sonia sat down on the terrace.

“There was a storm last month, just days before the bus crashed. There were many shooting stars from beyond a veil of interstellar dust. I was watching the Pleiades when I heard noise down in the street. People were arguing about something. I didn’t know who they were, but the lady who owns the hotel was a witness. She came out and told them to get in the car and get out of there. I don’t know if it’s important, but she said something like *You won’t do this in my hotel.*”

“And you didn’t hear what it was they wanted to do?”

“Nope. But I’m sure Luz knows it. You’ll have to ask her.”

“Thanks, Sonia. This could be important.”

He called Jackie on the phone.

“What?” she asked in a sleepy, tired voice.

“Did I wake you up?”

“Yes, it doesn’t matter... What’s up? Where are you?”

“I’m on the hotel roof. We should talk.”

“Right now? And you want me to come up there?”

“No, just come to the door of your room. I’ll be down in a minute.”

*

Jackie opened the door confused, in white and pink pajamas, like a schoolgirl on a Sunday morning.

“What time is it?” she asked, yawning. “I just heard the party people returning from their late-night celebration.”

“I found out something important: I think the old man didn’t do it alone.”

“Do what?”

“Mess with the brakes of the bus. He had accomplices. And Luz, the hotel owner, knows who they are.”

Jackie let herself fall in an armchair, yawning again.

“Listen. I know Smirk is murky, devious and vengeful, but he seems rather powerless... just a senile old man, you know?”

“He might as well have hired some mercenaries to do his dirty work. It was enough he thought about it. He could be the one sending threats to Consuelo today.”

“That could’ve been Boris too.”

"I thought about it – but Boris was too upset for being disqualified to worry about Consuelo quitting the dance."

"You never know, he could've done it out of bitterness. And yes, I believe the old man was capable of arranging the accident with the bus, but we have to keep our options open, in case we miss something."

"We have to talk to Luz."

"Right now?? Kevin, let her sleep, for heaven's sake! We'll go to her in the morning."

"Fine, I'll look for her first thing tomorrow."

Jackie looked at her silver watch and sighed.

"Tomorrow is already today. But you have a few hours before dawn. Go to your room. Get to bed. Shut your eyes. Stop being so restless. The dancers will be ok."

*

At first light, Kevin went to the office down the corridor.

Luz greeted him politely.

"Hello again, dear. How are you feeling? Is everything fine?"

"Yes, but I have some questions."

"Sit down. Would you like some coffee?"

“No, don't trouble yourself. I need you to remember one night when you had an argument with some men and you asked them to leave. It was just days before the bus crash.”

She stared at him attentively.

“It was something more complicated, dear. Those men I asked to leave the hotel were blackmailing one of my guests, who also happens to be my friend. She's a Portuguese show organizer. She comes to Rio often, to arrange connections for occasional shows in Lisbon. I don't know how she got in trouble with those individuals, but they were threatening her and I couldn't allow it.”

“Why did they blackmail her? Who were they?”

“I don't know, dear. I only know they wanted her to cancel the shows she had officially planned in Portugal.”

“Do you think I can talk to her about the incident? Can you reach her on the phone?”

“Of course. I'll call Isabela in a moment.”

She picked up her phone and dialed a number.

“Isabela? Dear, there's a detective who wants to ask you something.”

She handed the phone to him.

Chapter 5

Isabela greeted Kevin with a mixture of defense, interest and reserve. She was an elegant young lady with curly hair like a lion's mane. Her gestures, looks and manners seemed refined. She looked at the detective from a distance, measuring the infinite possibilities of his yet unasked questions and her well thought answers.

"I thought you would be older, from the way you spoke on the phone", he tried to break the ice. "You have a wise way of speaking."

She watched him silently and detached, her fingers playing absently with the thin golden chain around her neck. Kevin wondered if it was an unconscious gesture that showed anxiety or worry.

"What can I do for you, detective?" she finally said with the same reserved tone of voice, unimpressed by the compliment.

"You know what I want to talk about: the men who blackmailed you recently. Luz told me something, but I need more details from you."

She crossed her arms, leaning back on the chair.

“There’s not much to say about them. They are part of a hidden organization with much wider ramifications than the continent – some occult group with the same purpose that humans have aspired to for centuries: power. I don’t know in which way I was interfering with their interests, but they asked me to quit arranging shows in Rio. They said they would destroy my business if I didn’t do as they threatened. They even implied my life could be in danger.”

“Why didn’t you go to the police?”

A faint smile appeared on Isabela’s face, though she wasn’t amused. It was an ironic smile at his apparently naïve question.

“You think an organization that is involved with big money from cocaine traffic, guns and who knows what else would not have its inside people in every powerful department? You don’t expose such an octopus by calling 911. It’s no use.”

“So you did what they asked you to?”

“At the moment, yes. I canceled the shows that I had planned during that month.”

Kevin thought about it for a while. Isabela was watching him calmly and patiently, with a cold detachment, as if she was certain she couldn’t expect him to bring some light at the end of the tunnel.

“What are we really talking about? The Mafia, or what?” Kevin tried to understand.

“It's over both our heads. It's bigger than a liquor business or a simple network of drug dealers. Money is just a part of their interest. Power is more important. They've got enough money to provide it, but they seem to need to control everything that has an audience.”

“Do you think it has anything to do with the bus accident that happened not far from here?”

“I don't know, but for some reason their interests are focused here in Rio. They target the show business and keep trying to cut off any star that's on the rising.”

“Do you know if they could've been the ones who murdered that singer Maggie, many years ago?”

Isabela shrugged.

“It's possible. Maybe she was blackmailed like I was but she didn't do what they asked her. Maybe she was contacted to do something else and she refused. Maybe they asked her to join their group but she turned them down. In any case, their presence in this town has been causing unfortunate events for a long time. I'm sure Maggie's death could have been one of them. It's an old, closed case: it won't help you with the bus crash investigation. And I'm afraid I can't help you very much either.”

She seemed impartially sincere.

“I can only give you a piece of advice”, she added. “The international dancing contest could be a great opportunity for them to show off their claws again. Be careful, because the

day of the contest coincides with the Carnival – and that's a double show for them to target. There will be two million people in the streets. Forget about the bus accident: make sure there won't be anymore unfortunate events."

"Thanks for the tip", he said, getting up. "I'll be careful."

*

Back at the hotel there was a big quarrel. The Spartan had discovered the menacing messages on Consuelo's phone. He had asked Jackie to track them down with the phone company and she finally uncovered the truth about where they came from.

"You were right", she said. "The old manager had sent them. He was too dumb to hide the number. The company nailed him. We can issue a restraint order."

"You're right. He shouldn't be anywhere near the dancers. We'll restrict his access to the dance hall tomorrow."

Kevin went to the police station to get the official papers. Somehow, he had a feeling that Smirk was only a small part of a bigger problem. The dance contest was just a day away and as people prepared for the Carnival, the streets had already been crowded. It wasn't the best, safest environment to protect someone.

He returned to the hotel where Jackie had called the old manager.

“We have something to tell you”, Kevin started speaking seriously. “From now on, you won't be allowed to approach any of the participants to the dance contest. You are also not permitted to enter the building. Here are the official papers.”

“How dare you? Are you insane? I used to be the manager of the dancers team! You have no right to do this! This is illegal! I'll report you to the department! I'll file a complaint against you and you'll be in big trouble!”

Smirk was furious. He started threatening Kevin in a spiteful storm of words, choosing the most hateful ones:

“You have no right! You're just an insignificant detective! I've been a manager before you even got out of school! You'll have many problems, you'll see!”

Kevin wasn't impressed by the shouting voice.

“For a manager, you certainly didn't behave according to your position”, he said calmly. “Why did you threaten the dancers? Are you envious of them?”

“They have no talent! They won't get anywhere!”

Seeing he couldn't intimidate Kevin in any way, Smirk finally left the hotel resentful.

“Don't mind him”, Jackie said. “He's gone now. He can't cause any more trouble. We've got the papers to keep him away.”

“These managers...” Kevin said, frowning angrily. “How easily people are corrupted by a title, a company position or the slightest taste of power... they get a hold of it and they believe they’re gods. They lose their sense of proportion of man compared to the universe.”

“That’s a problem with humans in general”.

“Yes, unfortunately. Human character is weak and lacking an accurate view of the essential things that matter. That's the cause of suffering in the world: greed for power, limited views, vanity and primitive minds.”

“And evil.”

“Yes: and more than anything, evil...”

*

The Carnival had started early in the morning. Exuberance, extravagance and glamour were flooding the streets, as the Samba dancers had already begun the parade, dressed in vivid colorful feathers, sparkling golden adornments and shiny painted skin. Music could be heard everywhere. The African-Brazilian dancers were swinging in frenzy, flexible hot chocolate figures dancing in sunlight, blazing across the pavement.

The group of guests had gathered in front of the hotel, to see the festivity. They were watching fascinated, taking

pictures, tempted to follow the crowd that was headed to the beach in great celebration.

“You have a big night ahead of you” the Spartan told them. “Keep your energy for the contest tonight.”

Kevin was anxious, nervously waiting for the night event.

He could feel the tension in the air: mixed emotions from the contestants, thrilling anticipation, adrenaline rush and the silent expectation of something important that was about to happen.

In the evening they were taken again to the dance hall. He had seen it before: the display of grace and talent, the dazzling outfits, the beautiful and inspiring moves. He watched them one by one. He knew Consuelo would be the star of the night – once again. She was one step away from becoming a legendary sensation.

She came on stage even more determined than before to hypnotize the audience. Her dance was almost surreal, flashing across the stage, focused on every gesture, every graceful turn, each millimeter covered in perfection, a black swan out of another world.

Kevin wasn't surprised when she was crowned winner of the dance contest, at the end of the show. The sparkling diamonds on her head made her eyes shine brightly, from depths of happiness and vibrant energy, a breathtaking apparition of mixed innocence, sweetness and majestic beauty.

Kevin almost couldn't hear the thunder of applause in the roaring room. He kept his eyes on her, as she bowed and received the flowers, then retreated backstage. He turned immediately to go to the dressing room. He had to make sure she remained safe, even more that she had become the center of attention.

Rushing through the crowd, he reached the backstage door in what seemed like centuries to him.

"Consuelo... is she in there?" he asked the girls that were coming out of the dressing room.

"No, we haven't seen her."

"She just got off the stage! Didn't you see her get in?"

"No. Maybe she went outside for some fresh air."

Kevin felt fever running to his temples. He went directly to the front door of the dance hall, looking around the corridors to see the elegant figure with a diamond crown and a bouquet of flowers. She wasn't anywhere. He went outside. The night was filled with distant music from the carnival. The air was cooling off and the moon was shining brightly above the monument on the hill. He tried not to panic, but he knew it was already too late. Before declaring Consuelo's disappearance he had to make sure there was no other explanation.

He took out his phone and dialed Jackie's number.

She was still in the audience.

"What's wrong?"

“Consuelo is missing”, he said, regretting that he had to speak those words.

“What do you mean? She was just here on stage a few seconds ago!”

“I know, but she vanished on the way to the dressing room, before I could get to her.”

“Let’s go look for her at the hotel. Maybe she’s there.”

Jackie also alerted the Spartan who tried to call Consuelo on her mobile, but she didn’t pick up. There was no answer and no trace of her.

Kevin called Aysun. He got no answer from her either.

“No what? The Turkish agent is missing too”, he said out loud.

“Why would she disappear?”

“How should I know? Maybe she took Consuelo somewhere safe.”

He clung to that thought for a moment, hoping desperately that Aysun had secured Consuelo somewhere away from the menace. Worries overwhelmed his mind when he saw no response from the Turkish agent.

The two detectives went back to the hotel, but the rooms were empty. Nobody from the group had returned: they were still at the dance hall. Aysun was gone, with Consuelo or not. Coincidence or more, it was a double disappearance.

"It is possible they're together", Kevin said still hoping Aysun would offer some protection to the Spanish winner of the international contest.

"Kevin, calm down", Jackie told him as he paced back and forth along the corridor. "Do you think the old manager might have taken her somewhere? He was very furious this morning when we presented him the restraining order."

"I don't know. We could go check on him."

They went to Smirk's address. It was a villa at the periphery of the city. They rang the gate alarm.

"Who's bothering me?" the grumpy voice flared in the speaker by the gate.

"Let us in for a minute".

The old manager came to the gate in a bathrobe. He looked irritated to have been interrupted from resting at that hour.

"What more do you want?" he said with contempt and rising rage.

"We're looking for a dancer and an agent."

"And you think I have them here? Go ahead: look around. But I'll file a complaint against you! This is the worst insolence I've ever seen!"

Kevin ignored Smirk's words and entered the silent dark villa. He and Jackie went from one room to another, but there was no sign of anyone in the house.

"Where's your granddaughter?" Kevin asked him.

“She’s at the carnival, with her friends.”

“Is that what she told you?”

“Yes. The girl is grown up enough to go to the festivity with a group of friends. Do you doubt my words?”

Kevin didn’t answer. Smirk mocked him:

“So... you think I murdered everyone and hid them in the basement?”

“You had a grudge against successful dancers before. Maybe you hired someone to harm them.”

“You’re insane.”

Eventually, Kevin and Jackie had to leave the villa without finding any clue about what they were looking for.

“He could be involved in plotting Consuelo’s disappearance,” Kevin said as they were walking away.

“He might as well have something to do with it. Did you see? He looked like the devil himself with those glasses on his head. I thought they were horns”, Jackie laughed.

“Really. We must report the dancer’s absence to the police. I think I know who to call.”

Kevin didn’t have in his pockets the card that the grey-suited police officer had given him. He dialed the department’s number instead.

“Hello, I’d like to speak to Mr. Gustav Jones.”

“There’s no Gustav Jones here.”

“He’s a police officer.”

“You have been misinformed. There's no police officer named Gustav Jones.”

And they hung up.

Kevin looked in the night, his mind racing with thoughts. Who was Gustav Jones? The man had lied.

“Now what?” Jackie asked.

Kevin had a tense feeling that every minute counted for or against Consuelo's safety. He had to think fast.

“I know what we have to do”, he said. “We must go back to the hotel. ”

“Do you think someone will call for a ransom?”

“Not necessarily. But we must go back there.”

He didn't tell her what he had in mind.

*

He searched his hotel room for the card with Gustav Jones' number. He finally found it in the pocket of the jacket he was wearing that day.

“Now we'll have some answers”, he said and dialed the number.

“Yes, detective”, the man answered.

“How did you know it was me?”

“I recognized your number.”

"I didn't give it to you."

"You didn't need to. We live in the age of information, detective. I have my ways."

"I found out you're not a police officer. You lied to me."

"No, I didn't lie. I'm an officer, but not from the police you officially know."

"Can you explain?"

"I work for an organization called Green Peace. I'm sure you heard about it. We recently expanded our work from the environment to the underground group that's been causing massive catastrophes, like the breaking of the dam from the mines, spilling chemicals in Brazilian rivers a few months ago. There's a group that call themselves The Pillars. They maneuver big money and have substantial interests here in Rio. I've been trying to expose their activities for years."

Kevin had something on his mind.

"One of the dancers is missing and I must find her. An agent has disappeared too. Do you know where this group is hiding?"

"I can't help you with that. What I can tell you is that they meet on the nights of full moon for rituals. They believe that successful shows take from their fortune by gathering the attention and energy of the crowd, so they are willing to get rid of anyone who interferes in that concept."

The man was silent for a moment. Then he added:

"Tonight is a full moon again."

*

Kevin went to the roof of the hotel. If there was the slightest glimmer of hope that he could see Consuelo from up above, he was willing to try.

He wasn't completely surprised to see Sonia there.

"Hello again, detective", she smiled.

She was by her telescope, as he had expected.

"It's full moon tonight, isn't it", he said, leaning to look through the lenses of the telescope.

"Yes, it is."

"Why aren't you at the carnival at Copacabana beach?"

"Hmm... the sky is more interesting than the streets."

He turned the telescope towards the city. He could see the frenzy of each participant in the festivity, but none of the faces in the crowd looked like Consuelo or Aysun.

The bright mysterious moon was reigning over the city, the hills in the distance and the horizon, like a huge blazing sphere, with a cloud of dusty steam around it. Kevin and the teenager were both looking at it, in contemplation.

"You know", he heard Sonia speak, "if there's a place to go to on full moon nights it's certainly the monument. Sometimes the moon is aligned with the statue - it looks as if it's

resting on one of the open palms. During the night it travels from one arm to the other. It's amazing to watch."

Kevin stood up suddenly.

"You're so right, Sonia! The monument! This is a brilliant idea."

And he ran to the stairs.

He realized the teenager had disclosed a most important clue to him: if there was any place to have rituals, certainly the statue would be the best choice. If there was a place he would find what he was looking for, the monument had to be it.

He jumped over the stairs.

"Come on", he told Jackie as he ran past her.

"Where?"

"I've no time to explain. Can we drive something?"

"We can take the car that the hotel offers for guests. We haven't signed the leasing papers though."

"Forget the papers! Let's take the keys from the reception."

Kevin grabbed the keys from the reception desk and threw them to Jackie.

"Here, you drive."

They ran outside and got inside the car. The girl from the reception ran after them, knocking on the windows.

"Hey! You didn't sign this! You can't go without signing!"

Jackie started the engine and left with a jolt, before the girl could say anything else.

“We’ll sign later!” Kevin shouted through the window.

Jackie shifted the speed, turning the wheel.

“It will be difficult to go through these crowded streets... so where are we going?”

“To the monument on the hill.”

“Do you think Consuelo’s there?”

“I think she will be.”

They were silent the rest of the way. Kevin tried to prevent the worries in his mind taking over his thoughts. He was struggling to remain rational and positive. When they got at the base of the stairs, Jackie parked the car in the shadows of some trees.

“We have to climb now.”

There were a few tourists spreading on the stairs, next to the edge, by the pedestal. Kevin remembered there was a path hidden at the back of the statue. He ran towards the place where the light was dim and looked around. A group of four people were climbing the hill from the other side. He saw one with a veil, one with a scarf over her eyes and two men.

“What’s up?” Jackie arrived next to him.

“Shh! Look! Down there. See? Four persons.”

When the group came closer, Kevin recognized Aysun and Consuelo, despite the veil and the scarf they were wearing. They had their hands tied behind them.

The group stopped at the edge of the cliff.

“They want to throw them over” Kevin whispered. “I go left, you go right. We’ll disarm them.”

“Okay.”

“On three: one, two... three!”

They ran at the same time. The two men didn’t have a second to turn around. Kevin hit one of them in the nose. Jackie hit the other in the knees. One of them fell to the ground while the other staggered but went near the edge, dragging Consuelo with him.

“Don’t come any closer!” the man shouted.

They froze. Kevin saw they were so close to the edge that one more step would have sent any of them in the dark abyss below. In that instant of quick thinking and adrenaline, Kevin heard the whisper of a voice he knew.

“Justice at last... “

He looked up and saw Maggie above the cliff, drifting a few meters high in the air, swaying her bright image against the distant stars that had become sparkling garments on her green dress. He stared at her, not knowing what her peacefully gleaming voice meant.

“Is this the man who pushed you from the hotel window?” he asked her.

“Who are you talking to?” the man grumbled.

Everyone looked at Kevin in confusion. He had his eyes turned towards the sky, where Maggie nodded.

“Yesss...”

The others turned in the direction of Kevin's stare and saw, for a brief fraction of a flash, the trembling contour in the night sky. The two men probably recognized Maggie because their terrified eyes and speechless frozen mouths were a sign of unexpected fright and defeat. Kevin jumped forward, grabbing the man's collar. Jackie took the opportunity to immobilize the other's elbows.

At that moment, Aysun freed her hands and helped the detectives disarm and tie the bad guys down.

"So glad to see you again!" Kevin told her, relieved that they were safe. "I thought you ran away."

"I tried to keep Consuelo safe, but I could only make sure she wasn't alone in this", the Turkish agent replied.

Kevin freed Consuelo's hands and took the scarf off her eyes. She turned and smiled at him. In that moment her eyes were so warm and unexpectedly accepting, that it was as if her soul was speaking through the light in her stare. Kevin smiled back at her, the intensity of the moment overwhelming him speechless.

'If I never see her again after this week, at least I know she smiled at me, once in a lifetime', he thought.

It was the closest, warmest and unexpectedly most honest moment he had shared with the Spanish dancer that had captured his admiration. It was a moment of silence when only the eyes could speak an eternity in a second.

“What shall we do with these two?” Aysun asked, pointing to the men in handcuffs.

“I know exactly what to do”, Kevin said and called Gustav Jones.

After he dialed the number, he looked in the sky again because Maggie’s shiny holographic contour was dissolving softly, rising to the stars.

“Goodbye...” she whispered to him, melting up towards the distant beyond.

Kevin remained with his eyes looking to the night sky. “*At least she’s at peace now*”, he thought for a moment. He realized he was the only one and the last one to ever see Maggie’s ghost. Nobody else seemed to hear anything but the ringing tone in his cell phone, as he was calling Green Peace.

“We finally got the bad guys trapped. We’re at the monument. Come quickly” he spoke to the unofficial officer.

And he hung up. He turned around.

“In the meantime, these two will answer something. Now... about the bus crash. Which one of you messed with the brakes?”

The men were frowning silently.

“I think it was both of them”, Aysun said.

“Was it both of you?”

“What do you care? It’s gone and done with!” they said through their gritted teeth.

“That’s just the same as admitting you did it.”

“It's not just the two of us... you'll have a lot more trouble if you don't let us go right now.”

“Wow! And you think we're scared of you?” Jackie said defiantly, obviously annoyed. “We got you in handcuffs!”

“We're many more than you think.”

Kevin's answer was calm:

“Yeah - maybe. But there are people who will deal with you immediately... you and the rest of your organization, gang or whatever it is you've had going on for years... it's over now.”

The night was suddenly peaceful and calm, above the distant noise of laughter and music that was rising to the statue, from the beach. They didn't have to wait a long time until the sirens were also heard approaching the mountain.

After the Green Peace activists came with the local police to pick up the kidnapers, Kevin and Jackie took Consuelo and Aysun back to the dance hall, because they still wanted to participate to the celebration.

People hadn't noticed their absence. The night was still full of exuberance and joy. Kevin sat at a table, relieved that everything was solved in the end. He watched the participants dancing, clinking glasses, having a good time, laughing and enjoying the evening.

Jackie noticed his melancholy.

“What?” she asked.

“I was thinking... how people come and go. After tomorrow we might never see many of these persons again.

They'll fly away, each group to their own country. Everything is transitory in this world... You get to know people, start to care about them, and then they drift away."

"Let's go dancing", Jackie tried to convince him.

"No, I'm not in the mood."

"Well, I'll go. I don't want to sit here, we look like we're not having a good time."

"You go. I don't feel like dancing very much."

Jackie went to the dance floor. He remained in his seat, watching.

"Hey Kevin. Aren't you coming for a dance?" Aysun came smiling.

"No, not me", he answered a bit sorry he had to turn her down.

"Why not? Come on! It's the last night!"

"I'm not very good at dancing", he answered. "Next time, maybe..."

He didn't know if there would be a next time. He didn't know if he would see any of them again and it was hard to think about it.

*

It was even more heartbreaking to go to the airport the next morning. Everyone in the hotel had different flights.

Aysun had a later flight that evening, but she came down in front of the hotel to say good-bye to him. Kevin embraced her and for a moment he could feel her arms around him, warm and safe, as the subtle Turkish perfume from her hair made him feel he was on an exotic island.

“I’ll miss you”, he told her.

“It may seem like a long time, but we’ll see each other again”, she promised. “We’ll keep in touch.”

She remained there, waving her hand as he left.

Kevin and Jackie went to the check-in office. He was convinced everyone’s plane had already taken off.

He stared at the departure list.

“What are you looking for?” Jackie asked him.

“Nothing”, he answered, but his eyes strayed to the plane listed for Madrid.

It hadn’t left yet.

Jackie’s phone kept ringing.

“My son”, she said. “He’s so happy I’m coming home.”

Kevin looked at the crowds of passengers in the airport, the strangers going in many directions. He wondered what was the chance of seeing Consuelo one last time, before her flight. Somehow, he knew it wasn’t possible anymore.

He stood in front of the big windows that overlooked the runways and the planes moving outside. It seemed the planes were so close, and yet he knew it would take a thousand steps to get to them. He remained there silently watching the wheels

turning, the metal birds lifting in the air, towards the clear blue sky. It was like a dance. He could almost see the red label of the flight company turning into a bright bunch of petals, stuck to the silver metal in the swirl of a gracious move across the sky, one more step in the dance of life that had no beginning and no end...