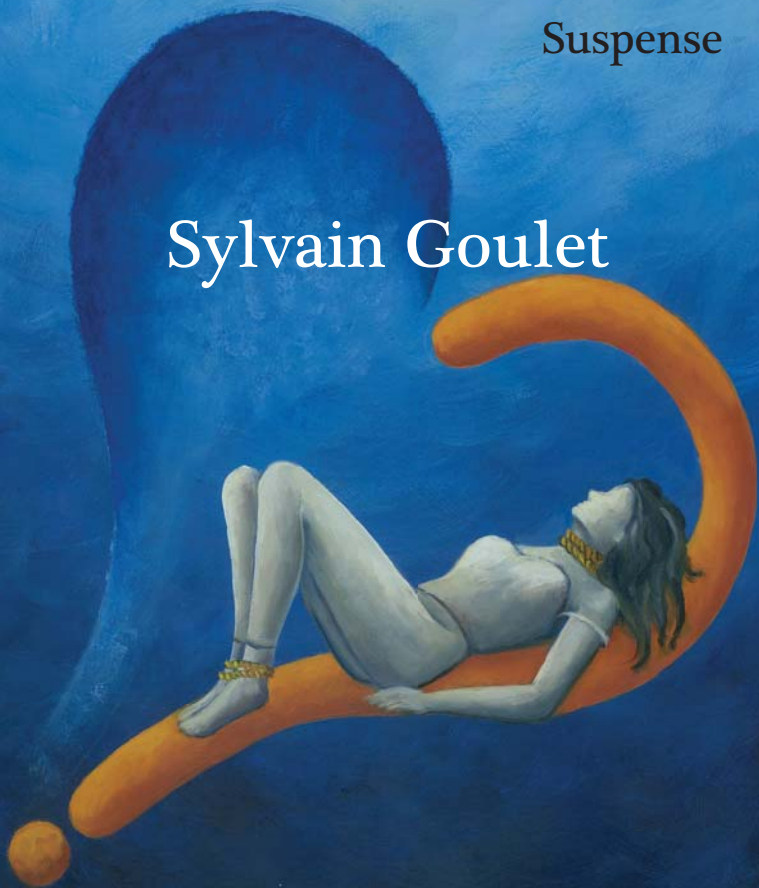


Suspicious disappearance

Suspense

Sylvain Goulet



La Caboché

SUSPICIOUS DISAPPEARANCE

Same author

Collection inspiration

Disparition suspicieuse, (2004) Novel

Le délivreur, (2004) Roman

Suspicious disappearance, (2005) traduction de *Disparition suspicieuse*

La croisée, (2005) Roman

Il est une fois..., (2006) Roman

Susciter une réflexion qui t'appartienne, (2007) Croissance personnelle

Susciter une réflexion qui t'appartienne, (2007) Disque compact

Et si l'amour..., (2007) Roman

Vallée Blanche, (2008) Roman

Le délivreur, (2009) Roman Réédition

L'ermite millionnaire (2011) Roman

Susciter une réflexion qui t'appartienne, (2011) Croissance personnelle

L'ermite millionnaire (2012) Roman 2e édition

Sylvain Goulet

SUSPICIOUS DISAPPEARANCE

Novel



Acknowledgements

To my children, who have so encouraged me. Your enthusiasm from the beginning to the end of the writing of this book was my greatest source of inspiration. I am so proud of you.

To God, who, in a very difficult time of my life, guided me toward the good in myself: an answer, an outlet, a saving source of inspiration: this book.

To all the readers, I salute you and hope to meet you one day. I sincerely wish that you get as much out of reading this book as I did writing it.

Sylvain Goulet

Praise for Suspicious Disappearance

An author is born!

A novel where suspense reigns from beginning to end.

An unlikely story where solving the mystery is pleasantly surprising.

An interesting and fun tale that leaves the mark of a life lesson learnt.

First Reader,
Louise C.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, or to events is entirely coincidental.

Preface

It had been more than eight months since that fateful day: the day of their separation. This commitment, their union, had been the answer to years of expectations. Simon and Jane had promised themselves to each other. But after two years, everything had collapsed. Since then, the nights had become endless and the days had become far too long. The tiredness was so intense sometimes that everything tightened inside his head like a vice exerting constant pressure.

He tried doing much more exercise, drinking less coffee, sticking to tisanes after lunch, and reading for hours, but nothing worked. It just made him fall asleep at nine o'clock only to wake up a few hours later with a spasmodic sigh as though from a child who has cried too much after watching a castle built in the sky come crashing down.

For Simon, this waking up in the middle of the night was always a cruel reality. He wanted to turn and take her into his arms, but she was no longer there. Alone, he would turn on the light on the night table rubbing his eyes, and look, once again, at all the pictures lined up on the small dresser near his bed. He looked at the picture of Jane smiling happily, where she had once written, "Thinking of you my love...I love you, forever!" Next to it were pictures of his children and of her children.

Once awake, he knew then that the next couple of hours would be difficult for him. He stretched out his arm to grab yet another book he had left on the floor. It would be added to the pile of books he had read in the last months. He tried to concentrate, knowing, from experience, that this was all he could do, other than write, to control the anger and the indescribable pain that would invade his senses. It was so intense sometimes that he would have to fight to get the air out of his lungs.

Reading would help calm him, most of the time, and he would be able to fall back asleep praying. He thanked God for having given him his children and the chance to have known Jane. He prayed that everything would work out for the best for her, for him, and for their children, but for Simon, the best meant being a family again.

Then, before he knew it, the alarm clock would go off at 6 o'clock with the sound of people talking or singing. As always, he felt as if he had just fallen asleep and ... when he would reach out for her, would find once more that she was still not there.

“Simon, why don’t you come with us to see this play? A little laughter would do you a world of good, and I also spoke to a friend about you. She’d really like to meet you. She’s nice, and she’s tall and pretty, too. It doesn’t commit you to anything, and it’s less stressful to meet someone this way.”

“No,” answered Simon. “It’s nice of you to have thought of me Martha, but my head just isn’t in it. Besides, I have my kids that weekend. It may do me some good to get out a bit, but what I really need to do is talk, to get it all off my chest.”

“You know you’re always welcome, Simon,” said Martha not knowing what she could say to cheer Simon up. “If you find yourself feeling lonely and wanting to talk, Richard and I will always be there for you. The kids get along well; they can watch a movie in the living room while we talk.”

Simon thought about it. He really did appreciate her offer. It would be a good idea to see Martha and Richard, and have supper together with the kids, but not to talk about Jane and him. He just couldn’t. He was reserved when it came to his personal problems, and besides, he thought he had already taken up enough of their time with what he had told them. He had decided to consult a psychologist instead, thinking it would be easier. He’d had three

sessions with one so far, but hadn't gotten a good feeling about it yet. He planned to see her one or two more times before deciding what to do and explained the situation to Martha.

"What's wrong, is it that you feel it's not helping you, or that you're not comfortable with her in particular?" she asked concerned.

"I think it's a little of both," Simon answered thoughtfully. "It's just that I feel like I'm going around in circles. Yesterday, I left my appointment a little angry and extremely disappointed. I told her, but it didn't make me feel any better. I understand that it mustn't always be easy being a shrink, but it's not easy being a patient either. Talking about personal, often intimate things, to a complete stranger; talking about Jane and me...it's forcing me to relive all my emotions." Simon knew that he was ready to accept someone else's point of view, which was why he was seeing a psychologist in the first place and trying to stay objective, but he was so tired that it wasn't always easy for him. The problem was that he loved Jane as much now as he did that first day. Her behavior since their separation only fueled his anger and disappointment. But he owed it to himself, Jane, and the children to try to be fair and honest.

"I think it's a very wise thing you're doing," Martha said after listening to Simon's explanation. "I also think that your kids have a wonderful father who loves them very much. I support you one hundred percent and know to what extent you love Jane and how hard it must be for you to see her act this way.

You're a good person Simon; Richard and I both think so. I know this isn't the time to tell you this, but don't forget, even with all you're suffering, there will be better days. Things will get better, they always do."

“Hi Simon.”

“Hi Anita.”

“How did this past week go?”

“Same as always,” he answered. “Even if I have some moments of relief, it seems as if the pain just doesn’t want to go away. I’ve been really angry this week as well, and I just can’t take it anymore. Everything always brings me back to Jane, to both the good and the bad memories. Saturday, while passing by a church, I saw a newly married couple walking out. I found them so beautiful. They looked good together and seemed so happy. This is when the heartache overwhelms me and comes from so deep inside me; I feel it through every inch of my body. I stupidly imagined us in their place and surprised myself by wondering if she’d have still married me like she said she wanted to. There’s this feeling of betrayal plaguing me constantly, and I’m trying to remember at what moment it really started.”

“This feeling of betrayal you’re referring to,” interrupted Anita, “can you describe it for me?”

“Yes,” he began. “I know that Jane, or at least a part of Jane, is a wonderful, generous, loving, and exceptional woman and is all I ever expected in a woman.” Simon paused, considering his words. “The other part,” he continued, “is a lot less sound, and I

think even immoral. I have the distinct feeling that I lived with two different women who shared the same body. I often asked myself which one had hold of it at each moment I was with her. Unfortunately for our relationship, the immoral one often controlled the other one.” Simon went on hoping that saying all this would help him. “I often asked myself why Jane never, or hardly ever, reacted when her children would lie to her, for example. Actually, that’s not true, she would react when I brought it to her attention, but negatively, denying it and putting blinders on. What I now understand is that, for those two years, she did the same thing at my expense, and, consequently, at her own as well. The first year, it was only the little things that put me - although somewhat unconsciously - on my guard. I think that because I wanted so much for her to see the faith I had in her, that I didn’t want to see what was insidiously happening. During the second year, everything became all too clear. She would sometimes tell me something one way, only to tell me the exact same thing completely differently a couple of days or months later. She would get upset when I brought it to her attention. In fact, she would lose her temper and deny it over and over again.”

“In any case, Simon,” Anita answered wanting to move on, “it’s no longer important since it’s over between the two of you, isn’t it?”

Simon was shocked “How can you allow yourself to suggest such a thing?” he asked. “You’re passing judgment!”

“You have to look at things straight in the face,” Anita explained. “At our first session, you told me that she hasn’t spoken to you since your separation, and that she also filed a complaint against you at the police station because you had left her a couple of messages on her voice mail. A few weeks ago, you had flowers delivered to her. Two days later, she returned them to you, calling you a liar and protecting her friends in order to bring you down, which seems to have happened more and more often in your last year together.”

“Hang on, Anita,” Simon started, unable to control himself. “I came here to try to free myself from the heartache and the anger. I came here because I still love her as much as I always have. I’m convinced that she still loves me too, and that she is suffering from a sorrow as great as, but different, from mine. She keeps her blinders on and is mean to me to protect herself from something that began before me, before we even met.” Simon took a breath and continued more slowly, “Before we separated, we spoke to our eldest children. She, herself, told them that she wanted us to separate for a certain time, but that she also still wanted all of us to see each other. She wanted to rediscover herself as a mother. She wanted to gain back her self-confidence. She wanted to be able to rest. I saw her children again in August. I heard them tell my kids that since the separation they have been doing pretty much anything they want. I know that these are the words of children who are living with a certain amount of anxiety, but I also know that there is a lot of truth in their words. Jane

isn't resting either. To the contrary. She is hardly ever home and gets in late, something she would do rarely when we were living together. She doesn't even look at me when our paths cross, and yet she still talks to everyone else we knew. This isn't the real Jane, the authentic Jane. Listen Anita; I didn't come here to put her down, or to be told that it's over between us. I want to keep hoping, even if I have no idea how I would react now if she came back and asked me to give us another try. All this ambivalence adds to my pain and makes it even harder to endure."

Anita was intrigued. "You don't want me to express my opinion; you refuse it outright. That says something, and that's what I want us to work on. Do you think you're a jealous man? There's a reason why you're so hooked on her, and it's my job to figure it out."

"I don't think you and I can get along," answered Simon disappointed. "I don't know what love and commitment mean to you, but I decided to live with Jane because I was convinced that she was mine, that she was the one. I also did it because I knew that she wanted it too and that she thought the same way I did. We wanted to commit for life. We've only been separated for eight months. If you really think that I can forget so quickly, or perhaps that, as many think, I should put it behind me and find another, then you're wrong about me. My values and my convictions are not what you think. My love for Jane is far greater than that. I still do have hope, I admit, but it's out of love and not to hang on to her."

“And if you were convinced that it was finished between the two of you, would you take it very badly?”

“I don’t want to discuss that possibility.”

“You want to deny it.”

“I think we’ve spoken enough for tonight.”

“Fine. But think about what I said.”

“I will not think about it.”

“As you wish. But if that’s the case, how can I help you?”

It was her job, he knew, but if she thought this was the only subject she could discuss with him, then he wouldn’t come anymore.

“Do you want to book an appointment for next week?” she asked.

“That depends on you. Do you think you can respect my request? If so, then yes,” Simon curtly responded.

“Fine. Is the same time still good for you?”

“Yes. It’s fine.”

“Okay. I’ll put it in my agenda, and I’ll think about what you said. I promise. I’m sorry to have brought up such a touchy subject.”

“I don’t think this session went well at all,” he said. The fact that she was trying to judge his relationship with Jane was making him lose faith in her. “I hope you do think about I said. Goodbye.”

Today, the day had been more than just difficult. Simon knew very well why this woman had gotten so deep under his skin. He knew why everything reminded him of her. He knew his commitment, his love, and what it represented. During those moments when he was able and in a position to trust her, he had made himself vulnerable. He had said things that were buried so deep inside him. But he hadn't had the time to tell her everything, not even close. He still had so left much to tell her.

At noon again today, while checking his home messages from the office, he had once again almost keyed in the password from when he and Jane were together. This had moved him, and with a knot in his throat, his eyes had filled with water. *How much longer was this going to last?* his heart cried out. *Hooked!* Simon thought to himself, *how could that woman even say such a thing! She hardly knows me!*

Simon had a flashback. He remembered the times he had gone in court to keep joint custody of his children. He had been dismayed each time. *How could a judge, who doesn't know either the children, their mother, or me, decide within minutes what's best for us?* He always wondered.

Each time, whether the situation was in his favour or not, he had always come to the same conclusion. After each address that signalled the end of the hearing and the rendering of the judgement, he found they were always completely off the mark. *They always get the last laugh*, he thought.

Unable to concentrate once at home, Simon changed clothes and went speed walking like he had done every day since he had become single again. When they had been together, he would go three or four times a week for thirty minutes. Sometimes, she would come and meet him. When he would see her approaching from a distance, he would get so excited and feel her so intensely that his heart would start racing.

Now, he walked at a moderate pace for five minutes to warm up, and then speed walked for forty minutes. He called it his venting walk. He cooled down with another five minutes of moderate walking to bring his heart rate back to normal before arriving home, or at least to where he lived. He hadn't really felt at home in the last two and a half years.

The exercise was good for him. The fifty minutes to cover six and a half kilometres every day, or just about, since she had left sometimes allowed him to figure things out. He would let go and think of everything or nothing at all. He would let his thoughts come one after the other, without sorting them or analyzing them. Some evenings, he would arrive home with his head clearer and would sometimes even rediscover the man he was normally; that is, the man

who could see and anticipate things and events with fairness, loyalty, sincerity, and compassion for others. He would rediscover his dignity in all its splendour.

In those rare moments, when he was in the shower, he would imagine himself with Jane and remember the times they had made love there. He also remembered the times she would sit on the counter near the sink and pull him towards her. They would sometimes savour each other for hours, when they had the time, and rediscover one another, snuggled together in their bed. They had loved each other so much and had told each other so many times...*my love, forever.*

Tonight, he was tired. It had been the story of his life these last few months. Before going to bed to read a few pages, he would write a note to his children, which he would leave in their mother's mailbox on his way to work.

Hello my loves. Just a note to tell you again how much I love you, and how proud I am to be your father. I know that I am not at my best right now. My romantic heart is hurt and sad. But always remember that my heart as a father is content and fulfilled.

I'm happy when I'm with you. I love you very, very much! We'll talk later. Dad, xxx

He reread it, and left it with his fruit and his keys, which he would take with him to work in the morning. Then he went to bed...it was 9:20 p.m.

He had started reading Let Me Call you Sweetheart by Mary Higgins Clark last weekend. One

of the books Jane had read, but for which he had never taken the time.

Police-type suspense novels, as well as some books on psychology and morality were the ones that interested him the most recently. He had gotten to know Clark and had become reacquainted with some authors he had known already, such as Mandino, Robins, Waitley, Roberts, Peale, and some others. He had discovered new books, but had also let himself be tempted by some he already had in his library.

The novel, Let Me Call you Sweetheart, the story of a young girl's murder committed a dozen years before, managed to change his thoughts enough so that he could fall asleep after 30 to 60 minutes of reading, but only after having looked at the pictures on his dresser before turning off the lights.

Tonight, it was obvious that Jane wasn't going to let him fall asleep before evoking some powerful memories buried deep within of him. This time he had found her in the book. A few lines he had just finished reading hit him and had particularly moved him...once again.

It held six notes of music in the key of C, with five words written underneath: "I'm in love with you." It was signed, "J."

"Young hummed the notes, then looked at Barney. "The opening phrase of the song 'Let Me Call You Sweetheart,'" he said.

He remembered all the times they had met before they started seeing each other. It was always an

instant, lasting only a fraction of a second, either while turning a street corner, or spotting each other at the last minute. Each time, their eyes met, they seemed to be so full of hope, and, perhaps, even already in love with each other. They had once seen each other with their children at McDonalds. Their eyes inevitably met once again and held for a couple of seconds; they exchanged a smile. He would never forget that wonderful moment. Another time, they had run into each other at the dentist. He had been so surprised that he had said, "Hello." She had given him her most beautiful smile. He had told himself that the woman he had imagined by his side; the one for whom he had been waiting and wishing for such a long time now; the one who was honest and loyal, who had integrity and a certain amount of modesty, would never have smiled at him in such a way if she already had someone in her life.

That evening, he had been angry with himself for not having asked her the question. It was October. It was raining a little, and it was cold. He could no longer concentrate. He felt just like he had when he was young and his grandmother would tell him he couldn't sit still. He had to do something; his inner voice was compelling him to act, so, he went to the florist and had flowers delivered to her house. On the little card he had signed "S."

She had written him back a couple of days later saying she couldn't promise him anything, that there was someone in her life right now and she didn't want to give him false hope. He had told himself that this

woman was either not in love, or he was wrong about her. But then again, he had never felt love this way before. Despite his disappointment, a flame had been ignited in his heart; something told him not to worry and have faith. On that very sad October night, something was growing inside of him...a flame had been lit...he didn't know how to put it into words, but he was convinced it was love.

A little over eight months later, he received a little note from Jane that had been written two months before, but sent to his old address. The people who had moved in had told him, but busy as he had been at the time, he had put off picking it up. After a couple of weeks, he finally passed by for his mail.

He had immediately recognized her handwriting on the smallest envelope in the pile. She had written:

Is it too late to get to know each other? J.

This was how the story began; their wonderful love story.

He lowered his eyes to his book and reread the passage once again, then got up to pick up a card from his desk. It was the last Valentine's Day card she had given him. It said:

With all my love, Sweetheart, I just can't stop loving you. Jane, xxx.

That night, lost in his dreams - and his nightmares - he hardly slept. He woke up several times, his eyes filled with tears just like on that October night he had just remembered. He needed her

so much. He wanted to snuggle to the warmth of her body and to feel her embrace, to feel as he once had.

If you only knew how much I miss you, my sweetheart.

He dialed her number and waited for the answering machine to come on.

“Hi. You’ve reached the voice mail of Anita Morin, psychologist. Please leave a short message, and I’ll call you back as soon as I can.”

“Hi Anita. This is Simon Griffin. It’s Thursday, one o’clock. I’m calling to cancel next week’s appointment. I’d like you to confirm that you have indeed received this message. Thanks.”

He thought about the call later that afternoon. He knew it was the best decision. In fact, he was positive.

Friday, 9:15 a.m.

“Hey Simon. How’s it going?”

“Oh hi, Martha. I guess under the circumstances, fine.”

“Has something come up with Jane?”

“I’d prefer not to talk about it; it’s never good news anyway. By the way, I decided to stop seeing the psychologist I told you about. I didn’t have a good feeling. I felt she lacked objectivity. But maybe I’m the one with the problem. Anyway, I wanted to tell you that I left a message with the receptionist of the help program you told me about. They’re going to call me back in a day or two to set up an appointment. I want to try again. I have to make an effort. I want to stay strong for my children; that’s all that matters to me now.”

Martha agreed. “See what you get out of this one, and then decide,” she said. “If you see that you’ve made a mistake, you can always go back to the other one. Listen, do you have your kids tonight? Why don’t you come eat at our house? We’re sending for pizza. We can take advantage of the time to chat while the kids play together.”

Simon said he would think about it. The kids would certainly enjoy it. “I’ll confirm with you this afternoon,” he answered. “I don’t really know anymore what I want these days. Actually, that’s not true, I do know...we’ll talk later. I have to prepare for my 10 o’clock meeting.”

Just before leaving his office for the meeting, he checked his home messages. Anita had called to confirm that she had received his message and said to call her if there was anything she could do to help him.

The receptionist from the help program had also called him back and asked him to get in touch with Marie Gartner to make an appointment. She had left her contact information. He was offered Wednesday 7 p.m. or Thursday 7:30 p.m. He called back and chose Wednesday. Thursday nights were always hectic because the kids were back. There was supper to prepare, homework to check, and the children’s activities to coordinate.

He felt reassured. He even sensed a certain anticipation that was actually positive, a fact that surprised him. He believed that he had done all he could for the relationship, but he wanted to check certain things, put words to certain emotions that he still had difficulty defining. He believed he had done what had to be done, he was sure that it wasn’t always how Jane would have gone about it, but he had been sincere in his efforts, as he still was today; otherwise, he wouldn’t consult a psychologist. He needed to understand what had happened.

Friday, 4:30 p.m.

“Martha, it’s Simon. I know it’s late, but I just spoke to my kids. Is your supper invitation still open?”

“Of course. The girls will be happy to see the children. It’ll be good. But be warned, there’s been no change to the menu. We’re still sending for pizza.”

“Excellent. I just need to organize my desk a bit and pick up the kids. How does 6:30 sound?”

“Perfect. But don’t worry. Take the time you need. We’ll wait until you arrive before we order. We can have a beer while we wait for the pizza.”

“Can you tell me which exit it is again, just to be sure?”

“Exit 116.”

“I hope I won’t get stuck in traffic in the tunnel.”

“At that time, you can expect it to take a little over an hour to get here.

“See you later.”

Simon was happy to see his children excited about going to Martha and Richard’s. He was too, up to a certain extent, but a gnawing feeling of emptiness overpowered him. He remembered the time they – he,

Jane, and the kids - had gone to supper at Martha and Richard's. Simon knew them well enough. He spoke to them regularly at work. Since his promotion two years ago, he often dealt with Richard and liked his work ethic: diligent and thorough. Even if he seldom worked with Martha, their offices were close to one another so they saw each other every day.

He remembered being so proud, excited even, to introduce Jane to them; maybe that was why tonight made him feel so melancholic. That night she had been the real Jane, the one who had met his gaze those first times they had run into each other. The one who made him feel like the man he always wanted to be... He realized his son was talking to him. He was frustrated to be so happy and sad at the same time: happy to be with his children, sad without Jane. His feelings brought him to the deepest part of his essence. It would always be - Jane and the children - he couldn't conceive it any other way.

She had so often told him that she had never been so happy, so fulfilled. She had felt so much like a woman, so desired and desirable, with him. He knew that it had been Jane, the true one, who had told him this, and not the other, less stable, side of her, the one who began to exert more and more control over her.

They arrived home. He tucked in his children, hugged them tenderly, and told them that he loved them very much, had enjoyed his evening with them, and was very proud of them.

Lying in bed, he looked at her. He turned the picture over to read yet again the words that she had written a few months earlier: *I'm thinking about you. I love you, forever. Jane xxx.*

He put the picture back. Sadness overwhelmed him. If she only knew...

He didn't understand anymore. He knew he had hurt her that time when, a couple of weeks before they separated, he had told her, "Do you think you can at least admit one day that your son acts with a total lack of respect!" He had lost his temper and had been angry with her, adding that, from what he could see, her son had become untouchable and overprotected. Her son had gone too far; he had been talking to a friend on the phone about the house rules in a very arrogant manner. He had shown disrespect when talking about Jane and Simon, in a way that was mean and degrading. She knew her son had gone way over the line, but she had once again defended him without justification. Simon had panicked. What was happening to Jane? He had known at that moment that it was over, that he was losing her. She had given up. She had given up on him.

Then, nothing. She didn't speak to him anymore, except on rare occasions when she had something hurtful to say. Last weekend he had sent her flowers. He had sent them after having watched "Bed of Roses," a movie that had touched him every one of the six or seven times he had watched it. The last fifteen minutes always made him cry. It was worse since Jane had left. This time, he had been

unable to restrain himself as he had at her request for over two months. The next morning, he had sent her flowers. He had needed to. And then, on Monday, she had returned them. He had told himself that if she really didn't love him anymore, she wouldn't have come to his house that night. She had tried once again to hurt him by calling him a liar, and saying she didn't believe him anymore. He knew very well, however, that she knew exactly who he was. He was perhaps the only person who had always been honest and sincere with her. He had told her a lie once, at the beginning of their relationship, but he had apologized the next day because of how badly he had felt about it. He had done it to protect himself from the pain, probably stemming from his childhood. The lie had come about because the night before while talking about the "other" man before him, she had told him that he would never know how much she loved that man. She had said she wanted to see him in order to retrieve some of her things. Simon had been very upset that night; their discussion had left him with a bad feeling. He had thought that she had perhaps gone to see her former lover. He had called her home, but no one answered. He had known then that he would not fall asleep without knowing whether his suspicions were right, and he was angry with her as well; so, he called back a half hour later. This time, she answered. He simply reassured himself that she was home, but felt so badly for having doubted her that he found himself unable to speak to her. He had hung up, thinking she would think it was a wrong number, but she had dialed *69. He answered. When she asked him why he

hadn't spoken to her, he had denied even calling her. He had been too pained to speak to her.

That night, he had felt nine years old again, the year his mother died. One night, soon after his mother's death, he had cried his heart out. It had been the first time he had let his emotions surface without restraint. His aunt, who had been taking care of him at the time, had gone up to see him in his room to ask him what was wrong. He wanted her to stay next to him, comfort him, reassure him, and show him she cared for him. When he didn't answer she had said, "Fine, if you don't want to talk, then cry. When you want to talk to me, let me know." And she had gone back downstairs. She had been his favorite aunt and her behavior that night had broken his heart. He had felt so alone, so...nothing. His father, who was hardly ever at home anymore, didn't help the situation. Simon hardly even saw him; he spent his days and a good part of his nights at work. His father would never be the same, not even today, after more than thirty years.

Despite not wanting to make excuses for having lied, something she often reminded him of when she was angry, he told himself that it was the only explanation. He could not erase this mistake; all he could do was to take note of it so that it wouldn't happen again.

In any case, this little white lie didn't change anything. The situation would not have turned out any differently.

But Simon had to admit it had shown his vulnerability. It had also proved his sincerity by having confessed everything to her. He had trusted her enough to share the horrible truths of his childhood with her, something he had never done with anyone else. This had surely bonded him to her, made him closer to her, but at what price? All this suffering brought on by Jane's absence, he wondered what the whole point of it was.

He tried to close his eyes and sleep, but he remembered the time they had prepared a romantic supper together; it had been on a Friday night they didn't have the children. She had been so beautiful, so radiant, and seemed so happy. She had only been wearing underwear and one of his shirts, which she had left unbuttoned down to her mid-torso. She knew how much he wanted her, and she liked knowing how desirable she was to him. They had drunk a bottle of her favorite red wine. Before the meal was finished, he had put his arms around her and kissed her, willingly giving himself up to her, lost in a passion previously unknown to him. Then he took her in his arms and kissed her again. He could remember each word they had said to each other that night.

"I love you so much, Sweetheart," he had said.

"I love you very much, too. I'm so happy when I'm with you, Simon. I never thought that one day I'd feel so comfortable with a man. I feel so beautiful and so much like a woman when I'm with you."

“You are the most beautiful woman, and you will always be to me. You have been since the first time I looked into your eyes. You will be until I close my eyes on you for the very last time when I’m very, very old.”

“Even when we’re very, very old, and we’re all wrinkled?” She had asked talking like a little old lady who had removed her teeth.

“Yes, and even with your glasses laying on the tip of your nose. By the way, have I ever told you how it drives me wild when you wear your glasses to read or watch a movie?”

“Yes. And it always surprises me. I want to grow old with you, Simon; I want to be beautiful for you and live out all my dreams with you.”

“And do you know what I want?”

“Tell me.”

“I want the same thing as you, and a little something extra.”

“Like?”

“Like taking you in my arms and carrying you up to our room. Are you ready?”

“Are you crazy? You’ll hurt yourself!”

“Are you scared I’m going to drop you? You think I’m not strong enough, eh? You think I’d risk letting you fall and hurting you!”

“You’re crazy, I’m telling you! We’ve had some wine... I don’t want you to hurt yourself.”

“Relax. Besides, if you fall, I’ll be underneath you.”

He had taken her. She had started laughing so hard she had tears in her eyes. On their way up the stairs, Simon kept stubbing his toes on the staples sticking out of the carpeting. He kept saying, “Ouch! Ouch! It hurts.” It really did hurt, but watching her laugh so much made him laugh too. Once upstairs, he lay her down on the bed. There would be nothing but laughter and tenderness and words of love the entire night until they fell asleep in each other’s arms. He remembered waking up often that night, instinctively, to make sure it wasn’t a dream; that she was really there by his side. He had been waiting and hoping for this moment for so long.

Then, unfortunately, last Thursday loomed up in his memory. He had received a note in his mailbox notifying him of a registered letter in his name at the post office. He had to go there to sign for it. Since he had something to get at the pharmacy, he stopped by to pick up the letter after driving his daughter to her class. It was addressed to him. He knew from the handwriting that it was from Jane.

“Please sign here?” the clerk had asked while Simon stared fixedly at the letter.

He opened it as soon as he was back in his car.

By registered mail

Without prejudice

Sir,

You have recently increased your contact with me, unwanted as it is. You have been very insistent, despite my refusal to be in contact with you, and you have ignored my repeated requests to be left alone. Such behavior is not acceptable; it is seriously affecting my private life. Moreover, the behavior you have shown by communicating directly with me despite my constant refusal is not that of a self-respecting man...

Furthermore, you are hereby formally requested to no longer contact me by any means. If you do not comply with this request, I will take the necessary legal measures, without notification or delay, in order to ensure my rights are respected.

Jane Lamer

He tried to get a hold of himself. His heart was beating out of control. He was too shaken to think straight. He didn't want to judge, but he felt a sudden urge to scream with all his might to get rid of the pain that seemed to want to take hold of him. How could she have done such a thing? How could she have gotten to this point? Could he have been so wrong about her?

He thought back to all the times she had screamed out words that seemed to come from a blind rage that had grown inside of her. It would sometimes become so intense that she would unconsciously lash out at him, armed with long-suppressed emotions, ones she fished out of a sea of bitterness raging deep within her, making him suffer all of the pain that was inside of her.

He felt her fear and her insecurity. All he asked her was to give him time to bring down the walls she had erected around her and to trust him. Once she had told him during an argument, “If you knew all that I have done in my life, you would leave. You wouldn’t even be with me.” He had then reminded her that he had accepted her as she was the moment he met her, and that all she had been or done before they had met was not what had attracted him to her, but rather what she was today...the person she had decided to be at that moment, either because of or despite of her past experiences, and the person she wanted to be in the future, based on what she was living now.

“Is that really all you think of me?” he had asked her. “Do you really think that I’d leave at the first sign of trouble and give up on us?”

Another time, she had said angrily, “Listen to me Simon. I’ll never put you before my friends or my family. Never. Do you hear me?” It was only a few days before her birthday. They had been seeing each other for two months. He had asked her what she wanted to do the next weekend since her birthday was on the Friday.

“Do you want us to spend a lovers’ weekend here, or somewhere else, maybe at an inn somewhere?”

She had curtly answered, “This weekend, I can’t. My friend Maurice has already invited me over to his house for my birthday. It’s been planned for a long time, I can’t cancel it.”

“Friend?” Simon had asked curiously.

“Yes, my best friend Maurice. I’ve already told you about him,” Jane had answered.

“Yes, but if he’s your best friend, isn’t he happy that you have someone in your life?”

“Why are you asking me that?”

“Because, if I had a “best” friend, and I had already invited her, but then found out she had someone new in her life, I wouldn’t hesitate to invite him as well. I mean, after all, she is my best friend and I’d be happy for her, right? And I guess that she would also be happy to introduce him to me, too. I would even offer to postpone the invitation given the circumstances and leave the day to the two of them out of respect and friendship for her. That’s what I think a friend would do.”

“Come on Simon,” Jane had replied, “There’s no way. I can’t do that to him. You don’t understand.”

“But you can do it to me.” Simon asked incredulously. “It’s Tuesday. Your birthday is Friday.

When were you going to talk to me about it if I hadn't brought it up?"

"I was going to do it soon, since I won't be able to have supper with you on Saturday, either. My brother has organized a supper, and I promised him that I would be there with my children and my parents."

"If I understand correctly, my kids and I are not invited," Simon had said bordering on shock.

"Try to understand. My brother is not rich, and..."

"Jane, what's wrong with you? You know very well that I wouldn't have shown up with my children, at the last minute like that, without bringing anything or contributing something."

"Yes, I know. But it's a little apartment and there isn't much space."

"You mean there's only enough space for your family. Period. A few extra chairs that I would have brought myself would have only been in the way!"

Simon had left angry. He couldn't understand her behavior. He knew that she was hiding something; he just wanted to know what. The rest of the week, especially Friday and Saturday, had been extremely difficult for him. He wouldn't make any decisions now, but there was an idea in the back of his mind that just wouldn't go away... Should he just leave it and not risk so much hurt by staying with her?

They had ended up speaking to each other a few days later. She had started crying and had told him that it had been a misunderstanding; that it wasn't what she wanted; that it wouldn't happen again; that she loved him more than anything. He went to see her. He loved her that much.

So who was she? Why hide her friends? Why feel so judged, by him especially, and always be on the defensive? She tried to run away from her role as woman, friend, and mother, and hide like a child who thinks that, by wearing a mask, no one will see her.

He had never met Maurice, her so-called best friend. He knew who he was physically and, since their separation, mentally as well. Once, Simon had gone to his house to pick up Jane's daughter, who was friends with his own daughter. He had only caught a glimpse of him. Afterwards, he had run into him four or five times at the grocery store. It was impossible to say hello to him because, as soon as Maurice saw him, he would change sections or avoid looking at him. This was not the type of man with whom Simon would have wanted to form a friendship – especially since his separation from Jane. But at that time, he had decided that, for her sake, he would respect him and respect their friendship. He would be a good sport. He had offered many times to invite him over for a coffee in order to get to know him. She would say that it was nice of him to offer and would so invite him, but she never did. He knew that the situation was this way because it wasn't friendship Maurice wanted from Jane, but love. They both knew it. Simon had begun

to believe that they were hiding themselves from him so that he wouldn't realize it. He had told her so, and she had denied it, but her eyes had given her away.

That summer, Jane and Simon had had a big argument. She had lied to him. She had spent the entire day with Maurice. Again the same old song: the tears, the reconciliation, and the promise never to do it again. Maurice had left her a message a few days later. She had listened to it and then erased it. She had told Simon not to worry; if Maurice tried to reach her in any way, he would be the first to know.

Simon wanted to show her once again that he trusted her, so, for her birthday, at the end of the summer, he had called Maurice. Since he wasn't there, Simon had left him a message telling him that he was organizing a surprise party for Jane's birthday the following weekend, and that he would like him to be there. On the Friday, when Simon arrived from work, there was a message from Maurice on his answering machine. "Thanks for the invitation, but I won't be there. I will never accept to be second in line for Jane, and I don't particularly like two-faced people like you. Thanks anyway!"

Simon understood to what extent this man loved Jane by the feeling in the tone of his voice on the message.

Why? Why all this mystery, Jane? Simon thought, Why not have told me there had been other letters, other telephone calls? This man had been in your life years before me. Why hide it all this time?

Why did you start seeing him again once you left the house? What were you protecting yourself from?

He had once asked her to help him understand her reactions if there was ever something other than friendship between the two of them? Maybe she just didn't want to tell him about it. That time she had answered "No," and had added "Did you think me even capable of kissing that man? Just the thought of it makes me sick. Have you seen what he looks like?" She had continued describing him using all kinds of degrading adjectives and added, "There has only ever been friendship between us. It's always been very clear to me." Then what did she have to hide from him? Something that Maurice knew? But what that was so important she felt the need to hide it?

There were so many questions racing through his head. He was convinced that somewhere inside her lay a wonderful woman. She would surface sporadically and then disappear at the slightest threat, real or not. He realized with time that this Maurice was not the only one she was hiding: there were other friends as well, even family members she had never wanted him to meet.

Jane, he thought, was I so threatening to you? I accepted to go so far out of love for you despite my values and principles. I would never have gone so far for anyone else. If you could at least realize what it all meant to me.

He once again spent the night tossing and turning in this bed that had become too big.

Exhausted, he finally fell asleep. He didn't recognize himself anymore; with her, he had felt so strong.

After having explained to Marie Gartner, as he had done with Anita a few weeks earlier, why he had chosen to consult her, she had told him the following; without, however, him feeling the slightest judgment on her part: “It wasn’t easy for the two of you. I sense that there is still a lot of love and a sincere commitment on your part despite everything she has done as a result of her reflex to protect herself. But why did you stay? From the very beginning there were very revealing clues about who she was. Answering this question in your own words will give me at least a part of the big picture and help me decide which direction to take.”

That night, Simon knew how to answer this question since he had already been asking himself the same question for weeks. He had found reasons, which had come to him sporadically, and, from there, had added them onto others. So to this woman facing him, he was able to explain:

“Why did I stay? I stayed because I thought our love for each other was rare. I was convinced, and I still am. I stayed, despite everything, even though I had thought about leaving a good many times. I stayed to give us a chance. I also stayed to give myself a chance. I kept telling myself that my love for her was

so strong that she would eventually bring down the walls she had erected around herself and overcome the suffering that had caused so much rage and hatred to fester her heart. I stayed because I wanted to be good for her. I didn't want to judge her based on my own principles and values. If only she had taken the time to see all the goodness and empathy in my soul. If she had at least perceived a part of this greatness inside me, a part of all that I was ready to do for her and her children. I stayed because I remembered what it was like to suffer. I had been hurt before I met her. I was trying to find a way, even if it was not her way, to understand her pain."

Simon went on, "I stayed because I believed in us, and I didn't want to become blinded by her occasional meanness and emotional endurance tests. I'm angry with myself because she got to the point that neither of us wanted to get to. She succeeded in making me panic. I panicked and I lost both my cool and my focus. I said things I shouldn't have. She felt attacked. I panicked even more at the thought of losing her; in her fear, she closed herself off. I lost her!"

"I stayed also because I wanted to be with her. I wanted to need her. I saw a lot more in her than she did...all the good in her. I stayed because I believed that I was able to take control of our relationship for a while, long enough for her, with the help of my faith and love, to come to terms with her doubts. It was important to our relationship. I stayed because I wanted us to be my last chance. I stayed for all that I

never had as a child: a mother and father who loved each other, an example. A mother and father who, through their love for each other, managed to pull through despite the conflicts and all the obstacles life brings. I've always believed in a lifelong love, in old people who still kiss and tenderly look into each other's eyes, full of need for each other and the desire to share everything until the very last moment...until they are separated by death. I miss that sometimes. It could have been an example for me, for our relationship; it could have served as a reference. I sometimes think that those memories would have helped me understand how my father had gone about loving my mother, protecting her and showing her that she meant everything to him. I would have sometimes liked to know all that. It might have helped me."

"In the end, I guess I stayed for her smile, for her arms, to please her as much as she pleased me...to love her. I stayed because I'm lost without her. I stayed because I wanted it to be for life."

"The commitment you made is deep and noble," said Marie a little awestruck. "Just hearing the way you express yourself and the conviction and passion I detect in you tells me you're a good person. You speak with a great deal of humility and, despite being profoundly disappointed; you are still in love with this person. I believe that you are filled with a sadness that is taking you over. I want to do all that I can to help. Would you agree to five sessions after which we can evaluate where we're at based on your needs? What do you think?"

“Yes. I definitely want to try,’ said Simon feeling relieved. “Despite the conclusions I’ve come to on my own, I want to take the time to talk to you and listen to you even if I feel completely lost in my pain and suffering. If the end result is just to be able to catch up on some lost sleep, it’ll be worth it.”

“I have to ask you a question before you leave,” Marie paused and looked at him closely. “Do you ever think about committing suicide?”

“No. I have my children, and I don’t want to think about that.”

“Perfect,” she answered satisfied with his expression. “Let me know if ever you do think about it. Just talking about it is often enough. I have room for you at the same time, on the same day, next week. Is that okay?”

“No problem. I’ll be here.”

This morning, Simon thought about the dream he had had last night. He was still all shaken up about it. He had dreamt that he was with Jane, in their house. She was admiring the wedding ring he had just placed on her finger. He looked at her and felt, through his entire being, how good it was to see her so happy. He told himself that this was what he had wanted since the first time their eyes had met: to make her as happy as she was at that moment. He felt strong, proud. He no longer had any doubts, despite his past sadness and the difficulty he sometimes had trusting people. He wanted to spend the rest of his life with her. This ring might only be a symbol, but for him, giving it to her and having her accept it was a gesture of honor, a gesture that would perpetuate and serve as proof of their invincible love for the rest of their lives. He was sure of it.

That morning, he had woken up to the music of his alarm clock, something he had rarely done since Jane was no longer beside him. Still shaken from his dream, he woke up slowly, as the radio host started talking about the call-in topic of the day: “Call us to tell us what happened when you either gave an engagement or wedding ring to your significant other for Christmas.”

The coincidence startled him. Then he remembered something that made what he had just

heard even more striking. A few years before, he had dreamt that one of his favorite musicians, one who had made him laugh so much as a child, had had a stroke while performing the night before. Someone in the audience had gotten up on stage to help him and had given him a cardiac massage. The ambulance had then arrived to bring him to the hospital.

He had woken up exhausted that night, once again overwhelmed by the reality of the dream. This dated back before Jane. He had been alone that morning. His children had been at their mother's house. He had taken an unusually long hot shower and had left for work, where he had found the morning newspaper lying on a table in the kitchenette. He had been astounded by the front-page headline: it had actually happened. The article, located a little further down, gave all the details. Even before reading the article, Simon felt he could have written it himself, word for word. It was more than just a coincidence. It had to do with something much larger. To dream about a role model from your youth is one thing, but to have a detailed dream about something happening to that very person on the very night of the event, without prior knowledge of his concert was something else entirely. Even years later, he often thought about that night.

Last night's dream reminded him of that dream and gave him a completely different perspective on it. He tormented himself with the thought of understanding what it could mean. He didn't want to

cause himself more hurt, but somewhere inside him,
his hopes began feeding on this dream.

“Hey Jay. It’s Simon. How are you?”

“Hey Simon. What’s up with you? I haven’t heard from you in a while. Are you in the neighborhood?”

“No. I’m calling from my place. I’m calling you before I go crazy. Are you doing anything tonight?”

“Nothing planned. I’m just getting back from my mother’s, and I haven’t eaten yet.”

“What about getting a bite to eat? Let’s say I’m going through a hard time and I need to get out of the house.”

“What’s going on?”

“I haven’t told you yet, but Jane and I...we’ve split up.”

“You and Jane split up! I would have never guessed. You’re not serious!”

“Unfortunately, yes. It’s been a little over eight months.”

“You’re definitely the last people on earth I thought something like this could happen to. Of all the people I know, I mean I have some friends and acquaintances to whom it could happen, or has happened to, but you two...I would never have

believed it! You were always such an example for me.”

“I know, Jay. I wouldn’t have believed it either. Are you interested in supper?”

“Sure. Where do you want to meet?”

“What about if we meet half-way. We could each drive about a half-hour. Let’s say Saint-Hyacinthe, near Highway 20.”

After having determined the place and time, Simon knew that he had to stick to the plan and not change his mind. He would not call Jay to cancel like he had with others in the past.

Jay had once been married to Simon’s best friend, but it hadn’t worked out, with good reason. Some people just aren’t meant to be together. After Jay’s divorce, he and Simon had continued to see each other once or twice a year. Despite his hurt, Simon was looking forward to seeing Jay and talking to him, as he had done many times before. He wanted to hear his news. He knew that Jay, too, had recently gone through a breakup. He felt like staying in and not speaking to anyone and, at the same time, wanted to see Jay and talk about everything and nothing...he desperately needed that. His feelings had scared him at times, the resentment and the anger inside of him, the huge void without Jane. What had become of him? What would become of him?

That Monday morning, Simon went back to work after a much deserved vacation. He usually got to work at seven in the morning since he liked starting early to take advantage of the calm in the office to get a head start on his paperwork and to try, like always, to clear the top of his desk, a feat that always bordered on the impossible. Since his and Jane's separation, his work had become his second reason for persevering, his children obviously being the first. When he had been with Jane, he had still liked arriving at work early, but thought that 7:30 was a more reasonable hour to arrive, since it gave him an extra half-hour to be with Jane.

That morning, however, he only got to work at 7:30. He told himself that it was because of his holidays. But then focusing on how he felt, he realized that he sensed something had happened, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it. He had stopped on his way to work to have a coffee and some toast, a habit he had all but given up in order to avoid running into Jane, who, since she had known him, had also developed the habit of stopping for coffee in the morning. Now, he either went early or didn't go at all.

But for some reason, despite the time at which he had been there, he hadn't seen her. He passed close by her house and noticed that her car was still in the driveway. He had found it strange, even more so

perhaps because of the strange feeling he had had since that morning. He tried to convince himself that she had taken the day off or had woken up late.

By mid-morning, he hardly thought about it anymore. The usual back-from-vacation conversations with all of the same questions, which he tried to keep to a minimum, forced him to think about other things. But the feeling deep inside him wouldn't go away. It was a little like the anticipation leading up to a special event like Christmas. We manage to go about our daily tasks, but the feeling persists. The only difference in this case was that the sense of anticipation was not a positive one.

Throughout all his daily activities, he kept thinking back to the week he had just spent. He had made a list of things to do and had managed to start only couple of them. His children had been with him for the first weekend until the start of school on Monday morning, and he had spent the rest of the week alone, without them. He had dropped by their mother's house three or four times during the week to say hello and give them a hug, unable to do otherwise. He had promised himself to visit some of his friends and even to go see his relatives.

But the reality had been entirely different. He had gone out only once, with his friend Jay. He hadn't visited any other friends, nor had he gone to see his family. He knew that he should have tried, but Jane haunted his thoughts. No matter where he went, he would see her. *What is happening to me?* he kept asking himself. *Is running into her so often a sign?*

He had even bumped into her three times in one day – on the first Sunday of his vacation. He had also bumped into her yesterday at lunch; he had walked by her and hadn't felt well, not well at all. He missed her so much; he felt the hurt in every part of his being. He had to get out of the house to escape. Towards the end of the morning, after having read for a good half-hour, he had gone speed walking. It had been so nice outside that he had promised himself he would get his act together and force himself to stay in control. He was making himself sick, both physically and mentally. More importantly, he had to get it together for his children. When he had arrived back home, he had checked the movie listings. Nothing appealed to him; he had already seen the new James Bond movie with the kids the weekend before. Nonetheless, he had to do something. He decided to go to the 12:50 screening. He kept his word to himself and, at 12:30, was already in the parking lot of the movie theatre.

The shock was terrible. Just as he arrived at the door, he spotted her, standing a few meters from him, with her children, Maurice, and his children. She was teasing Maurice's son, holding him in her arms, something he had hardly ever seen her do with his own kids. Simon's heart knotted up and began beating uncontrollably. His body shook with anger. He felt that he was losing control. He suddenly sensed his own vulnerability. He had pretended not to see them. He would have liked to have been able to scream, his pain being that intolerable. He pretended not to see them and went in anyway, purchased his ticket and found a seat in the theatre. He tried to regain

control...to understand. He told himself, *If this is a test, Lord, guide me towards the answer; I'm lost. I don't think You realize what I'm feeling. Stop! I'm begging You. I can't take it anymore!*

One of the two had not understood. Lifting his head, he saw them in the aisle on the right of him. They were sitting two rows in front of him. She seemed happy. He stayed almost an hour, at which point he couldn't bear it anymore and he left. He didn't want to risk coming face-to-face with them when they left, not knowing anymore what he could do or say. To see her with that man, even if he was only a friend...to see her laugh and have fun was more than he could stand.

Monday

His meetings being over, Simon went over the events of the week before and decided that at five o'clock he would call it a day. He had a guitar lesson at 10 o'clock and hadn't practiced much recently, partly because he lacked motivation and was unable to concentrate. That night, he promised himself that he would practice for at least an hour.

On his way home from work, he stopped by Tim Horton's to have a bagel. He took his time and read for a half-hour. It was another Mary Higgins Clark, Loves Music, Loves to Dance. He had succeeded in regaining his ability to concentrate through reading this book, whose style was the only one that had interested him lately.

Upon leaving, he promised himself not to pass by her house on the way home. But he had been unable to resist and had once again gone by. Her Christmas lights were on and her car didn't seem to have moved all day. It was covered with a thin layer of snow that had fallen before lunch. The blinds were closed, and there didn't seem to be any lights on inside. The same uneasy feeling from that morning came over him, even stronger this time.

Finding himself once again unable to concentrate, he could only practice his guitar for half

an hour. It seemed useless. He went to the phone and cancelled that evening's lesson.

He spent that night as he had all the others over the past months: sleeping too little and feeling far too anxious. A little before 2 a.m., he woke up and was unable to fall back asleep. A sense of urgency wouldn't let him sleep, so he got up, got dressed and drove by her house. He was worried and it irritated him because he knew that there was nothing he could do, even if something had happened. But was this feeling really telling him that either Jane or he, himself, was in danger? He didn't know any more. After all that had happened in the last couple of days, could he still trust his instinct, despite its never having been wrong? The fatigue he was living with these days was draining all his energy; it made him doubt himself.

He had already been wrong about her. He hadn't had any idea how far Jane would go to protect herself. If it hadn't been for the prosecutor, who had refused to pursue the harassment case that Jane had brought against him, there was no telling what the judge would have done. His experience had taught him to fear the worst. He preferred putting himself in God's hands than in those of a jury. Simon knew that he could have ended up with a criminal record and all that it implied; the lawyer he had consulted had told him as much... A criminal file for wanting to protect her son, for sending her flowers, for a letter asking for forgiveness for having been wrong and not having been all that she had expected from him, and for

leaving a few messages on her voice mail. All this done without the slightest intent to be cruel, but because he still loved her, and he just wanted to know...what exactly? He didn't really know anymore...he wanted to talk to her; he wanted to hear her voice...he needed to.

Jane! Did you really have to go so far? Are you still so afraid of the feelings you have? How unhappy you must be! So unhappy!

Tuesday

They were at the grocery store. He had taken the day off and they had had lunch a lot later than usual, around 3 o'clock. Simon had to go into work for a couple of hours that evening, so Jane wanted to buy a few things to prepare a quick supper for when he got back around 10 o'clock. Not a supper, really...more like a snack. They were looking forward to being together again, just the two of them.

They were going up and down the aisles. She chose the salad, a pepper, and cold cuts while he looked at her, filled with admiration. Each time she would turn around, he would replace what she put in the cart with other things. She would laugh. She laughed so much. She was happy, and that was all that mattered to him. Once they were in an empty aisle, he took her into his arms to tell her how much he loved her, how happy he was to see her laugh and to see her so radiant.

Just as she was looking at him and telling him that he was hers for life, he woke up. He was happy to have taken her in his arms, even if it was only a dream; he still felt her there. But he was also disappointed to have come back to reality. He would never be able to forget the effect she had on him.

Then, all of a sudden, he remembered yesterday. He took a hot shower, under which all his desires seemed to become entangled. On the one hand, he wanted to take advantage of this moment of relief and relaxation, while on the other, the urgency to drive by her house in the hopes of seeing a light on or the car running - or at least the snow having been removed from it - would reassure him. It would confirm that he was wrong. For once, to be wrong was what he wanted more than anything else. Despite the pain she was causing him, he wanted to know that she was safe. Despite his anger, he wanted to know that she was okay.

Not even a half-hour later, he realized that everything was still the same. Knowing her so well, he was sure that she would not have taken a vacation at this time of the year. Could she be sick? Possibly. He surprised himself by hoping so. Better that than something more serious.

He promised himself one thing: He would drive by again at dusk and, if the situation were still unchanged, he would notify the police, regardless of what they might presume or insinuate. This was certainly not normal. He was already thinking about the consequences should they knock at her door or simply call her and she answered. What if she complained about him yet again? Should he go that far? What if his fears were justified and something bad had really happened to Jane? She might have simply slipped and fell in her bathtub, or lost consciousness, or whatever. Silly little accidents

happen every day. He had to call the police. If they didn't understand, he would have to vouch for his instinct. He was doing it for her own good, whatever the circumstances. One day she would understand.

The day was long. Simon was the type of person who gave himself completely to his work. He had long since adopted the philosophy that a person shouldn't wait for others to tell him what he wants in life and that, regardless of the circumstances, he should always give a hundred percent. Arriving home after a job well done filled him with a feeling of satisfaction and accomplishment. Voluntarily doing what needed to be done gave him a sense of fulfillment. In fact, his work had made him feel better in the last months. When his children were at their mother's house, he stayed long hours to get ahead in his projects. He had to keep himself busy. This didn't make him forget Jane and the children; they were always in his thoughts, but his work served as a type of relief, a safety valve. In terms of priority, it was second only to his family.

Not everyone agreed with his methods, but he was known to have integrity and to be sincere. They had a lot of respect for his commitment and his reliability. He wasn't an attention-seeker but rather humble and very efficient.

He would laugh when someone asked him how he managed to do so many things in a day. He would remember his childhood, especially his adolescence, when he worked in the woods piling blocks and logs into an old pick-up truck. He remembered the

summers spent loading and unloading haystacks, one after another. Hard times, but wonderful times, too. He used to love to work on the farm; it was his passion. It was the reality in which he would lose himself to forget the rest, especially what his father had become after his mother had died; he just couldn't bear hearing his father damning of all the saints in Heaven when the bank called to remind him that his mortgage payment was late.

The summers were especially magical. He would wake up early to milk the cows. He preferred doing it alone; it was calm in the stable and the cows would sense it, which made the milking go more smoothly. He felt free. He imagined the day when it would all belong to him. The pencil drawings to renovate the stable and make it bigger were ready; he had redone them countless times. He had also figured out the layout of the fields, the rotation of the crops, and the grazing areas. Only the house had yet to be finalized in his mind, but he had done that on purpose. He preferred imagining the woman who would live there with him. They would then decide together how to renovate the house. They would have so much fun doing it.

Then, the morning of his eighteenth birthday, his dream came crumbling down. The woman his father had remarried shortly after the death of his mother, had asked him, on the very day of his birthday, to leave the farm. She wanted to live there alone with his father and their child. He had held a grudge for the longest time, but had never told his father.

Turned upside down by this request, he had left that same afternoon for the city to meet with the man who had been his mother's supervisor when she worked at the factory. The man had asked him a few questions and had simply said, "Would you be ready to start Monday morning?" It was not what he wanted, but he had answered yes anyway.

All this happened over 20 years ago, but he remembered as if it were yesterday. It would be the same thing with Jane. He had loved her so much; he would never forget her. She had been his greatest hope. Like the smell of the hay drying in the sun during his youth, his memory was engraved with the smell of her body and her hair. Asking himself why it had to turn out this way, he once again felt the tears stream down his cheeks.

If you only knew, my love...

11:30 a.m.

What Simon didn't know at that moment was that his worries were justified. At 8:30 that morning, the secretary of the school where Jane had been working for the past couple of months had notified the director. It wasn't normal for Jane not to show up at work two mornings in a row, without even telephoning. Even if she didn't really know Jane, it didn't seem to be her style. Just as she had with Simon, Jane had given the secretary the impression of being more responsible.

Mrs. Lemay, the director, wasn't overly worried, but had nevertheless taken the necessary measures. She remained calm, aware that Jane had been going through a difficult time in the last months. She knew that sometimes things that are normally important to us become less of a priority when the very essence of our life is at risk. She supposed that Jane might have a few issues at the moment. So, in her best interest, she dialed Jane's parents' number, which Jane had left in case of an emergency. Jane was very close to her parents but, at the same time, was also withdrawn. Simon had been both surprised and touched by what he had seen her do once. They had gone to the movies and he was helping her with her coat when he noticed that she was quietly crying. She had told him that the movie had reminded her of things

she never settled with her mother, and that it was difficult for her. He had held her tight and told her that he loved her. He had offered to listen if she needed to talk...but this was one of the many things he had never gotten to know about her.

More and more often during their last year together, whenever Simon made some kind of comment, she would disagree with him, saying that her mother had told her the opposite, as if her mother could never be wrong. He would tell her then, "Even though I respect your parents, I'm not living with them, but with you. I love you and we have to live together, so it's together that we have to come to an agreement in order to be happy, whether your mother agrees or not. You know very well, Jane, that even if I don't agree with you parents, I would never disrespect them."

At 9 o'clock, Jane's parents were at her house. After having knocked at the door and rung several times, they used the key she had given them. Inside, everything seemed normal, as if she had just gone out somewhere. The curtains on the back door were drawn, her bed was made, and there were a couple of glasses on the counter near the sink; in short, nothing suspicious. Yet Jane hadn't been home or at work for at least two days and her car was in the driveway. Jane's parents spent an hour calling some of her friends and acquaintances, having found their numbers in a little notebook she always left near the phone. At that time on a Tuesday, they didn't have much success.

Only one of her friends had answered, but she hadn't seen Jane for at least three or four weeks.

They knew that Jane liked taking risks sometimes, and that she was capable of many things, but they were convinced that she would have notified the school of her absence. They called the school and found that Mrs. Lemay still didn't have any news. They no longer had a choice; at 10:30, Jane's parents decided to notify the police.

Tuesday, 5:30 p.m.

He still had a lot to do, and after 4:30, it was as calm as it was before 8 a.m.. This time was precious to him. He could leave his office door open without too many interruptions. He felt a little freer and more productive. While he liked to meet with the others who made up the work teams to talk to them about both their personal lives and their work, he also liked to be alone to finalize things, bring himself up to date, and get back to his optimum performance level.

At 5:30 p.m., the winter darkness had already fallen. He imagined her, at that very moment, turning on the light to read or prepare supper. He finished writing his instructions, gave them to the head of the night shift, and wrapped his scarf around his neck before putting on his coat and gloves. He was hoping. His heart started beating a little more rapidly and he was nervous. He had just realized that his worries had not allowed him a moment's peace since he had had that awful feeling yesterday morning.

On his way to her house, he thought over all that his psychologist, Marie Gartner, had told him and the way she had listened to all that he had said. It had done him good. Those few sessions with her, plus all that Jane had subjected him to in the last couple of weeks should have been enough to distance himself from her. Why was he still so dependent on her? Why all this worry? Why all the dreams that wouldn't stop?

A part of him knew. He knew that, apart from the immoral side of her, she had meant everything to him. He had never committed himself so deeply. It was a commitment he wasn't able to completely comprehend, but he had voluntarily submitted to it. He remembered when they made love - the complicity, the authenticity, the profound intimacy, the honesty, the gift of self and the reciprocity of their feelings for each other. It was the ultimate love; they complemented one another totally and absolutely. He knew why. It wasn't only physical; it was a union of souls. All of their sensitivity would surface during those moments. It was fulfillment and perfect compatibility. What hurt him the most was that he was convinced that he would never forget Jane. At the moment, he would have liked to have been able to erase everything that they had been through together, purging himself of her. It was too much, more than he believed he could withstand. There was a cassette

playing continually in his head, replaying all their best moments together. He had to do something. The cassette, the dreams, the frequent run-ins when he would leave the house had to end. *Jane, I'm begging you, I was always sure that we could have been happy together forever. But today, please leave me alone. I prefer to live alone than to live like this.*

The hurt he felt at that moment was cruel and treacherous. It stemmed not only from having loved her so much, but also from a senseless desire to keep on loving her. It was no longer of his free will; he had been taken over. His heart belonged to her.

5:30 p.m.

Simon noticed Jane's parents' car parked in front of her house as he turned the corner of her street. He also noticed another dark-colored vehicle, which he didn't recognize, parked just behind Jane's car. At the same moment, there was a portly, mustached man in his forties walking out of the house.

After taking all of this in, Simon immediately came up with a series of possibilities. His fertile and instinctive imagination made him fear the worst, and he remembered all the times Jane had accused him of being too cautious and fearful of others. She, on the other hand, could either be very reserved or extremely nonchalant. It was an irritating trait, but it was one of the reasons he wanted to be with her and love her forever; he wanted to protect her; it was part of his commitment to her. Simon wasn't the type to exaggerate events, however. He never watched the news on TV, and hardly ever read the newspapers, except for the Entertainment section and a quick glance at the Business section, but he knew that there were all sorts of unscrupulous people out there who were capable of anything. He believed that being careful didn't always keep you out of harm's way, but it tipped the scales in your favor. It didn't mean you had to walk around with a bodyguard 24 hours a day

either; there were many other, simpler ways to deter crazy people.

What could have happened to Jane? And how could he find out?

Maybe she was at home, and he had simply let his imagination get the best of him. She might have been out of town with her parents for the last two days, perhaps for the death or illness of a family member. He knew she had relatives who lived far away. She might have simply driven her parents there and back, but his gut told him otherwise. Whatever the case, he would go no further for the moment, at least, not for today. Her parents were there. If something serious had happened, the police would have already been notified. He could do no more. He would go home, change his clothes, and go speed walking. It might do him some good, clear his head and help him deal with the emotions still raging within him.

He had given it his all, like he did with everything he undertook. He had taken 45 minutes instead of his usual 50. When he got near the end of the boulevard on which he took his walk, he went north to the corner of the street. From there, he could see her house about 150 meters away. The dark-colored car was still there, as was the one belonging to her parents, although it had been moved. From where he stood, he could see her house, but he couldn't tell whether the lights were on inside. He figured they must be. He could, however, see that the outside light was on. It was too risky to get any closer, since Jane's house was on the corner of a busy street where no one ventured on foot or by bike. Should someone see him there, it would raise suspicion. He decided to drive by later that night in the hopes of seeing her in one of the windows.

Once home, Simon took off his running shoes and coat. He was proud of himself, proud to have made the effort to complete his walk. It had done him good. Once outside, he had been surprised at how nice it was; it wasn't even five degrees below zero, and there were a few snowflakes falling lazily to the ground. It was a beautiful evening. He couldn't help but remember his romantic rambles with Jane. One October night, a few months into their relationship, they had gone out to his place in the Eastern

Townships. She had told him that at the first snowfall of the season, she would sometimes lie down in the snow and move her arms back and forth to make a snow angel. That night he imagined her making her angel, an angel who, if something had happened to her, would somehow protect her. He truly hoped so.

He got into the shower, where he stayed for several minutes. After putting on his clothes, he noticed the light flashing on the telephone, which meant that he had a message. He took it. It was his son, who was asking him to call back and saying he wanted to talk to him. Even when they were at their mother's house, Simon didn't let a day go by without speaking to his children. He picked up the receiver and dialed the number.

Simon passed by Jane's house with his car around 9 o'clock. Her parents' car was still there, but the other one was gone. There was a light filtering through the living room; it was the one they would turn on when they watched a movie. There was also a little bit of light in the kitchen but, because the blinds were only partially opened, he couldn't see much of anything. Jane's car, however, was still untouched.

He suddenly had an idea. Maurice! He hadn't thought about going by his house on his way home from work, or even that morning. He knew that Jane had seen Maurice often during the last few weeks. Maybe she was making up for lost time after having hidden her friendship with him for the last two years.

On his way to Maurice's, he remembered a warning that one of Jane's acquaintances had once given him. The woman also knew Maurice through a common friend. She and Simon had run into each other at the grocery store about a month after he and Jane had moved in together. She had frankly, but sincerely, told him that Jane wasn't the woman for him, and he would end up getting hurt. She knew that Simon already knew Jane's brother and sister-in-law. She was also aware that Simon had met two other couples who were friends of Jane's. She had told Simon honestly, "You know very well that those people are not like you. They are the immoral side of

Jane. She has made a choice, the least complicated choice for her.” Simon had asked her to be more precise. She continued by explaining, “You are the man she has dreamed of spending the rest of her days with, I’m sure of it, but she won’t be able to because she doesn’t have your willpower, discipline, or perseverance. She doesn’t have your pride, either. Or rather, I’d say she does have pride, but she doesn’t have the will to deal with the consequences of it.” She then stopped and took a breath. Seeing that Simon was listening intently, she continued, “I’ve seen her with her children, her family, and some of her friends and ex-boyfriends, too. She puts herself down in order to make them feel good about themselves; she even goes as far as spending quality time with these people who are unworthy of who she is deep down. I’m not a therapist, but I don’t think she’s made the best choice, but rather the least bad, the easiest one. Unfortunately, it is also the most insidious, unworthy, and hurtful. These people she has let into her life and the lifestyle she has adopted offer her two possibilities, which I believe she unconsciously deems necessary in her life. On the one hand, her sense of morality allows her to withdraw when necessary, while her sense of immorality allows her to find acceptance in the world she has created for herself, a world without great expectations, modesty, or dignity. I don’t want to go into more detail, but haven’t you noticed the rage inside of her?” Simon nodded and she continued, “I’ve already seen Jane defend those who are a part of the world I’m talking to you about. You’re not part of it, and she knows it; that’s what’s hurting her so much.

She knows deep down that she is like you, but it's too hard for her. She doesn't think she'll ever make it, and it's what keeps the two of you apart. She goes from being the woman who is fulfilled and in love with you, to the scatterbrained young teenager who's angry with you for not understanding her. That's why she's dangerous for you and your children. Believe me, Simon. I'm sure that you already know what I'm talking about. Don't tell me she hasn't already given you any warning signs? Listen, I have to go now. I've already taken too much time; we have a supper tonight... You don't really know me, and I've taken a risk by telling you all this, but I trust you and I know that if Jane were able to understand what was happening inside her, you would be the only man who could make her happy. Be careful, and don't hesitate to call me if you want to talk."

He didn't want to be influenced by this meeting and he had never told Jane about it. In hindsight, however, he had to admit that the woman had been right. He felt responsible for not having known how to tame Jane.

A few minutes later he passed by Maurice's house. His car wasn't there. Seeing as it had snowed, it was possible that they had taken a few days off to go skiing.

The thought made Simon reflect a little. He didn't really like downhill skiing; he preferred cross-country. It required a lot more effort and gave him the opportunity to be closer to nature and appreciate its real value. It was also a lot less stressful than

downhill. Allowing yourself to be pulled uphill while remaining still in your seat, after having waited in line, and then heading back down the hill at full speed while making sure you don't run anyone over or get hit by someone, kept him off the slopes. The last time he had gone, the ambulance had come two times in the span of two or three hours for people who had gotten hurt. One of the injured was a woman who had shielded her daughter and had ended up with a concussion. The teenager who had hit her hadn't even stopped to see if she was okay.

According to Simon, someone who liked downhill skiing also liked going on rides. He didn't like rides, either, but he had gone downhill skiing three or four times with Jane anyway to make her happy. He had even taken a few lessons, just in case.

Simon arrived home, boiled some water to make some herbal tea, and sat near the table with some paper and a pencil to write down what he was feeling at that moment. It was a useful means for him to clear his mind and relax. He sometimes felt more at peace with himself after writing, and he only ever wrote about his love for Jane.

At 9:45, he couldn't keep his eyes open anymore. He hadn't even been able to read. He had laid down on his bed, looked at the picture of his kids, and fallen asleep with his eyes moist from thinking of how much he loved them and how much he loved Jane.

He woke up at 3 o'clock. He finally turned on the light by his bed at 3:30 and read for a good half-hour before being able to fall back asleep. At 5:30, he woke up again, quickly put on a pair of jeans and a warm woolen shirt Jane had given him. He started his car with his car starter and prepared a snack: a green apple, two clementines, a banana, and a granola bar.

He picked up his things after putting on his coat and shoes, and left. Five minutes later, he was in front of Maurice's house. His car was there.

He continued on to Jane's and noticed that nothing had changed. He stopped by Tim Horton's for a coffee and some toast and reflected on the situation. He had to know. He had to find a way to get some news about her, to find out if she was okay. His instinct, or sixth sense, as some called it, told him something had happened.

Wednesday, 8:30 a.m.

Simon was working on a file to hand in that week when the telephone rang. It was Inspector Gauthier asking him to meet him as soon as possible. He hadn't wanted to say anything, but Simon had asked if it had anything to do with Jane. The inspector hadn't denied it, but he hadn't wanted to speak any more about it over the telephone. They had agreed to meet a little before lunch.

Finally, he was going to find out something about Jane's whereabouts. Based on the circumstances, he hadn't been at all surprised by the call; if anything, he had expected a call earlier. He put himself in the inspector's shoes and knew that the man had to follow every lead, every detail. Whatever the case, at least his instinct had been right. He prayed to God that nothing bad had happened. Seeing that the inspector hadn't called him sooner, it probably meant it wasn't all that serious.

Sunday, 5:15 p.m.

“Hi. Am I speaking to Jane?”

“Yes.”

“I’d like to meet with you. I know things about Simon that might help you.”

“Simon doesn’t live here anymore.”

“I know what happened, and I can help you. I also know about the complaint you made against him, and about the criminal charge. I can tell you things that can help you.”

“Who is this?”

“A woman who knows things, a lot of things, and who is only asking to meet you for a couple of minutes over coffee. You can do what you wish with the information.”

“Do I know you?”

“No.”

“How is it that you know Simon? And how long have you known him?”

“That’s not important at the moment. Like I said before, we can talk over coffee.”

“How do I know that what you have to say will be of interest to me?”

“You’re a big girl. You’ll be able to decide for yourself.”

“Is Simon putting you up to this?”

“Simon doesn’t know anything about this. He would certainly not approve of what I’m doing. In spite of everything you’ve done to him, he still wants to protect you.”

“Alright. I’ll meet you for coffee. But if I find that Simon is involved in this, I’ll contact the police immediately. Do we understand each other?”

“Fine. It’s a beautiful night, just perfect for a brisk walk. At six o’clock, head towards the shopping center and stay on the sidewalk on the left side of the boulevard. I’ll meet you.”

“How will I recognize you?”

“I know you, so don’t worry about it.”

A little less than forty minutes later, Jane left, just as the stranger had told her to. A little regretful and perplexed, she asked herself what this woman could possibly tell her about Simon that she didn’t already know. She knew that sometimes you could make a mistake about someone, but not about Simon; it was unthinkable. He was much more than just a handsome man to her. It was his inner beauty that made him so rare. His life experiences had taught him humility, and they had also endowed him with a certain wisdom that was rare in a man his age. She knew that, above all else, he was honest and loyal. The only thing she could perhaps learn about Simon

from this woman would have to do with his past, of which she knew little. She had refrained from asking him too many questions about his past because she hadn't wanted to feel obliged to talk about her own. She knew, however, that Simon had often wanted to bring it up because he trusted her more than anyone else and wanted to share it with her, even though his experiences sometimes left him feeling vulnerable.

Jane had been walking for about twenty minutes. A few snowflakes were falling slowly to the ground, and it felt good to breathe in the crisp air. Looking a little further ahead, she noticed that someone was walking towards her but, from that distance, she couldn't make out if it was a man or a woman. It didn't take her long to figure it out, though. The person was about Jane's height, with blond hair that was partly covered by the collar of her black coat and a scarf, which was wrapped around her neck and mouth. A pair of dark glasses finished the look.

She was sure that this was the stranger, which is why she wasn't at all surprised when, as she got closer, the stranger said: "Hi Jane...Let's keep walking."

They took a few steps. Jane was sure she had never met this woman before.

There were buildings and apartments on this side of the boulevard and, when they were about to pass the second entrance, the stranger told Jane to follow her because she had to get something from her car, which she had parked behind the building next to them. Jane followed her, a little on her guard even

though she was familiar with the area. The closer they got to the back of the building, the darker it became. Jane opted to follow the woman at a distance, something that didn't seem to bother the woman. There were only two cars in the parking lot; the only light came from the center window of a third-floor apartment. Once they arrived next to the brown car, the stranger took out her keys, but then dropped them. In what was almost total darkness, Jane instinctively bent over to help her find them. But it was too late. Jane hadn't realized that the woman had taken a cloth out of her left coat pocket. She immediately covered Jane's mouth with it.

Within a few seconds, Jane was asleep.

Jane woke up much later that night. She vaguely remembered what had happened. She went to scratch her right ear and realized that her hands were tied behind her lower back with a rope that was tied to something else. As she was trying to figure out what she was tied to and to remember the details of her escapade, she heard the stranger say:

“Ah. So you’re finally awake. I’m going to take the tape off your mouth, but at the slightest scream, I’ll have no choice but to become nasty. Do you understand?”

Jane nodded yes. The stranger peeled off the tape with a single quick stroke. Even though she was still sleepy, Jane’s face contorted with pain.

“Why are you doing this to me?” she whimpered.

“You’ll find out, when the time is right. I stayed until you woke up to be sure that you were okay. Now, I have to leave. If you need something, now is the time to ask.”

“I have to go the bathroom, and I have a headache.”

“I’ll help you,” said Jane’s abductor, “but when I’m not here, you’ll have to use the basin I’ll leave

next to you. Here's some Aspirin for your headache," she said handing Jane two tablets.

Jane was feeling a little dizzy and was having trouble walking but, with the stranger's help, she finally made it to the bathroom, which was quickly becoming an absolute necessity. Left alone for a few minutes, Jane wallowed in the bitterness of the situation. Her feet and hands were tied up and she couldn't see because her eyes were covered up. The feeling reminded her of something, but she couldn't put her finger on what exactly... probably some memory from way back in her childhood. She suddenly realized that the same memory probably also explained her behavior toward Simon. Sometimes, when he had wanted to tell her something, he would take hold of her arms to hold her still. She knew very well that he would never have hurt her, but she always reacted violently, pushing him away and telling him to let go of her. She, herself, was taken aback by her reaction, and not being able to understand it only amplified the unpleasant feeling that nagged her.

At least she was breathing better, she told herself. She also felt a little freer now that she had use of her mouth. She would not risk, however, getting that tape stuck on her again by screaming out before she knew a little more about what was going on and, more importantly, where she was. She also wanted to make sure that someone could hear her if she dared to scream. Jane had to get this woman to talk, just enough to let something slip. She needed a clue.

The woman knocked at the door, which was partially open, and walked in. Jane activated all her senses, except, of course, her sight. She didn't smell any perfume, nor did she recognize the voice other than its being that of the person who had called to meet her. She remembered that the woman had said she knew her. Had she lied? Maybe she had already seen Jane in a picture, which is why she had recognized her on the street.

"I hope you took the pills," said the stranger. "Tomorrow, we'll have a lot to talk about and I'm depending on your being able to."

"I didn't take them. I didn't have any water," replied Jane.

The stranger went to get her some water. Jane put the pills in her mouth, and the woman gave her a sip of water, and then another, at Jane's request.

"Sit down on the floor for a second. We'll try to make you more comfortable."

Jane sat down and backed up by sliding her buttocks along the floor until the woman told her to stop.

"I will place a rope around your neck and attach you to the bar while I untie your hands and tie them back up in front of you," she said. "You'll be much more comfortable, and you'll sleep better this way."

Jane took advantage of the moment to say thank you and to ask the stranger her name.

"You can call me Valentine."

“Valentine! That’s not your name!”

“You’re right; it isn’t. Let’s just say that it’s the name of the woman in love inside me, more in love than I’ve ever been.”

“If you’re as in love as you say, why are you wasting your time with me?”

“Because the man I’m in love with doesn’t love me back, at the moment.”

“I don’t understand. What do I have to do with it?”

“He can’t love me because he loves you, like I have never seen a man love a woman. I want him to learn to love me as much as he loves you.”

“Simon! You used him as bait! How do you know him?”

“Let’s say that, in a matter of speaking, he confided in me.”

“Simon is not the type of person to confide in people about his personal life.”

“It’s not all that rare to think that you know someone without knowing them at all. It’s rather common, actually.”

The stranger finished tying Jane’s hands. She then removed the rope from around her neck, passed it through the rope that held her feet, and tied it to the bed. Before putting the tape back on her mouth, she asked Jane if she needed anything else.

“Yes. Keeping me here won’t do anything,” said Jane, buying time. “Let me go now before it’s too late. I won’t say a word. If you keep me here, you’ll be charged with kidnapping, and you’ll go to prison. It won’t get you Simon.”

“What I have to do or not do is my business. Just worry about doing what I tell you to do.”

Then, the stranger stuck more tape over Jane’s mouth and said: “Sleep well. I’ll be back later.”

The stranger didn’t want to tell Jane that she would only be back in the morning before going to work.

It took Jane a long time to fall asleep that night. She thought about the last few years. She had believed in Simon, and still did. Had she gone too far? Somewhere inside her, she expected him to stay by her side no matter what she did. She thought back to all their arguments. She would often add fuel to the fire. She remembered one night during the first months of their living together, when they had gone away for the weekend and had stopped in on a friend of hers. While they were talking, her friend’s husband mentioned that he saw someone who looked very much like her in the newspaper. “She was very pretty, just like you,” he had said. The young woman in question, who was an athlete, had posed wearing only a very sexy bathing suit bottom in order to raise funds for young people training for the Olympics.

That same afternoon, while walking arm in arm on the sidewalk in a city where they had decided to

stop for supper, Jane and Simon went over the discussion. Simon had purposely not participated in the conversation earlier that day, and Jane asked him if he had seen the picture that, according to Simon, had only served as an opportunity for Jane's friend's husband to imply that he found her attractive. "You can smell these things from a mile away," he had said.

Simon had seen the picture, not because he had the habit of reading the newspaper, but because a colleague at work had shown it to him. He had asked Jane what she thought about these types of fundraising activities. She had said that she agreed. Then he had asked her, "And if it were your children?" And she had answered, "I would respect them, and if it were for a good cause, I'd support them." She had felt Simon close himself off. Her answer had disturbed him. She knew, but she had gone ahead and asked him anyway.

"Does my answer bother you?" she asked.

"Yes, I guess it does," he answered. "There's a part of you that surprises me sometimes, that doesn't seem to fit with you, or at least my idea of you."

"And what do you think?"

"I think that young people deserve better than that. I believe that by approving of this type of behavior, we aren't teaching them respect or pride. It's just too easy. I mean, for a young woman to display herself practically naked for such a thing...don't you think that a young person who earns what he gets feels a greater sense of pride? We can always do worse than others in life, but it's just too

easy for me, too immoral. I prefer to aim for the best for our youth, and the best of who we are, as well. Sure, we can sometimes end up feeling more alone because the tendency these days is to take the easy way, but don't you remember the moments in your life when you got something by working hard and you knew that you had really earned it? These are the moments we remember for life. That's what I want for my kids, for us."

She knew that Simon was right and, knowing him as she did, today she knew that he hadn't spoken with such conviction to be right, but because it was who he was. His wisdom had bothered her sometimes. She felt a little judged by it, but she knew it wasn't what he had wanted her to feel. She knew that he loved her as he had never loved anyone else. In fact, she was sure of it.

Tuesday, Noon

Inspector Gauthier went ahead with his usual routine. He inspected the house, looking for clues. In his notebook, he noted that there was no sign of forced entry and nothing to indicate violence. He had checked the last numbers still in memory on the telephone, but Jane's parents had used the phone so he couldn't know which one was the last one Jane had dialed. He had to find out, so he wrote them in his notebook.

He knew that she had left either with someone else by car, or by foot. This last possibility could not be ignored, since her parents had confirmed that she was wearing her walking boots and the coat she wore for walking or outdoor activities. But if she had gone out for a walk, why hadn't she returned? Based on the information he had gathered, he was able to deduce that she had been gone since Sunday night.

Jane hadn't mentioned anything about her absence at school, either. On Friday, she had even told the secretary that she would see her on Monday.

He had planned to question all the neighbors before the end of the day. For the moment, he had to review the facts with her parents. What did they know about her private life? Did she have a husband or a lover? Who were her friends? What did she do in her

spare time? What was her routine? He had to know as much as possible. He had to have a clue. Sometimes the answer was hidden in plain sight.

“Did you see her this past weekend?” the inspector asked Jane’s parents.

“No. We haven’t seen her very often in the last few months. She hasn’t come by for a week, at least.”

“And she didn’t call you?”

“No.”

“I don’t want to keep you much longer, but before you leave, I’d like you to look around the house once again to make sure that nothing seems out of place or unusual. Even if you think it’s nothing important; it could be something that is not hers and was forgotten here.”

He then left them his card and suggested that they get some rest. It wouldn’t be easy, but it was the best thing for them to do at the moment. He would surely have to meet with them again.

“You can call me at any hour, day or night, if something comes to mind,” said the inspector. “In the meantime, even though you have a key, I’d like you to let me know if you need to stop in here.”

He took down their address and telephone number in his notebook and let them leave.

The stranger went to see Jane regularly. They spoke a little each time, but their conversations were limited to Jane's hygienic and nutritional needs. Then, that morning, Jane asked the question, "How can keeping me here help you get closer to Simon?"

"I want to use this as an excuse," the stranger answered. "Once this step is complete and I've shown the compassion I have for him...Well, you know the saying, 'Out of sight, out of mind.' I'm a very seductive woman who is ready to do anything for him. I know that it will be difficult since he lives only for you and the children. When he finds out that you're missing, he'll be in shock. That's when I'll make my move."

"And if it doesn't work?"

"It has to work. Simon is the only thing that matters to me now; he is my life. He's a unique man and I want him to love me as much as he loves you, and need me as much as he needs you."

"How did you meet him?"

"I already told you. He confided in me."

"He confided in you without knowing you?"

"Let's just say that things sometimes have a way of working themselves out."

Jane knew that she was on to something, but she had to follow it through carefully. This time she had smelled the stranger's perfume. The woman was well spoken and intelligent. She seemed to be, and probably was, brilliant, which made Jane think she might be a little psychologically imbalanced. You don't kidnap someone for the sole purpose of getting someone else's attention, even in the name of love. If she could at least see her face, her expressions, hear what she didn't say. She must have been disguised when she laid her trap on Sunday. Jane decided to test the waters a little.

"If it doesn't work, how far are you willing to go?" asked Jane. "You know that each hour that goes by tightens the noose around your neck. This is a small city, and as soon as people realize I'm missing, they'll start looking for me."

"What makes you think that we're still in the same city?" replied the stranger. "You slept a lot on Sunday, you know. For the moment, how far I go depends on you. If you should try to escape or to uncover my face, I won't hesitate for a second. As for the rest, don't worry about it. I don't expect Simon to fall in love with me that quickly. I just want him to learn to trust me as a friend. You betrayed him. You were everything to this man and I don't think you ever really grasped that. He did things for you that went against his very grain. He has never done that for anyone else, and probably never will again. He's mortified by it all, and feels anger toward you with every ounce of his being. He will now be more careful

than ever. For the moment, getting involved with someone else is out of the question. I have to go now. Tomorrow I'll bring you some clean clothes and you can wash yourself. In the meantime, get some sleep.

Wednesday Morning

Inspector Gauthier had learned many things about his investigation. He had found out from her neighbors that Jane rarely received visitors when she didn't have her children. The only person who came by regularly, about two or three times a week, was her friend Maurice, whom they either didn't know or seemed not to want to know. That Sunday, her closest neighbors had been away so no one had seen anything. The inspector had questioned Maurice and had added him to his list of suspects. Something just wasn't right with this guy, and his alibi didn't seem credible. There was nothing to prove that he hadn't stopped by Jane's for whatever reason and lured her away. Even though Maurice had tried to convince the inspector that they were just friends, the inspector was sure that Maurice had something else in mind. Some things were just obvious. Maybe this could put him on the scent. Before getting involved with Simon, the inspector knew that Jane used to see Maurice about as often as she did now. But during her relationship with Simon, she had cast Maurice aside. When Maurice spoke, you could hear both the love and the hate in his voice. That would be enough of a motive. The inspector knew that this man wasn't telling him everything and he had to check some things out.

He thought the investigation was making good progress. He was meeting Simon at noon. He and Jane had lived together until about eight months ago. Their relationship, which had seemed so perfect, had ended badly, according to some information he had gathered. Jane hadn't spoken to Simon since their separation. She had even filed a complaint against him a few weeks ago for intimidation and harassment. It had been an official criminal complaint. Based on what he had read in the reports, Inspector Gauthier thought that the investigator of the case had demonstrated a lack of judgment, but he was looking forward to speaking to Simon. He was sure he would learn something interesting from him. Afterwards, he would pay a visit to the investigator of the complaint.

“Hi, Simon,’ said Martha. “I went through last week’s file. Josie put the finishing touches to it on Friday. She mentioned that it was quite a good piece of work, and, I have to tell you, she’s right. It was excellent.”

“Thanks, Martha. I did it the way it was supposed to be done. I worked on it for at least two months, whenever I had the chance. I’m proud of the end result and happy to have finished it.”

“I heard that they’ve asked you to join the committee for the new changes they want to implement in the office.”

“Yeah, it’s true. Alan suggested it. I haven’t said no. With things the way they are now, it would keep me busy, and I definitely need that these days.”

“As if you’re not busy enough already. I can’t figure out how you do as much as you do in a day! Be careful; don’t neglect your health and your kids. Tell me, how’s it going other than work?” asked Martha, hoping not to sound nosy.

“Under the circumstances.... Was there something else you wanted to ask me?”

“I see. I guess it hasn’t been Paradise Island.”

“As I’ve told both you and Richard in the past, my family is my energy. Jane hasn’t been part of that

for many months, but that doesn't mean that she isn't always in my heart. I just can't get over this. My children and her are my rocks. I'm nothing without them. Right now, I feel like only a half of something. By the way," Simon continued, "I'm sorry about your friend. I'm just not ready to meet someone new. In fact, I might never be ready. I can't stop thinking about Jane. I miss her so much; I just can't take it anymore. All these memories keep coming back to me."

"I understand. I'll let her know," replied Martha.

"I have to go," said Simon. "I have a meeting in ten minutes, and I have to pick up my file from my office first. We'll talk later. Have a good day."

During the time it took him to get to the meeting, Simon thought back to the previous night. For the first time since his and Jane's separation, he had gone to see a movie on a weeknight, just as they used to do when they were together. It hadn't been easy. He had almost changed his mind, yet again, on his way to the theatre, but this time he had forced himself to stick to his plan. He had looked for her hand throughout the entire movie; he even half-expected to hear her offer him a coffee as she had every time they had gone to the movies. They would always buy a large coffee, which they prepared sometimes to her taste, and sometimes to his, and would share it. He thought of how much those moments had meant to him. There was a complete complicity, a unity. It was both very intimate and very

intense. He felt as if he had belonged completely to her, and this simple habit they had formed together was engraved in his memory along with the others that belonged to their time together. He remembered all the details; he felt them just as much. It would be like this until the end.

Simon had to meet Inspector Gauthier at noon, but decided to leave work twenty minutes earlier to bring a book back to the library and see if he could find another one interesting enough to keep him occupied for the next couple of days. If he couldn't find anything, he would read one of the books he already had at home. It didn't matter if he had already read it or not. A suspense novel, a biography, or even one of the psychology books about success and failure he hadn't finished would be fine.

He was reading the preface of an old Agatha Christie book when he heard:

"Hi Simon. How are you?"

He knew that voice. Turning around, he recognized to whom it belonged.

"Oh. Hi, Anita. How are you?"

"It's good to see you. It's been a while. Are you off today?"

"No. I have an appointment at noon. I just stopped here to return a book and pick up another. And you?"

"Same thing. I didn't have any clients this morning, and I like hanging out here every once in a while."

“I got your Christmas card. I’m sorry, I haven’t had a chance to respond to it.”

“That alright. I understand, you don’t need to explain. So how are you doing? Are you sleeping better, at least?”

“I’m starting to sleep a little better, thanks. It’s going fine; it’s better than it was. Sorry, Anita, I have to go or else I’ll be late.”

“Right. I remember very well that at one of our sessions you said you hated being late. I’m really glad to have seen you again. Take care, and if there’s anything I can do for you, don’t hesitate to call me. You know how to reach me.”

“Thanks. Have a good day.”

On his way back home, he thought back to what Anita had said and reflected that she couldn’t help him since she couldn’t give him what he needed. It was still nice of her to have offered, but then he thought back to their last session together and the unpleasant feeling it had left him with. He had lost what little trust she had earned during their first few sessions together. He had felt, although he could have been wrong, a certain jealousy toward Jane. He had thought it wasn’t really appropriate and wondered how she could be jealous of a woman she didn’t even know, a woman whom she had only heard about from a man she didn’t know either. But why? Whatever the case, he hadn’t gone back to see her. Her reaction had disturbed him, and he had asked himself whether she was really the one who could help him.

“Inspector Gauthier?” asked Simon, opening the door.

“Yes. Mr. Griffin?”

“Hi. I appreciate that you’re here on time. It’s a rare quality.”

“I agree with you,” said the inspector.

“Come in. We’ll be more comfortable inside.”

“Thanks.”

“Mr. Griffin,” began the Inspector once he was sitting down. “I’m sorry to have to inform you this way, but the reason for my visit is that Ms. Lamer has disappeared.”

“Disappeared! What exactly do you mean by disappeared?” asked Simon, on the edge of his seat.

“No one has heard from her since Sunday night. I would like to know if you know something that might help us in this investigation.”

“I knew that there was something strange going on,” Simon began, “but I had no idea that Jane has disappeared. I’m afraid I won’t be much help to you. My feelings for her might cloud my thinking.”

“If I understand correctly,” said the inspector, “you and Jane don’t speak to each other anymore.”

“That’s right. But let me just specify that it’s Jane who doesn’t want to speak to me anymore,” answered Simon.

“Why did your relationship end this way?”

“I think Jane would be the best person to answer that question. I can only tell you what I’ve figured out.”

“I won’t lie to you by saying that I don’t already have one version of the events,” responded the inspector, “but I want to hear your side. I need to get a better idea...to see the picture before I start putting together the pieces of the puzzle. Unfortunately, in my line of work, I rarely have this luxury.”

“Jane and I are...were a beautiful but tragic love story, a story of betrayal.”

“Which one of you ended it?”

“I made the decision to leave, but she ended the relationship.”

“Can you explain it to me in more detail? I want to make sure I understand.”

Simon took a deep breath. “The last thing I wanted to do was leave. It took me a long time to finally go ahead and do it. I always hoped that she’d realize what was happening to us. No, actually, what I hoped was that she would wake up and finally face reality. It was just getting worse, and I loved her so much. The last time I had to make such a serious decision was over twenty years ago when I wanted to commit suicide. It wasn’t something I wanted to do

back then either, but I didn't think I had any other choice."

Simon continued, "I asked Jane to be fair to herself, our children, and me. Our entire life together was based on her friends, her family, and...her son, who would continually lie to her and call her all kinds of names. This boy had a terrible attitude toward her, and it hurt me to listen to him talk to her; it hurt all of us. She said she preferred it this way instead of arguing with him. She was great when he wasn't around. Don't think that I hold it against him, it's with her that I'm angry, and maybe a little with myself."

"You see Inspector," Simon explained, "Jane and I had agreed on house rules, but when her son would break them, she'd tell me I was too strict and inflexible. Her son had become untouchable. In the beginning, she didn't want me to get involved in her relationship with him. Later on, she wanted me to do everything except give my opinion about the boy. She'd get angry with me in front of all the children. It's not that I wanted things my way; I just wanted us to find our way; the way we decided on together. Even when Jane's son didn't follow the rules, I was always sure she'd take his side, regardless of the situation. Jane even told me once that if I wasn't happy, I knew what to do. There would be no contest between her son and I. The worst part of it all was that we would argue about these things when the children were at the house. She'd speak loudly on purpose so that the children would understand what was being said.

During our last months together, I'd move to the living room so that they couldn't hear us arguing."

"The truth is," said Simon lost in his thoughts, "I never believed that Jane could behave that way; I had faith in her commitment to me, and felt betrayed by her apparent lack of it. In retrospect, I understand many things now. I know that Jane loved me, but I'm not all that sure she was committed to me. All I wanted was that all the members of our family be treated fairly and with respect. Did it really make a difference if my children ate brown bread, and hers ate white? I think that, if children know what to expect, anything is possible. There are things that are negotiable, points on which people can compromise, but respect is not one of them. It is the basis of all healthy and harmonious relationships."

Simon kept going, tired of still harping on the past, but having no other choice. "Things continued to get worse until, one day, when I finally told Jane that I was leaving. She agreed. She probably had had enough as well. That same afternoon, Jane gave me the address of an apartment she had seen for rent. Our last weeks together were horrible. I couldn't believe she preferred my leaving to what we could have been together, the two of us...a family. I literally panicked. A few days before I left, I overheard a phone call during which Jane's son was discussing our relationship with a friend. Aghast, I told Jane how poorly raised her son was. I just couldn't believe that Jane would allow her son to discuss such things without saying a word. Jane, of course, defended her

son and, in front of the children, expressed her delight in my leaving, adding that it was the best thing I could do. I was mortified; I slammed the door on my way out.

“I’m really sorry to have to ask you to bring up such painful memories,” said Inspector Gauthier, after listening intently to all that Simon had confided.

“This is the second time I’ve spoken about it,” said Simon. “I went to see a psychologist, thinking that it would be good for me to get all my frustration off my chest, but it hasn’t really helped. It still hurts as badly now as it did at the beginning. We were so happy together. All I wanted was to make her happy – her and our children.”

“But didn’t Jane file a complaint against you afterwards?” asked Inspector Gauthier trying to get to the bottom of the question that was nagging him.

“Yes,” Simon replied. “Harassment and intimidation. The day the police called, I don’t think I really understood what they were saying, although I heard every word. The inspector who had called me had the audacity to add that I shouldn’t try to go any further, that statistics prove that Jane is not the one who will have the problems afterwards, but me. I was told to leave Jane alone. I remember that it was a Friday, and my children had just got home from school and were waiting to talk to me. I didn’t want to discuss it in front of them; I didn’t want them to hear what was being said over the phone so I hung up. I felt

like I was stuck in a movie, and I was turning out to be the bad guy.”

“Harassment and intimidation. Those are pretty serious accusations. What does she have against you, and what have you done to deserve it?”

“I called her,” said Simon matter-of-factly. “Or more precisely, I left a couple of messages on her voice mail. I wanted to know how she was doing and hear her news. I had also warned her about some of her friends. I wrote her a letter about her son. What I did is not even remotely close to being harassment, and even further from being intimidation. I wasn’t exactly a stranger. Everything was traceable; I don’t see why the investigator didn’t check things out before accepting the complaint...Anyway, after the complaint, I stopped contacting her for a couple of weeks but, one Sunday, my son wanted to stop by her house. I had accepted to drive some boy scouts around the area to sell some calendars to raise funds and we were right next to Jane’s house. I didn’t want to tell my son what she had done, but I asked him to call her first so as not to show up unannounced. My son had called right before supper, and she had told him not to call from his father’s house anymore; she said she would call him back when he would be at his mother’s instead. My son Matthew didn’t talk to me about it right away, but I could see something was bothering him. Finally, at supper, I asked him what was wrong, and he told me he didn’t want Jane to call him at his mother’s house either. If Jane didn’t want him to call from my house, then he didn’t want her to call him

anymore at all. I knew how close my kids were to her. They trusted me enough to accept and love Jane almost without question, except maybe my eldest, who had some reservations at the beginning. That same night, I left Jane a message explaining that, given the situation between us, my children would no longer call her despite their feelings for her, and I asked her not to call them at their mother's house. A couple of days later, there was a message waiting for me when I got home from work from the mother of my children telling me Jane had left some of my things on her porch. That same night, I left another message asking Jane not to do it again, and to leave my things at my door after I had left for work, or simply to throw them away. I was under the impression that Jane was trying to get to me. A few more weeks went by, and she wouldn't even look at me whenever we bumped into each other. She acted as if I were a complete stranger. Then, one Friday night, I couldn't take it anymore so I rented a movie I had already seen six times...a love story. The next morning, I went into the office, even if it was a Saturday, to get ahead in one of my projects and keep myself busy. I didn't have my kids that weekend, but by lunchtime, when I left, I couldn't help myself. I just couldn't accept that our love story had ended the way it did, so...I sent her flowers. I needed to, and it made me feel better. It made me feel as if I had done all I could, and I was at peace with myself. The next Monday, Jane came to my house with the flowers I had sent her in a bag. I left them on the ground because I didn't want to take them back. I told her that if she hadn't wanted them, she could have just thrown them

out at her house, and I asked her why she had bothered to come all the way to my house to do what she could have done at home. She called me a liar and told me to leave her children, her family, and her friends alone. She told me I invented stories about them. I answered that she knew who I was, who her family was, and who her friends were. I told her that the least she could do was stop lying to herself for her own good, and I asked her if the life she had chosen was really the one she wanted, if it was really who she was. She answered that it was possible her friends weren't always very good to her, but she had known them for years and she wouldn't just abandon them at the drop of a hat. I told her that although that might be her view on life, she shouldn't call me a liar in order to justify herself, then I closed the door. We haven't spoken to each other since. I wrote her one last letter asking her to forgive me for not being all I could for her. Two days later, the investigator called me about the complaint she had filed against me. He had called me at work and asked if I could meet him, which I did that same evening. This time it was the real thing. It was an official criminal accusation of harassment. It was one week before Christmas. Can you imagine the kind of holidays I had? I was accused for having sent flowers, for having written her the letter I just told you about, for having left some messages on her voicemail, and for having left a tape recording of my voice on her steps. I expressed my doubts to the investigator and asked him if he had read the letter or listened to the tape, which could only be the messages I had left on her voicemail. He refused to let me listen to the tape

and said that he was aware of all the evidence against me. I then asked him why the accusation held up, since he should be able to determine, based on the facts, that there was no malicious intent, and I was sure I didn't deserve to be treated like a criminal."

"And," asked Inspector Gauthier, wanting to hear more.

"And...he answered that I had already been warned to leave her alone but had nevertheless continued to have contact with her. He gave me some conditions to abide by, as if I were some common criminal, and had me sign some documents that obliged me to show up at his office and in court on two different, pre-established dates."

"Did you keep the letters or the other documents? If so, I would like to borrow them," said Inspector Gauthier.

"Yes," answered Simon, "I kept them in an envelope just in case. I'll gladly lend them to you. You know, my psychologist, Marie Gartner, warned me to be wary of Jane. She said that, based on my description of her behavior, Jane wouldn't want to lose and, if she were backed up against a wall, she might do something drastic to prove to everyone that she was right, because she needs to be right, no matter what. From Jane's perspective, according to Dr. Gartner, the two of us couldn't both possibly be good people; there had to be a bad guy in order to explain our separation. Jane's feelings are such that she has to seek and find approval in order to fill the endless void in her. That

probably explains her many social relationships, some of which are dubious, her social expectations, and the ties between her and her family. I have to admit that I never thought she would go so far. She was ready to destroy me, and whether it was a conscious effort or not, she did it anyway because of how desperate she was, and I almost paid the consequences for it. As an officer of the law, you know that, had the case not been refused by the prosecutor and instead been brought before a judge, I would have ended up with a criminal record. The love of my life wanted to destroy my life. Perhaps one day I'll be able to forgive her but, for the moment, I'm only at the point where I'm wondering whether what she did requires forgiveness; I fear that she is not even aware of the consequences of her actions."

"I understand your confusion," said Inspector Gauthier. "There is always something to be learned from the different situations we sometimes find ourselves in, but when the people we love hurt us or betray us...I sometimes wonder whether God's master plan can also distance us from people we love in order to bring us closer to others who are better suited to us."

"Despite my beliefs," Simon answered, "which I believe to be noble or, at least, honorable, I just don't know what to think at the moment."

"May I call you Simon?"

"Of course."

"Simon, when was the last time you saw Jane?"

“Sunday afternoon. I didn’t have my children last weekend and it’s worse when I’m alone because I miss her even more. I wasn’t feeling very well on Sunday; in fact, I was pretty depressed and was having dark thoughts. I left around lunchtime and went to eat. I convinced myself to go see a movie because I had to clear my head. When I got to the theater, I saw them...Jane, her friend Maurice, and their respective children. My heart was in my throat. You can only imagine what this woman does to me when I see her; it’s been that way since the first time our eyes met. It’s what makes all of this so difficult. I know I love her, I know that it’s really love, but what hurts is that I sometimes realize that I’ll never get back together with her. Anyway, that’s the last time I saw her.”

“What do you know about this Maurice?”

“He’s warped, a little off his rocker, and... completely in love with Jane! During the two years Jane and I were together, she made sure I never met him.”

“Don’t you think it’s a little strange that Jane didn’t want you to meet Maurice?”

“Do you really want an answer to that question? The man is supposed to be her best friend, and yet I never had a chance to talk to him! I happened to run into him four or five times when Jane and I were together, always while grocery shopping. He always turned the other way or changed sections altogether. I never really understood why, except that he was in love with Jane and she didn’t feel the same way. He

once left a message at my office after I had invited him to a surprise party for Jane. He said that he refused to be second in line for Jane, and without even knowing me, told me I was two-faced.”

“If we start with the premise that Jane was kidnapped, do you know anyone who would have a reason to take her? It could be out of vengeance, jealousy, ransom...”

“I can’t think of anybody.”

“Do you think Jane is capable of orchestrating her own kidnapping, perhaps to get attention or for some other reason?”

“What kind of other reason?”

“Perhaps so that you would appear guilty of kidnapping.”

“I don’t know what you’re thinking, but I really don’t see what she would gain from orchestrating her own kidnapping.”

“Dr. Gartner, your psychologist, mentioned that something might push Jane into doing something drastic to justify her behavior. We should perhaps ask her if she believes Jane to be capable of reaching this point. Do you have an alibi for Sunday night?”

“Not really. I went out for a coffee around six o’clock, and then I came home to watch a movie. I was alone, but I don’t think she would go that far. It’s just a gut feeling...”

“I have to foresee all the possibilities. You know, I think, over the years, I’ve seen just about everything. Some people will do just about anything to get what they want. I don’t know Jane, but she was ready to give you a criminal record. Had she succeeded, she would have proved to everyone that you were the bad guy. It didn’t end up working out her way, and her pride must have taken a hit. If Dr. Gartner’s theory is right, and I would like to believe it is, then Jane is angry with you because she lost some of her credibility, and I would hazard a guess that she holds you responsible for what is happening to her.”

“It’s possible, but I don’t want to believe it...not from Jane. I’m just not ready for that.”

“What about the things she accused you of?”

“I sent her flowers and left her some messages on her voicemail that were clearly without malicious intent. In contrast to what the police officer claimed Jane had told him, I hadn’t left a tape on her doorstep, nor had I written the letter they referred to. However, I do assume full responsibility for both the tape and the letter, seeing as I had recorded the tape with someone I know and I admit that I initially wanted to give it to her so that she would understand how much she had hurt me. But after I finished making it, I didn’t want to give it to her anymore. I guess I just needed to get it off my chest, so to speak. I left the tape in the tape player and gave it no more thought. After I heard the accusations, I thought that maybe the person I had recorded it with might have told her about it. I found it strange that this tape was brought up that I went to

make sure the tape was still in the recorder. It's only very recently that I finally understood what had happened. At one point, my children had wanted to use the tape recorder and I realized that the tape had been replaced by a blank one. With regards to the letter, I know who wrote it. I never said anything because I believed it to be of no importance, aside from the fact that it was meant to protect her son. I recently left Jane a note explaining that I wanted to let her in on certain things about it, but I think she was afraid to know what my motives were and therefore decided not to follow up on it."

"How could you conceal this information in spite of the risk of your ending up with a criminal record?" Inspector Gauthier asked, aghast.

"Because I wouldn't have said anything, except to her. I was protecting her son. I was trying to make up for not having met his expectations when Jane and I lived together," Simon explained.

"And concerning Maurice, why do you say that he's sick?"

"Because of all the anonymous calls he made to my house for all those months, and for the ones he made from her house, which are not even worth repeating."

"Can you give me an example?"

"One night he called me from her house telling me she had left him alone while she had gone to pick up her daughter at a friend's house. He told me he liked being left alone at her house so that he could

caress her bed sheets and her clothes. He told me he had her panties in his hands and would gently rub them on his face and other parts of his body that I need not mention. He said that it drove him crazy and really turned him on. He told me that when she arrived, he would do what he always does, that is, lock himself in the bathroom on the first floor and take her panties from the hamper of dirty clothes and smell them and taste them, something he alone had the right to do. He started insinuating that he and Jane had...well, you know... I'd prefer not to talk about it."

"And you never said anything about this to Jane?"

"No. With all this accusation business against me, and the fact that I couldn't understand how Jane could fraternize with such a sicko without realizing how crazy he was, I figured it was better to just keep quiet. Besides, she has been friendly with this guy for almost ten years. If he had wanted to hurt her, he would have already done so."

"Simon, I have a meeting in fifteen minutes. I appreciate your collaboration. Here's my card. If you have any news from or about Jane, please call me immediately. Once again, I apologize for bringing up all these painful memories. I understand your confusion, but I'm sure that all of this will help me gain some insight."

"Well in any case, it's your job, and you seem to do it very well. I'm sure you'll figure it out, and I

sincerely hope you find her soon. And, if you don't mind, I'd like to know how she is when you find her."

"Rest assured that I'll keep you posted. I'll be in touch with you soon. Maybe even later today. I'd like to continue our discussion about this so-called Maurice."

Simon had a good feeling about this man. He was in his mid-fifties, with a complexion and body that insinuated good nutrition and relative fitness, which, for Simon, were both very good things because they required a certain discipline that was probably present in his work as well. His tone of voice and the calmness he displayed were also very reassuring.

Simon's impression was reciprocated. The two men understood each other and a certain trust had already developed between them.

Simon spent the afternoon working on a new project. He had stopped for a break twice to make an herbal tea and take advantage of the moment to stretch a little. This was a new habit he had developed since he and Jane had separated. He had his two or three coffees in the morning, and would drink only tisanes for the remainder of the day in the hopes of enjoying more restful nights.

He had been sleeping better in the last couple of weeks. One night out of three, he was able to sleep almost an entire night, except for the times his many dreams haunted his subconscious. Simon now went to bed early and convinced himself that in a couple of months he would be less tired. The intense cold from the last weeks, amplified by the strong winds and the constant humidity caused by the city's proximity to the river was coming to an end and spring would soon be here. Simon hoped he would soon be able to say the same for him. He tried to focus what was left of his energy on his children and his work. His only hobbies were speed walking, which he did six to seven times a week, and writing, which helped him free his spirit. He would sometimes sit down and write for an hour or two and let his emotions run free. Reading and music usually helped him get through his evenings. Although he would occasionally call them, he hardly saw his friends anymore.

That afternoon, despite his being worried about Jane, he managed to get ahead in his work, more so than he would have expected. Simon knew that if he was able to concentrate this well on his work, it was because he still couldn't believe what was happening. At the very least, he hadn't yet fully grasped the gravity of the situation: First the separation, now the disappearance. It was as if Jane had been taken from him twice. He didn't watch boxing, but he compared his situation to a boxer who's knocked out once and, just as he starts waking up to realize what's happening, gets knocked out again. He wondered if he should let the referee count to ten this time, or to get up and keep on fighting. However, unlike the boxer, who fights for a title, Simon wondered what he was fighting for. What had become of Jane? What had happened to this woman who had given him so much hope? What had happened to everything he had seen in her eyes, all of her laughter and smiles, and all of the times she had written and told him out loud that he was hers forever?

I am so lost, Jane. Please, give me a sign, I'm begging you. Tell me who you are. Could I have been so wrong about you?

The inspector went back to Jane's house, hoping to find something that would help him in his investigation. After a half-hour, he sat down near the dining room table. He took out his Thermos of coffee and poured himself a cup. He took out Jane's kidnapping file from his briefcase. It consisted of a couple of documents he had found here and there and two envelopes. In one envelope was the tape and the documents he had picked up at the municipal police station that afternoon. It was evidence that was supposed to be used against Simon Griffin in the harassment case. In the other envelope were the documents Simon had given him that afternoon. Intuition told him to open the second envelope first. There were the letters Simon had briefly spoken to him about, and two other photocopied documents that the investigator had had Simon sign. One document was a promise to appear in court, and the other was a list of conditions to abide by until the hearing.

Something seemed out of place to Inspector Gauthier. It had all been handled too fast but, out of commitment to his work, he wanted to be cautious and not be too quick to judge. The idea, however, had already formed in his mind. He had had a good feeling about Simon at their meeting earlier that afternoon, but he needed to know more.

Just as he was putting the documents back in the envelope, he noticed the letter at the bottom of the pile. It was a two-page photocopy of a handwritten letter. He began to read:

For not always being at the height of your expectations,

...for not having been able to penetrate the walls surrounding you and enter into your secret life by earning your trust,

...for not having known how to vanquish the rage and bitterness hidden in your heart,

...for my silences...for not having given you enough words to show you the way to that part of my heart still wounded from the past because I was naïve enough to believe you would be able to guess the way there,

...for all the times I lost my patience or my temper and told you things that were below who we were,

...for the times I forgot to tell you I loved you,

...for the times I didn't take you in my arms, even when you needed it, and sometimes even when I needed it,

...for the times I wasn't as close to your son as you would have wished,

...for the times I was so lost in my own pain that I didn't know how to listen to yours,

...for the anger and bitterness that have been plaguing my heart for these past months,

...for having gotten to the point of wanting to see you suffer as much as I have suffered,

*...for not having made the gestures that would have
proved my love for you no matter what,
...for having lacked judgment and overstepped my own
values and used them as a pretext to tell you that your
behavior towards myself and our children was unjust,
...for the times I was weak when you needed me to be
strong,
...for having let the moments we disagreed come
before the beauty of our love,
...for having cut my nails near the bed even though I
knew how much it bothered you,
...for the bathtub that was sometimes badly rinsed,
...for my clothes on the chair,
...for my way of sometimes saying things that made
you feel judged,
...for the times I hurt you in one way or another,
...for not always having protected you the way you
might have expected at the moments you might have
wanted,
...for not having told you often enough how much I
enjoyed living with you,
...for not having been able to always accept you the
way you were, and the way you wanted to be,
...for the times I didn't honor our symbolic gesture of
love by not taking your hand in mine before falling
asleep,*

*...for not having brought you all that Klimt's painting represented to you,
...for all this, for all that I didn't know how to be for you, and for many other things like loving you still,
...I am sincerely sorry, and I ask that you forgive me.*

Simon.

The inspector was awe-struck and pensive for many minutes. Moved by these confessions from a man drowning in his pain, wounded to his very soul and written with such humility and sobriety. There was no doubt in his mind that Simon was a good person. This whole story had to lead to something, if only he could find a clue. Inspector Gauthier had to believe who Simon was in his soul; it would lead him to the answer. He had to hang on to the good in people and not the bad.

For the next couple of minutes, Inspector Gauthier was deep in prayer, thanking God for his life, a wonderful and exceptional wife, a job he loved, and a state of health he was proud of.

Simon finally finished his work at 4:30. Unlike the long hours he had spent at the office recently, today he would finish early. He had been at the office since 6:45 a.m., so it hadn't exactly been a short day either. He turned off his computer, left his instructions, took his things, and shut the door behind him. He had an apple left from the afternoon. He carefully wiped it and took a bite. At the end of the corridor, he said goodbye to Maryse, his department's secretary, as he passed by her desk and told her that he was leaving for the day.

He hurried home to change into his exercise clothes and running shoes. After his walk, he would take a hot shower, stop for some fast food, and catch a movie.

Concentrating on not thinking about the events of the last months, or at least thinking less about them, would perhaps allow him to clear his mind a little.

He walked a little more quickly that night and felt the fresh air penetrate his lungs, replacing the air he had breathed in all day at the office. He suddenly had more energy, at least physically speaking. But a certain nagging feeling of worry invaded his senses a little more intensely now. He thought back to what the inspector had told him that afternoon. Could Jane have really orchestrated her own kidnapping?

He stopped himself. He couldn't think about that for the next couple of hours; he had to let his subconscious do the work for him.

The hot shower he had been waiting for did him good. While shaving, he thought about staying home, but he didn't want to give into the idea. Instead, he put on some music to help get him into the right mood. He chose "Higher," the last CD he had bought, and placed it in his sound system, raising the volume so as not to think of anything else. Fifteen minutes later, he was ready, dressed in blue jeans, a black shirt, and a black wool sweater.

He lowered the volume and called his children. He then took his keys and the CD and left for the restaurant, where he ordered a draft beer and a hamburger, well done. While he waited, he quickly went through the newspaper, and had started writing in a notebook he always carried with him. Once again, he heard Anita's voice say, "Hi, Simon. It's good to see you out at a restaurant. It's good for your spirits."

"Hi, Anita. Do you really think so?"

"Of course. Are you alone? Do you mind if I sit with you, or..."

Simon hesitated for a moment. He really didn't feel up to it, but it would certainly give them an opportunity to discuss their last session together.

"Sure. Have a seat."

The waitress came with his plate just as Anita sat down.

“Thanks,” she said. “That’s very nice of you. Don’t wait for me to start eating. I’ll just have an appetizer; I had a big lunch.”

“Are you off tonight, or are you just in-between clients?”

“I’m off tonight. It cuts my week in two and allows me to go to bed early so that I can regain my...mental energy; to think about my own problems instead of those of others.”

“Your problems?”

“It’s nothing serious. My biggest problem is being alone, having no loved one to talk to and listen to. I’d like to have someone who would take me in his arms and hold me tight when I need to be held tight. Actually, I was wrong, it is serious...I’m sorry, I wasn’t thinking, telling you all this. I’m really sorry.”

“It’s okay. I know very well what you must feel. Apology accepted. Let’s talk about something else...Anita; I’d like to apologize for our last session together. I couldn’t continue seeing you because I had lost faith in you. I’ll be honest with you by saying that you went too far. I don’t think I’m fundamentally a jealous man, not to the extent you seem to believe anyway. It’s just that when I’m with someone with whom I’ve decided to spend the rest of my life, I need to totally trust that person. I think it’s a legitimate reason. I’m hooked on Jane because of my love and commitment to her, not because of jealousy. You shouldn’t have insisted on it, you could have simply believed me, and believe that love can actually be that

strong sometimes. Despite everything that has happened I loved, and still love, this woman. It is what I feel inside; it is what belongs to me.”

“I appreciate your honesty,” said Anita looking thoughtful. “You’re right. I feel as if our roles are reversed tonight...the psychologist is in therapy.”

“Don’t take it badly, I just like things to be clear.”

“I’m not taking it badly...to the contrary. When I think back on it, I really did cross the line. Even if I was a little skeptical about your words, you had the right to be respected. Perhaps what you said just reminded me of a place deep inside of me I’d forgotten about. I’m glad you brought it up. I admit that I was wrong about you.”

After a half-hour on the subject, Simon said, “Let’s forget about it. I have to go now. I planned to catch a movie tonight, and I don’t want to be late.”

“Really. Which movie were you planning to see?”

“I don’t know yet. I’m debating between two or three movies, all of which start within five minutes of each other.”

“Now that I know that you’re sincere and that you know how to express what’s on your mind, do you have any objection to my coming with you?”

“Not really. I’m not really used to all this anymore; I warn you that I’m not very good company these days.”

“I think that, this time, you’re the one who’s wrong. I’ll take my chances.”

After the movie, Anita invited Simon for a coffee, which he refused, claiming he was tired. She told him that she had spent a wonderful, unforgettable evening. Simon gave her the benefit of the doubt regarding what he thought of her. She, too, had the right to a certain sensitivity, which could sometimes make her vulnerable. She, just like him, knew what solitude was, and it might cloud her judgment from time to time.

Out of habit, Simon passed by Jane’s house before going home to bed. He felt almost disloyal for having gone out with Anita. His love belonged to just one woman...even now.

Good night, Jane. I love you. May God watch over you and protect you wherever you are.

She went home to take a bath. She filled the tub with hot water and added vanilla-scented bubble bath. That night, being next to Simon had awakened all her sensuality. She had wanted to take his hand in hers the entire night, but had restrained herself. She had brushed up against him twice and had realized just how vulnerable she was when she was near him. She had even bent over to whisper comments about the film in his ear...his scent, his face, the proximity of this man whom she so desired, if he had only known her thoughts at that moment...

Once in the tub, she slowly rubbed her entire body with the sponge she held in her hand and imagined that very soon it would be him caressing her and arousing her with his passion.

She took the mirror from the decorative plinth at the foot of the window and looked at her face. What did Simon think of it? Did he find her beautiful? Would he be able to find her as beautiful as the other one? She then remembered the words he had used to describe Jane in one of their sessions together; he had so eloquently described the effect this woman had on him, even after all this time. "Every time I see her," he had said, "my heart and my body tremble at the sight of her. I can't even stop myself; I lose all control. That's the effect she has on me, and that's one of the reasons why I'm so sure she belongs with me."

She then looked at her hair. Did Simon prefer short or long hair? What about the color? As she lowered the mirror to look at her breasts, she imagined him looking at them and slowly caressing them with his fingers and mouth. She closed her eyes and was so lost in her own fantasy that she heard herself say out loud, *Take me, my love, do what you will with me, and fulfill my every desire. My body and my heart are yours and yours alone, for the rest of my life. I love you Simon; we belong together.*

Then, as if of their own accord, her hands and her fingers explored her entire body, following the will of her desires and needs. Then, just as she was about to reach the point she had not dared to reach for many years now, a thought, like a bolt of lightening, struck her, traveling from her mind to her entire body. During a state of complete ecstasy, where there were only her and Simon, alone in their purest form of intimacy, Jane appeared, as if to remind Anita that Simon did not belong to her, and that as long as Jane was there, it was she who would possess Simon's mind, body, and soul. It would be like this for as long as Simon was in his current state of mind; Anita understood this clearly.

She suddenly felt very stiff; her muscles, which had been so relaxed a moment ago, were suddenly so tense they ached.

If this was the way it was supposed to be, and this woman was going to interfere in their relationship....if she could not possess Simon without worrying that the memories of the other woman could

take him over at any moment and jeopardize their relationship, then...

She would decide what to do after speaking to Jane that night and after speaking to Simon as soon as possible again this week. If she noticed that he didn't want to go as fast as she wished because of the feelings he still had for Jane, she would just have to go a step further...further than she had ever thought possible. Kidnapping Jane had been daring on her part. She had thought that holding her captive for a week or two would be enough, but if things did not go as she had planned, she knew...she knew now - especially after the evening she had just spent with this man - that she would go as far as taking the life of this other woman. She justified this idea by telling herself that Jane's life without Simon could be nothing now, anyway. Killing her gently, without suffering, would simply be liberating her.

Jane had just dozed off when she heard a key in the lock. She thought she was dreaming when she suddenly realized she was indeed awake. The scarf around her eyes made night seem endless to her; it was the worst part of her captivity.

“Hi, Jane. Did I wake you up? Sorry, I’m late. I usually come much earlier, but tonight...tonight, I went out with my Prince Charming, and he is even more charming than I could have ever imagined. We had supper together, and then we went to see a movie. Simon is an incredible man and, to be honest with you, I’d say we’ll get along marvelously.”

As the stranger helped Jane reach the bathroom, Jane made a series of grunts and groans that meant she wanted the tape on her mouth removed.

“Fine,” said the stranger, “but if you scream, you know what’ll happen.”

What a feeling. It was like taking off a pair of high-heeled shoes that were too small. Her blood suddenly seemed to circulate again. Her lips and jaw hurt. She tried to calm the pain by moving them a little. She stretched her cheeks and chin, making sure that she could move the different parts of her face at will. After a minute or so of this exercise, she felt a little better and risked asking the stranger a question.

“How much longer do you plan to keep me here?” Jane asked.

“How long do you think it will take Simon to forget about you?” the stranger asked in return.

“You mean, you didn’t ask him yourself?”

“Very funny, Jane,” said the stranger. “But you’re becoming insolent, and you really shouldn’t. I detest the bitterness I sense in you.”

“Insolent! Please. I ache all over. I don’t know where I am or how long I’m going to be kept here...or even if you’ll ever let me leave. At least be honest with me, Valentine, and tell me the truth. I feel as if I’m going to explode. I’m not even remotely involved in this whole story. If you want Simon, take him and let me go, I’m begging you. I want to go home and forget about all this.”

“That’s just the problem...forgetting this story,” said the stranger, now exasperated by all these questions. “And what about Simon? How can I take Simon, as you say, and be happy, alone with him, knowing what his feelings are for you and yours for him?”

“You know nothing about my feelings for him. There is nothing left between Simon and me.”

“Dear Jane, are you trying to lie to me, or to yourself? You must think I’m a little crazy for having done what I did. You may also think that I’m a little mentally imbalanced, but I know very well what I’ve done, and I also know that there was no other way to

do it. Your tone of voice betrays you, my dear. It was a good try, but my intuition for these things is very keen. It's a shame, mind you. I would have really preferred that you didn't love him anymore."

The stranger forced Jane to eat quickly that night since it was getting late. Sticking to the routine established over the last few days, the stranger left right after Jane had finished eating.

"Sweet dreams, Jane," said the stranger. "Life is beautiful and you are in a very good position now to realize how precious it can become sometimes."

Jane knew she was in danger. The stranger had said too much. How could she hope to have her freedom back...she knew very well that this woman could never make Simon fall in love with her, no matter how hard she tried. Whatever the case, one thing was certain, if the stranger really had been in contact with Simon, and she eventually released Jane, Jane would simply have to check with Simon to discover the woman's identity. If her theory was right, and she was sure it was, then her time was running out and the stranger would not give her a chance. She had to act...and quickly.

I have to do something, she said to herself. What do I know about the situation? I have to remain calm and try to breathe deeply. An investigation must already be under way, but who's in charge? There are always good cops and...ones that aren't so good, she thought. Jane didn't want to be pessimistic, but she decided not to count on the police.

Then she thought of Simon. He must be beside himself at the moment, although she would deserve it should he feel that she had it coming to her, with all the pain she had caused him. If the officers in charge of the investigation were the type to jump to conclusions, Simon must be living hell on earth yet again...and it would be all her fault. She was really upset with herself. Simon would have done anything for her.

She took hold of herself and tried to find some clues. She knew that she wasn't in the city, but in a suburb or the like. She thought she could hear traffic from a side street. The house she was in must be about fifty or seventy-five meters from the street. Jane estimated that she couldn't be too far from her own house, otherwise the stranger would not drive all this way, twice a day. Jane also remembered that, one night, the stranger had brought her half a club sandwich and fries that were still warm.

If only I could manage to untie my hands and take off this scarf from my eyes, she thought, maybe I could figure out where the hell I am.

She already felt a little more reassured now that she knew she might be just a couple of minutes from her house. It encouraged her to find something else that might help her.

Wednesday, 6:10 p.m.

“Mr. Jones, have you known Ms. Lamer for a long time?” asked the Inspector.

“Yes, a couple of years,” he replied.

“What kind of relationship do you have?”

“What exactly do you mean by that?”

“From what I understand,” began the Inspector, “you and Ms. Lamer see each other once or twice a week, sometimes more. What I mean to ask is, are the two of you just friends or is it more than that?”

“Just friends,” said Maurice.

“How exactly do you define friendship, Mr. Jones, or, more specifically, what does friendship mean to you?”

“It’s having someone who understands us and accepts us as we are. Someone we have fun with.”

“Can a friend accept us as we are even if they do not understand us?”

“I don’t understand. What do you mean by that?”

“Mr. Jones, my idea of friendship is such that my friends remain my friends even when they undergo major changes in their lives, be it a child, a job for

which they have to travel great distances, a sickness, a new boyfriend...Do you know Mr. Griffin?"

"Jane has mentioned him to me."

"She has mentioned him to you! Have you, yourself, ever spoken to Mr. Griffin?"

"Not really."

"Not really! Are you insinuating that you have known Ms. Lamer for all these years, eight to ten, if I'm not mistaken - she must surely be your best friend, you see each other often - and you don't know the man she lived with for two years?"

Maurice lowered his head and didn't answer.

"Is it true that you have already run into Mr. Griffin a couple of times and haven't even said hello, even though you knew he was your best friend's boyfriend?"

The inspector noticed that Maurice was getting nervous. He didn't trust this man, nor had he discovered any redeeming qualities in him.

"Have you ever called Mr. Griffin from a public telephone?"

"No."

"Have you ever called him from Jane's house, using her home phone?"

"No."

"Is this what you call friendship? How do you explain the fact that you and Ms. Lamer hardly saw

each other while she was with Mr. Griffin and then, suddenly, you start seeing each other again once they're separated?"

"Ask Jane."

"Could you possibly envy this man? Because in my opinion, it must be one of two reasons. It's either envy or you have something to hide - things that you and Jane didn't want to discuss in front of Mr. Griffin."

Feeling that Mr. Jones was on the brink of breaking down, the inspector asked the questions he was sure Jones was dreading.

"Mr. Jones, were you and are you still in love with Ms. Lamer?"

The no he got as an answer did not surprise him at all. A no from the mouth of a man whose body language betrayed his words only served to make the answer clear.

"Did Mr. Griffin ever invite you to party he was organizing for Ms. Lamer's birthday while they were still living together?"

"It's possible. I don't really remember."

"Could it be that you told Mr. Griffin that he was two-faced and that you would never be second in line for Ms. Lamer?"

"I don't know, but I'd be surprised."

"Where were you Sunday evening?"

"At home."

“Do you have any witnesses?”

“No.”

“Have you seen either Ms. Lamer or Mr. Griffin?”

“Yes. She and I went to see a movie together with our children.”

“With whose car – and who drove?”

“With my car, and I drove.”

“Did you drive her back to her house?”

“Yes.”

“At what time?”

“A little before supper – maybe around 4:30 or 5 o’clock.”

“Have you seen her since?”

“No.”

“I’m asking you not to leave the city unless I authorize it, and only unless it is to go to work. And I must be able to contact you at all times.”

The inspector knew by experience that this man was about to crack. He ended their meeting by telling himself that he would check some things out and definitely put him under surveillance. In the state of nervousness he was in, if he had something to do with this disappearance, he might make a mistake that would bring them straight to her. Of course, this depended on whether she was still alive, as he hoped

she was.

Thursday, 5:50 a.m.

She woke up early, her sleep broken by nightmares. She got up and hugged her pillow to her, pretending it was him and telling herself that it would soon be the case. The thought filled her with joy and happiness; she almost forgot about her nightmares. She took a shower and got dressed. She would make herself pretty today, just for him, bringing out her greatest assets just in case she saw him. She picked a navy suit, which fit her like a glove, and a sky blue knit sweater. She was perfect; she felt perfect – perfect to seduce a man.

She took the bag of food she had prepared for Jane: a couple of cans of tomato juice, a sandwich, some muffins, and a few other snacks. At least she wouldn't have to prepare more food again that night. She would bring the bag to Jane that morning and leave it there so that she could go directly to see her again after work that afternoon without having to stop at home beforehand.

Yesterday she had asked the office secretary to postpone the two appointments she had after 6 o'clock. She wanted to keep her evening free. She took her coat and her keys and left, on the brink of euphoria.

Taking the road she had been taking regularly for almost a week now, she thought back to her

nightmares. She had seen herself killing Jane, but each time she had thought the deed was done, Jane would open her eyes as if to say, “You’re being too gentle with me – you won’t be able to kill me – you just can’t do it.”

That’s what you think, she thought. When I decide that you should die, Jane, you won’t be able to open your eyes ever again.

She knew she had to decide soon. Her friends would be back from their trip in a week at the most, and she had to set aside at least a day to get rid of all traces of Jane’s stay there.

“Where are you in this kidnapping case?”

“I don’t really know anymore. I feel as if I’m lost in a strange city. I’m moving without knowing if I’m going in the right direction, hoping to find a clue that will point me to where I need to go.”

“Poor Paul. I wish I could help you.”

“Do you think that a woman who seems mentally balanced would go as far as orchestrating her own kidnapping to make the man she loved suffer? A man, who as it happens, I believe to be a good person.”

“I personally wouldn’t do it, but that’s presuming that I’m mentally balanced!”

She moved close to him and put her arms around him, hugging him.

“What do you think?”

“For a woman of a respectable age such as your own, I find you perfectly balanced, and I’m not just talking psychologically.”

She tenderly kissed him. They could have stayed like that for hours, but she ended it after a couple of seconds.

“Has it been a long time since I told you that I loved you?”

“Yes, a very long time,” he answered, “and you should really be ashamed of yourself. I think it’s been since...almost before breakfast.”

“I love you, Paul, as I have for the last twenty-two years, and as I will for the next twenty-two if it suits you.”

“Can I think about that for a while and give you an answer tonight?” he said, jokingly.

She took hold of his tie with her left hand and scolded him, “If you don’t answer me right now, I won’t let you go.”

They hugged each other lovingly and kissed passionately.

“I’m so happy with you. You’re good for me. When I think that this man loved his woman as much as I love...” The inspector could go no further. “I don’t know what I would do if we were to break up. I consider myself an understanding guy, but just the thought of it makes me sick. I don’t even want to think about all the pain it would bring me.”

“Don’t worry about it. Just think about us...our happiness. Use our strength. I am sure that you’ll find this woman. Maybe she has taken the past few days to reflect on what the two of them meant to each other.”

“You’re probably right, just like you usually are. Have a good day, my love. I’ll call you at lunchtime. I love you.”

“Hi, Simon. I’m sorry to call you at work. I tried your home number, but there was no answer.”

“Hi, Inspector,” replied Simon. “I left for work very early this morning. It’s calm at the office at this hour and work keeps my mind occupied. Do you have any news?”

“No. I just had some things to check over. I thought maybe you could help me.”

“I’ll do whatever I can.”

“First of all, I met Jane’s friend, Mr. Jones. He’s a pretty shady character and, for now, he’s the only suspect on my list.”

“Do you think he’s capable of doing such a thing? And under what pretext?” asked Simon. “I’m no longer in the picture and I was under the impression that he had regained his stature with Jane. I mean, I don’t really have a good feeling about this man either, but I only know him based on what I’ve already told you.”

“It’s hard to say,” answered the inspector, “but you raise a good question...under what pretext?”

“Now that I think about it,” said Simon, “when I say I don’t have a good feeling about this man, it’s not just because he and Jane started seeing each other after Jane and I split up. It’s the way he has looked at me

ever since that irks me. He has this condescending way about him when he looks at me: he lowers his head so that his eyes are above his glasses. It's as though every time he sees me, he's repeating, "you see...I told you that I would not be second in line for Jane." Then, there are the anonymous phone calls, which, unfortunately, I can't prove. I received them for many months, and they only started a few weeks after the police called me back to tell me that I would no longer have to go in for fingerprinting, or to court. From the information I was able to gather, I'm certain that he is behind the phone calls. I didn't really pay attention to them at first, but after three or four calls, I started asking questions. All the calls were placed from the same location – except for two calls, which were made from a neighboring city. Then one evening, two months ago, the phone rang at 8:40 p.m. I knew it was him from the number on the call display. I was right, but this time, he didn't say a word, but just breathed. It was a man's breathing, I'm sure of it. He started coughing a little and then hung up. I quickly went to the phone booth he had called from, and asked the teenager working at the convenience store next door if he had seen the person who had just used the payphone. He said that he had seen a big man wearing a dark coat and a hood pulled over his head leave about five minutes before. He didn't know any more since the man had had his back to him and the teenager had been speaking to his friends at the time. The teenager couldn't tell me anything about the car this man was driving either. Then, the next Saturday, the same thing happened. At eleven past midnight exactly,

the phone rang. I had been asleep for about fifteen minutes. I had gone out with my children that night and had arrived at home at around 11:30. I went to bed right after I had tucked them in and kissed them goodnight. I had driven by Jane's house on the way home and there had been no light on. Anyway, as I said, the telephone rang, I picked up, but I was so fed up of the same song and dance every time that I wanted to get him this time. The children were sleeping deeply, so I rushed to the convenience store as quickly as I could. The guy working there hadn't seen anyone, but had noticed a car like Maurice's leaving when he had gone out to check something. It was all he could tell me. I then thought to pass by his house. The light was on. I then decided to pass by Jane's house again and noticed, even though the blinds were shut, that there was a light on inside. On Monday, someone at my office who knows Jane told me that he had seen Maurice drop Jane off at her house around midnight the previous night. I'm sure that Jane isn't aware of the calls, but I'm willing to bet that he's behind them. I finally became certain of this a week later when, on the Wednesday morning before he and Jane were to leave on vacation together, the phone rang around 5:20, as usual. I was exhausted; I had only slept about three or four hours that night. It was the same old story – the guy didn't say a word. I had had enough. Without naming any names, I recited his complete license number and told him that if he called me again, I would have him followed, and not by the police. I said I hoped he understood what I meant. The next day, right before supper, I stopped by the

grocery store and, just as I was walking out, came face to face with him. When I saw his face, and the way he was trying to avoid me, I immediately knew that it was him. I haven't had any prank calls since."

"I would like to have the phone number and address of the convenience store," said the inspector. "There is something I'd like to check out. I thought about something else this morning while I was talking to my wife. What if, instead of a kidnapping, it was a simulation? I'm dropping the idea of a suicide since no note has been found and, if that had been the case, we would have found her already. I had considered the possibility of an accident while she was out walking on Sunday night; she might have been hit by a car or something. She didn't have her purse and, therefore, had no ID; the ambulance might have come to take her to the hospital, unconscious, and nobody would have known. But this possibility has also been dropped. We've checked it out, but there's no one fitting her description."

"If we go back to the idea of a kidnapping, whether simulated or not," said Simon, "we are now on the fourth day, and there's been no demand for ransom or anything else. Why? Whatever the motive, it seems strange to me."

"Have you thought about what I told you last time? What if it was to harm you? It seemed the most logical deduction before you told me about these anonymous calls. I'll be honest with you Simon; I'm probably the only one who believes you're not somehow involved in all of this. I won't lie to you,

either; I've checked you out. It's my job, and I've been fooled in the past. Because of Jane's complaint against you, you are the first suspect officers at the station are pointing to. Taking this into account, if I thought as they did, there would already be a warrant for your arrest, and you would have to be interrogated a lot more thoroughly. I don't want to get to that point, I need to find something and that's why I'm calling you. The slightest detail is important. Except for this Maurice Jones guy, we have nothing concrete. And, like you, he has no alibi for Sunday night."

"Listen Inspector, I understand your position, and I know that mine isn't exactly spotless. I've thought about what you told me last time. If you knew how much I love this woman and if you knew how much all this hurts me...I still miss her as much as I did on our first day apart. I know that I'm still angry with her for having reacted the way she did, but rest assured that, if I had the slightest idea of something that might help you along in your investigation, I wouldn't hesitate a moment to tell you, out of love for Jane or, at the least, for all the precious moments she and I shared together. But I still don't believe that she would have gone as far as to orchestrate her own kidnapping."

"I believe you, Simon. For the moment, I would like you to make up a list of her friends, the ones you know, and include the people you think she got along well with, and those who seemed a little... shady. Once you've finished the list, I'd like to see it. Today, if possible."

“You’ll have it today without fail. If I think of anything in the meantime, I’ll call you.”

“Thanks, Simon. Think about it – you didn’t think she was capable of building a criminal file against you either, you said it yourself. In my opinion, it’s possible that she might have done it a little unconsciously, so to speak. She might even be a little depressed. There’s just one more thing I would like to know: Why didn’t you lay charges against her after the prosecutor threw out her charge against you? Especially if her accusations were unfounded, as you’ve explained? She risked a lot by accusing you. At the very least, you could have requested an official apology in order to regain your reputation. It would have been of help to you now.”

“I didn’t want to get involved in all that. By digging deeper into her accusations, it might have turned against her and, more specifically, against her son. And as I’ve already told you, I did what I did in order to protect him. If Jane uses this story to bring me down, that’s her problem. My beliefs and my faith have allowed me to get over my anger. In our hearts, we know who we are. That’s all that matters to me.”

Simon spent the morning working in his office with a list of names next to him on which he had already written around ten names. Even the shadiest of them weren't suspects for him, just smooth talkers. They were all people whom, for the most part, he didn't trust, or trusted very little, but whom Jane had seemed to respect nonetheless. For the moment, however, that wasn't what was important. He would be extremely surprised if any of the people on the list were somehow linked to Jane's kidnapping.

11:44 a.m.

He was getting ready to leave the office when the phone rang.

"Hello."

"Hi, Simon. How are you?"

"Oh. Hi, Susan."

"Sorry to bother you right before lunch, but a client just called me and wanted some information on one of our products. I thought you would be the best person to answer him – can you do me a favor and talk to him?"

"Of course. It would be my pleasure. You can give him my number."

"Thanks, Simon. I owe you one."

“Don’t worry about it, it’s really my pleasure. Just give me his name so I know who it is when he calls.”

She gave him the information and he hung up the phone. Just as he had put the receiver down, the telephone rang again.

“Hello.”

“Hi...Simon?”

He recognized the voice immediately.

“Hi, Anita. How are you?”

“Not too bad. Am I bothering you?”

“Not really. I was just going out to get a bite to eat, but I can take a few minutes.”

“I just wanted to thank you for last night. I really had a nice evening with you, and I just wanted to tell you that I think you’re a very nice person. Really.”

“Thanks, Anita, it’s just that...” Simon stopped and changed his train of thought. “I’m glad you enjoyed the evening. I don’t really know what to say. Sorry, it’s just that I’m not used to this any more. I was even feeling a little guilty last night when I got home.”

“I understand. You still love Jane as much now as when you first came to consult me, don’t you?”

“I think so, albeit a little differently than before.”

“Differently?”

“I still love her as much, and she still has the same effect on me every time I see her, but now I told my therapist that I’m not so sure I would take her back if she came knocking at my door, not at the moment anyway. I guess you can say I’m at an impasse. I love a woman I’m not sure I want to live with.”

“Do you remember what I said last night about having someone to confide in?”

“Yes, I remember.”

“Well, I have a last minute cancellation tonight, and I don’t want to replace it with another client. I’d like to see you, just to talk. We can go for a coffee or a beer...as friends. I’m feeling kind of lonely today, and I trust you.”

“I don’t really think that this is a good time to confide in me. I prefer to be honest with you. I still think about Jane constantly. She’s still the love of my life. Do you understand?”

“I understand. I understand...as a friend. I have a proposition...if you accept; we can talk over a beer and have a bite to eat somewhere relaxing. If, at any moment, you feel uncomfortable, just say the word, and I’ll let you go, no questions asked. Fair enough?”

He told himself that, in fact, it was. He could take the opportunity to clarify some things between them. Under the circumstances, he was open to a new friendship, but his love was exclusively reserved for the children and for Jane. They were his destiny.

“You’re right. It is fair,” he answered.

6:50 p.m.

They met at the resto-bar they had agreed upon earlier. They chose a table that was a little secluded from the rest of the place, in order to have some privacy. He helped her with her coat and hung it up for her on the coat rack near their table. She was wearing a knee-length black dress that was slightly fitted, with a low-cut back. It was highly possible that she had taken the time to go home and change before meeting him. She wore her dirty blond hair up, which he noticed immediately because it was the type of style he liked. Her perfume was exquisite. It was neither too spicy nor too sweet, but rather like the scent of a poplar tree in the autumn. The freshness of it told him that she had put it on not too long before they met. Simon realized that he wasn't at all sure what this woman expected from him. If it weren't for Jane, could she...?

She gave him her most dazzling smile. She seemed happy to be with him, but he would not let himself be fooled by appearances. Other women before her had also seemed happy to be with him...

Once they had sat down, they ordered drinks; she, a dark beer, and he, a lager. Jane would have also chosen a dark beer. When the young waitress returned

with their drinks, they ordered a platter of raw vegetables and a bruschetta appetizer.

Nervously, she started the conversation.

“Thanks, Simon. I really feel privileged to be here with you tonight, and I realize how lucky I am. But please promise that you’ll tell me if it becomes too difficult for you at any point.”

“And the same holds for you, too, Anita. I don’t feel too interesting these days – and haven’t for a long time now.”

“I don’t want to deceive you, but if you wait for me to tell you it’s time to go, they might have to kick us out.”

They spoke of everything and nothing. He tried hard not to mention Jane. She too was careful to watch what she said. She didn’t want to move too quickly, preferring to reel him in gently, and she didn’t want to speak about Jane, either. She realized after her second beer, which she was now drinking a little more slowly, that she was becoming much more talkative. She was even having a hard time filtering her words; it was now taking all of her concentration.

Simon had, rather unconsciously, answered the two questions he had asked himself before arriving that night. He appreciated this night out with Anita. He would have liked for the two of them to become friends, for her to be someone he could talk to on lonely nights, or to go out with occasionally, but he knew very well it would be impossible. Anita wanted more than friendship from him – it had become

perfectly clear over the course of the evening. Physically, she appealed to him. He knew how to appreciate the beauty of a woman. She had a style he admired, but it stopped there. There was no chemistry, no desire. He had to tell her. He didn't want to hurt her, but it would be better for both of them to set things straight that night before they left.

He also knew that the beer was taking effect. He was no longer used to drinking it – he had to leave soon. He had to tell her what he needed to tell her and then leave. He felt a pressing need to be all alone to think...to think about Jane. He remembered now their first date. They had had dinner at a small restaurant she had chosen. She was the only one who was able to make him feel so good.

Maybe a little out of spite, he suddenly wanted Anita to make him relive all that he had felt that first night with Jane. Would any other woman ever make him feel the same again?

Lost in his thoughts and therefore not paying much attention to his surroundings, he realized that Anita had gotten up. He wanted so much for her to have the same effect on him as Jane did– as much on his body and heart as on his eyes.

“I have to leave you alone for a few minutes or maybe more. When a woman goes where I'm going, it's hard to predict when she'll be back. Will you wait for me?”

“Don't worry about it. But if you're not back in fifteen minutes...”

“I should be back. You’re a patient man, though...fifteen minutes! That must be a record.”

Once in the bathroom, she tried to get a hold of herself. It was obvious that he was falling deeper and deeper into his thoughts. She also knew, unfortunately, whom these thoughts were about. She had to act. She sprayed herself with some more perfume, fixed her hair, and went back to the table. Just as she arrived, Simon got up.

“It’s my turn. Do you think you can be as patient with me?” he asked.

Oh, what he did to her! She had butterflies everywhere inside her. She purposely did not sit down right away. As he advanced a bit towards her, he brushed against her and almost touched her. He smelled so good. It was too much, she couldn’t take it anymore. There was no one sitting at any of the tables nearby. She took him by one arm, made a half-turn and took hold of the other one. She moved up against him. She thought she was going crazy. She brought her lips up close to his and kissed him with all her love; she gave of herself completely. Her whole body was trembling. It was the ultimate feeling – better than her best dreams, far better than anything she had experienced up to this point. It was her every heart’s desire until...she realized that Simon was not partaking in this desire. Her dream suddenly became a nightmare. The worst possible nightmare.

Simon lifted his head and said, “No, Anita. I can’t do this. I’m sorry. It’s impossible; I shouldn’t

have come; I'm hurting both of us. For all this time that Jane hasn't spoken to me or even looked at me; she has done things that have succeeded in destroying me, things I will never be able to forget...and yet...maybe I'm going crazy or maybe I'm already crazy, but I have felt dishonest since the start of the evening, unfaithful, even. Can you imagine! I have felt dishonest towards both Jane and you. I don't know what I was expecting by coming here. Maybe I was expecting the impossible."

"No, Simon, don't say that. This is entirely my entire fault. I spoke to you of friendship and I got caught in my own trap. I am the one who is dishonest. Jane doesn't know how lucky she is. You are a wonderful man, so wonderful. I have spent my entire life waiting for a man like you, and now that I've finally met you...I respect you Simon, a great deal. You are honest enough to tell me the way things are, but I wasn't able to control myself and I moved too quickly. I am the only one responsible here. I love you, Simon. I want to give you time, the time you need. I want to show you that my love for you is sincere and that I can wait for you. Maybe one day you'll be able to love a woman other than Jane."

"No, Anita. I don't want you to spend your life waiting for me. You seem to be a very nice person, but I don't think that I will ever be able to love you; not you or any other woman. I just feel it inside. It's not your fault or mine. I have to leave. Don't be angry with yourself for tonight – you were just perfect.

I'm really sorry for everything, but I think it's better if things are clear between us."

He put on his coat and left the restaurant. He knew how much he had hurt her; he, himself, had already been hurt enough. Jane was still the centre of his universe. What was the point of all this? He once again felt all the pain inside him, the kind of insidious pain that made it difficult to breathe. The tears were once again rolling down his cheeks. The hurt seemed to spread throughout his entire body, endless. A feeling of intense emptiness filled him; his entire being was drowning in the emotions of love, hate, and anger.

Dear God. You are my witness. I have always tried to do the right thing. What is happening to me? I would so much like to understand.

She knew she had lost. It was true, he was right when he said that it wasn't her fault. It was all because of Jane. The love Simon professed for her was almost sacrificial; he was willing to give up his life for this woman. His commitment and his love were that intense. She no longer had the choice but to get rid of Jane. It would be too risky to free her now.

She thought of Simon. She would not be able to live without him. The problem was that she felt for him what he felt for Jane. She understood where he was coming from, but couldn't accept it. Ever.

Anita knew the intensity of his love, which had not faltered since the first day he had come in for therapy. With all her experience, and after all this time, her chances should have been better. But Simon was not like the others; he was an exceptional man.

Once Jane was out of the picture for good, would she be able to wait for him? One year, five years, ten years, how long would it take him? How long, and for what? Simon would have wanted her to be his friend, nothing more. Just by his reaction tonight, even without Jane in the picture, she didn't hold out much hope. It would now be too hard to live knowing he was alive and never being able to be everything to him. She could run into him anywhere, at any time, without ever being able to take him into

her arms and kiss him, or being taken in his arms and made passionate love to. She was at the point of thinking that a form of widowhood would be better than enduring all this. A thought occurred to her and a Machiavellian plan began to take form inside her head...

Simon arrived at home. He had passed by Jane's, but nothing had changed. He had to find something that would help the inspector. Somewhere inside of him, he knew that something was missing, but he couldn't figure out what. It was tormenting him. He was sure that it was the missing piece to the puzzle.

The light on his answering machine was flashing. He dialed his password and listened to his messages. His children had wished him goodnight, his brother had asked him to call him back, and the inspector wanted Simon to call him back that night, if possible, should he have listened to the message before 11 o'clock; otherwise, as early as possible the next morning.

He checked his watch; it was 10:40. He dialed the inspector's number. The inspector picked up after two rings – they said hello and quickly got to the point.

"I was hoping for your call tonight, Simon," said the inspector. "I looked over your list and I've already contacted most of the people on it. I've found nothing useful up to now. I'm starting to lose patience. I wanted to talk to you in case you had something new to tell me that might inspire me."

"Unfortunately, I don't think so," answered Simon. "Well, maybe there is something, I just don't

know what. Something is bothering me, something that doesn't fit; I just can't put my finger on it. Have any of your missing persons notices panned out?"

"No, nothing yet. There have been no calls since yesterday morning. We've posted a picture of Jane in all public offices, and it will also appear on the front page of all the local newspapers tomorrow. I'm putting a lot of effort into this angle since it's such a small city – the snowball effect will be instantaneous. If someone around here disappears, everyone is bound to talk about it."

"I can tell you have faith in this theory, but you're still worried, aren't you? If you're reasoning this out as I am, you must be starting to think that this kidnapping theory is becoming more and more improbable. But if this is not a kidnapping, with what we know, I don't even want to think about the other possibility."

"We're on the same wavelength, Simon. It isn't a pleasant thought, but at this point in time we have to start considering it – but this is strictly between us, of course. As you said, the kidnapping theory is becoming more improbable by the second. Maurice is the only serious lead I have. I've been having him followed since our discussion this morning; he has only worked and watched TV up to now, nothing more. Simon, do you think she might be mixed up in something suspicious, like drugs, blackmail, or something of the like? Some of her acquaintances told me about a heated discussion the two of you once had

at a dinner party where drugs were brought in. Have you considered this possibility?”

“All I told Jane about the subject was that she was too intelligent to party away years of sacrifices she had made to get a diploma she deserved by smoking drugs, especially at her age and as a parent. She told me that I had been unfair with her friends and that I wasn’t her father, so I had nothing to say on the matter. The only thing I regret about what I told her was my tone of voice; I was taken aback by her answer and had reacted too quickly. She took it as an accusation. When I think about it today, it was one of the five or six times I should have gotten up, put on my coat, thanked our hosts, and left – but I stayed out of respect for her and myself, and out of my love for her – I stayed because I hoped that she would understand that I had told her those things out of love for her, and not to control her life, as she often accused me of doing. But to get back to your question, I really don’t think that Jane could get involved in such a thing, in fact, I’m sure of it.”

There was nothing she could do. She had spent the last few hours trying to untie herself and remove the scarf that covered her eyes. She was tired and exhausted. After giving it one last try, she burst into tears. She felt the end approaching and she was beginning to believe that it would almost be a deliverance. She thought to herself: *It's what I deserve for having been so blind to the man who would have brought the most to my life, the one I would have loved more than anything.* Jane had been angry with Simon because he had succeeded in making her see what she was. It was as though he had taken a mirror and placed it right in front of her heart. She had felt threatened by him. She hadn't wanted to see the truth. How many times had he asked her to take off her blinders and to trust him? He hadn't wanted to be with her for whom she could have been, but for whom she wanted to be. How many times had Simon reminded her of how much he loved her and how much he wanted them to be strong together, that he no longer wanted to live without her. When he had told her that he had never done so much for a woman, she hadn't taken the time to really listen to what he had been telling her. Shamefully, she thought back to all those times she had told him that he didn't understand anything, that he couldn't possibly understand...How could she have been so rude and mean to him? *I only thought about myself and my friends and family who*

also had blinders on, thought Jane. Simon could see through me better than anyone. By intuition, probably, but he had taken the time to listen to me. He wanted to understand who I was. He was mine – I'm the one who didn't understand anything. And now, I will die without being able to tell him one last time how much I loved him, and how much I still love him underneath all this stupid pride, and these damn blinders...without even letting him know how sorry I am. Underneath these blinders... what a joke and what a metaphor – with this damn scarf covering my eyes, I will have seen nothing until the end!

5:20 p.m.

“Hi, Paul. We’ve gone to visit all the houses around the perimeter of the city, as you asked, and have found nothing. No one has seen anything suspicious: no car and no new faces. We still have two houses to check again tomorrow. The owner of one of the houses lives alone and works the night shift. He wasn’t there when we passed by his house around 3:30; it was his neighbors who told us his schedule. The couple who live in the other house are in their mid-thirties. We’ve confirmed that they are presently on vacation down south. Their neighbors told us that they have seen a woman pass by to check the house a couple of times, but that they didn’t find this suspicious because they had been told that someone would be passing by from time to time. The couple had mentioned that they would be leaving a key with a friend of theirs. I told the neighbors to call us if they saw her tomorrow and left them my card.”

“Excellent work, Louis. I wasn’t expecting any less from you – I didn’t call on your services for nothing. I know a good detective when I come across one, and you are definitely a good detective.”

“Coming from you, Paul, I really appreciate the complement. I’ll let you know as soon as I have some news on these two houses.”

Friday, 5:20 a.m.

Simon was already dressed. He put on his walking shoes and left. He had hardly slept that night, trying to figure out what it was that had bothered him yesterday, the detail that was eluding him. He felt the same as he had when Jane had disappeared. He knew that there was something, but couldn't figure out what. He got up to glance at a copy of the list he had given to the inspector, to see if what was eluding him had to do with one of the names he had written down – or maybe with a name he had forgotten to write down -- but he found nothing.

Help me find you, Jane - if not for me, then for you.

He left with a determined step, reflecting on the events of the last week. He didn't recall having met anyone new recently, nor had he seen any of her friends, except for Maurice, whom he now knew a little better through the information the inspector had given him. Sunday was also the last day he had seen Jane, and with Maurice of all people. If it turned out to be Maurice who had taken Jane, he didn't know what he would do. He still couldn't believe that she spent time with him. It made him sick just to think about it; she deserved much better. Despite her having remained friends with him, knowing that he had called Simon

two-faced and had told Simon that he would never be second in line for Jane. Despite all of this, they had started seeing each other again as soon as Simon had moved out of Jane's house. It hurt him, a lot. If one of Simon's friends had ever said such a thing about Jane, he would have told them where to go and would have protected Jane even at the cost of losing the friendship.

Anita crossed his mind like a bolt of lightning. He suddenly had the same feeling as when he would finally remember a word that had been at the tip of his tongue. The feeling could have something to do with her. It might have to do with something he had discussed with her in therapy. Perhaps he felt guilty about something he had said. He had seen Anita yesterday, and it was since then that the feeling that something was missing had bothered him. What could have happened to make him feel like this? What could Anita have done or said to make him realize that something was missing? He felt that he was getting closer. He had to find out what it was.

He had forced himself not to talk about Jane last night. He noticed that she had done the same. He remembered that Anita had said that Jane didn't realize how lucky she was, right after she had kissed him. She had also said that he might be able to love someone else one day. That didn't help. He was sure that Anita hadn't said anything else about Jane. He commented to himself on how strange life was sometimes. Since Jane had disappeared, Anita had suddenly come into his life. *Hey, God and Jane*, thought Simon, *when I*

*asked you guys for help, this isn't what I meant. I'm
through with therapy!*

An early riser, he had already done his thirty minutes on the treadmill and about fifteen minutes on his stationary bicycle. It was a good compromise on days when the weather was not ideal for his usual jogging routine. He had gotten up during the night to check once again the Lamer file, just in case something would pop out at him. He wanted to make sure he hadn't neglected any information. He didn't discover anything he hadn't already covered. The three calls she had received the Sunday of her kidnapping had been checked. They had been from Maurice Jones, her brother, and the last, from someone calling from a telephone booth about a kilometer and a half away, at around 6 o'clock in the evening. It didn't really give him anything to go on. Whether they were dealing with a kidnapping, a murder, or a disappearance, the guilty parties would not have used their own telephone to contact her. It would be far too stupid and simple to do so. It also didn't shed any light on where the guilty person came from. Were they from the area or strangers? The detectives had even made sure to inquire at the convenience store where the telephone booth was located whether anyone had noticed anything, but they had come up empty.

The inspector then had an idea. It was a long shot, but it was worth a try. He thought back to the telephone calls. After he had once again gone over the

information he had gathered, he was able to confirm that the calls Simon had received and the call Jane had received on the night of her disappearance had been made from the same booth. Maurice was looking more and more guilty. It could be a coincidence but, in an investigation, every angle had to be examined – all ideas were welcome.

He had a fast shower, gobbled down a slice of toast, and filled a Thermos with coffee. He then went upstairs to change. He sat on the edge of the bed and gently kissed his wife on the cheek, whispering, “I love you, sweetheart.” He then added, “Don’t shoot the messenger, but it’s Thursday and it’s 6:30. You know what you have to do.”

“I know, I know. I have to get up and get ready to go to work.”

“Right you are, my dear, and just think, when you’re an old grandmother, you’ll be able to stay in bed every morning, that is, of course, if you’re nice to the wolf.”

“Very funny. You’re quite the comedian this early in the morning. What brilliant idea have you had this time, Inspector Gauthier?”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because, Paul, this old grandmother knows you like the back of her hand. You’re ready so early and you’re impatient to leave. Something must be up with the investigation – is it serious?”

“Serious? Yeah...I hope to have found a lead.”

At 6:50, he arrived at the convenience store. He hadn't expected to find so many people there at this hour, especially in a city of this size.

He asked the boy behind the counter if he could please speak to the owner.

"He's not here this morning," he answered. "He'll be here around 11:00."

"Do you have a number where I can reach him?"

"Usually I do, but his son was sick last night and he spent the night at the hospital with him. He asked that we not disturb him this morning unless it's an emergency."

"I'm an inspector and I really need some information from him. Don't worry; he's not the one being investigated. I understand the situation, but I would really appreciate it if you could leave him my card and tell him to contact me as soon as possible when he arrives. I think he might be able to help me with my investigation."

"I'll be sure to give him the message," said the boy. "He said that he would be here at 11:00, regardless of the night he had last night."

"Can you give me the store's phone number?" asked the inspector.

The cashier handed him a piece of cardboard on which he had written the number of the store and the owner's name. The inspector thanked him and wished him a good day.

7:15 a.m.

She finished eating the muffin that the stranger had brought her. The stranger had told her that she could take all the time she needed this morning – that Jane could sip her coffee as slowly as she wanted and she would wait.

“You know, you were right. Simon will never be mine,” she said. “He has sacrificed his life for you. Without you, he is nothing. You have no idea how much I envy you. If I weren’t so afraid of dying, I’d let the two of you live.”

“The two of us?”

“Yes. I can no longer live without Simon, knowing that he is alive and that I can’t be with him...I just can’t accept that. It would be a life too cruel to imagine.”

“You’re going to kill us, Simon and me? How can you do such a thing? You’re sick!”

“You really have a lot of gall to speak to me like that! What about you? How could you react the way you did with him? Not only did you destroy his life, but you’ve destroyed mine as well. Death is nothing compared to what he is living at the moment. How dare you? Do you really have so little compassion? If you could see him when he talks about

you...you're just an egocentric bitch who thinks only of herself! You, your family, and your so-called friends. Simon should have left you in the beginning, but he wanted to believe in you. You abused the situation, you abused his goodness. You wanted him to be perfect, based on your idea of perfection. Despite your selfishness and cruelty, he only wanted to defend you in therapy. He always defended you under the pretext that he has always seen more good in you than you could ever see in yourself. He loves you so much. This man won me over by the strength of his commitment to you...and I lost him for the same reason. I cannot live my life knowing that it's you he's thinking about. You will have to die together. My only consolation is that, by doing this, I will have fulfilled one of his greatest desires, which is to live by your side until his last breath. It will be the only thing I will have been able to bring to him. Take these last few hours to reflect a little on what I've said and to think about what you'll say to him as you wait for the gates of Heaven to open for you – providing the good Lord has enough pity on you to let you in.”

Simon couldn't concentrate at all this morning. His thoughts were scattered. He sensed that time was becoming of the essence. The idea of possibly finding her dead was unbearable. The state of ambivalence he found himself in made him feel completely lost...and if he saw her once again, alive? He didn't even know if he would be able to forgive her and take her in his arms and hold her tight. She had gone too far, way too far, but he wanted to be with her, to still need her.

He had to find a way to help the inspector. He concentrated on thinking about everything the inspector had told him. *If only I knew this Maurice guy better – if only she had introduced him to me.* Was it possible that she had finally rejected his strange behaviors and he had decided to take it out on her? Would he go as far as killing her? He didn't really want to think about this possibility. *Oh, Jane! What got into you? What did you do to our love, and why? And what about our family!*

But if it wasn't Maurice, who else could it be? Simon thought once again about the hypothesis that it was a simulated disappearance, voluntarily acted out to hurt him. He knew how far Jane had already gone, but would she go that far? If he must, he would have to admit how wrong he was about this woman for whom he would have given everything. He already had gone

through enough, just admitting and digesting what she had already done to him.

He would get an update on the events at lunchtime. Perhaps the posters and the ads in the newspaper will have been fruitful. It was Friday, and most people had just been paid, so they had already started doing their grocery shopping and therefore must have seen the posters that had been put up in plain view, in store windows around the city.

The posters in the storefront windows ...in public places...in...that's what had been bothering him! How was it that Anita hadn't mentioned it to him last night? That she didn't wasn't normal. After all, it was a disappearance; she should have at least asked whether he had had any news. But now that he thought about it, should he have even been out with Anita knowing that Jane had disappeared? Had he been normal for not bringing the subject up himself?

He didn't know anymore what was normal and what wasn't. Since he had been with Jane, everything had been both too perfect and too cruel. His love for her had betrayed him. About a year before she had decided to let him know that she was ready to start a relationship, he had bought a piece of land in the Eastern Townships countryside. He had wanted to build a different life for himself there. He had various business projects and was adjusting them in such a way that the day he would meet the right woman, he would be ready. When Jane had written him, he hadn't had the slightest hesitation; he had seen the rest of his life pass right before his eyes. He knew she was the

woman he had been waiting for. A few months later, he gave up on his projects in the Townships. There were two reasons for this. One was that the mother of his children had backed him up against a wall and the judge had favored her. If Simon had not gone back to live in the same city as his children, he would have lost the privilege of joint custody, which he had had up until then. His children and Jane were all he had, and he had gotten attached to Jane's children, as well. He sacrificed the rest and came back. In spite of this, the judge did not keep his word and took away his custody anyway, making a new schedule that reduced the amount of time he could spend with his children.

Two years later, here he was, losing Jane. Luckily, he still had his children. All his other dreams had come crumbling down around him, one after the other. What a disaster!

Simon thought of all those people who thought they knew him, who thought that he had had an easy life. Right! The position he had at the company he worked at, the same position he had had for a little over ten years now, had been earned by working with fervor and determination. He had been courageous and determined to pursue his ambitions and aimed for success in all he had undertaken since his adolescence. He persevered when most would have given up. His best friends had tried to convince him countless times to relax and take it easier. They always told him, "C'mon, live a little and come out with us." Simon had gone through so many different experiences that he had acquired a wisdom that was well beyond his

age. Other events had temporarily gotten the best of him, but he had gotten through them and discovered an unexpected inner strength. Not only had he undergone a series of trials, but some of his dreams had fallen through. He had, among other things, lost his mother, he had been unable to take over the family business, which he so wanted, his brothers and sisters had chosen different paths, and he had lost a child. His father hardly spoke to him anymore either, lost as he was in his own pain since the death of Simon's mother.

He had had choices to make. One day, while reading a book, a sentence had allowed him to see life from a perspective that put words to what he had lived through. *All events that we go through are put on our path to bring us toward something even greater and better.* He had believed in this sentence and had lived by it these last twenty years. He had even turned it into a personal conviction. Today, he allowed himself to question it. How did losing Jane bring him to something better? Because of her, he had known the worst, due to the constant pain since the day he understood that she had given up on him but, more importantly, with her, he had also experienced the best life had to offer.

That morning, he was angrier with himself than ever. He knew now why he had gone out with Anita. He felt nothing for this woman. His heart had become a prisoner of the love he had for Jane.

Perhaps destiny had played a part in this as well. Perhaps this was all part of the answer he was looking for. The more he thought about it, the more he found it

bizarre that Anita hadn't inquired about Jane's disappearance. There was a poster hanging up in all commercial buildings in the city, including where Anita had her office. She couldn't have missed it. He had perhaps been onto something yesterday when he had asked himself why she had suddenly walked into his life. But none of this made any sense to him. What did she have to do with this whole story?

Whatever the case, he would let the inspector know about it today.

She kept thinking about how she would finish them off. Despite the intense anger she felt, she didn't want him to suffer. Ideally, she would have wanted him to go gently, telling him she loved him, but that was impossible. She owed him the privilege of a death without pain, with all the dignity he deserved. But how? It was what she had been thinking about all morning while waiting for her first appointment.

Drowning, medication, exhaust pipe...were there any other methods to achieve her goal?

Would she let Jane watch him die, so that she could finally realize once and for all that she was losing him? Maybe. Or she could let them die together, for Simon's sake. One thing was certain: Even though she was angry with Simon, she still had the utmost admiration for him. The commitment he had toward this woman could only be perceived as admirable. This man was, and would always be, the hero of what could have been a beautiful love story. Jane was the evil witch who had destroyed everything. She, Anita, was the good fairy who was returning Cinderella to the prince before dying. It was her commitment to him. A commitment to the only man she will have ever loved. For her, it was also the only imaginable commitment she could make, given the circumstances.

She had the answer. She would put him to sleep and then put him in the bathtub, where he would slowly drown. He wouldn't even know that he was dying. As for Jane, she didn't really care. She would think of something. She would give both love and freedom to Simon at the same time. She suddenly felt at peace, almost serene, and had no regrets. In fact, the pain she felt was not that unlike what a widow who still loved her partner must feel...

She was losing him physically, but she would keep him in her soul.

She would have Simon write a note saying that he was sorry, but that he simply was unable to go on living without Jane. He would quickly be forgiven out of compassion for his situation. Stories like this were fairly common. Newspapers were filled with them, and people would soon forget.

As for herself, when she would speak of him, she would preserve the memory of this man as he really was – Jane will be the only guilty party.

This is how she would mourn. This is how she would show him her love. And when she wanted to see him, she would look at his picture or visit his gravesite. All this, without the slightest chance of running into him, alone or with this woman on his arm. This would now be her life...

Friday 9:30 a.m.

Louis Landry knocked at the door. A tall, skinny man answered. He was in his late thirties with messy hair and square glasses perched halfway down his nose. He tried to tame the strands of hair sticking out with his right hand but without much success. The detective noticed that this was bothering him.

“Yes?”

“Hi. I’m Detective Landry – here’s my badge. I passed by yesterday to meet you, but your neighbors told me that you work the night shift. I’m sorry to be stopping by at what must be a very early hour for you, but I have a couple of questions to ask you.”

“That’s fine. I was already awake. How can I help you?”

“I’m investigating a disappearance. I’m checking out anything that might help us. We have reason to believe that the missing person may still be within city limits. Have you noticed anything unusual these last few days? Any new faces, or perhaps a new car?”

“No. I haven’t noticed anything different. Are you talking about the woman whose picture is up at the grocery store?”

“Yeah. That’s the one.”

“I’m sorry. I would have liked to help you. You can maybe leave me your card – I’m not the type to check up on my neighbors, but now that I know about this, I’ll try to be a little more attentive to what’s going on around the neighborhood.”

“Thanks. Here’s my card.” The Detective took down the man’s contact information and said goodbye.

9:45 a.m.

Detective Landry was on his way to the house that belonged to the couple on vacation. He hadn't heard anything from the neighbors yesterday. He would go back again today to see if he could get some news – time was increasingly becoming of the essence.

As he was driving up to the house, he could easily make out that a car had been there that morning. The tracks in the snow that had fallen the previous night were evident. Once his car was parked near the house, he got out to survey the area. There were footprints, which proved that someone, probably only one person, had gone up to the door and into the house. He confirmed that there had been no forced entry; therefore it must have been their friend that had come by. There were no footprints near the garage – he looked through the small garage window, but couldn't see any vehicle parked inside from his angle. He noticed that there was a wall with a door that separated the garage in two more-or-less equal sections. He figured that a workshop and some storage space were probably what was on the other side, but he couldn't see anything. A heavy curtain was completely covering the window on that side. As he went back to his car, he thought that this was probably an ideal location to hide someone, or to hide out.

He estimated, judging by the property markers, that the house was about eighty meters wide by about a hundred meters deep. There were no neighbors in the back, only woods as far as the eye could see. The closest house to the east was about two hundred meters away, and about one hundred meters away to the west. The house's privacy was easily kept by the rows of trees and borders arranged in such a way that the neighbors couldn't be seen from the house and, more importantly, the neighbors couldn't see in the house.

He got back in his car and went to visit the neighbors to the west, the ones who had seen the stranger the day before. The woman had told him that her husband had woken up earlier than usual that day to put some logs on the fire and had noticed a car drive into the driveway at 6:50 a.m. They said they had wanted to call him, but it was too early. The husband tried at 9 o'clock but the detective's secretary had told him that Louis had already left and that she would give him the message. The woman gave the detective a brief description of the car.

She was dozing off, almost asleep, in a near-perfect silence. She heard a door close. The stranger, unless something unexpected had happened, could not be back so soon. Maybe she had forgotten something. She estimated that she must have left about two hours ago. She suddenly had hope. It lasted only a moment, though, because then she heard the motor of a car start and the sound move further and further a way. The bit of hope she had fostered for a second was dashed. She began to cry like a baby, but also like a woman who has just realized how useless her life has been. She had lost the love and respect of the most important people of her life – her children, Simon, and his children. She regretted it, but it was too late now. She would die with her regrets, but what hurt the most was that she would not be able to tell them – it was worse than dying.

In his quest for happiness, Simon had committed himself to her. Because of this twisted stranger, he would die because he had loved her. What would happen to their children? They had nothing to do with any of this. Simon's children would find themselves without a father, and hers, without a mother. It was inconceivable. It could not end this way. When the stranger came back and once again gave her the chance to speak, Jane would tell her what

she thought. She had to convince the stranger... the only thing she risked now was dying sooner.

9:40 a.m.

If he didn't call the inspector now, he would only be able to call him after his 10 o'clock meeting, which would only finish a little before lunch. At that time, he would probably miss him, and Simon wouldn't be in his office much that afternoon.

He picked up the receiver and dialed the inspector's number, which he now knew by heart. The inspector picked up on the second ring.

"Hello."

"Hi, Inspector. This is Simon Griffin."

"Hi Simon, how are you?"

"Not too bad. I told you that I would call you if I thought of something new. I'm afraid it might be a trivial detail, but last night I went to supper with Anita Morin, the first psychologist I went to see after Jane and I separated. I have only bumped into her once since, but all of a sudden, I've seen her three times in one week. This could only be a coincidence, but what seems strange to me is that last night, despite knowing my history with Jane, she didn't ask anything about her. There is a poster of Jane in the window display at the entrance of the building where she works – I checked on my way to work this morning. Knowing about Jane's disappearance and knowing my

relationship with her, in her place, wouldn't you have at least asked me if I had had any news about her?"

"Probably. It's very strange and it's also a very interesting detail. What do you know about this woman?"

"During supper last night, she confessed her love for me after kissing me. I told her that I could never love her – that it wasn't her fault – that Jane was the only woman in my life and that all I could give Anita was friendship, nothing more. The only other thing I think I can add is that I had only consulted her three or four times for therapy. I stopped going because I didn't like her reaction during our last session together. She seemed to be lacking objectivity and judgment. Yesterday, however, she apologized for that."

"You did well to speak to me about it. An investigation is like a puzzle. Sometimes, when a piece is not the same color, you think there is no place for it – but it is usually the piece that links the other pieces together."

"Mr. Gauthier, do you still think that you'll find Jane alive?" asked Simon.

"I'll be honest with you, Simon. I trust you and I know how much you love this woman. There are different types of leads – the leads we have up to now are similar to investigations that usually involve either teenagers who were drugged and taken to be used for prostitution purposes, or runaway teenagers. But the facts being as they are in this case, Jane is not a

teenager, so the kidnapping theory is becoming less and less probable. No ransom has been requested. What kidnapper would risk waiting so long unless it was part of some unusual plan? Why wait? Is it to let the dust settle and take advantage of the time to put us on another scent? It's possible. If that's the case, then prudence will be our only means of uncovering any sinister plan. It's always surprising to realize to what extent criminals try to stay at the top of their game. It's like a virus that we cure with a vaccine – with time, the virus adapts to the vaccine and strikes again even stronger than before. Now, with the technology we have and all our experts being better than ever before, criminals are forced to find ways to outsmart the vaccine. It becomes a game of cat and mouse. Who will be the slyest? Now, don't get me wrong, I'm not talking about psychopaths who come and mix up all the cards because they respect neither their own craft nor ours, or novices who, for all sorts of reasons and sometimes no reason whatsoever, lead us down the wrong path because their actions are so demented. But to get back to this investigation, I still seriously think that Jane might be trying to make people think it's a kidnapping or a disappearance, whichever you choose. I've got a lead to follow along those lines this afternoon." The inspector took a long breath before continuing, trying to reason out his thoughts. "The last option we have is murder," he said, "but the question is why? What is the motive? Nothing seems impossible to me anymore, not after everything I've seen. People who kill other people always have a reason, but it isn't always directly related to the person they kill. A man

will often kill another man or woman without knowing him or her for something he has suffered. It is often what we call an unmotivated act – because the motive is not obvious if someone doesn't take the time to analyze it – but there is always a hidden motive.”

“I don't know anymore, Simon,” continued the inspector, “but rest assured that I am conducting this investigation as if Ms. Lamer were still alive. I have to find her, and I will not rest until I do. I would have liked to have given you a better answer, but I have none. I can only be honest with you. I'll let you know more by the end of the day.”

11:10 a.m.

“May I speak with Inspector Gauthier, please?”

“The Inspector is not in his office right now.
May I take the message?”

“Yes. He came by to see me this morning, but I wasn’t there. My employee told me that he wanted me to call him back as soon as I got to the store; he said it was important.”

“Alright,” answered Inspector Gauthier’s secretary who had been waiting for the call. “Can you leave me a number where he can reach you within the next fifteen minutes?”

The inspector’s secretary immediately called him to pass on the message. The inspector had hardly hung up the phone with her when he started dialing the number he was given. He felt he was on to something. What had seemed to him to be a trivial detail just that morning was possibly becoming his best lead.

“May I speak with Mr. Jobin, please?”

“Yes, one moment.”

“Luke Jobin.”

“Hi Mr. Jobin, Inspector Gauthier here. I’d like to thank you for calling me back so quickly. I’m investigating a disappearance, and I need you to check

something out for me. I might be wrong, but I have to follow every lead I've got."

"Is this about that woman on all the posters – a Ms. Lamer?"

"Yes, that's the one."

"What can I check for you?"

"We know that someone called her from the phone booth near your store the night of the disappearance. It's possible that there is a link. If we start with the hypothesis that the phone call is indeed linked to Ms. Lamer's disappearance, then I would need to know if there was anyone in the store between ten minutes before the call and ten minutes after the call. If I'm right, then it's possible that the person who made the call came into the store and bought something or just passed some time by going through a magazine or something."

"When was the call made?" asked the storeowner.

"Last Sunday night at 5:15," answered the inspector. "I'd really appreciate it if you could give me all the information you have. Surveillance cameras, debit or credit cards...anything that might give me a clue. It is also important that you speak to the person who was working there at the time; they might remember something."

"That shouldn't be too difficult; it's usually calm here at that time on a Sunday. I'll call you back as soon as I can."

“Thanks very much. I have a feeling that you’ll find something that could be very interesting. By the way, how’s your son?”

“Fine. He’s feeling much better. He came out of the hospital this morning almost happy to have missed a few days of school. These kids! We worry about them and then they come up with this nonsense!”

“I’m happy that everything turned out okay. I’ll wait for your call; here’s my cell number...”

The inspector was impatient to hear from Mr. Jobin, especially since he knew that the call Jane received the Sunday she disappeared had come from the same phone booth as the anonymous calls Simon had received.

10:55 a.m.

Simon got to his Friday meeting at 9 o'clock. He had decided then that he was going to take the afternoon off. He had had a difficult week with Jane's disappearance and all the urgent projects he had to finish at work. It had drained all his energy. He was sure the office could do without him for a couple of hours. He would tie up a few loose ends, leave instructions for the weekend shift and leave at around 1 o'clock. At home, he would take a hot bath to relax and spend the rest of the afternoon going over every detail and writing down anything that raised a doubt. The inspector would be calling him back today, and he had to be able to give him whatever lead he could. The atmosphere was becoming too heavy to bear. He was imagining the worst for Jane. The slightest questionable detail he could uncover to help find Jane would give him a little hope, and he definitely needed to find some; he didn't want to seem too worn out this weekend with his kids.

When he got back to his office, he had some messages waiting for him on his voice mail. One of them was from the department secretary, asking that he call her back. She had an important message for him.

Simon went to see her in her office. “Oh, Simon,” she said, “Inspector Gauthier’s secretary called to say that he has found a serious lead and would like to talk to you about it, but that he would be out of the office all day. He wants you to meet him at this address at 6:30 this evening without fail.”

Simon thought that it must be very important. At that time on a Friday, his wife must surely be waiting for him for supper, as it was once the case for him...such a long time ago.

1:15 p.m.

“Inspector Gauthier?”

“Yes, speaking.”

“Luke Jobin here.”

“Hi.”

“I’m calling to give you the information I’ve found up till now. You’re lucky. One of my friends, who works as a security guard, looked at the videotape for me. He was in the neighborhood fixing a client’s security system and was nice enough to come by once I explained the urgency of the situation. I’ve kept about a half hour of tape. Six people came into the store during the period you gave me. I also have two debit card payments and two credit card payments, as well as the names that go with them.”

“Excellent work,” said the inspector excited by the news. “I don’t know how to tell you how much I appreciate what you’ve done. I’m meeting someone in fifteen minutes, and I should be done about fifteen to thirty minutes later. I can come by to see the tape right after that. Would that be alright with you?”

“No problem. I’m here until 5 o’clock. I’ll wait for you.”

“Once again, thanks. I have a really good feeling about this.”

Simon was moving toward her with a bouquet of colorful flowers in his hand. He was so handsome and seemed so much in love. She liked so much to see him smile like that. It was a smile full of the precious love he had for her and the pride he felt when he was near her. When you didn't know him, you could mistake his reserved attitude as being cold and sometimes a little up in the air, but that wasn't at all who Simon was. When you got to know him, he was a passionate and warmhearted man. He was also extremely humble. His well-kept body and appearance often turned the heads of the women he passed, but she trusted him completely and therefore was not even remotely worried. He lived only for her; he was crazy about her and always would be. He was coming closer and closer, only a few meters from her. He was so close to her now that he stretched out his arms to hug her. As he came up to her, his lips were moving as if saying something. Then, all of a sudden, without warning, his expression changed. The intense happiness he had portrayed a moment ago was replaced by an intense sadness. He slightly lowered his head and said, "Excuse me, I thought you were someone else. I'm sorry."

She woke up sad and confused. A few tears that normally would have rolled down her cheeks were

instead absorbed by the scarf around her eyes. “You weren’t mistaken, Simon. It was me. I’m sorry, too.”

1:20 p.m.

It was raining heavily, like a typical grey autumn day. It was cold and windy out, and he was walking hurriedly, hardly realizing that this was no kind of weather for this type of activity. He was probably the only one out in it, in such a determined way. He had practically run out of the office earlier, saying that he had an urgent errand to run. He had arrived home, had taken one huge gulp of pink grapefruit juice, changed, and had left right away.

After his walk, he would take a long, warm shower in the hopes that it would revive him a little. He didn't want to lie down for even a couple of minutes, in case he fell asleep. He had more important things to do this afternoon. The little time he had to himself had to be spent on what he had planned. He would take a notebook and go out to have a coffee and muffin somewhere. He would write down everything that came to his mind. One small detail, one clue was all he wanted.

He thought of the inspector. What could he have discovered? Was his lead really as serious as his secretary had made it sound? He decided that, after his coffee, he would go to the address his secretary had given. He would at least know the way there

beforehand. It might also remind him of something...anything.

“Hi, Paul. Are things going okay?”

“I might be onto something interesting. I have to meet the owner of a convenience store near the phone booth from which a call was placed to Ms. Lamer the Sunday she disappeared. He might have some useful information.”

“I checked out what you asked me to. Your instinct is definitely on the mark, Paul. The phone company just confirmed that no call has been placed from Jones’s phone to Ms. Lamer’s house since her disappearance.”

“Isn’t that strange?” said the inspector, pensive. “These two call each other often, and then nothing. How could he have known that Jane had disappeared? Her parents didn’t call him; neither did the other people I spoke with. Unless, before the posters went up, there was some element that we missed...I’m sure I didn’t mention it when I questioned him – I never totally explained why I was questioning him. He could have easily thought that we were questioning him about Simon. I think we’ll move onto the next stage right away. We can’t allow this weekend to go by without taking some action. Do you have the warrant?”

“Yes. Do you want me to take care of it personally?”

“Yes. I’d prefer that it be you.”

“No problem. I’ll take one of my colleagues with me. I’m sure he’ll do a good job and won’t erase any clues, if there are any.”

“Excellent. Thanks a lot, Louis. You’re doing me a big favor.”

“It’s nothing, Paul. It’s my pleasure to be able to help you. I’ll get in touch with Jones as soon as I reach my colleague, and we’ll arrange to meet with him right after he finishes work and proceed with the search. I’ll let you know what happens later this afternoon.”

1:50 p.m.

The inspector went to the convenience store where Mr. Jobin was waiting for him. He had just left a meeting with a therapist Jane had once consulted, but he still didn't have the answers he had been hoping for. According to the therapist, Jane would not have gone as far as orchestrating her own kidnapping or disappearance; however, she did say that Jane had displayed a great need for approval, and that she also had a lot of bitterness inside her. This could be what pushes her to go to great lengths to show Simon what she is capable of. She could hurt Simon in order to gain the approval of her friends, family, peers, and the judicial system, if she had to. Jane was the type who had to be right and look good by hurting Simon – even if she still loved him as much as she always had.

This just went to support what Simon had been told in therapy. This explained the complaint, the accusation, the time she went to his house to return the flowers he had had delivered to her. She needed to hurt him, the person who loved her so much. The inspector understood why Simon was so hurt. This woman and their children were the center of his universe, his equilibrium. He deserved to be listened to when he spoke about it. The inspector was overwhelmed by the empathy he felt for him. What would happen to him if he lost his wife? What would

be his reason for living? He would find Jane for Simon. He had to. This man deserved to find the peace inside him once again.

She was nervous this afternoon when she met her clients, thinking as she was about what would happen in the next couple of hours. Tonight, everything would be finished. Everything would go back to the way it was supposed to be. This woman would no longer be a barrier to their love, and Simon would belong to her, only to her. Tomorrow she would sleep in all morning. With her eyes closed, she would feel him holding her and cuddling with her for the first time since they met. In the afternoon, she would go shopping with him beside her. She would show him all her favorite shops. She would finally be happy, and she would make him happy too, in her own special way.

Her plan was simple and efficient, without fault. Simon would come meet her at 6:30, thinking that he was meeting with the inspector. The rest was child's play. She had everything she needed. She was ready. Nobody would suspect a thing. Simon would be the only one to blame. He would have come on to her; she would have refused his advances. Furious, he would have decided to finish her off. In a moment of inattention, she would have defended herself, but thinking that she had only hurt him, she will have killed him instead. She would then inject herself with the same sedative she will have already given to Jane so as not to raise any suspicion. The only difference

between Jane and her will be that she won't have drowned in the bathtub.

Everything was perfectly thought out. She would also finally convince Simon of the intensity of her love for him and of everything she was willing to do to keep him close to her. This last sacrifice would be a consecration, the ultimate proof of their love.

2:40 p.m.

The inspector had taken the videotape and documents and had gone to the police station to look them over. He wanted to study the names and observe the faces of the four men and two women who had entered the store the evening of the disappearance. There was a feeling, or positive expectation, that pushed him to keep going and convinced him to pay attention to every detail. If his hopes panned out, by looking at this tape, he would see the face of the person he was looking for – either the kidnapper or the murderer.

After a little over an hour, he isolated himself near a phone and called his secretary.

“Hi, Doris.”

“Hi, Paul.”

“Have you had any other calls?”

“Yes. Six since this morning, but nothing concrete. Mostly just curious people who want to know if we’ve found the woman yet, and if the investigation is progressing.”

“Nothing for me?”

“Nope.”

“Thanks, Doris.”

Disappointment. That was what he was feeling at the moment. Even if it didn't prove anything in and of itself, he hadn't seen Jones's face on the videotape, but he tried to stay positive anyway.

4:12 p.m.

The car slowly entered the driveway. Valero, the police officer who was staking out the house, had been at his post since 3 o'clock, as Inspector Landry had asked. He was sitting in his car, parked on a little road leading to the woods; the driver of the car couldn't see him. He couldn't see the driver either, but he had seen the car and that was all that mattered. As soon as he had seen it stop near the house, he slowly drove up and passed in front of the driveway. From what he had been told, he was able to ascertain that the model of the car matched the description the neighbors had given Inspector Landry. A woman got out of the car, walked up to the house and opened the door as if she were at her own home. He didn't have a doubt; this woman was the friend of the couple on vacation, coming to make sure that everything was okay. He took his cell and dialed the number he was given.

"Inspector Gauthier here."

"Hi, Inspector. Luke Valero here. I'm the police officer in charge of staking out the house on De La Picardie."

"Oh, right. Hi. Inspector Landry told me about you. Do you have any news?"

"He asked me to call you in case there was any movement. I know that it's Friday, but I would like to

have some instructions. A woman has just arrived at the house and has gone in. Based on the information I was given, she is supposed to be a friend of the owners. Do you want to meet her, or do I proceed with the usual questioning?”

“Well, that’s good news. She might be able to help us. I’m starting to get impatient. I don’t want to sound too optimistic, but I feel that we’re close. I would like to meet her myself, but I already have something planned with my wife...a promise written in stone.”

“I understand, Inspector. Just tell me what you want me to do.”

“Here’s what we’re going to do. I’ll be at my house at 7 o’clock at the latest. Talk to her, briefly explain the situation, and ask her if I can meet her at her house around 7:30. I wouldn’t want to worry her needlessly by asking her to meet me at the station. You can perhaps tell her that it should only take half hour at the most to reassure her. If she can’t meet at that time, ask when a good time would be. If it’s anytime after 7:30, I can arrange it. I’d really like to talk to her tonight.”

“Perfect. I’ll relay the message. I didn’t think anyone would appear so quickly. Do you think it’s necessary that I stay in the area after I speak to her?”

“No. I don’t think so. Unless something seems suspicious to you, you can leave.”

“Thanks, Inspector. Have a nice evening with your wife.”

“Thank you.”

4:17 p.m.

As she took off the scarf around her eyes she said:

“Good evening, Jane. Tonight is a very special occasion for us. I brought you some clean clothes. We’re expecting company. I’m sure that Simon will be happy to see you again. What do you think?”

Even with the shock of her eyes, which were still only half-open, being exposed to the light for the first time in days, Jane managed to blurt out:

“I think you’re crazy. Have you even thought about our children? Do you know how much Simon loves them? Do you really think you’ll make him happy by killing him?”

“I know. I, myself, have lived through that. My father died when I was still very young, but sometimes we don’t have a choice in the matter.”

“You’re committing two pre-meditated murders. Do you realize that you’ll spend the rest of your life in jail?” Jane no longer knew how she could change the stranger’s mind, but she had to try. “Have you ever thought that your getting to this point may have something to do with your father and the fact that you miss him?” she continued. “Do you really want our children to suffer as much as you suffered? I can

understand that you love Simon a whole lot, but I can't understand why you want to kill him."

"Don't bother trying, Jane, I've made up my mind. As for..."

At that moment, the doorbell rang. Jane started screaming and asking for help with all her might. Anita, who was crossing the living room to get to the kitchen, took the ash shovel near the fireplace, walked back towards Jane and hit her over the head with it. Jane immediately lost consciousness... or was she dead? Now wasn't the time to check; she put the scarf back around Jane's eyes as best she could. The doorbell rang a second time. She was running on adrenaline and her thoughts were all over the place. She told herself that she had to keep her cool and go answer the door. The person at the door had, without a doubt, heard the screams. If she didn't take the situation in hand now, it would get worse; this person might even alert the police. She instinctively began to sing and went to answer the door, appearing surprisingly calm. She opened the door a crack and answered:

"Yes?"

"Hello. My name is Inspector Valero," he said as he showed her his badge. "I'm sorry to bother you. Can I speak to you for a few moments?"

"I don't think I can help you. I don't live here, you know. This is my friends' house and I'm only here to make sure everything is under control."

“Yes, I know. We’ve already been informed. I don’t want to lie to you, but I’ve been waiting for you. I’m here for Inspector Gauthier. A woman disappeared last weekend and we’re checking out the neighborhood. It’s just routine.”

“Is it the woman we see everywhere on the posters and in the newspapers?”

“Yes. That’s the one. The inspector wanted to know if he could meet you at your house around 7:30. It would only take about a half hour.”

“It’s just that I had a supper planned...”

“It could be later if you prefer. He can rearrange his schedule; it’s just that he told me he would really appreciate it if he could meet with you tonight. The investigation is at a standstill and any new information would be useful. He is the one leading the investigation, and I don’t know all the details, so it would be better if he met with you himself.”

“Fine. I’ll be at my house around 7:30. You said his name was Gauthier?”

As soon as he wrote down her address in his notebook and took his second step outside, Anita closed the door and went straight to Jane. That had been a close call. She was still shaking. He had probably thought she had been singing. If only he had known how close he had been to solving the investigation.

She could feel Jane's pulse. She heard her sigh weakly when she let go of her arm. Less than a minute later, she was back with a cold wet towel, which she placed on Jane's forehead where she had the bump. She was slowly regaining consciousness.

"I warned you," said the stranger. "You almost left us earlier than planned. It would have been a shame if you had missed Simon. I've decided to give the two of you some time alone. I will have to leave you two for a little while tonight. Something unexpected has come up, but I plan to use it to my advantage to confuse things a little. I'll wait for Simon to arrive, and once I have immobilized him, I'll make my move. Until then, we'll eat, and afterwards, I'll help you clean up a little and change. We only have an hour before Simon arrives. I will have to tie you up again before he arrives. You weren't a very good girl earlier."

She removed the scarf from Jane's eyes and gave her fries, a piece of chicken, and a soft drink, all of which she had picked up at the grocery store. She freed one of Jane's arms and then served herself the same thing.

"To your last meal, Jane."

“Paul? It’s Louis. I know you have something planned with your wife, but do you have a couple of minutes?”

“Do you have some news?” asked the inspector wanting to get straight to the point.

“Maybe. We’ve just finished searching Jones’s place. I don’t know this Ms. Lamer, nor do I know Mr. Griffin, but from what you’ve told me, I find it hard to believe that this woman could go out with a guy like this. His apartment was not very neat, not to mention the stench. I can still smell it now, but I’ll stop complaining. We found some porn magazines - a little hardcore, if you get my drift - pictures of Ms. Lamer, in fact, a lot of pictures, and under his mattress we found three pairs of women’s panties, two of which had been worn and never washed, and the other, seemingly clean at first glance. There was also a bra in the same place. Jones didn’t say a word, except that we didn’t have anything on him, and that he didn’t remember that these underclothes were under his mattress, or to whom they belonged.”

“This man seems to have a very short-term memory, don’t you think?” said the inspector. “Take him to the station and have him wait until I arrive. I should be there around 8 or 8:15 at the latest. If he uses the phone, I want to know where he’s calling.

You never know, he might be feeling the heat and call an accomplice, if, of course, he turns out to be our man.”

“No problem, Paul. Consider it done. See you later.”

6:20 p.m.

Jane had tried everything to make her abductor change her mind, without success. She had threatened to tie Jane up again if she didn't change the subject. Jane had hardly eaten a bite.

6:22 p.m.

"I have to tie you up now. This time, it'll be really tight. I don't want any surprises. If I hear the slightest sound, I will have to kill Simon before you have a chance to talk to him one last time. Think about it."

Anita closed the door behind her and turned the radio on loud, in case Jane decided to warn Simon of the danger. She also put the dryer on to make even more noise. As she sat down, someone knocked at the door. She knew it was him. Her heart was beating fast as she went to open the door for him.

"Hi, Simon. Surprised to see me?" Anita said coyly.

"Anita, what are you doing here?" answered Simon momentarily shocked by the sight of her at the door.

"Come in. The inspector told me that he had asked you to be here as well. It seems that there is some news about the investigation. Sit down, and let

me explain. I was just making myself a cup of coffee; do you want one while we wait? The inspector just called. He's on his way, but he'll be a couple of minutes late."

"Fine. One milk, one sugar."

"This house belongs to some friends of mine who are on vacation. The inspector agreed to meet us here. I thought it would be less stressful here than at the station, as he had initially suggested. I had to come here after work in any case, as I've done everyday since my friends left on vacation, just to make sure everything was under control. Here you go," Anita passed Simon the mug. "If it's not as you like it, let me know."

"It's perfect," said Simon after taking a sip. "Did he tell you what he found out?"

"No. I thought that you would know more than I. I'm really sorry about Jane. If I didn't mention anything about it yesterday, it's because I didn't know how to bring it up. I felt really uncomfortable, and my head...was elsewhere. How do you feel? How are you getting though this?" Anita was laying her trap.

"I'm not really sure how I'm getting though. I hope the inspector has some good news."

"The way I see it is that if he has asked us here on at this time on a Friday night, it must be important."

"Yes. I guess you're right."

Jane could hardly hear anything from where she was; the dryer was too close. Her heart was pounding

like a drum. The only thing she hoped for at that moment was that this lunatic wouldn't change her mind and still leave her and Simon time to talk to each other, at least for the time it took her to tell him what she had in her heart...and to kiss him one last time. Just knowing he was so close to her reassured her. But what was happening? At what time did he arrive? She wanted so much to lose herself in his arms. What she regretted the most were all the times she had told him that, if she were forced to choose between him and her children, he knew what the outcome would be. She knew that she shouldn't have hurt him so much. The only choice she should have made was to choose them all - they were all her family - and to help him to make it work. She thought of how he must have suffered every time she had been so cruel. She had to ask him for forgiveness before dying. She asked God to grant her this last wish.

“Can you tell me how you're involved in this whole investigation?” Simon asked Anita still boggled by her involvement in all this.

“The night Jane was called from the public telephone, I was there. I know who called.”

“I hope you're kidding,” said Simon once again shocked.

“No. I'm very serious. I know the woman who kidnapped Jane, and I also know why she did it.”

She got up, knowing, as she watched him react, that he was already getting weak. With the dose she had put in his coffee, which was stronger than it should

have been, there could be no doubt. She hadn't wanted to take any chances, none whatsoever. She had almost been caught earlier; she wasn't going to take any more risks. "I'll be right back, Simon. Wait for me." A few seconds later, the music that was playing stopped and was replaced by another. From the first notes of "Fly Me to the Moon," he understood what was going on. It was Jane's favorite song. She was there. Everything became very clear. Anita knew their story. All of the unexpected meetings in the last few days hadn't been coincidences. He felt so tired that he had difficulty keeping his eyes open. Only one thing mattered to him now. Anita came back smiling; she even danced a few steps towards him.

"Is...is...Jane.... is Jane still alive?" he stuttered.

"Yes. I kept her alive for you," she answered smiling. "I wanted, out of my love for you, to offer you one last wish, the one of dying by her and with her. You have to understand, Simon, I cannot let you live. I cannot live knowing that you love her instead of me. I know that she means everything to you. Until yesterday, I had hoped that you would accept my feelings for you, but please know that I still have the utmost respect for the loyalty and love you have inside you for her, despite everything she has done to you. In fact, I thought that it would help me win you over to me."

"Where is she? I...need...to.... to see her. I really need her." Simon was desperate now.

“She is here, Simon, in this house. I’m the one who called you here. Don’t be disappointed, that trap was too perfect. There was nothing you could do. I’m the one who called your secretary today. The inspector was not invited; in fact, it’s the opposite. I’m going to go meet him a little later. Without his realizing it, the inspector is actually going to help me. It will give the two of you time together since I will have to delay your death until after my meeting with the inspector.”

“She’s here, Simon. She’s here, Simon...” it was like a mantra in his head forcing him to keep fighting. He concentrated on gathering up all his strength to be able to get up and find her. He had hardly gotten up when he fell to the wooden floor beneath him. The last thing he saw was Anita, all blurry, bending over and telling him that he was only falling asleep.

She had been trying to wake him up for the last ten minutes. He was immersed in a total state of inertia, almost comatose. She had to find a way to bring him around. Every minute, every second that passed was precious. She suddenly had an idea. She was certain that, before leaving, the stranger had forgotten to pick up the leftovers of her supper and make sure, as she always did, that Jane had not kept anything that could help her escape. This time, she had not drunk her soft drink and had uncomfortably hidden it under her legs. She took it and shook the can several times rapidly, hoping that when she opened it, the jet of liquid that would spray in the direction of Simon's face would be enough to wake him up a bit. She pointed the top of the can in his direction and opened the lid. Bulls eye. Even with her hands tied behind her back, she easily gave herself an 8 on 10. A gentle feeling of pride became a tingling feeling that renewed her hope. She saw him stir a bit, then slightly turn his face. She gave it one more try, knowing that this was her last chance.

“Simon! Simon! Simon! You have to wake up, I’m begging you. You have to wake up. Simon! Simon! Simon! Wake up at least to hear me tell you one last time how much I love you. I’m begging you, Simon. If you only knew how important this is to me... I love you, Simon. Can you hear me?”

She continued to speak to him loudly; she was almost screaming through her tears, which she just couldn't hold back any longer.

As he slowly woke up, Simon heard all kinds of voices...first Jane's, and then Anita's all mixed up together. "She's here, Simon...she's here, Simon...You have to wake up...I kept her alive for you...One last wish, to die next to her."

"I really, really need...need Jane. Where is she?" Simon said aloud.

With these words, Jane burst into tears. "Simon, do you hear me? Tell me you can hear me! You have to, Simon."

"Jane! Jane! He turned his head in her direction. Jane, you're alive. I feel so tired; tell me this isn't a dream. You're really alive and so am I?"

"Yes, Simon. We're both alive, but not for long. When this woman comes back she's going to kill the both of us."

"How are you? Did she hurt you?" Simon asked amazed that he finally had Jane before his eyes.

"Not physically. It's mostly my heart that has taken a hit. I thought I would never see you again. I'm so sorry for everything that is happening. It's all my fault. Please forgive me for having hurt you so much."

"Seeing you alive is all that matters to me, Jane," answered Simon. "I was angry with you, but I have never stopped loving you. Never. We have to

get out of here. Think of our children, think of what we once were. We have to get out of this nightmare. If I could just untie my hands...I have to get a hold of myself. I'm so drowsy, I can't think straight. She must have put something in my coffee. Do you think you can reach that soft drink can beside you and throw it to me? I have an idea."

Using her knees, she managed to get the soft drink can, roll it under her legs, underneath her buttocks and, with a lot of effort, into her right hand. She had managed to carry out Simon's instructions very well, and was able to throw the can a few inches from his hands. "Perfect, Jane," he said. Despite the difficulty he still had coordinating his movements, a few minutes later, he finally had the can between his own hands. What he hoped for now was to be able to bend the can back and forth to break it in two. Once he had accomplished this, he would give half the can to Jane, and they could try to use the cutting edge of the can to cut through their bonds...hoping they still had enough time left.

In the meantime, Inspector Gauthier was at Anita's, in the middle of an official interrogation of which she was unaware. He had recognized her on the videotape and was now showing it her to gauge her reaction to it. He hadn't even thought that a woman could be involved in this whole story...but this entire disappearance had revealed itself to be rather unusual... but he had to be careful not to jump to any conclusions too rapidly; he had to admit, however, that this was his second big lead. He had made the right decision to return to the convenience store to check a second time.

"Ms. Morin," he said after having pressed the pause button, "do you recognize this woman?"

"I was on holiday and preparing to make myself some dinner, which explains why I wasn't dressed up that night, but it's me, alright. If I had known..."

"Ms. Morin," began the inspector, "I have to emphasize that it is very important for us to know what you were doing at that convenience store on Sunday, the reason being that a woman was kidnapped that same night and received a call from the payphone near the parking lot of the store during the ten minutes we see on this tape. There were only six people who showed up during that time, including yourself. Can you please give me your version of events?"

“I just stopped by to pick up some milk for my cat,” answered Anita as innocently as possible. “While I was there, I filled up on gas. I was the only client there then. As I was leaving, I ran into someone I know. We spoke for a little bit and then I went back home. That’s about all I can say.”

“You ran into someone you know. A friend? A relative? Someone who can confirm what you’ve just said?” probed the inspector.

“Of course. In fact, it was really just an acquaintance. I’ll tell you who it was because you’re an inspector. It was a man I had as a client about a couple of weeks ago. Let’s just say that he no longer wanted to be just my client, if you get my drift. He was rather nice, but I wasn’t interested.”

“Can you give me his name? This is for the investigation, and it will remain between the two of us, but I may just check it out to confirm the facts.”

“Fine. I don’t mind telling you, but I have to remind you that I have a doctor-client privilege that professionally binds me to my clients. His name is Simon Griffin.”

“Simon Griffin?” asked the inspector taken aback.

“Yes. Do you know him?” inquired Anita.

“I’ve already questioned Mr. Griffin. Why did he come to see you?”

“He was going through a separation and was having a hard time with it. I tried to help him...but I

guess he didn't want my help anymore. It's a shame really."

"Do you think he still needs help?" asked the inspector trying to understand the turn of events.

"Without a doubt. He is very troubled by this separation."

"Do you think, as a therapist, that Mr. Griffin can go as far as committing suicide, kidnapping, or even murder if he were pushed too far?" The inspector was trying to put some logic to this new evidence.

"It's hard to say. I only met with him four or five times. I hadn't completed my evaluation of him. Sometimes there are people who spend years with someone without ever really knowing them, so I can't really say. He seemed to be a very intelligent man, but with beliefs that were... a little rigid."

"You said that you met Mr. Griffin as you were leaving the store. Did you see him near the telephone booth, either before or after your conversation?"

"I'm trying to remember where his car was," Anita was trying to sound as convincing as possible. "Wait. Mine was near the gas pumps. I was on the way to my car when he called to me. It's coming back to me now. I can't say from where he was coming, but I remember that, after our conversation, he headed towards the parking lot of the grocery store next door. I wasn't really paying attention. Anyway, then I left."

"Did he seem nervous, worried, or in a rush?"

“I would only say he seemed surprised. You know, Inspector, if you have to confirm these facts with this man, I can’t stop you, but to tell you the truth, I would prefer to keep this between the two of us. With everything going on these days...”her trap was laid.

“I understand. I sense that you’re worried. Would you say that you’re a little afraid of his reaction if he finds out you’ve spoken to me?” The inspector didn’t know what to think anymore.

“I think the word afraid is a little strong. It might just be a feeling of insecurity...added to the fact that I’m a woman and I live alone. I don’t want to make a bigger deal out of this than necessary. Mr. Griffin is probably a very nice man.”

“I thank you very much for having taken the time to meet me on a Friday night, Ms. Morin,” concluded the inspector. “I just need your contact information. The information you’ve given me will undoubtedly be useful. If you have to leave the city in the next couple of days, I would appreciate it if you would call me to let me know. I may have some more questions for you, or things that I want to verify. Here’s my card.” The inspector handed his card to Anita. “If there’s anything at all, please don’t hesitate to call.”

“You’re very kind.”

She opened her purse and took out a business card, on which she wrote her personal number, and handed it to him.

“Here’s mine,” she said. “I’ve written my personal number on it and my cell phone number is already on there. You’ll be able to reach me, one way or another.”

“Thanks. By the way, when are the friends whose house you’re watching coming back from vacation?”

“Next Saturday. Until then, I’ll be going by everyday to make sure that everything is okay.”

“Once again, I’m sorry to have insisted on meeting with you tonight, but this investigation is very important to me.”

“There’s no need to apologize. It’s your job. I just hope I was able to help you. Good night, Inspector.”

As soon as he left, he dialed Simon's number. Someone answered on the second ring.

"Hello."

"Hi. Can I speak with your father, please?" asked the inspector.

"He's busy at the moment. Can I take the message?"

"Tell him that it's Inspector Gauthier and that I need to speak to him right away. It's very important."

"My father is in the bath," the young girl blurt out, "but I'll give him the message. He doesn't want us to disturb him, he's fallen asleep. Does he have your number?"

"Yes. Ask him to call me on my cell phone. I'm not at home."

"Fine. Bye."

He hadn't insisted because he hadn't wanted to make Simon's daughter feel uncomfortable. Simon had explained to his children what to say if someone called while he wasn't there, and they had listened to him. He would wait a half hour. If he hadn't received a call by then, he would go to their house. If Simon wasn't back by then, he would no longer have a choice. Could he be responsible for Jane's

disappearance? Everything was against him now... especially with the information that Ms. Morin had just given him. If Simon wasn't home when he went to see him, he would have to give the information to the police and an arrest warrant would be issued against him. The police officers under the investigator who had handled the harassment charge had always considered Simon to be the prime suspect. The inspector couldn't blame them, since the officers only knew one side of the Lamer-Griffin file. He had, however, managed to convince them to wait until they had all the facts before presuming a suspect's guilt.

The minutes were going by too quickly. All the elements of the investigation were passing in front of his eyes, one by one. He wasn't the type to swear by anything but, in this case, he would have. Yes, he would have sworn that Simon was innocent. His pain had seemed sincere and real. Could he have been fooled that easily? The empathy he had felt for Simon had made him protect Simon from the beginning. His intuition had guided him; he had been the only one to believe in Simon's innocence. He had to find him to clear up some things. If he was actually guilty, he would have to tell him what he had done with Jane. He no longer believed that she was still alive, but maybe it still wasn't too late.

They had been trying to cut the bonds around their wrists for the last ten minutes, but it wasn't easy. For one thing, they could hardly move their hands and there was so little space between the rope and their wrists that, with one wrong move, they would end up slicing their wrists instead of the rope.

"Simon, you don't want to talk to me anymore, do you?" asked Jane. "You're angry with me for what I've done. I understand. I told you I was sorry. I love you. Regardless of what I do in the future, what I've done to you is not at all acceptable, I know, but please talk to me. I'm begging you."

After hesitating for several minutes, he tried to get the first words out. He was also trying to see through the confusion of his emotions – this drowsy effect that he still felt, added to the happiness he also felt for having found Jane, and the anger that still plagued him for everything she had done to him... not to mention the fact that if they didn't do something soon, they would both die.

"Jane...it's hard for me," he began. "I was so looking forward to hearing from you, to making sure that you were still alive. Now that I've found you, I'm afraid. I trusted you so much. I trusted us so much, if you only knew. Do you remember when we spoke of marriage, when we opened our first bank account

together, the houses we looked at together, all the projects we had? What I felt for you was so strong. I still look for you at night when I wake up, when I go to the movies, when I come back from work; I look for you everywhere. Everything reminds me of the two of us. I was in Heaven when I was with you, and it's been Hell since you left. Why did you go so far? Why the lies? Why did you hide your friends from me? Why did you bring me down in front of them for having ideas that were different from theirs? You have no idea how angry I am with you. You have no idea what I felt when I was called to the police station to be given papers telling me to appear in court when you accused me of harassment and was told I had to respect certain conditions, which included staying away from you and your children, and that I would have to go in on the Friday for fingerprinting. I felt like a common criminal, Jane. I'm sure you can imagine what it might have felt like. You were with me the last time I had to go to court to fight for the custody of my children. Remember? I had sold everything and given up a lot just to be with you." Simon couldn't hold it in anymore. "You know that I did it to abide by the agreement and not lose custody of my children. You also know that, despite everything, the judge went back on his word and I lost custody anyway. You and the children were all that I had, Jane, can you understand why I'm still angry with you? Do you know what I felt when I had to sign those papers, just a few days before Christmas? Do you have any idea what those holidays were like? Can you imagine all that it took for me not to let what I was going through

show too much in front of my children? There were even things that you accused me of that weren't true. How could you? Why, Jane? Was I that cruel to you? We had promised to talk to each other, to understand each other. You knew that it wouldn't be easy with children. The day you started lying to me was the beginning of the end. I didn't want to believe what was happening to us. I started panicking more and more each day at the thought of losing you. You knew who I was, Jane. I didn't hide anything from you. We knew what our expectations were before moving in together. We had said that at the slightest disagreement we would find a solution. Why did you change your mind? I didn't get another chance with you; you didn't give me another chance. You knew who I was, Jane. I didn't want to control your life. And for all those times you told me that I didn't understand, there is one thing you should know: I tried my best. I loved you, Jane. I still love you, and I probably will for the rest of my life." Simon stopped. He was so tired, but he had nothing left to lose anymore.

"There's at least one thing I'm sure of," he continued, "you're worth so much more than all of that. I saw the real woman in you, Jane, the one who spends most of her time behind a mask, behind blinders. Are you afraid of showing people who you are? You are so beautiful when you are yourself, Jane, so feminine and wonderful. I felt invincible when I was with that side of you, and so vulnerable when I was with the other side of you. I also had my weaknesses. When I discovered that you told me tales sometimes, and that, rather than reacting, you lied to me, I was deeply hurt.

I've come to understand a lot of things, one of which is that I'm convinced that I can't survive without you. From the very beginning, I knew that our love was for life. If God allows us to get out of here safely, I will thank Him for my children, for the chance to see them everyday of my life. They are my pride. Continuing my life away from you would be so difficult. I don't know if I can trust you again. I would like so much for you to explain to me why you did all this. I'm nothing without you; it just hurts so much. Can you understand how much I loved you, and how much you hurt me?"

"I loved you, too," Jane answered her heart in her throat. "I love you now, and I will for the rest of my life, Simon. It's hard for me to explain to you why I acted the way I did. I don't even understand the half of it. I think I wanted to hurt you for the things I lived through before I met you. I know you're a good person, and that you didn't deserve all that. I know everything we promised one another, and I trusted you, your promise, and your commitment. You are the one, the only one, who made me feel so much like a woman. I felt so loved and desired by you, not only for my body, but for everything that I was. I can't explain to you why I wanted to hurt you, but I can tell you one thing: If God allows us to get out of here safely, this last week has made me realize that I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I know that it's too late, and that I should have told you this before, but it's what I have to say to you, from the bottom of my heart. If you say you believe me, then I will be able to

die in peace and ask God to protect our children. Do you think you could believe...”

The door opened, and they heard her footsteps coming towards them...

“So, my turtledoves, I hope you had time to clear things up and forgive each other.”

8:28 p.m.

A detail came back to him about a half hour before, and he couldn't really understand how it fit in. It was perhaps not normal. Whatever the case, even if there was a possibility that his instinct was wrong, he had to mention it to the inspector. After all, the inspector had seemed understanding, he surely wouldn't mind, even though it was Friday, and the hour was getting late...at least Luke hoped not.

"Inspector Gauthier, please."

"He's not here at the moment. May I take a message?"

"I'm a police officer. I spoke to him this afternoon with regards to an investigation he's conducting."

"That's exactly why he isn't here," answered Mrs. Gauthier. "He had to meet someone tonight. He just called me, and it seems that something new has come up; he'll be home a little later. If it's urgent, you can call him on his cell phone."

"Thanks. I think it very well might be. Have a good evening."

Something new. Maybe this detail would no longer be important...the inspector's wife had made a good impression on him, as had the inspector when

they had spoken on the phone. With all the different kinds of people police officers come across, it was reassuring to know that there were still sound-minded people out there.

“Inspector Gauthier? Detective Luke Valero here. We spoke this afternoon.”

“Yes. Hi. Were you a little bored on a Friday night, or is this an occupational hazard?” asked the inspector.

“Maybe you could tell me. Something is bothering me. It might not be important, but I had to mention it to you. I hope my conscience will be clearer afterwards.”

“Go ahead, I’m listening.”

“This afternoon, when I spoke to Ms. Morin, I felt that she didn’t want me to come in, so I stayed in the doorway. I thought that she might be nervous having a police officer question her, but there was something else. I was speaking to a friend earlier and it came to me. When I told her you wanted to meet with her tonight, she claimed to have dinner plans, but I’m sure I saw a bag of groceries on the kitchen counter behind her. Of course, it could have been anything, even food for the cat, but I thought it would be best to mention it to you.”

“Maybe it was food for a secluded romantic dinner. If so, then I’m afraid I spoiled their dessert. I just left her house.”

“Your wife told me that you have some new information.”

“Yes, but I’m not too happy about what I’ve found out. It’s information that is leading me down a different path. You were right to call me. The more I think about it, the more my instinct is telling me that it couldn’t have been a romantic supper she was preparing. When I saw her, she showed no signs of having drunk wine or any other alcoholic beverage.”

“And yet I was starting to believe it,” Luke replied. “I remember that she was singing rather loudly when she came to open the door. She also had a small ash shovel in her hands. A fire in the fireplace, a romantic dinner...it’s a plausible deduction.”

“I have to let you go. There’s something I have to check. I hope that you’ll sleep well, now that you’ve gotten things off your chest! I’ll tell you what. The house is only a kilometer or two from the road I take to go home. I have to go to the station for a minute or so, depending on what my witness tells me, after which I’ll drive by Ms. Morin’s friends’ place to see if she’s gone back there. I’ll keep you posted. Have a nice weekend.”

“Thanks, Inspector.”

8:46 p.m.

He knocked at the door. A teenager came to answer. He showed her his badge through the window next to the door and explained that he was the one who had called earlier. She opened the door to him. The inspector offered to call her mother if she felt uncomfortable, but she just wanted to know what had happened to her father. The inspector told her that he didn't know and that that was why he had come to see her and her brothers.

“What did he say when he left?” asked the inspector.

“He said that he was going to meet you and that he would be gone for about an hour. He said that your secretary called him at the office and told him that you wanted to meet at 6:30. He usually leaves us the phone number of where he's going to be, but this time he didn't have it. He said that, in case of an emergency, I was to call my mother or 911. He also said that if he wasn't back by 8, he'd call us. He's hardly ever late and, when he is, he always calls us.”

“Do you know in which direction he went?” asked the inspector.

“No. The telephone rang as he was leaving and I went to answer it.”

“I saw him,” said the young boy. “He went to the left. He told me he was going to the other side of the river, on the road where we see the cows in the summer.”

“Excellent. Your father has reason to be proud of you. You’re very good children. I just have one last thing to ask you, I’d like your mother’s name and telephone number. I’m going to call her to tell her what’s happening. And as soon as I have some news about your father, I’ll call you. Don’t worry, I’ll find him.”

He hoped he hadn’t seemed as worried as he was. As soon as he was in his car, he called the station for back up. He recited the address to dispatch and drove towards the house on De La Picardie Street. He would be there in five to eight minutes.

She took her keys and went outside to hide Simon's car behind the garage, so as not to raise suspicion. She would park hers there, too. She came back a couple of minutes later and asked Simon in an urgent tone:

"What do you have to do to disarm the kill switch on your car?"

"There is none."

"Listen, Simon, it's in your best interest to answer me, and right away, or else!"

"Or else what, Anita?" answered Simon now very frustrated. "You'll kill me? Enough with the threats. It's the right-hand turn signal, alright!"

As soon as she was out the door again, Jane asked him why he had answered, since they were going to die anyway. The sight of a strange car in the neighborhood might have been their only chance that somebody would come and check, or call the police.

"You're right, Jane, but I had to buy some time; I've almost cut through the ropes, I just know it. I have to, or else it's all over for the two of us."

"I'm scared, Simon. I don't want to die."

"Stay with me. Don't give up. We still have a chance."

With these words, Anita came back in, filled with a seemingly uncontrollable rage. She took the ash shovel and walked over to him. “Tell me the truth or, I swear, you’ll regret the little time you have left on this Earth.”

He tried to buy a little more time.

“I can’t stop you, Anita. Kill me if you want; it won’t change anything. I was right to stop therapy with you. I knew you had problems. Do you realize what you’re doing? Killing two innocent people! You’ll have to live with that on your conscience for the rest of your life. If you love me as much as you say, then you’ll let us go, Anita. You know how it works. Judges are a lot more lenient on women. They’ll oblige you to be in therapy for a few months and then it will be finished, and you’ll be cured. You still have your whole life ahead of you. I wanted to be your friend, Anita, and my offer still stands. I don’t know what could have led you to do what you are doing now but, believe me, you can overcome it.”

“Enough, Simon! There is nothing more you can do. It’s too late. You can’t change my life. Let me do what I have to do. Don’t contradict me; I want to remember you as the man I loved, the man I will cherish for the rest of my life. I...” Anita was starting to lose control, “just tell me how to disarm your car’s kill switch. Don’t make me wait any longer,” she bellowed out.

“Think about what you’re doing, Anita, I’m begging you. At least let Jane live. Let her go and come sit next to me. We’ll talk, just the two of us.”

Anita lifted her arm with the shovel and went to Jane, “You don’t understand, Simon. Is this what you want?”

“No, stop! It’s the little button just below the one to defog the back window. I swear it’s the truth.”

“If you’re lying to me, she will die so slowly that you’ll beg me to finish her off, Simon.”

She was back quickly and was in the kitchen preparing two syringes. Her plan had changed slightly. She would inject Jane with a dose that would only put her to sleep, then she would fill the bathtub with water and slide her inside. She would then hit Simon with a deadly blow. Once she was sure that he was dead, she would inject herself with the contents of the second syringe so that the police would believe that he had planned the same end for her as for Jane, except that she, unlike Jane, would have managed to distract him just long enough to grab the pickaxe and whack him over the head with it. That’s the story she would give them.

Anita approached Jane, syringe in her hand, and asked her if she had any last words. She then lifted Jane’s right sleeve and pricked her with the needle. Jane kept repeating to Simon that she was sorry for not having known how to love him properly. The effect was almost instantaneous. Her words became low murmurs and, after a few minutes, she drifted off.

Anita no longer felt like herself. She felt as if a part of the person she had become was giving orders to the other part, who then carried out the orders. She felt as if she were both the actor and the spectator. An adrenaline rush enabled her to slide Jane into the tub almost effortlessly. She inserted the stopper and turned on the cold water.

Simon was trying with all his might to free his hands. He couldn't let her die. He refused to stand by and do nothing; he was full of rage. She took the pickaxe and, raising it above her head, said, "I'm sorry, Simon. I love you." She closed her eyes and swung the tool at him with all her strength. Simon managed to bend over just enough that she missed his head, hitting his shoulder instead. The pain from the blow was so intense that he instinctively moved his opposite hand to his injured shoulder to rub it and assess the damage, and this caused what was left of the rope that bound his hands to break. Anita took the pickaxe and was about to give it another swing when the door burst open. "Stop! Police! Put that on the floor and turn slowly towards me, immediately!" She knew it was over. She dropped her weapon and turned, almost relieved. Despite his pain, Simon screamed with all his might to alert the officers that Jane was in the bathtub. The inspector came in and walked over to Simon. He untied his legs and feet and asked for an emergency first aid kit to treat the lacerations on his wrists. An officer came to tell the inspector that Jane was still alive, but unconscious. Simon quickly explained what Anita had given her and

went to Jane to take her in his arms. The inspector was touched by the scene and felt an intense pride.

“I can never thank you enough for what you’ve done for her, Inspector,” said Simon.

“You should thank your children, Simon,” answered the inspector. “If it weren’t for them, I would have been too late. I understand why you’re so proud of them. On the other hand, I admit that I’m partially responsible for the fact that the two of you are still alive. I rarely make this offer, but if you really want to thank me, Simon, you should know that my friends call me Paul...”

The siren from the ambulance was getting louder. Simon held Jane’s hand in his, as he had promised long ago that he would, and kissed her several times before the ambulance technicians put her in the stretcher to bring her to the hospital. He followed her into the ambulance and before they shut the door, he looked at the inspector and said, “Thanks so much...Paul.”

A few months later

Jane and Simon had been invited to Paul and his wife's house for supper. It was a beautiful summer evening. Paul was grilling steaks on the BBQ while the women made the salad. Simon walked over toward Paul to speak to him.

"Who would have thought of this a few months ago?"

"Indeed, who would have thought! You have no idea how happy I am for the two of you. You seem so great together. Jane is glowing and I no longer see that sadness in your soul."

"Yes, I am truly content and Jane seems really happy. Her eyes are full of love and happiness once again."

"And what are your plans?"

"I want Jane to become my wife. I haven't spoken to her about it yet, but I plan to in the next few weeks. Seeing you and Helen makes me want to live a similar life with Jane. Since that incident last winter, we've understood that we were made for each other. I think we knew it before the separation, but were unable to understand it. This time, I think she sees us as inseparable. It makes everything a lot easier with the kids. They now understand that no matter what

happens, nothing will ever separate us again. I knew that Jane was special, and the efforts she has been making have made me so proud of our family. Life sometimes has a funny way of working out. If it weren't for that incident, I don't think we would be together today. Despite how much I loved her, I'm sure that I wouldn't have asked her to come back to me; I was too angry with her. As for her, the way things were, I don't think she would have come back either. I thank God for every moment I spend with her. I also thank Him for bringing you into our lives. If it hadn't been for you..."

"Don't give it another thought, Simon. That's all in the past now. The one thing to remember is that we have to be thankful for and appreciate life. You have once again found your reason to live, and I have found a new friend. Life is beautiful, so let's enjoy it."

"You're right Paul. Life is so beautiful today...Let me pour the wine."

Simon entered the kitchen just as she was bringing out the salad and bread. Her eyes were sparkling with happiness and her smile was beautiful. All he wanted at the moment was to spend the rest of his life next to her.

"Hello, Miss. Have I ever told you how much I love you?"

"Maybe...I'm not sure."

"I love you, Jane. If you only knew how happy you make me."

“And I love you, Simon. I love you forever.”

THE END

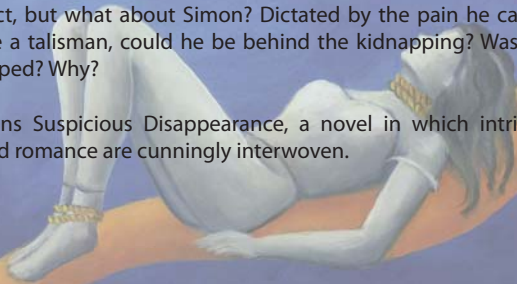


After a little over eight months of separation, Simon Griffin is still having a hard time moving on; he is living only for his children and his work. His life love, Jane Lamer, however, seems to be on a different path. As Simon tries to fight through his emotions, he discovers new depths to his feelings for Jane. One morning he wakes up with a feeling he just can't shake off. He can't understand it, but something makes him believe that Jane is in danger.

Lost in the whirlpool of his emotions, Simon doesn't know if he should trust his instinct or not, until he gets a call from Inspector Gauthier. Jane is missing. Nearly a week passes and there is no news, no demand for ransom.

Both strange and unexpected, Jane's disappearance doesn't follow the usual rules. As the mystery unravels, a dubious friend appears to be the prime suspect, but what about Simon? Dictated by the pain he carries with him like a talisman, could he be behind the kidnapping? Was she really kidnapped? Why?

And so begins *Suspicious Disappearance*, a novel in which intrigue, suspense, and romance are cunningly interwoven.



9 782923 447902