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“They are two; one acts, the other keeps watch”
The Count of Monte Cristo
Alexander Dumas père (1802-1870)

INTERLUDE

She took her usual path through the woods, feeling the frost-hard ground beneath her shoes. Winter had broken unannounced over the city, as if the world had frozen under its icy breath. She liked the image, the idea that everything was just as cold and inert as she was inside.

She started to speed up, felt her heart pumping, heard the blood roaring in her ears. Her breath came in regular bursts, the only sound that broke through the silence. The wispy morning mist hung between the trees like spider’s webs. A branch whipped her face, and she blinked, rubbing her eye as she ran on without pausing.

The path stretched out straight ahead of her, then made a slight bend to the right, where it grew wider and the trees began to thin out, until a clearing came into view. She always stopped for a moment there before turning around and jogging back. The clearing was beautiful in both summer and winter; it looked enchanted, silent, far from all the realities of life in the city and the university. As she stepped out from between the trees and onto the crusted grass, she stretched, lifting her arms above her head. Breathed the cold winter air.

At first she thought there was someone standing there, as stiff as the frost, waiting, keeping watch. Then she realised that no one could be that tall. And finally she saw the body turn slightly, a movement that was barely perceptible, as if it was swaying in the wind. She looked up, saw the line of the rope rising up behind his head, stepped closer, saw features that had once been familiar. Heard his last words. I don’t have anyone else. Then she screamed. And screamed. And screamed.

AFTERWARDS

“Looking back, it always amazes me that we got through it.”
(Robin Preuß)

1

“You might believe that the girl’s screams were still echoing off the walls to this day.” Alexander didn’t need any dramatic pauses to be sure that his listeners were paying attention. “She screamed and screamed. As if someone was trying to murder her.”

Leonora watched as, around them, the flickering candlelight made shadows perform bizarre dances on the walls. It wasn’t a big party, more of a gathering in an old house that was sometimes rented out to students. Somehow, Alexander had managed to get himself invited – with a plus-one.

“And what was happening to her?” a young woman asked.

Alexander was half sitting with one hip perched on a table, turning a glass between his hands. “She was having a baby.”

“A home birth?” Now the voice sounded bored. “That was all?”

Alexander smiled. “She was still very young.”

“Happens though, right?” The student had shoved her hands into her pockets, and the others were standing around, waiting for Alexander to finish his story. He looked over at the window, where the room was reflected in the night-black glass. On the other side lay a long garden, half overgrown, surrounded by a head-height wall.

“The girl,” Alexander went on, “was glad that the baby’s father wanted to take care of all the formalities. They had agreed with her family to keep the whole thing a secret. The girl was still at school, and was overweight enough that no one noticed. The man, however, was married and rapidly climbing the career ladder. Having an illegitimate child with his underage lover would have been quite a hinderance.”

“What a pig,” said a female voice.

Alexander glanced up, seemingly scanning the group to see who had spoken, and then carried on.

“The child came into the world – a world where no one wanted it. The girl was driven home the same night, and the baby stayed here in this house.” Alexander leapt up from the table he’d been sitting on and walked over to the window. “Could someone switch the light off?”

“Ooh, it’s the witching hour,” some joker said. Very soon it was dark in the room, and you could make out the outlines of the garden.

“It was a comparatively mild winter,” Alexander said, “but still very cold that night. If you look out into the garden from here, you can see a group of four plane trees.”

He turned back to the group, a dark silhouette against an even darker background. “Anyway. The girl was in labour with a baby that no one wanted. Because, as I said, the father was an ambitious career guy.”

“Sure, they’re always the ones who get the women,” a man’s voice said loudly.

“And they’re always the ones who leave women in the lurch with unwanted babies, too,” a girl responded.

“The man,” Alexander said, leaning nonchalantly on the windowsill, “couldn’t risk his slip-up coming to light, of course. And so, when the child was born, the girl’s mother took her home and trusted the man to deal with the problem of finding a suitable place for the child. But the man had different ideas about what ‘suitable’ meant. While she had an adoptive family in mind, he was thinking about a grave beneath the plane trees.”

Someone let out a shriek.

“What kind of sicko does that?” one of the men asked. They were all still young, none of them past their fourth or fifth semester at university, and yet, Leonora thought, at nineteen she probably had the most life experience of them all. She watched Alexander as he went on telling his story.

“So he dug a grave and placed the child in it, alive. But then he couldn’t bring himself to kill it with his own hands.”

“Are you telling us there’s a baby’s body buried under the trees?” someone asked. “I’ve never heard of a serious crime like that taking place here, and the press would surely have had a field day with it.”

“I don’t believe that story,” another girl said, adding to the doubt.

“There was a witness, but the man didn’t notice him. The person who had been watching took the baby out of its cold grave and left it outside a hospital. From there, it was passed on to the local authority, and to new parents.”

“And the man?” one of the students asked.

“Got off scot-free.”

“So why didn’t the guy who found the baby inform the police?” she insisted. “That’s failure to report a crime.”

“Accessory to a crime, my learned friend,” said a man’s voice. “Failure to report is something else.”

“Do you *always* have to stick your oar in?”

“The person who found the baby,” Alexander went on, “wasn’t someone who likes to get involved or to make enemies. He just watched.”

“What a messed-up story,” someone said as the light went back on. “I don’t believe a word of it.”

Leonora could hear the students starting to indulge in speculations as Alexander came to join her. She cocked her head to one side. “Nice debut.”

He grinned.

Leonora had never particularly liked crowds of people, and parties were no exception. But there were reasons for her to be here, just as there were reasons for everything she did, and so she pretended to be more relaxed than she really was, and strolled around the rooms where groups of students stood chatting or dancing. The milky yellow light threw strange shadows on the walls, silhouettes that moved, flowed into one another and separated as if a weird kind of darkness were swirling around her.

In one room, there was a bar constructed out of several tables pushed together, standing in lakes of various spilled drinks. Someone had tipped over some red punch, and the liquid was dripping from the table onto the floor. Leonora stared at it, and for a moment the image of dripping blood flashed through her mind. She turned away with a gasp. Maybe it hadn’t been such a good idea to come here, after all.

“Hey there, princess!” said a voice behind her, and she turned around. A young man whose silly sash marked him out as a member of a student fraternity was standing behind her, his voice slightly slurred.

Leonora decided to pretend he wasn’t talking to her. She picked up a smeary glass of lemonade and walked away from the guy. He, however, clearly decided he wasn’t going to be got rid of that easily. “You’re into the hard stuff then, eh?” he said, looking at her glass. He was clearly trying to be funny. Leonora didn’t give him even the ghost of a smile. She walked away and disappeared into the toilet. Someone had taken a lot of trouble to keep the bathroom in a nostalgic-looking state of disrepair. Beneath a cloudy mirror set in a wooden frame with gold leaf peeling off it was an old-fashioned washbasin with tarnished fittings. The house had been rented to students for several years, meaning that for practical reasons someone had decided it was cheaper to install two toilets in one bathroom than another bathroom on every floor. The toilets were separated by cubicle walls in station-lavatory style, and Leonora disappeared into one of the cubicles. She put the glass down on a high ledge, intending to leave it there. The bathroom door opened again, and footsteps approached. Instead of going into the next toilet, they stopped outside Leonora’s, and, as every unusual noise put her on high alert, she froze and listened.

Was it that persistent guy again? She could deal with him: he was drunk but harmless. Then a tentative knock. That didn’t sound like him.

“Alexander?”

A slight shudder ran through Leonora, and she stayed motionless, waiting for the person outside to rattle the door. Slowly, she raised her eyes. The cubicles were open at the top. If he came from above, she would rush out of the door. She waited, as the seconds dripped slowly away. Finally, the

footsteps moved off again. Leonora let out a deep breath and pressed her hand to her wildly-beating heart. It probably *was* just the drunk guy, even if her gut instinct told her she was wrong. Then the bathroom door opened again. Footsteps: firmer, this time, and more decisive.

“Leonora?”

Alexander. She quickly threw open the door and walked out.

“I was planning to go on somewhere afterwards. Want to come, or shall I take you home? You look exhausted.”

“No, I’m coming with you, that’s what we agreed, right?”

“Okay, I’ll wait for you by the coats.”

She wanted to ask him to stay there with her, but she kept quiet, turned on the tap and ran the cold water over her wrists. This constant fear. Could it go on like this forever?

* * *

[...]

She met him for the first time around midnight. He just appeared, joining their group as naturally as if he’d known them for years. The fact that he was instantly accepted was probably down to both his charisma – he was one of those guys you inevitably want to get to know, whether you’re a man or a woman – and the girl at his side. Boots, black jeans, knee-length coat, a creamy white scarf. Her deep black hair was piled up on the back of her head, apart from a few strands that fell over the side of her face. She was really very pretty. The young men began to exhibit classic display behaviour, laughing a little too loudly, talking a little too much and making exaggerated gestures as they spoke. Alexander Dobberstein and Leonora Manjali.

“What are you studying?” Alina asked the stranger, who was eying her as if he expected something specific from her. Where he was standing, the reflection of a blue light from one of the stalls gave his face a ghostly pallor. “Law,” he replied.

“Like Patrick.” She looked at her boyfriend, touched his arm, made it clear that there was no subtext to their conversation. She was really just talking to him because she was bored. “I’m sure that since he started his degree, he’s caused a significant increase in profits for Brazilian coffee producers.” She heard herself laugh.

A little smile played around Alexander’s lips. “Is it really that stressful?”

“He’s got exams through this whole period while there are no lectures on.”

“Not exactly great for relationships.”

No, it wasn’t. Especially not when, just as Patrick’s holidays were beginning, Alina would be setting off to backpack around New Zealand. But that had been planned a long time ago, and it had been hard enough to find dates that she and her three friends could all do as it was. She’d seen so little of them since they left school that there had been nothing to discuss with Patrick there, either. “Not especially,” she replied. Her eyes strayed involuntarily to his companion, then she looked back at him and noticed the tiny smile at the corners of his mouth. “Well, we’ll see. Are you from round here, too?”

“No, Heidelberg.”

There were many places Alina might have found more appealing.

“And what are you studying?” he asked, seeming genuinely interested.

“Psychology.”

Now he seemed disappointed, as if she’d given him a very pedestrian answer. “Because your friends have always felt the need to tell you their problems?”

“No. Because they haven’t.”

Now he grinned.

“Though I do know plenty of people who fall into the other camp,” she added.

“Uh-huh, me too. Not exactly the best in the business.”

They exchanged a look of strange agreement, and Alina looked into his eyes perhaps a fraction of a second too long. And there was something there, the flicker of familiarity and repressed memories. Then the moment passed and she reached blindly for Patrick's hand, his fingers enclosing hers firmly.

* * *

Leonora stretched out on the sofa and watched Alexander busying himself with the kettle in the open kitchen next to the living room. What time was it? She couldn't see the clock on the wall from where she was sitting, and she had no desire to stand up and fish her phone out of her bag. She had been living here for four weeks now, and there were still a few moving boxes sitting around waiting to be unpacked.

"Are you sure you don't want any tea?" Alexander asked.

"No, I won't sleep tonight if I do."

Alexander could drink green, black or white tea at any time of the day or night. While Leonora was a coffee drinker, Alexander drank almost exclusively tea and regularly called her a philistine, because for her, making tea meant dangling a bag into some hot water. Of her collection of discount supermarket teabags, he said: "You might as well drink dishwater." Since she had moved in here, he had made sure she always had a small supply of good-quality loose-leaf tea that he could use.

"What did you think of them?" he asked, lowering himself into the armchair opposite her.

"Hm." She bit her lower lip. "Patrick comes across as one of these spoilt rich boys to whom everything in life comes easily. He tries to give the impression that money doesn't matter to him. And he's extremely charming." This impression, at least, he did give very well.

Alexander nodded vaguely. "And Robin?"

"A bit like a puppy. You can't help but like him, even when he's standing around like a gooseberry, not knowing if he should stay or go."

"And the girl?"

The girl. "Alina? Well, *you* spent the whole time talking to her. A bit stand-offish, I'd say."

"You're a better observer than I am."

Leonora sighed. "She's good looking, and she knows it. And she's probably been with Patrick so long that they don't have to always be touching or looking at each other any more. They know they belong together. So she could happily let you flirt with her." She couldn't stop herself needling him a little.

Alexander narrowed his eyes for a moment, then took a sip of tea and said nothing for a while. "I wasn't flirting," he said at last.

"She was looking at you as if you were."

"Her problem."

Leonora closed her eyes and yawned again. "What time is it?"

"No idea. My phone's on the worktop."

Leonora watched Alexander drink his tea with half-closed eyes. She imagined him dressed as a 19th-century English aristocrat. Irresistible.

"What's with the bedroom eyes?" he asked.

Leonora sighed and sat up. "I was just imagining something."

"Oh yes?"

"Not that." She got up and found her phone in her handbag. "Half three. We could just stay awake."

"Push on through? No, I've got to go out again early, that's out of the question."

Leonora laughed. Almost every other guy she knew would have taken the opportunity to make some innuendo that left open the idea he might actually want to go to bed with her. Alexander never did. They both knew why. And it didn't matter how often he assured her that she didn't owe him anything.

Her flat had an enchanting view of the Rhine, even at night. But as the light was on in the room, all she could see in the windowpane was a pale, translucent version of herself.

"Can you hack it?"

She turned to face him. "I would have said no from the start if I couldn't."

He watched her intently for a minute, then got up. "I need to go to bed. See you tomorrow?" She nodded, and he came over and touched her arm. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

The door clicked shut behind him, and she heard his footsteps on the stairs. Shortly afterwards, she heard the door to the downstairs flat closing. She turned away slowly and switched on the hall light before switching off the one in the living room. She thought about the moment five months ago when he had leaned against her bedroom doorframe, a dark silhouette against the brightly lit hall. She had only been able to guess his smile. Do you always leave the light on at night?

AFTERWARDS

"You reproached me, you said I must have noticed something. And he said the same. But how was I supposed to know anything about it?"

(Alina Falk)

2

It was like breathing underwater, whenever the past flared up before Leonora like a flashlight. Reality blurred for a moment, yielding to the images of another reality, which was so recent and yet seemed so far away. At such moments, Leonora had to stop where she was, fight for breath and concentrate on staying in the here and now. Things were usually fine again once she had taken a deep breath, and it worked this time, too. Alright then, she thought, straightening up and continuing along the route that Alexander had given her, although with a slight sense of unease. And so, half an hour later, she was sitting in a stranger's living room, opposite a woman she didn't know, trying to help a child who meant nothing to her.

"They said if the utility company cuts off my electricity, Lara will go to a foster family."

Leonora was sitting opposite the young mother, who was pressing her five-year-old daughter to her as if she were afraid someone might snatch her away at any moment. "But just until the electricity is working again, right?"

The woman, Elisabeth Kaufmann, nodded. "Even a few days is bad enough, though. I think when things have reached the point where they take my daughter away, then they'll do it again for the slightest reason."

The reason in this case was that social services didn't consider a household with no electricity a suitable environment for a child – a fact that couldn't be denied. No hot water if the electric water-heater wasn't working, no light, no way of preparing a hot meal. Without a working fridge it was impossible to buy fresh food in advance, which severely limited options for breakfast and dinner.

"How much is the payment you owe?"

"Two hundred and seventy-five euros." A lot of money for a single mother with no job.

Leonora bit her lower lip. She had no feeling for such situations; she wasn't at all suited to this kind of social work. But Alexander thought she would manage it. *If not you, then who?* So here she was.

"Is there no one who could lend you the money?"

Wrong question, the woman's eyes told her.

"And Lara's father?" An engineer, if Leonora remembered rightly.

"He works abroad, and he doesn't pay maintenance."

Of course, how could she have forgotten? "Forgive me."

Elisabeth Kaufmann shrugged as if she was used to this kind of thing.

"And when do you have to make the payment by?"

"Yesterday." The woman let out a bitter laugh.

"Right, then." Leonora picked up her handbag and took out three hundred Euros, which she laid on the table. "Here you are. You can pay it back in instalments if you don't want to accept charity."

The woman stared at her. “Is this some kind of joke?” She made no move to take the money. Mistrust crept into her eyes, perhaps even a trace of fear. Before she fell on hard times, she’d had a well-paid job at an IT company. She had a maths degree. Because she had her little girl, it was only a three-quarter-time position, and in a wave of redundancies she had been one of the first to go. Which hadn’t been a problem, because her husband earned a ridiculous amount. Only unfortunately, not long after the redundancy, he went off with another woman. Then came the divorce. He didn’t want custody: he said that with his new wife, he could finally have children of his own. Lara was adopted, and it seemed she was not sufficiently “his own”.

“Are you really from social services?” Elisabeth Kaufmann asked.