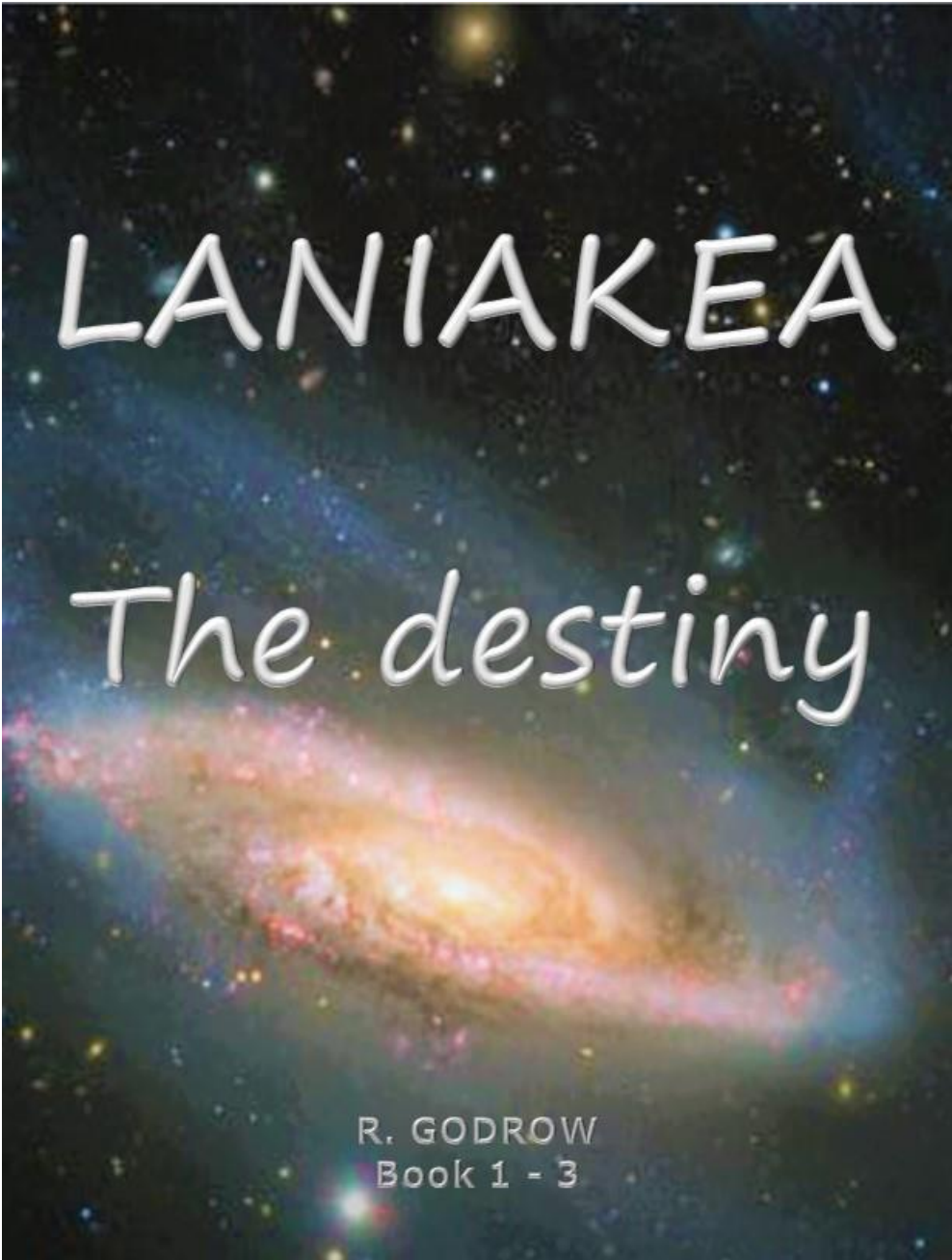




LANIAKEA

The destiny

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Book 1 - 3

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Preface

LANIAKEA (“immense heaven” in Hawaiian) is composed of approximately 100,000 galaxies including the Milky Way, which contains our Solar System as well as the Earth. The red dot on the [picture](#) indicates the Milky Way.

LANIAKEA tells a fictional story in several volumes. Each one relates how the Universe will lay the cobblestones on the road leading to the emancipation of the human species.

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The author depicts contextual elements such as landscapes, clothing, and places. He also sought to take advantage of the tools available through technology. He has therefore included links that make it easy to view the images. Just select the text in a different colour and underlined.

Those images were typically taken from a number of different websites. However, in all cases, there is no indication that their use is prohibited.

Some of these images are more or less explicit, while still being respectful of beauty.

Enjoy your reading!

On this early summer afternoon, the sun is shining on an intersection in this beautiful Quebec City. The first days of July are hot but the wind keeps the pedestrians cool.

The intersection is very busy. The traffic light turns yellow. A man in his sixties stops his car. He is wearing dark blue pants, which are customary for his work as a consultant. His long-sleeved beige shirt has no creases. A few pedestrians cross the street in front of him. He glances at the sidewalk to his right and, among those waiting to cross the perpendicular lane, he spots the back of a tall woman. She is wearing a fitted white dress with large flowers on it, which lightly flows just above the knee. Her back, waist and buttocks are well defined. Her long, suntanned, muscular legs are straight.

She turns slowly to her left and reveals her profile. The small waves of her long dark hair with a few light-grey strands float gently in the breeze. Her forehead is long and bare. Her nose discreetly curls up. Her belly is quite flat. Her dress fits her chest well.

She looks to her left, across the street, waiting for the signal to cross.

The man behind the wheel can make out her light blue, almond-shaped eyes. Her slightly open mouth gives him a glimpse of perfectly white teeth. A barely extending round chin completes the masterpiece.

He thinks:

She must be around fifty years old. What a wonderful, beautiful woman! Universe, be kind and let me meet her.

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He takes his eyes off her to check the traffic light.
His gaze is drawn further ahead.

He sees a tractor trailer travelling in the opposite lane. Surprised, he wonders:

What the hell is he doing here?

He notices the top of the driver's head lying on the steering wheel.

Worried, he says to himself:

If he doesn't stop, he'll hit the pedestrians. He'll hit this beauty as well.

He looks at her and sees that she is moving her left leg forward as she gets ready to step off the sidewalk.

She mustn't go forward, he thinks.

He turns the steering wheel of his car to the right, accelerates quickly and then brakes just as fast to get between the truck and this beautiful woman.

He glances at the tractor trailer, which is still moving and is about to hit his car. He raises and bends his left arm to protect his head.

The truck hits his car pretty hard. The whole left side of the car is lifted. The car, pushed sideways towards the

pedestrians, ends up stopping, blocked by the curb. The truck stays stuck to the car and continues to push.

— Ouch, he moans as he moves his left arm.

He looks and sees blood on the sleeve of his shirt. Nervously he whispers:

— I have to get out of here, and fast.

He activates the roof window that takes forever to open. Somehow, he gets out and jumps on the hood to let himself slide to the right of the car, still being lifted by the tractor trailer.

On the sidewalk, he immediately notices his beauty lying on her back. Both her legs are under his car.

He gets closer. On his knees, he takes her right hand and says in a reassuring voice:

—It's going to be all right! Don't worry! Are you in pain?

She tries in vain to look at her legs. In tears, she answers:

—My left leg hurts a lot.

—What about the right leg?

—I don't feel anything.

He leans over and tries to see her legs under the car. He asks her:

—I can't see your legs. Can I touch them? I want to know if they're hurt.

—It hurts, she says, still crying.

—Can I touch your legs? he insists.

—Yes. My left one really hurts.

—He grabs her right knee and moves it to the left and then to the right. It moves and she doesn't react.

—Your right leg seems to be fine, he concludes.

The left knee is pressed against the leaning car. He places his fingers on the side of the knee:

—I'm going to check under.

Quickly, he goes on:

—My hand is under the car, and I can touch your shin. I'm going lower.

He gently runs his finger along the tibia. When he touches a bump under her skin, she cries out in pain. He apologizes:

—I'm sorry. I'm almost done.

At the site of the fracture, he moves his fingers towards the calf to get under the leg. Then he withdraws his hand and looks at his fingers.

—There is no blood.

He moves closer to the head of this beautiful, suffering woman. He sits down on the sidewalk, takes her head between his hands, and gently lays it on his thigh. With his right hand, he takes her hand.

He asks those around him:

—Did anyone call for help?

Silence.

What idiots, he reflects angrily.

He picks up his phone and calls 911. An operator answers:

—You dialled 911. What is the emergency?

He replies nervously:

—Sir, we need the police and an ambulance. A truck hit my car, and a pedestrian's legs are trapped under my car. I checked and I think she's fractured her left tibia. I don't think it's an open fracture. There's no blood. I think the other leg is fine. But she's in a lot of pain. We are at the corner of Charest and Dorchester.

—I understand, sir. How's the pedestrian?

—How is the pedestrian? he repeats.

I just told him, he thinks to himself.

Then he looks at her and asks:

—How are you?

—My leg and my left arm hurt. Listen to me, I'm scared. I don't want to go to the hospital.

—Hold on, he says to the operator.

He puts the phone down and asks her:

—Let me look at your arm.

—Okay. Go slowly, please.

He bends over a little and extends his left arm to lift her arm. He feels a sharp pain. He winces, but doesn't want to moan.

—It's just a bruise. You fell on your arm.

He gently touches the spot with the fingers of his left hand. At one point, she moans as she tries to move her arm away. As he slowly sets her arm down and picks up his phone, he tells her:

—My name is Ethan. And you?

—I'm Kate. Ethan, I'm scared.

To reassure her, he says:

—Your arm doesn't look broken. What are you scared of?

—Going to the hospital. I'm afraid of hospitals.

—What if I go with you? Would that make you feel better?

—That is very kind, she says, looking at him with her beautiful pale blue, watery eyes.

—Okay, I'll stay with you. So, what do I tell the 911 operator who wants to know how you're doing?

—I don't know! I'm in pain.

He puts the phone to his ear and replies:

—Sir, it'll be okay, but hurry up.

—Stay on the line. I'll stay with you.

—I can hear the sound of many sirens in the distance. Is this for us?

—Yes. Now are you or the lady in any danger?

—Yes! My car is still being pushed by the truck. It might hit us.

—I'll tell the rescuers to go faster.

—I can see the police cars coming.

The operator concludes:

—Okay. I'll notify all the paramedics. I am going to leave you in the hands of the police.

Two police cars arrive in a hurry. Two more arrive on the other side a few seconds later. A police team quickly approaches the scene of the accident to find out what is going on. One of them uses the radio that he is carrying on his left shoulder:

— 2042 at the corner of Charest and Dorchester. I need firefighters with the extrication clamps. I also need a second ambulance and a tow truck for a tractor trailer. This is an emergency.

Then he heads for the truck door. The other policeman stops him:

— What are you doing?

— I'm going to turn off the truck's engine.

— Bad idea! Nothing is moving, so we shouldn't touch anything. Quick, put blocks in front of the rear wheels of the truck. We have to stop it from moving. I'm going to help the wounded, if I can.

Six other policemen are taking care of traffic. The tractor trailer is blocking part of the intersection that has become chaotic with the intermingling of cars and pedestrians. The police officers have to restore order quickly to make room for help.

A policeman approaches Kate. In a reassuring tone, he says:

— It's going to be okay Ma'am. The fire department is on its way. Listen, you can hear the siren. The ambulance will be here soon. We'll get you out of here.

He looks up at Ethan:

— We'll put a pillow under her head, and you're going to be able to step away.

Kate responds, panicked:

— There's no way Ethan is leaving. I want him next to me. And also in the ambulance.

Ethan looks at her and reassures her:

— Kate, it's going to be okay. I'm staying here with you.

The police officer insists:

— Sir, you're going to have to step away, it's not safe here.

— Officer, I'm staying right here with Kate.

— It's your life! he says, resigned.

— Yes, it is my life, agrees Ethan.

The police officer delicately lays a blanket over Kate. Ethan grabs the nearest corner and gently wipes the tears from her cheeks. She looks him in the eye and gives him a little thank you smile.

Four firefighters arrive in their red truck. Quickly, they examine the situation. The lieutenant orders:

— First, we need to secure the car so that nothing moves. You know the procedure. Go! Go!

A firefighter immediately pulls up behind the tractor trailer. Two firefighters then pull the steel cable from the winch. They run the cable under the tractor trailer and attach it to the car. One firefighter returns to the winch. He stiffens the cable very slowly. The lieutenant whose hand is on Ethan's car is watching it closely. After sensing a very slight movement, he signals to stop. As he joins the other firefighters, the lieutenant says, relieved:

— This way, we can keep the car from running into the wounded.

The other firefighters install jacks so that the car does not move at all when the engine of the tractor trailer is turned off. The lieutenant says:

— We're running out of jacks. Call Fire Station No. 10. They're not far away. Tell them to use the emergency unit truck. It'll be faster. We need at least four or five jacks.

— Okay.

The lieutenant turns to the fireman next to him and says, in complete astonishment:

—This woman and this man, I don't understand how they're still alive.

The firefighters install the jacks carefully to ensure that the car is properly secured. Impatient, the lieutenant orders the driver of the fire truck:

—Go and stop the engine of that damn trailer.

—Lieutenant, if I do that, there's a risk that the front of the tractor trailer will drop down on the steel cable. It could drag the car, despite the jacks.

The lieutenant bends over to look under the truck. He gets up and concedes:

—You're right. Phew! Thanks, I owe you one. Hey, guys, we're gonna have to secure the tractor trailer too. We're gonna put three jacks up front, under the engine. It's not hard. We'll also have to stop it from backing up by placing blocks behind the wheels. Otherwise, the jacks will let go.

After securing the tractor trailer, a firefighter shuts off the engine. The driver is still inside, completely still. The lieutenant orders:

—Now we're going to lift the car a little bit to get the lady's legs out of the way.

After analyzing the situation, two firefighters set the extrication clamps between the tilted car and the sidewalk. A firefighter operates the clamps very slowly and the car starts to lift.

All of a sudden, Kate screams out in pain. Despite the injury to his arm, Ethan lays his left hand on her cheek. Then he gently presses her head against his chest. She screams out in tears and squeezes Ethan's hand tightly. He lets out a shout:

— Stop. Something's wrong.

The lieutenant gives the order:

— Check under the car. Be careful.

The firefighter crawls under the car and reports:

— There's a metal bar hanging off her left leg. I can fix it. Lower the car a millimetre.

It only takes a few seconds to push the bar and:

— Now you can lift it, slowly.

And then:

— Okay, that's enough now. Get her out.

Still holding her right hand, Ethan moves out of the way to give the firemen some room. They gently ease Kate's legs and move her away from the car. A fireman is holding her left leg to avoid any kind of collision.

Two paramedics approach with a gurney. They gently place the victim on it. Ethan is still holding her hand. They approach the ambulance, place the gurney on a stronger stretcher and then attach a device to protect the fractured leg by securing it.

Once her pain has subsided a little, she tells the paramedic next to her:

— I want Ethan to come with me to the hospital.

— No problem, Madam. He has to go anyway, for his arm.

Surprised, she asks:

— What is wrong with his arm?

— During the accident, he injured his left arm.

She starts to cry again:

— Oh no. Is it serious?

— I don't think so. You have to stay calm.

Ethan wants to reassure her:

— Kate, it's not important. I'm going to be fine.

The policeman says to Ethan:

— Sir, I have a few questions for you.

— Officer, I don't mind, but I can't leave Kate and I need to get my arm checked. Can the questions wait?

— Not really, says the policeman firmly.

— Can you come to the hospital?

— We can do that.

In the ambulance, following the paramedic's instructions, Ethan sits on a bench, next to the stretcher, next to Kate's head. With his good arm, he takes Kate's hand from her belly and gently squeezes it. She responds by squeezing his fingers.

While the paramedic sets an IV, the dispatcher tells the driver which hospital is ready to receive the victims. The ambulance drives off quickly while the paramedic in the rear box makes sure that everything is under control.

He takes scissors to cut open the sleeve of Ethan's shirt. He then cuts from the wrist up. He examines Ethan's arm, which has a large bruise running along almost the entire length of his arm. He notices that the wounds are no longer bleeding, and asks him:

— Was it a hard blow?

— All I remember is that I used my arm to protect my head.

— I guess the car window was broken.

— Yes. It shattered into many pieces.

— I think you did the right thing protecting yourself. A blow like that to the head could have caused serious problems. Are you in any pain?

— Not too much.

— Take it easy now. At the hospital, they will take care of the pain.

Eventually, the paramedic takes the microphone and relates the situation to someone in the emergency room so that the necessary preparations can be done quickly.

During the ride, Ethan's hand stay locked with Kate's. Ethan looks at her and thinks:

The universe has been kind to me. It let me meet her. Thank you for giving me the chance to know what love is. Now it's up to me not to waste this chance.

Fifteen minutes is all it takes for the ambulance to reach the emergency room.

The ambulance driver opens the back doors and asks Ethan:

— Sir, could you leave the lady's hand and please get down?

Ethan reassures Kate:

— Kate, I'm staying right here.

He gets up and heads towards the exit. He tries to lift his left arm and grab the safety bar, but he can't. A sharp pain shoots up his arm. He groans slightly while wincing and bends over so as to hide his pain. Kate can't see his face, but she hears his moan and sees him bending over.

— Ethan, are you okay? she asks, crying.

— It's going to be okay. I just need a few seconds to catch my breath.

Slowly, he gets up while holding his arm. His eyes are damp.

The paramedic gets in the box and helps Ethan down.

Then, both paramedics lower the stretcher and quickly transport it to the emergency room. They transfer her to another stretcher quickly and smoothly.

Kate cries out nervously:

—Ethan, where are you?

—I am right here, beside you.

—Come closer and take my hand. You promised you wouldn't leave me, she is blaming him.

—I am right here, he says taking her hand and seeing panic on her face.

He turns to the doctor and asks:

—Could you give her a sedative or something? She's really scared.

—Who are you in relation to the patient, sir?

Without thinking too much, he looks into Kate's eyes and replies:

—I am her husband.

Astonished, Kate looks at him and then she also smiles, to let him know that she agrees. Ethan moves his eyebrow slightly and nods to one side. All these small gestures calm her.

The doctor asks the attending nurse:

—Give the patient an injection of 5 mg of morphine.

Then he tells Kate:

— Madam, we have to separate you from your husband for a few minutes. We are going to have to take X-rays of your leg and then we're coming back here. Your husband can't come. Anyway, I have to examine his arm and I have a strong feeling that the police over there are waiting to question him.

While the doctor is speaking, the morphine injection gradually takes effect. Kate feels an inner warmth invading her. Her eyes close for a few long seconds. She relishes the disappearance of her pain.

After nodding to the doctor, Ethan looks at Kate and says:

— Darling, trust the team of doctors. When they've finished the X-rays, we'll be together. As soon as I'm done with my arm and the police, I'll find you and we'll never leave each other's side. Okay?

— Okay, DARLING, she responds wryly with a smile.

And continues:

— Whew! The sedative is really working. You know, I like when you say, "We'll never leave each other's side."

Someone takes her to the radiology department.

The doctor looks at Ethan's arm as the two police officers approach him. They tell the doctor:

— Doctor! We have to question this gentleman.

— I understand. Just give me a few minutes. I have to look at his arm, but it doesn't seem very serious. There's no fracture. We're going to clean this up, and then I'll have him put some antiseptic cream on it. Sir, can you take off your shirt?

Ethan tries to unbutton his shirt, but as he lifts his injured arm, he moans and winces. The doctor resumes:

— Stop. I'll just cut off your sleeve. A good painkiller will help you.

Turning to the police officers, he says:

— You can ask him your questions now.

The policemen ask Ethan what happened. Ethan recounts the events. One of the police officers makes sure he has it straight:

— You drove your car between the tractor trailer and the pedestrians, and the lady as well?

— Yes!

— You could have been killed.

— I know that, but at the time I didn't think anything of it. I had to do something, or she was going to die. As for me, there was a chance I'd survive.

— Yeah, how so?

— I had a car to protect me, but she didn't. The universe was protecting me and I had to protect her.

The police officers then stop trying to figure him out.

One of them asks:

— Do you have your registration, driver's licence and insurance certificate?

He writes the information down on a form. Then he hands him the documents:

— There you go. I'm sorry to tell you but your car is seriously damaged. In fact, it had to be taken for scrap metal. Here's the address. You're going to have to notify your insurer. We thank you for all your cooperation and wish you a speedy recovery.

A nurse hands a cup to Ethan. It contains a pain-killer. She also hands him a small cup of water. Ethan swallows the pill. The doctor finishes spreading the antiseptic cream and asks the nurse to bandage the arm. He instructs:

— Keep the bandage on for a few hours, after which you can remove it. It's better to leave the wound in the open.

— Can I take a shower?

— Not a problem. I'm going to prescribe you some anti-inflammatory cream, antibiotics and a sedative. In a week, everything will be fine.

- Thank you. Is Kate back?
- No, not yet. But she should be soon.
- Where can I wait for her without missing her return?
- There are chairs over there. You can't miss her.

Ethan goes to sit down. He's starting to feel the day catch up to him and especially the stress he's been under. The elevators keep opening and closing, but at one point, Ethan sees a stretcher and Kate emerging from the elevators. He regains all his energy and moves closer to the stretcher. He asks her:

—How are you?

—Fine. The morphine is kicking in very well.

—They put you in a hospital gown? You are very pretty, I would even say radiant, but I swear I prefer you in your white floral dress.

—Ethan, I have a strange feeling.

—What?

—I feel like my husband is trying to be charming right now.

—Absolutely not.

—Absolutely false, she says, giving him an inquisitive look.

The orderly pushes the stretcher and closes the curtains. As he sets off, he says:

—It shouldn't take long.

— Kate, I'm looking at your fracture, and I can see it very clearly. The doctor is going to have to reset the bones.

— That's right, just scare me now. Are you going to stay with me?

— If the doctor lets me.

— There's no way you're leaving.

— Calm down. You saw, he's quite nice. And he took good care of my arm.

— Your arm! How is it?

— It's fine. It's been disinfected, and they gave me painkillers. The doctor prescribed some for a few days, that and other things.

As soon as he arrives, the doctor looks at the X-rays and says:

— Good. There is a small displaced fracture. I'll have to set it back in place and then we'll put a cast.

— Is it going to hurt? I want Ethan to stay with me, she says.

— It's okay for him to stay. I'll give you local anesthesia for the pain in addition to the painkiller you've already taken.

Ethan lays his hand on Kate's shoulder. While the doctor sets up the injections around the fracture, Kate nervously grasps the sheet from the stretcher with both hands. Ethan reassures her:

— It's going to be okay. Just take deep breaths.

The doctor says:

— By the way, I overheard your husband being questioned by the police.

— Oh yes?

— He's a real hero. According to the police, he saved your life and the lives of the other pedestrians. All of you would have been crushed. It will certainly be on the news tonight. Well done, sir!

—Is that so? I didn't know that, she says looking at Ethan. So, I have my own personal hero, my knight in shining armour.

—I was quite surprised when your husband said, "The universe was protecting me and I had to protect her."

Suddenly, the doctor pulls Kate's foot in order to realign the two bones. She is startled and grabs the sheet. He gently sets her bones together and makes sure they're properly aligned.

—Everything seems to be in place, but we'll take another X-ray after the cast is put on, just to be sure. I don't want there to be any complications.

He asks an attendant to set the cast.

—As soon as it's done, I will come back.

The attendant arrives with the supplies and prepares the leg. But as he begins working above her knee, Ethan asks him:

—What are you doing?

—I am getting ready to put a cast on her leg.

—Is it going to be above the knee?

—Yes!

In disagreement, Ethan replies:

—That's not okay. I want to talk to the doctor.

Please, hold on a minute.

Ethan goes to look for the doctor, and comes back with him. The doctor asks the attendant:

—Why are you starting above the knee?

—Because that's how we do it.

—Are you new here?

—Yes, Doctor.

—In this case, you start below the knee. Remember that she has to be able to walk. So, you'll need a heel under the cast.

—Okay, Doctor.

Ethan approaches the doctor and thanks him sincerely by giving him a good, firm handshake, but without a single word. Kate notices Ethan's eagerness and dedication.

Ethan comes back next to her and takes her hand.

Kate confesses:

— You know, Ethan, I'm very happy with the story of you being my husband and the way we keep calling each other "darling". I want to thank you, she says, squeezing his hand with both of hers.

Once the cast is set, they go back to the radiology department. Ethan does not leave her side except to wait outside the X-ray room. After a few minutes, the door opens and the radiology technician comes out pulling the stretcher:

— Someone will come and get you.

— Thank you very much, says Ethan.

Back in the emergency room, the doctor checks the X-rays. Then he hands Kate a piece of paper, saying:

— Here's a prescription for painkillers, antibiotics and anti-inflammatory drugs. Even if the cast is made for walking, try to take it easy for the next 4 or 5 days. Obviously, no showers. Good! everything is in order. If you don't have any questions, a nurse will set you up with a wheelchair to take you outside. Good luck to you both.

— Thank you, Doctor, they both say.

Ethan says:

— Kate, you have to take off the gown and put your clothes back on. Thankfully, you were wearing a dress and not pants. I'm going to get a nurse to help you. I'd be happy to do it, but I have to take it easy on my arm.

— Yes, yes, yes. I'll take you up on your offer to get me a nurse.

— Don't forget to brush your hair; we'll have to go outside in style. Just picture it: "The rescued one and her hero." We'll be like "beauty and the beast".

— So, you're also a poet!

The nurse helps Kate get dressed and then draws the curtains. She brings in a wheelchair and helps Kate sit on it.

With a strong push on the wheelchair, the nurse calls out to the other nurses and doctors pointing to Kate and Ethan with her index finger. There's a lot of applause. Even the other patients are applauding.

— Bravo to the heroes! shouts one person.

— Here is the hero, says Kate pointing Ethan.

Ethan kindly greets people. The nurse pushes the wheelchair to a taxi door and helps Kate get in.

In the taxi:

— We'll head to your house, and I will help you in. Then I'll get back in the cab and go to rent a car somewhere. But first I have to buy something to replace my shirt.

— That's right, you don't have a car anymore and your shirt is weird with only one sleeve.

— It'll be okay.

— No, we'll get my car. Can you drive manual?

— Yes. So, you have a manual clutch car?

— Yeah!

— It won't be easy for you with your cast.

— I know. I would even say it's impossible.

Kate gives the driver the address to her office.

Once there, she directs him to her car so that she does not have to walk too much.

— Kate, hold on a second.

He goes out, circles the taxi by the back and opens her door. Kate brings out her right leg and tries to do the same with her left.

— It's heavy and it hurts, she admits with a slight wince.

— Not like that. Bring your leg back inside. Now, you have to imagine that your buttocks are a pivot. So, lift both your legs at the same time and then, with your arms, pivot outward.

She does so with a little astonishment, then smiles when she realizes that his instructions got her out of the car successfully. Ethan leans towards her and holds out his two hands.

— Oh, ouch!

— Your arm? she asks.

— Yes, but I'll be fine. The pain medication I took in the hospital is starting to wear off. Well, I guess. But it's going to be okay. I'm gonna pull you slowly towards me.

She gets out of the taxi and puts her arms around Ethan's neck. As she does so, she offers him a gentle hug. After a few seconds of enjoying this moment between them, he asks:

— Where is your car?

—It's that one, pointing with her head.

—The Porsche?

—Yes, the Porsche.

—Are you serious?

—Why? A woman can't own a Porsche?

—That's not it. You'd let me drive your Porsche?

—Yes, why not? Let's go, she says, handing him her keys.

He gently helps her closer to her car, and puts her against it. He opens the passenger door and comes back to help her.

—Now, Kate, you do the opposite. You put your butt down and then you swivel.

—Okay the Man! I understood the concept, you know, she gently says.

—I have absolutely no doubt about it now.

She clings the door and leans on the edge of the footboard in order to sit down and get her legs in. Ethan returns to the taxi and pays for the ride.

Once in the car Kate confesses:

—I need to take a shower. I don't know how I'm supposed to not to get the cast wet.

—Just sit in your bath and keep your leg out of the tub.

—I don't have a bathtub.

—You don't have a bathtub!

—Well, no.

—You own a Porsche but you don't have a bathtub!

—I don't see the connection.

—In any case, it's too dangerous for you to be in the shower with one leg inside and the other outside. You could slip very easily.

—You're right. So, I have quite a problem.

—Do you know anyone who could help you? If not, I have two showers and one in the basement also has a bathtub. If you want, I can help you out. We'll have to go to your place and get some clothes, or we could use my laundry. After your bath, I could take you home. We'll have to do it quickly, though. I live on Île d'Orléans and the back and forth will take time. I am a little tired, you understand.

She looks at him, thinking, then says:

—Ethan, looking back on this entire day and especially how incredibly helpful you've been, I haven't forgotten how you risked your life to save mine.

—Yes, so what?

—You should know that I've never done this before, but I would like you to kiss me!

- *Oh. And what kind of kiss do you want?*
- *That's up to you.*
- *Seriously?*
- *Yes. Do I have to ask twice?*
- *Certainly not.*

He gets out of the car and quickly circles around it. He opens the passenger door and sits on the footboard. His right hand moves towards Kate's cheek and gently caresses her with its fingertips. He then strokes her neck. Meanwhile, he slowly draws closer and lays several small kisses on her other cheek, slowly making his way towards her mouth. He gives her a few small kisses on the lips and carefully backs away removing his hand from her cheek.

—I loved it, she admits. I'd like you to kiss me again.

He moves closer, placing his hand on her shoulder to caress her arm. He nears her lips. When their lips touch, Kate exposes her tongue ever so slightly and caresses Ethan's lips. After a few seconds, she withdraws her tongue. Ethan does the exact same thing. Kate then brings out her tongue again to gently caress Ethan's. Then moving back a little, he cups her cheek and neck with his hand, and Kate, to show her delight, leans in. He looks at her and professes:

—You know I'm falling in love with you. In fact, I started falling in love with you when I saw you standing on the sidewalk. I saw how beautiful you looked.

Everything about you fascinated me. Your eyes, your forehead, your mouth, your butt, your belly, your entire body. And now, your sense of humour, your self-assurance, your fears, your smiles and your laughs. Well, everything except the crying. This, I can do without.

—Such wonderful words, thank you, but you didn't mention my breasts at all. You don't like them? she asks while looking down and giving him a mischievous smile.

—I haven't seen or touched them yet, but I'm sure I'll love them.

—I find them a little small, she admits shyly.

He looks at her breasts and finally says:

—I don't. But I'll have to check closer.

—Let me know when you do.

—I have a weird feeling that you won't need me to tell you.

—Ethan, I am also falling in love with you. But please, we can't go too fast.

Gently, once again, they kiss. Then, caressing his cheek, she says:

—I'll take you up on your offer to help with the bath. If you want, we can go to my place and get a few things. I'll give you a sweater to replace your shirt. And I could sleep at your place tonight, that way you could get some rest. If you want to.

—Of course I do. I appreciate you wanting to take care of me and seeing to my rest.

—Ethan, you'll need a great deal of rest, she says as she leans her head to one side and gives him a naughty smile.

He goes back to the driver's seat and starts the car. He drives carefully, not taking advantage of the car's powerful engine. She points him in the direction of her home.

She lives on the sixteenth floor of an apartment building. He parks the car with the passenger door facing the entrance. He helps Kate by taking her hands and pulling her out of the car. His face reflects the pain in his arm. Kate, seeing this, puts her arms around his neck and hugs him tightly.

—You're sweet, but your arm is hurting?

—A little. We have to go to the pharmacy to get our prescriptions. You have one nearby, I suppose?

—It's in the building. If you want, can we go there before we go to my place? You can give them your prescription as well.

—It might be good for you, but I'm going to my pharmacy on the island.

Once in her apartment, she keeps using Ethan's shoulder for support as she slowly makes her way to the kitchen. She fills a glass of water and takes one of the pain-killers.

On the way to her bedroom, he notices a breathtaking view of the city. The overall decor is well thought out, without exaggeration. The apartment is sleek, just like its owner.

—Your home is very nice.

—Thank you. My bedroom is right here. I'm going to sit on the bed for a few minutes. I want to give the painkiller time to kick in. Can you take my carry-on bag that's in the closet, right there? she asks pointing at it.

Taking the carry-on luggage, he asks:

—I, too, will have a seat if I may.

—Of course. Come sit next to me.

—I do not want to be indiscreet, but tell me: do you often offer your bed to a man you just met on the very first day?

With a small punch on his thigh, she replies:

—Every day.

—I didn't think a woman as beautiful as you could be so violent. I'll have to be careful.

—You're right to be suspicious. Let's get going, she says as she stands and leans on Ethan's thigh.

They get to the dresser to take underwear. She admits:

—I'm a little embarrassed.

—Don't worry, I have some at home. They're for when I play dress-up.

Kate stops what she's doing and gives him a frown.

—It's a joke, he says, laughing heartily. I like that you're naive. I'll have to take advantage of that. Nice

underwear! Don't forget that your panties are going to have to pass the cast test.

— It's a G-string. It will pass all the tests.

— Oh, yeah? What do you mean by all the tests?

Without answering his question, she asks him:

— Could you help me get to the closet to get a few things?

— Of course.

They slowly make their way to the closet.

— I'm not sure you can wear pants unless they are stretchy. I like you in a dress or skirt. Great legs have to be shown.

— Message received. And by the way, thank you for the whole cast-above-the-knee thing. Otherwise, it would have been hell. Lucky for me you were there.

— There are some debts that need to be paid on the spot. This is one of them, he says, as he leans in to kiss her.

— I understand, she replies. But the debt is more than you estimated.

And she kisses him with her tongue while pressing her entire body against his.

In the car, on the way to Ethan's house, they get to know each other a little bit better. Ethan asks her:

—Tell me a little about yourself.

—I have been divorced for many years. I am the VP, Vice-president of Accounting and Finance for a large Canadian financial investment firm with head-quartered in Montreal. I also run the branch in Quebec City, so I go to the head office quite often. I have a bachelor's degree in actuarial science and a master's degree in economics. I really love my job.

—Impressive, madam! In addition to being magnificently beautiful, you are intelligent and educated. That's quite rare.

She hits the top of his hand which is on the gear stick. He asks her:

—Don't you have kids?

—Why do you ask? I have a boy and a girl and each have a child of their own.

—I don't believe you. When I saw you on the sidewalk, I looked at your belly, which resembles a teenage girl's. I assumed that you didn't have any children.

—Exercise keeps a woman in shape. I have to admit, there's also a bit of genetics.

—And you're a grandmother! I can't believe that today, I kissed a grandmother.

—Yes, I am a grandmother. Besides, when we kissed, you didn't seem to hate it.

—I loved it.

—And you? she asks.

—You want to know if I have children.

—Yes. And so much more.

—I also have two kids. Two daughters each with one child.

—Hello Grandpa. But I respect grandpas, you'll see.

—I am a freelance consultant going on a few decades now. Currently, my job is Strategic Consultant. I've had contracts in almost every field, like accounting, human resources, IT, etc. I have completed structuring and restructuring projects. I've also managed different types of projects. You should know that I like to build. I have a BA in accounting. I've also been divorced for several years.

—You have a full life.

—Yes, but I have to tell you that I'm missing something that I've never known, but I think I've found it recently.

—What is it?

—Love.

—Oh!

After a few seconds of thinking, she confesses to him:

—Ethan, I have to tell you, I don't think I'm ever going to live with a man again. I've asked myself the question a number of times and I always come to the same conclusion. I don't need that. I need to keep my privacy and I'm fine with it. But you never know, a lot can change. I'm sorry if that's what you're looking for.

—Don't be sorry. I'm not looking to live with a woman. I'm thinking exactly like you. So, I understand very well. Fantastic! We already have something in common. Wow!

—Until now, I would say we have more than one thing, she responds smiling at him.

—Name another one.

—We like to kiss.

—You're damn right we do!

Once on the island, Ethan parks the car in front of the pharmacy. He goes in alone to buy the medication prescribed by the doctor. He also buys her a Derby lacrosse stick. Back at the car, he gives her the cane and says:

— Here's a gift.

— It's great but it's too much. Are you trying to buy me?

— I want you to be independent and protect your leg.

— You are a sweetheart. Thanks.

He's driving the car to his place. He lives in a house sitting on a large lot with several trees. The land runs along the St. Lawrence River. It is set on the south side of the island where all kinds of ships and boats sail.

When they finally arrive, Kate notices a "House for Sale" sign beside the road. Ethan stops the car and points to the two ships about to cross each other:

— Kate, you're in luck. There is a freighter going up the river to the port of Quebec City or Montreal. Given its drag, I believe it is looking for merchandise. As for the cruise ship, it's going down the river and turns back somewhere.

He moves the car forward so that Kate's door is level with the driveway leading to the entrance of the house. He asks her:

—Do you want to walk on the driveway slowly? Or I can bring you to the back of the house. It's shorter, but there are around eight steps to climb.

—I would prefer the driveway. The steps are not my forte right now.

—That's what I thought. Okay. I'll help you.

—Wait, let me try my gift.

—Okay! But let me get closer just in case.

—Okay!

Ethan gets out of the car holding Kate's carry-on. He moves towards her. She gets out of the car using the cane. Then they walk towards the front of the house.

—Ethan, this cane is really sweet. I owe you one.

—You are starting to owe me a lot.

—I know. I assume you're going to charge me interest?

—That's for sure.

As soon as she enters the house, she sees the river through the large glass panes lining the entire south wall. The floor is light brown hardwood. She notices the furniture, the huge beam running from east to west and the supporting columns, all in dark brown wood. Kate says:

—The interior is very nice. It's beautiful and cozy. The view is simply sublime.

—Thank you! That's very kind of you.

—Why do you want to sell?

—Because I am getting older and I want to go to rent a place instead of owning it, so that I can have peace of mind about maintenance and all the upkeep a house needs.

—I get that.

—It's getting late, he says. I imagine you'll want to take a shower now. I also guess that you won't really want to go out to a restaurant after that. Let me see what I have. If nothing is appealing, I will go out to a restaurant to get something, but only after your shower. I want to be close to you just in case.

—Close to me! You want to watch me bathe?

— No! Just outside the door. But now that I think about it, that's not a bad idea.

Approaching the refrigerator, he asks her:

— Promise me that you will be completely honest.

— I promise!

He runs through the choices, and she decides.

Then they climb down the stairs to the basement. As she climbs down under Ethan's watchful gaze, she discovers a pool table.

— Do you play pool?

— I am completely awful. I'm not good at games, especially competitive ones. I don't know why.

— Great, we'll be able to make some bets.

— What kind of bets?

— We'll see.

After two seconds, she adds:

— We can alternate. I have a few ideas worth exploring.

As they approach the bath, she says:

—It's going to be all right.

—Can you do this?

—What a question! But just for kicks, tell me how.

—So, you just take off your panties and throw them somewhere.

—What?

—Listen all the way to the end.

—Okay! I'll shut up, she replies submissively.

—I'm going to have to start again, he says in a bossy voice. You just take off your panties and throw them anywhere. I won't look. When that's done, I'll help you get on the podium and you can get right leg in the tub. I'll help you without looking. Then you'll sit upright on the edge of the bathtub. Now, it's going to be cold, but I am sure you could warm it up very quickly.

—What exactly are you saying about my ability to warm things up?

—You're not supposed to speak. I'll run the water to get the right temperature. Once that's done, I'll leave the room and close the door behind me. You will undress, and get in the bath with your leg on the edge and you

can do all the work. If there is anything you need, you'll call me and I'll be right here. Don't worry, I've seen a naked woman or two in my life.

—There you go, look who's bragging.

—Listen to me, promise you won't take any chances.

—Promise.

He leaves the room closing the door behind him. Kate starts bathing. After about fifteen minutes, she yells out:

—Ethan, don't come in, but what do I wear to come out? And besides, how do I get out of the bathtub?

—I have a woman's bathrobe upstairs. It's never been worn. I'll go get it.

—Okay, great.

He's back:

—How do I give it to you? I have to come in. I know, I'll use the bathrobe as a screen in front of my face so that I don't see you. Did I just say that! I don't believe it.

—Okay, she says with a laugh.

He opens the door and approaches the bath with the robe in front of him:

—I mustn't fall down. Two disabled people, it would be devastating. Here, he says, handing her the robe as planned.

Then he leaves the bathroom. After a few minutes, she calls out:

—You're going to have to come back. I'm not able to get out of the bath alone.

He comes back and says:

— Okay. Let's regroup. I'll get barefoot and sit up-right along the edge of the bathtub, facing you. I'll put my left foot on your right foot so you don't slip. We'll hold our hands and I'll pull you a little bit towards me. You lift your butt and sit on the edge of the tub in front of me. Then I'll stand up and help you get your right leg outside the tub, while you're still sitting. Then you could get up and walk down the step while I help you hold your balance. Once you're down, you can hug me and thank me. There you go. Fantastic planning, isn't it?

— Shall we go?

— Yes.

— You are really great, she says mockingly as she approaches him for a hug.

— I know.

Still hugging him, she accuses him:

— Pretentious!

Once at the top of the stairs, Ethan asks her:

— We'll have supper and then you can choose a room downstairs and I'll go prepare it.

She puts her arms around his neck and replies:

— There's absolutely no way I'm sleeping downstairs.

Ethan responds:

— Me neither.

Kate gives him a kiss and concludes:

— See, we have many things in common. I told you so.

—They embrace each other with a long kiss and a reserved passion.

—You rest while I prepare the meal.

She replies:

—I want to help.

—No way, for three reasons. One, you're going to bother me. Two, you'll get tired and hurt yourself and three, I want you to be in shape for dessert.

—Okay boss! But what's for dessert? You didn't mention anything and I'm intrigued.

—Let me explain.

Ethan turns on some soft music:

— Kate, do you like it?

— That's perfect.

He opens a bottle of wine and pours it into two glasses.

— So, the dessert. It's something very special for me, he says.

— Oh? Well, what is it?

— It's going to be the most wonderful dessert I have ever seen or tasted in my life.

Finally, realizing what it was all about, she lets out a broad smile and admits:

— All of a sudden, I think I'm going to like eating this dessert.

As they gently tap their glasses together, she looks him in the eyes and says:

— Ethan, I wish you 10,000 pounds of happiness.

— Well, obviously it's already started.

— It started for me too, you know.

He sets the cutlery on the table and then starts cooking. Every once in a while, he looks at her and sees her admiring the river.

He serves the meal and asks her:

—It's almost time for the news. Do you mind if I turn the TV on for a few minutes?

—You can do what you want. It's your home. It could be interesting. They might talk about the accident.

Ethan turns off the music and turns on the TV. They start to eat slowly and the news starts. The news anchor begins:

—Today, at approximately 1 p.m., a truck driver lost his life while driving his vehicle. The cause is still unknown. The tractor trailer continued its driverless run in the heart of downtown Quebec City, up to the intersection of Dorchester and Charest. According to witnesses, the tractor trailer was heading directly for pedestrians waiting to cross the street. In the opposite direction, a driver waiting for his green light anticipated the situation. He drove his car directly between the truck and the pedestrians. The truck slammed into the left side of his car and pushed it towards the sidewalk, eventually coming to a stop by the sidewalk. We have been informed that the car was completely wrecked. The driver managed to extricate himself through the opening of the roof. We are told that he sustained serious injuries to his left arm. According to witnesses, he managed to climb out of the roof with difficulties and went to help a woman who was hit by the car. This courageous man then called 911 while trying to reassure the woman whose legs were wedged under his car. Witnesses report that the woman suffered an injury to her left leg. She

and the man were rushed by ambulance to the emergency. The man was holding her hand. We don't know if they knew each other. Later, one of our journalists interviewed the police officers who had gone to the hospital. The police officer told us on camera:

— This man knew he was risking his life, but he ran to protect the pedestrians. The investigation is still ongoing, but the evidence is clear: had he not driven his car across the road, there would have been several deaths. At this moment, we believe 4 or 5 people would have been run over. I don't know who this man is, but I can tell you that he's a hero, a real hero.

Ethan turns off the TV. He sighs:

— And the problems begin.

— What do you mean?

— You'll see. When they find out who we are, they'll start coming.

— They will come for you. You are the hero.

— You believe that, and you are the one who was saved. You saw the whole thing. Besides, we went together, hand in hand, to the hospital remember?

— Yeah! But you saved my life and the lives of those four other people.

No longer listening, he says:

— Damn it! Okay! We'll have to be ready. Damn it! They eat slowly while considering the situation.

The doorbell rings.

—Don't move, he says. I hope it's not a journalist.

He goes to the door and opens it to see a journalist with his cameraman. With his hand, he waves them back and steps out. He suppresses his anger at being disturbed during suppertime:

—Do you know what time it is?

—Yes, sir. Sorry to bother.

The reporter brings the microphone closer to Ethan's mouth:

—Are you Ethan Miller?

—Yes.

—It was you who was in the accident downtown today?

—Yes.

—Can you tell us about it?

—Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you. I'm trying to keep my discomfort to myself. I am in the middle of supper. Today, I was in an accident, and then I had to go to the hospital. I am tired and I do not feel like talking right now. I would ask you to come back

tomorrow around 1 p.m. and I will answer all your questions. Otherwise, there is no interview.

—I'm sorry, Mr. Miller. Can I ask if the Porsche in your backyard is Kate Jackson's?

—Yes. She can't drive her manual car because of her broken leg and my car is scrapped. She let me drive it today.

—Does that mean that Ms. Jackson is here?

—Not necessarily, but yes.

—Did you two know each other before the accident?

—No. Now go away.

—One last question. Will Ms. Jackson be here for the interview tomorrow?

—I'm not sure, but I get the feeling that she will be, he says as he enters the house.

He turns around and asks:

—Please do me a favour. Tell your reporter friends not to bother us today.

—We will do that. See you tomorrow!

—See you tomorrow.

He comes back to the table:

—Damn it, we're not done. But it's all going to stop in a few days.

As he continues eating, he asks her:

—Do you like the food?

—It is delicious.

—Remember you promised to be honest.

—It's true, it's delicious.

—Tomorrow, will you stay with me for the interview?

—Yes.

—They're not dumb, you're here now and yesterday we didn't even know each other. I'll tell them that when I saw you standing on the sidewalk, it was love at first sight.

—Really?

—Yes. It's the truth, after all.

They finish their meal while listening to the music.

—Stay seated, he tells her while he clears the table.

Then he cleans the kitchen counter.

—What about the dessert? she asks him.

He bends over to kiss her and replies:

—The dessert is coming, but I want to take a shower first.

She gets up and walks over to him. She wraps her arms around Ethan's waist and gently but firmly presses herself to him. She rests her head on his shoulder. He envelops her in his arms and gently embraces her. After a few seconds, she lets him go and says:

—I'll be waiting for you in the living room while enjoying your music and this good wine.

He takes a sedative so he doesn't have to worry about his arm. He removes the bandage and takes a well-deserved shower. He comes out wearing a men's bathrobe.

As he approaches her, she gets up from her chair. She lays her hands on his chest spreading open the bathrobe. The top of her bathrobe is also slightly open to reveal part of her breasts.

He runs his fingers through her long hair as though he's combing it. He strokes her cheek, then brushes her neck with his fingernails. She shivers. Gently he leads her to the room that he prepared before his shower.

She lies on her back and he lies on his side. They caress each other's face, hair, neck. Ethan opens Kate's bathrobe a little more and frees one breast that he then caresses slowly by stroking the nipple with his fingers back and forth. Then he gently squeezes it by rolling his two fingers. Kate makes a moaning sound while arching her chest.

Slowly, she exposes her other breast, making it accessible to him. Ethan alternates between both breasts, caressing each one in turn and then slowly approaches her with his lips. She sees him moving closer and grabs his head to

guide him. He kisses and licks her breasts and then her nipples, which he sucks on delicately.

As he does so, he unties the belt of her bathrobe and slips his hand on her hip before moving on to her buttocks. She lifts her pelvis, revealing her pleasure and desire.

She puts her hand on Ethan's buttocks and draws him towards her. Ethan grabs her wrist and extends her arm over her head. Kate understands and she does the same with her other arm. She must give herself over to him.

Slowly, he comes back to her breasts. He licks each breast in turn and then moves up, running his tongue along her underarms.

—Ethan, I love that. Keep doing it. Yeah, um...

After a short while, he starts to slowly descend while stroking her belly, caressing with one hand and then licking her flat belly.

He continues downwards, addressing each thigh in turn. He fondles the outside of her thighs, then the inside, kissing and licking everywhere.

He soon approaches her Mount of Venus, which is completely hairless. She opens her legs ever so slightly, while moaning. He enters her with two of his fingers, moving them back and forth and rubbing the wall of her vagina and paying particular attention to the G-spot. During this entire time, he is stroking her clitoris with his thumb. He keeps going until she reaches an intense orgasm. As she climaxes, he carries on caressing her and places his other hand on her belly and uses his fingers to press just above her mount. Her orgasm lasts quite a long time.

After a few seconds, she catches her breath and gently pushes back Ethan's shoulder so he can lie on the bed. With her bathrobe entirely open, she crouches on the bed on top of him. She unties Ethan's belt. She opens his bathrobe completely.

She leans in towards Ethan's mouth. She kisses him, slowly licking his lips. She takes a few short stops to look at him. During one such pause, Ethan admits to her:

— I love you madly!

— I love you madly too, but don't talk.

She leans over him again and begins brushing her breasts against his chest. She pulls herself back a little to caress and kiss his chest. She licks his nipples. And she keeps going down. He can't see anything because of her hair.

She sees his raging excitement and likes it. She strokes his belly with the palm of her hand, kissing and licking him. Slowly, she presses on his belly and moves her hand to brush against his penis. She feels his great arousal. She stops:

— Ethan, let me ask you something. I really want you to come inside me. Right now, I really want you. But I want to keep torturing you. Just tell me "I'm going to come!" and not at the very last second. And I'll get on top of you and take care of you. Okay?

— Yes!

Kate starts masturbating her target very slowly. She takes turns using her hands, her tongue, her mouth. From time to time, she looks at his face to see his arousal escalate. With her other hand, she caresses his face, his lips and uses one finger to enter his mouth and stroke his tongue.

At some point, he moans:

—I'm going to come!

She straddles him and drives his penis into her vagina. She slowly rocks her entire upper body back and forth. She does circular movements with her pelvis. As she lies down on top of his chest, Ethan lets out a moan of pleasure signalling his imminent euphoria. She presses her arms and continues riding him with her pelvis. She sees him closing his eyes, his face changing. As she lifts her head, she comes at the same time. He opens his eyes and watches Kate orgasm. He gazes at her as he caresses her breasts.

She lies down on top of Ethan's body while still keeping him prisoner inside her. They stroke each other's hair in silence for several long minutes. She breaks the silence:

—I love you so much. These moments, I will never forget them. I came twice. That's never happened to me before. And right now, I can feel you inside me, even though we're not moving, I love it.

Ethan gently admits to her:

—Now I know why they call this "making love". It's crazy, I never really loved life, but now, I'm afraid of losing it.

They both share a tender and lengthy kiss. Then she releases her captive and moves to Ethan's right. They are both on their backs savouring the moment.

They both take off their bathrobes now.

Then, Ethan informs her:

—There's something about me you should know. I have a very slight issue. My lungs function at less than

50%. Today, it went well because you were on top. If I had been on top, I would have run out of breath and we would've had to stop.

— I'm sorry to hear about your lungs, she answers. But it's quite clear that it only affects your breath. The rest is working marvellously well.

— You will have to be on top most of time. You will be dominating me.

— I like the idea quite a lot.

— Be careful, I mean domination only in bed.

— We will see about that, she replies.

They look at each other in this semi-darkness and, exhausted from the day, they fall asleep comfortably.

In the morning, he makes breakfast. In the meantime, he asks her:

— It would help me if you came with me to buy a car. If it's ready, you could drive it back here. We could go after the reporters leave.

— Drive back with it! We won't even take the afternoon to shop!

— Unlike the man you met last night, today you meet a man who is quite fast.

— Oh really? Now, if you'll agree, we could make a deal. I won't be able to drive my Porsche for the next two months. So, I'll lend you my car for the time being while you lend me your new one. That way, I'll be independent.

— That's fine. May I ask you a question that's a little personal?

— Sure.

— Seeing as you have a Porsche, what do you do in the winter?

— The engine of my other car blew up. I was waiting to get it fixed.

—I see. We'll have to notify our insurers that we are driving each other's cars temporarily.

—Good idea.

—I will also call work to tell them that I will take the rest of the week off.

—I'll do the same, she says.

They go to the bedroom to get dressed. Her tight-fitting blue-patterned pants perfectly define her lower body, not taking into account the bump of her cast. A white silk blouse with a black lace collar and a modest neckline reveals a sexy bra. She asks:

—So, now that you've seen my breasts and done pretty much everything you can do to them, how do you find them? Small?

—You don't have big breasts, but they are, let's say, respectable. That being said, there are a few important considerations. First of all, I don't like big breasts. I prefer smaller breasts. Also, a respectable pair of breasts like yours hardly sags with age. This somewhat negates Isaac Newton's law on universal attraction.

—Universal attraction?

—Gravity.

—Mister Miller flaunts his knowledge of science.

—But the most important thing about your breasts is that they speak.

—What do you mean "They speak?"

—Well, when I fondle, caress or kiss them, your nipples get hard. They let me know you like it.

—You're completely insane and I love it.

—Look, you're beautiful. Your pants shape your two buttocks beautifully. I'm going to have to stay behind you all day.

—Voyeur!

—Yeah!

—We're coming back here, tonight?

—No, I want to entertain you.

—Do you have two dressing gowns?

—No.

—Then you can't entertain me. I'm kidding! I think that for a few days you should take it easy and stay at my place.

—You're going to let me take it easy. I'm not so sure, she says, looking outside. Ethan, we have to deal with the reporters. They're coming.

Ethan says, opening the door:

—Ladies first.

Kate goes outside, and he whispers:

—Remember, I'm right behind you.

—I know, but come next to me. Otherwise you'll get too excited and we won't be able to go buy your new car.

After the usual greetings, the reporter starts the interview:

— Mr. Miller, we've obtained details from the police. The driver of the tractor trailer was probably dead when he hit you. How did you feel at the time of the impact?

— Actually, I had just noticed Kate standing on the sidewalk and I was thinking about her when I realized what was happening. I was afraid for her. You know when you see such a beauty, you want to be there for her.

— What about the other pedestrians, did you think about them?

— Yes, but not much. Kate was up front. If she had been standing behind the others, I probably wouldn't have noticed her.

— Would you have done the same?

— Ask God, but I do not know if he knows the answer.

— I guess you're right. Please go on.

— In the car when I saw the truck coming towards me, the only thing I thought was to protect my head. I

knew it was going to hit me hard. My window was closed. It's always closed.

—Once you stopped, what did you do?

—I looked to the left and saw that the front of the truck was wrecked. Then I looked to the right. I could see the pedestrians without seeing their faces. I couldn't see Kate's dress. I got worried. Then I told myself that I had to get out of there fast. That's when I opened the window of my roof.

—At what point did you know that your left arm was injured?

—When I stretched out my arms to get out through the roof. I couldn't lift it up. I looked and saw blood on my sleeve. I felt my bones and there didn't seem to be any fractures. I only had one arm and my legs to climb, but I made it.

—You found Ms. Jackson on the ground?

—At first, I saw that she was moving. Soon, I saw that her legs were trapped under my car which was on the side. I assumed the car was on top of her legs. I was afraid that she was bleeding. I looked under the car, but I couldn't see anything. She said her left leg hurt.

—What did you do then?

—I took her right knee and moved it. She didn't react. Then I touched her left leg, from the knee to the ankle to see if it was wet. She felt a discomfort when I touched her fracture. After removing my hand, I saw that there was no blood.

—And then?

—Then I sat on the sidewalk and put her head on my thigh, so that she wasn't too uncomfortable. She was very nervous. I took her hand and told her about the fracture to her leg, but the good news is that the fracture wasn't open.

The journalist asked:

—Ms. Jackson, do you remember when the car hit you?

—Not really. I was looking at the ground because I was about to step off the sidewalk. All of a sudden, all I saw was grey. That's the colour of the car.

—So then what happened?

—I felt a sharp pain in my leg and I fell to the left. Once on the ground, I saw that the car was leaning towards me. I was really scared. I thought: *What if it falls on me?* That's when Ethan came and took care of me.

—Mr. Miller, when you were next to her, did you think that the car would continue in its path and fall on you?

—Yes, but nothing was moving.

—What if the car had moved?

—Look, you can imagine any scenario. But I wouldn't have had time to run unless the car was moving very slowly. Also, it wasn't really option for me to leave her there and get the hell out. All I could think about was protecting her.

—Ms. Jackson, I was told that you didn't want him to leave your side, but a few minutes prior to the

accident, you didn't even know Mr. Miller. How do you explain that?

—What can I say? I was frightened. Afraid of everything. I was scared and really hurting. His presence reassured me. I don't know why, but he calmed me down without really speaking to me. He took my hand. Maybe that's it. He placed my head gently on him. That also reassured me. At one point, I told him that I was afraid to go to the hospital. I remember him calling for help. Then he offered to take me to the hospital to comfort me. I agreed. I saw that he had a great deal of empathy, selflessness and dedication.

—Before I came and met you last night during supper, and I apologize for that, I spoke to the doctor who treated you. At some point, he said that you were married. But yesterday, you did not know each other, so you weren't married. Why would you say that?

Kate answers by pointing to Ethan:

—He said it. He's the culprit.

Ethan then responds:

—First of all, I want to apologize to the doctor who, and let me be loud and clear, was fantastic. I just said that because I wanted to stay with Kate for two reasons. One, I promised her. And two, I liked being next to her, taking her hand, her arm and looking at her.

—So, if I understand correctly, you took advantage of me, she says with a smile.

—Okay! So now, we have to be specific when we say that yesterday we weren't together. We need to specify exact times during the day.

—Ethan, don't go there.

—Too late, and besides, you're the one who pushed me there. So, that's right, when we were in the hospital, we weren't together.

Looking at Kate:

—As for me, there was a great attraction and I am convinced that it was the same for you, you just didn't know it yet.

—You think so? she replies.

—However, that same day we got together. So, the question was just a little unclear. It was all a matter of time. On that note, I believe the interview is over.

The reporter shakes their hand:

—Thank you for all your generosity.

Ethan responds:

—And I thank you for being respectful.

He turns to Kate:

—Now let's go buy my car.

They get into the Porsche and drive away from the reporter and cameraman.

— Since you are staying at my house for a while, we should go by your place and pack a suitcase for 4 or 5 days.

— Good idea.

While Kate prepares her suitcase, she admits:

— You know, the cane you bought is really helpful. Thanks again. I can't wait to see how you buy a car.

After a few moments of silence, she comes near him, hugs him and says:

— Ethan, I can't believe it. We only met yesterday. Then, we made love and it was wonderful. Today we're together and it is as if we've known each other for years. It feels so good. It seems that we are made for each other and the universe brought us together.

— Kate, I have a profound belief that we are all cogs in a gigantic gear that makes up the universe. I am truly convinced that the universe brought our two cogs together and the teeth fit perfectly into one another.

— Do you believe in destiny, in God?

— I believe that God is the universe. Since everything is part of the universe and helps create it, then we too are part of the universe. Our cogs are part of the work of the universe, of God.

— So, we should avoid putting sand in it, she says while kissing him.

She goes on to say:

— And I like what you just said about the universe, about God.

They go to the scrap yard to pick up his old licence plate. Then they set off, straight to the dealer where he purchased his previous car.

— Kate, look at the master go, he brags.

At the sale desk, he asks:

— Is Andre Dupuis here?

— Yes, sir. He is.

The salesman approaches, reaching out his hand:

— Good Afternoon, Mr. Miller.

— Good afternoon. I need another car right now.
Here is my old licence plate.

— Do you want the same car?

— About.

— I have one that is almost ready, but it's a little more luxurious than your previous car.

— How much more?

— \$7,500

— What colour is it?

— Gold. Look right in front of you, in the window.

— That's great. Tell me where to sign.

— Please follow me to my office.

— Do you need financing?

— No. I'll write a cheque.

— Perfect. Have a seat.

He completes the paperwork and has him sign every so often. Ethan writes out a cheque and gives it to the salesman.

On their way to the car, she asks him:

— You paid cash?

— Yes, my insurance is covering almost everything.

Kate drives his new car and Ethan takes her Porsche. Once home, Kate says to him:

—You won't get any credit for buying a car in a matter of minutes. You knew the dealership and the salesman. Even worse, you would have bought anything, just to be right. Your pride's going to destroy you one day. So, you have to admit that you cheated.

He takes her hands with a broad and almost indecent smile. After a few seconds of satisfaction, he resolves to admit:

—When you say that I cheated, you're much more right than you know. But not for the reasons you think. The truth is, this morning I called the salesman. We determined everything and he reserved the car for me. I told him to pretend we never spoke. I wanted to trick you a little bit. He played the game very well.

—I'm so naive! In my defence, your plan was... And I hesitate to say it... just perfect.

—Being naive is a tiny little flaw that just makes your perfection even more perfect.

—Whew, flattery on top of that. I wonder what exactly it is you're looking for.

She hugs and kisses him.

She sits down and, holding her cast, she moves it back and forth to scratch herself:

—Ethan, it itches like hell under the cast.

—Stop it, you're going to hurt yourself. I have an idea.

—Do you? she says as she opens her eyes wide.

—Yeah!

He goes to get a cordless vacuum cleaner. The air outlet can act like a blower. While he carefully cleans the vacuum, he explains:

—You don't want any dust between the cast and your skin.

Then he goes outside and runs the machine. He hits the nozzle on the balcony floor. When he returns, he hands it to her and she uses the thinnest nozzle all around her leg, she lets out a long sigh of relief. She lifts her head, closes her eyes and says:

—Ahhhhh. Still my saviour. I am very happy to be back here with you. At home, I wouldn't know what to do.

—You look like you're about to come just by using the vacuum cleaner.

—I swear I am close. Let's keep it handy, all right?

—Okay, so I use it tonight?

—We won't need it. I can guarantee you that.

Over the next five days, they have a lot of fun. The music is always on. They prepare meals together. They go outside and enjoy looking at the scenery. They walk side by side, he hugs her shoulder, she takes him by the waist and, from time to time, they stop cuddling.

On the third day, as Kate returns from shopping, she pulls \$20 in change from her purse, and tells him:

— You owe me \$10.

— Why?

— Here are ten one-dollar coins.

— Why?

— Because we're going to play pool and it's one dollar per game.

— Oh boy! I'm going to go broke.

— Shall we head downstairs?

— Yeah okay, he says submissively.

— Heads or tails to see who breaks.

— Tails, he chooses.

She flips the coin in the air and catches it in its fall.

— Heads, I break.

— So, it begins, he says in a discouraged tone.

He loses one game and then another. For the third face-off, he gathers the balls in the triangle and Kate suggests:

—I don't want to steal all your money in one day. So, what if we bet something else?

—I'm going to lose anyway.

—Deal, so the loser gives the winner a massage with the massage oil I bought today at the sex shop.

—You went to an erotic store alone?

—Yes.

—Don't ever do that again. If you ever go back there, it'll be with me.

—Oops! Okay, I promise. Now, will you take the bet?

—Do I have a choice?

—No.

Ethan loses the game.

—You're going to have to pay. I'm going to lie on the bed.

She lays on her stomach on a large towel, completely naked. He kneels beside her. He pours some oil, on the one hand, and rubs his hands together, warming the oil. He starts massaging her shoulders slowly for a few minutes. He moves slowly down to her waist and then up again. He moves on to her feet then proceeds upwards, spreading her legs as he does so. He takes great care to put oil all over her calves, thighs and the area between her thighs then applies it on her buttocks and the area in-between. He goes back down to her feet and gently orders her:

—Turn around.

He moves up, over her. He massages her shoulders and, as he leans back, his hands slowly fall lower, still covering her with oil. He massages her breasts and stomach for several minutes. Then, as he massages her thighs, she spreads open her legs to give him access to her sex. He massages her whole sex and keeps his fingers on her clitoris. She arches and orgasms with great intensity.

He stops massaging her and just keeps his hand on her sex, motionless.

After a few minutes, she tells him:

—Stand up. It's your turn.

He stands up in front of her. She lowers his pants and takes great pleasure in making him come, watching his face all the while.

A little later, she tells him:

—I love making love to you; even the sex is not unpleasant.

—My intuition tells me that we'll be using the pool table again.

—You can count on it. I like to win, to dominate.

—When we make love, you are always on top because of my lungs. You dominate me every time. Isn't that enough for you?

—No. When we make love, you have no choice. Playing pool, you have a chance to be on top.

—I have no chance, I suck.

—That's your problem.

—Now we see who's the boss.

- *Let me be clear: Vice-president.*
- *My bad!*
- *Ethan, I loved it.*
- *Me too.*

On the morning of the fifth day, they are lying in bed.

—Ethan, I didn't know we could just lie down, hug and caress each other, without it going further.

—I call it tenderness.

—Yes, it is tenderness and it's great, very affectionate and I love it!

—You know, for me, making tenderness is making love without the sex. Making sex is making love without any love. And making love is doing everything.

—I will remember those definitions.

—Now, listen. In about two months, the cast will come off. I suggest that on that day, we go out for supper at a nice restaurant. You will dress sexy. Then, if we feel like it, we'll make love all night long because we'll be off the next day. What do you think about that?

—I love it.

—Perfect. I'll arrange it.

The next day, Kate returns home and goes back to work. Ethan goes back to his client to continue his contract.

Over the next two months, they see each other often. Ethan gets to know Kate's children and grandchildren. Their kids' spouses are also there. Kate gets to meet only Ethan's second daughter, her husband and her son.

One day, while they're having supper at a restaurant, Kate asks him:

—I'm curious to know why you and your eldest daughter aren't speaking to each other.

—It's not an interesting story.

—I'd like to hear it.

—Are you sure you want to?

—Yes. I want to know, but if you don't want to talk about it, I understand.

He ponders for a moment while contemplating her light-blue eyes staring back at him.

—Kate, I could lose myself in your stunning eyes.

He stands above the table and steals a short, sweet kiss from her lips.

—To get the full story, I have to start far back. I'll tell you about it. For the first five years of her life, my daughter was an only child. At home, she was the Queen. And at the age of six, her sister came into the world. She lost her throne.

—It must have been more difficult than in other families due to the age gap.

—Yes, quite. My ex-mother-in-law came to help at home, as she had done with our eldest daughter. The house was typical with one floor and three bedrooms. So, as you can see, there were five people living in the house, including one couple. We were already one room short.

He takes a break. And continues:

—A few days after the birth, my own mother committed suicide.

—Oh no! How did it happen?

—It really doesn't matter how it happened.

—Ethan, I'm so sorry.

He takes a sip of wine.

—My father, filled with despair, came to live with us. You have to know that he was in bad shape for quite some time. Everything surrounding the birth of my second daughter was a living hell. My father used my ex-mother-in-law as his personal servant, seeing as he had just lost his. And she would order my eldest daughter around. They argued very often. This lasted a few months. As for me, I was overworked, but couldn't show it.

He takes a break:

—One day, at the end of winter, it had started snowing some very big snowflakes, without any wind. Like leaves swaying slowly from left to right, he says as he makes a similar gesture with his hand.

He goes on:

— I watched the snow through a window at work. It was mid-afternoon. I called my ex-wife and told her to get ready; we were going skiing. I got home, changed clothes and then we headed to a ski resort. At the reception desk of the resort, we were told that if we bought tickets at that moment, we would have less than one hour left to ski. The ticket was only for the afternoon. We decided to leave the resort and come back some other time. So, we got in my car and started driving. While in the parking lot, a car hit us violently from the front, on the passenger side. Even worse, due to the ice that was on the ground, the car swerved back and hit us in the back, on the right side. Great, right? The same car hit us twice. What bad luck!

He drinks some wine, and then continues:

— My car got towed and we went home in a taxi. When we got there, after recounting the story, I went to lie down in bed with the door closed. My ex-wife came in and found me. She sat next to me and asked me what I was going to do. I said I wanted to get some sleep. She said she wanted to go to sleep as well. When she told me that, I realized in that moment that we both wanted the thread of life to stop. So, I looked outside and I saw that the big snowflakes were still falling. The streetlights lit them up very well. And then, overcome with anger, I said, “There’s no way we’re missing this. We have to go back.” She asked me what car I was planning to use and I answered that I’d drive my father’s. She told me that he’d never agree and, still angry, I told her that I simply

didn't care. We went back to the resort. I remember it well, how I took the individual ski lift, placed it between my legs, sitting there as it started to move forward, and still these big snowflakes were falling slowly all around me. The climb was really magical. It seemed like the higher I climbed the mountain, the more energy I had. When I reached the top, I had my full energy back and wanted to live. I was ready to go for it.

He continues after taking a short break:

—By spring, the atmosphere at home was so unbearable that we asked a couple friends of ours to babysit our eldest daughter. They agreed to it. They had a boy the same age, and the two kids got along. I was the one to drive her alone. This friend of mine, a physicist, asked me how long it would be. I told him that I didn't know.

—I think I see where you're going with this, says Kate in a sad voice. Go on, will you?

—On the way back, in a remote little place, I parked my car to think. I told myself that none of this made any sense. People were coming to my house and I had to get my own family out. It didn't make any sense to me. I had to fix it. I didn't know what I'd do, but I had to do something. I think my brain was working in slow motion, really.

After taking a sip of wine, he continues:

—A few days later, I met up with a cousin. Without knowing my exact situation, he told me that except for my wife, everyone will be against me. Kate, he was so right.

—It's so sad.

—I realized that I needed at least one or two allies. So, I went to see my sister and her boyfriend, to explain the situation. Both of them were supportive. I had a social worker meet my father and explain that he had to leave my house, and that my sister and I would find him a place for semi-independent people that he would like. He refused. He couldn't see the damage he was doing.

—It wasn't his fault. His intentions weren't bad.

—You are right, but the damage was done. My sister and I found two places that we showed him and asked him to choose one. He refused to decide. So, we chose for him and moved him. I asked my ex-mother-in-law to move back home, and I went to get my daughter.

He pauses and then continues:

—I never realized that all the damage that was done would gradually fester over time. I didn't realize it. I couldn't foresee the consequences.

—It's not easy.

—The years that followed saw my eldest daughter rebel against any authority, against her parents but especially against me. No matter what I said to her, she did what she wanted. So from time and time, I had to spank her on the butt, of course. Given her constant rebellion, I even thought of taking her to youth protection services and put her in foster care.

—The situation was that bad?

— Yes. But that would have been a mistake, because her mother didn't understand anything. She was good when they were babies, until the age of 4 or 5. Then she lost all control and I had to be the bad guy.

He stops and takes a good long sip of wine. Then a second, more reasonable sip.

—You can stop if you want to.

—No! I'll just finish setting the table and I'll continue. My daughter was like this for a few years, and she got even worse as a teenager. Somewhere along the way, I decided to stop caring, to isolate my feelings from her. One day, I told her that the idiots that she was dating with earrings all over the place, including in their nose, were no longer welcome in my house. More than that, I said that if she continued this behaviour, I'd kick her out of the house, even if she wasn't 18 yet. She calmed down a little and her stupid friends stopped coming over. Some time later, my ex-wife and I moved to Montreal, because that's where I found some great contracts. As for her, she stayed in Quebec City. She dated a guy and had a child with him. Later on, they broke up and she dated someone else, her current partner.

He stops for a few seconds and goes on:

—A few years went by. We saw each other from time to time. One day, as I was coming back from work in Quebec City, my ex-wife called and told me that my daughter wanted to talk to me and that I should go to her house. Which I did. I found her in tears. Her partner

greeted me. She worked in a department for the Quebec government. She told me she had problems with two of her bosses, who had complained to human resources. Kate, I had never been a unionized, unlike her spouse, who didn't say a word. I am sure that he was angry that his girlfriend, who was over 37 years old, called her father for help instead of going to him. I think that on that day, he had to choose between his girlfriend or her old man. He chose to simply get rid of the old man. So, he came up with a plan to get rid of him.

— I'm sorry, says Kate sadly.

— Don't be. I am who I am because of all that, all my past. Now, I'm in front of a wonderful woman whom I love to watch, with whom I love spending time, talking, eating, making love. All that shit in my life allowed me to meet you and I sincerely hope that our relationship will last a very long time.

He takes a sip of wine:

—One day, she had a complete burnout which lasted several months. Her employer at that time wanted to end her sick leave and forced her to see a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist brought her back to her past, which she had laid to rest. She remembered the spankings without obviously saying why, I guess. He tells her that I'm a violent man. She believes that, I think because she wants to get over her depression. It's easier to blame someone else. I am sure her partner maliciously supported her decision to stop talking to me. It helped his plan. I call him a pimp because he uses the same strategy, to isolate his victim from their family and friends. He has completely isolated her from her family, from me, and he barely tolerates her sister. As for her mother's side of the family, I would say they've broken off about 90%. He is a "pimp" and she's brainwashed.

He takes a sip of wine and continues:

—I am almost done. One day, for New Year's, I invited her, by email, to a restaurant for supper. It was only for her, her sister and me. She refused. She wrote

to me, “Thank you for the invitation, but it isn’t possible for us.” I didn’t invite her “pimp”. This was the end of any type of relationship and any type of heritage. Finally, I want you to know that soon after that, I also ended up looking through a few of my own skeletons. What I remembered about her made me realize that not seeing her wasn’t really a great loss. Quite the opposite, in fact.

—Despite what you may say, Ethan, I wish you had a better relationship. You may, someday.

—Kate, let me quote an American abolitionist woman from the 1800s, Harriet Beecher Stowe: “The bitterest tears shed over graves are for words left unsaid and deeds left undone.”

—What an amazing truth! Of course, this applies to her, but Ethan, you must realize that it applies to you as well.

—You’re absolutely right, and that is why, if it ever happens, I will not cry on her grave.

—Ethan, this makes me so sad.

—I’ve spoken enough about it, and I think I have to put the past to rest and focus on the present and even a little on the future. I want to focus on you and the beautiful memories we are making together.

—Ethan, what you said is so nice. I’m with you.

—So, how was your day?

She recounts funny, light things that happened to her.

After their meal, next to their cars, they say good-bye to each other with a big, long hug and a kiss.

For the next few weeks, they go shopping together on Saturday mornings, and meet on occasion. One day, he tells her:

—Kate, listen. We don't see each other very often during the week. You have to manage your branch and you go to Montreal regularly.

—That's right.

—And when I'm working, my days are very busy. Clients expect this of me, considering they are paying a high level of strategy.

—Okay.

—We go shopping on Saturday mornings and then meet up. On Sundays, we spend some time together, but we each go home and go to sleep early to be in shape the next morning. We spend only one night together per week. It's too condensed. It's even stressful. If we plan to no longer work on Friday afternoons, we can do our shopping. That way, our weekends would be more relaxed. We can even go for supper together on Fridays,

without any stress. We can also spend the night together and even make love.

— That sounds like a great idea, she admits. I'll arrange it at work.

He goes on to say:

— When the weather is nice, you can come to the Island. In the evening, we can start a fire in the open-air. We'll have a good glass of wine and we'll admire the scenery. Usually, when there are no clouds, the moon's beams are reflected on the river. We can see the beauty of nature. We can see the huge boats sailing past, more or less slowly. You know, it's been years since I've taken the time for all this. Before my divorce, everything was bad, and after, I was alone. Evenings like these have to be shared.

— Your offer is quite attractive.

The following Friday afternoon, they take care of their shopping and end up on the island. They cook a good meal. On Saturday night, it's cloudy and Ethan asks:

— It's raining, so there can be no fire. What would you like to do?

— Shall we play a game of pool or two?

— Whew! It's going to be a tough night.

— Tough! I'm counting on it.

The next day is quite sunny. While he mows the lawn with his tractor, she watches a few sailboats sail away in the wind. When he nears her, she signals him to stop. He turns off the engine.

— Can you let me mow? Hmm?

— Listen here. A real man doesn't lend his tractor.

— I get it. Just like a real woman doesn't lend her Porsche.

— Precisely.

He steps down from the tractor smiling. He explains the handling to her.

— Get on, I'll help you.

— Kate puts her right foot on the step. She grabs the steering wheel to hoist herself. Ethan takes her by the waist to help her. She brings her left leg to the other side and sits down.

Pointing at the sailboats, she asks him:

— I'd like to go sailing with you. I've never done that.

— I have. About 20 years ago, I took lessons and got the rank of skipper. At the time, I used to rent

sailboats about 10 metres long. They have better control than the smaller sailboats and are more pleasant to sail.

— Could you rent one for us? I'd love that.

— No. It's been too long since I've gone and I'm not fit enough. Besides, you've never gone, so you wouldn't be much help. But I can rent one with a crew.

— Can you really?

— Yes. But with a crew, we wouldn't be able to drop anchor and do different things, you know! But it would still be fun.

He gives her a kiss and goes on:

— Okay. But we'll have to wait for your cast to be removed. It'll be about 4 or 5 weeks. Otherwise, you won't really enjoy it. Walking on a sailboat requires a certain agility. So, it will have to be in September. For it to be nice, we will have to check the weather. We don't want any chance of rain. The winds should be about 10 to 15 km, but no more than 20 km per hour. That's typical September weather. When the time comes, I'll arrange it with the marina in Quebec City. We'll try for a Friday, Saturday or Sunday, and we should leave right after lunch and return at around 9 or 10 p.m. I want you to see the beauty of the river during the day and evening as well. It's two different worlds.

— That sounds wonderful. I'm really looking forward to it.

Some time in early August, Ethan's phone rings. He answers:

— Good morning.

— Good morning. Am I speaking to Mr. Ethan Miller?

— Yes, it's me.

— Let me introduce myself. My name is Albert Samson. I am the chief of staff to the Premier of Quebec.

— Mr. Samson, what can I do for you?

— The Premier saw what happened last month. He saw your television interview. He also spoke with the chief of police in Quebec, who confirmed that during the investigation, the police discovered a recording taken by one of the street cameras that shows very clearly what happened. We wanted to know the identity of the people involved. At our request, the police carefully analyzed the video and identified the individuals in question. Obviously, there's Ms. Jackson and four other people as well, who've been identified.

— I see. What does this have to do with me?

—I am getting to that, Mr. Miller. The Premier wishes to hold a ceremony in two weeks. He wants to officially award you the Medal of the National Assembly. He wants for everyone you saved being present during the ceremony. With the exception of Ms. Jackson, I've contacted the other four individuals and they were happy to accept. Actually, they're all looking forward to it. As for Ms. Jackson, I wanted to speak with you first. Would you be willing to attend this ceremony, receive this medal and meet the people who are alive thanks to you? Of course, the Premier will be there, and so will several ministers and dignitaries.

—Of course, Mr. Samson. As for Ms. Jackson, I'd like you to be the one to contact her.

—That was my intention to begin with. The day before the ceremony, there will be a small rehearsal just for you. A small lesson in protocol. I will be there also.

—Not a problem and it will be my pleasure to meet you.

—For me as well, it will be an honour. My assistant will contact you with the details.

—Perfect.

An hour later, Kate calls him:

—Ethan, the Premier's chief of staff just called me. Great news, you're getting a medal. And you'll get to meet the others you saved. It's fantastic. I'm so happy

for you. I asked him how it's going to go. He explained everything to me and suggested that we go to the parliament separately.

— Okay, we'll go separately. We'll come back together after it's over. During the ceremony, I imagine you'll be with the other four people, but after that, I want you to be by my side again and stay close to me.

— Okay. We'll speak again.

— Talk to you later.

Ethan drives to the parliament in the Porsche. Kate takes a taxi. A protocol officer takes care of the five people who were saved. A guard of honour takes Ethan to see the premier. A lot of people are there. Ministers, deputies and reporters applaud him. Ethan looks at them and respectfully nods to them.

The premier starts his speech by first addressing the assembly and then the five people with tears in their eyes. He ends with Ethan, who seems to have kept his cool. The guard of honour takes a box from the table next to them. He opens it and hands it to the premier, who pulls out the medal. He reaches Ethan and pins the medal on him while offering his congratulations. They end by shaking hands.

Then the premier takes a step back and gives way to the five people who come to shake Ethan's hand and kiss him. All of them are crying, even Kate. They take turns expressing their deepest thanks to Ethan. During this acknowledgment, one of them says:

—Today, I have the honour of being here and thanking you in person. But let's not forget my wife and my four kids who still have their father because of you.

On that day, you have saved a lot more than only five people.

When it's her turn, Kate walks up to him and kisses him on the cheeks. Then in his ear, she whispers:

—It's crazy how much I love you and I'm so very proud of you.

—Stay close to me during the small reception.

—I'll be by your side through all of it.

A formal reception features glasses of red and white wine. There are also canapés. Ethan is sticking to the red. Several people come to shake his hand, professing their respect and admiration.

They finally leave the parliament together and go to the Island for some down time. On the way there:

—It was deeply moving, she admits.

—Yes, it really was.

—Ethan, you didn't seem to be affected at all.

—Actually, I was really moved when that man spoke about his family. I had never thought about the families before. It's unfortunate they weren't invited.

As she enters the house, Kate stands in front of him and says:

—You look good with your medal.

She takes him by the neck and gives him a long hug.

One month has passed and it's time to remove her cast. Her appointment at the hospital is scheduled for Friday at 4 pm. Ethan has reserved a table at a gourmet restaurant. He takes her to the hospital in her Porsche, and once again, they meet the same doctor.

—How are you? he asks.

—Kate answers, "All right."

Ethan, stroking her back, adds immediately after her:

—Wonderful.

The doctor smiles broadly and gets ready to cut her cast with a special saw. Ethan notices Kate's nervousness as she grabs the sheet from her stretcher. He takes her forearm:

—It's going to be okay.

—I'm afraid of the saw.

—I know, but it's made for that. It can't cut your skin. Doctor, could you please show her?

He places the saw on the palm of his hand and turns it on. Nothing happens. Kate is a little reassured.

—One day, you could explain to me why you are so afraid of hospitals.

—Maybe, says Kate.

Giving Ethan a side look, the doctor accuses him:

—By the way, sir, on the day of the accident, you lied to me.

—Lied! What do you mean?

—You told me you were married and it wasn't true.

—How did you find out?

—You were on TV.

—Yeah! And if you remember, I publicly apologized to you.

—That's true.

—Also, we started dating that day. So, I was actually right that day. It was just the hour that was wrong.

—I knew he was going to say that. Please somebody, shoot him, whispers Kate.

Smiling, the doctor cuts and removes the cast. While a nurse is cleaning Kate's leg, he says:

—Mr. Miller, congratulations on your medal of the National Assembly. I saw the ceremony at the parliament. And the man who said you saved more than five people that day. I think he was absolutely right.

They shake hands. Then the doctor examines her leg:

—Everything is great.

Ethan asks him:

—Do you have any recommendations?

—Not really. Everything looks in order, but Ms. Jackson, try not to skip rope.

Ethan asks him:

—Do you have a thing for her skin colour?

Kate replies:

—Ethan, I have everything I need for that.

When she gets up, she says:

—Doctor, thank you for my leg, but really, thanks for your patience while dealing with this insufferable man.

—You make a beautiful couple. I wish you nothing but happiness for a very long time.

They all smile and shake hands before departing.

Kate sits in the driver's seat as Ethan tells her:

—Just relax! Okay?

—Don't worry about it.

—Okay?

—Okay.

—You should know that looking at a beautiful woman drive around in a skirt or a dress is a turn-on. A manual car, even more so.

—Why? she asks as she drives out of the parking lot.

—Because the skirt or the dress always flies up. So, a skirt up to the knee becomes a mini.

—You're such a pervert, you know that? she says, eyes the road but with a quick and inquisitive look to him.

—Yeah! And you enjoy it.

—Yes, I do! she says with a smile.

—I have to go home and change for the restaurant, she says, and lifts her skirt ever so slightly with her left hand.

—Kate, you're obviously sending me a very effective message.

—I am, but not before the restaurant. We won't have the time to do everything we want.

Kate is getting ready while Ethan waits for her in the living room, looking at her view of the city. She comes out of her bedroom wearing a sparkling blazer and skirt with vertical grey stripes. Her entire ensemble is very tight. Her skirt ends just above her knees. You can't see that her leg hasn't been exposed to any sunshine for the past two months. Beneath her blazer, she isn't wearing a blouse, nor a bra. Her neckline is plunging and reveals part of her breasts.

Surprised, he exclaims:

—Wow. You are so very sexy.

—Isn't that what you told me? Or had you forgotten?

—Yes, I forgot and I'm rather glad I did. I like surprises.

—Let's go, she suggests.

—What car are we taking?

—Why, the Porsche, of course.

—And who's driving?

—Me, of course.

—Your skirt won't allow you.

—We'll see about that.

Kate opens the door on the driver's side and stands with her back to the car. Then, she lifts up her skirt, making it a miniskirt. Ethan is in the car, watching her performance attentively. Then she sits her butt on the seat and turns around, bringing her legs in.

—Whew, how about we go back home and forget all about the restaurant?

—What? she says, surprised. You're the one who taught me to sit like this. Don't you remember?

—That's not the issue, he says, noticing the opening of her neckline, which reveals her entire left breast.

—And what is the issue? she asks as she launches the car towards the restaurant.

—We'll discuss the issue after the restaurant. You'll see.

—I am quite intrigued and rather impatient.

The waiter directs them to a table. Ethan follows and is already feasting his eyes on Kate's carved buttocks. They both choose the gourmet menu, which includes seven courses complete with seven accompanying drinks, all of the chef's choosing.

While they are enjoying the appetizer and enjoying each other's company, the chef comes to their table to ask about their tastes and inquire about any allergies.

The meal is magnificent: the taste of the food and the appearance of each course. Their conversations, the laughter, as well as her neckline that doesn't hold, everything is just perfect.

As they leave the restaurant, Kate gets behind the wheel and drives directly to her house, without further delay. All throughout the drive, they are silent. They remain silent in the elevator, in the hallway and even in her apartment.

Ethan gently pushes her against the wall. He doesn't want it to become sexual, he wants it to be emotional.

He begins to caress each side of her face gently, then her neck. He kisses her, not using his tongue, and his hands reach down to fondle her glorious buttocks beneath the suit that contours her shape beautifully. Kate joins him in the kiss and then slowly draws him into the room, closing the door behind them.

Ethan is monitoring the weather, as he can now plan a day of sailing. They have to wait for a Saturday in the middle of September for the conditions to be just right. They go to a restaurant close to the marina in Quebec City to eat lunch. They order a standard meal along with a glass of wine. Then they head to the reception area of the marina where the captain and his crew are waiting for them. The captain asks:

— Have you ever been sailing before?

Ethan answers:

— I've gone before, but Kate hasn't. It's her first time.

— Tell me a little about your experiences.

— I got my skipper's licence and even took my courses here, at this marina.

He asks him:

— Do you want to steer the boat today?

— No thanks. I prefer being a passenger and most of all, being with Kate on a trip that I hope she won't forget.

The captain steers the sailboat into the lock and docks it. Ethan explains:

— Kate, today, this will be your first surprise. Normally, people go to the lock and look down on those lucky enough to be motorboating or sailing. Now, Kate, you're on the bottom, looking up and seeing people who are a little envious.

— That's true. And it's quite high.

— That's because right here, the high tides during the equinoxes could reach up to 6 metres. So, the dock has to be even higher.

— How interesting.

The gate of the lock opens, letting the boats through. The captain steers the sailboat, powered by the engine, to the middle of the river, bow to the west. Once in position, the mainsail is hoisted and the Genoa is unfurled. The boat begins its course with a south-westerly wind of about 15 km. This wind generates good waves, causing the boat to sway. He heels to starboard, drawn by a headwind. Ethan and Kate sit on the highest side, port side. Kate, with her hair blowing in the wind, has the amazed look of a child. She is looking everywhere, trying not to miss anything. She is surprised when the sailboat rises over one wave only to drop down again as it cuts into next wave, with the water splitting on each side of the boat and splashing in the air. From time to time, there is a spray of water that blows over the boat, wetting those on board. She is looking and taking pictures of the Château Frontenac, resting atop of its mountain. She turns around to look at and take pictures of Lévis.

Ethan, who has already seen all of this, watches this beautiful woman who is experiencing it for the very first

time. Her gaze, her broad smile, and the emotions pervading her entire body make Ethan truly happy.

Kate realizes he's looking at her. She smiles at him and kisses him as she caresses his cheek. Then she returns to her infatuation.

Ethan gets up and asks the captain:

— Can I steer a little? In such a wind, it's so much fun to sail a sailboat. Besides, I want to get away from Kate for a bit to let her enjoy it to the fullest.

— Okay, great! I wondered how long it was going to take you to make up your mind. The helm is yours, he finishes with a smile.

Ethan wants to take full advantage of the boat's power. He examines the direction of the wind, turns the helm a little to change the speed and asks them to tuck the main-sail and loosen the genoa a little. The sailboat approaches the river bank.

He announces:

— We're going to have to change tack.

The captain asks him:

— Are you able to handle it?

— Yes.

— You're up.

As he looks at Kate:

— Kate, stay where you are. I'll tell you when to move.

— Yes boss!

— You don't say "boss" on a boat. You say "sir", he says in an authoritarian tone.

She gives him a laugh and a military salute with her hand:

— Yes sir!

He starts:

— Ready to swing to port.

— Mainsail ready, replies the captain with a smile that depicts his satisfaction at seeing the pleasure on the face of his new helmsman.

— Genoa ready, says the crewman.

He quickly turns the wheel to port, and the ship begins to swing. The sails change quickly and let out a bang. Ethan puts the sailboat in position to get the best wind and the crew adjusts both sails. Then the sailboat, which has barely slowed down, picks up speed, while heeling to port. Kate, finding herself very close to the water, dips her hand in it.

— Kate, you can go to the other side if you want.

She gets up and moves to the other side of the sailboat, passing behind Ethan. As she moves behind him, she hugs him and whispers in his ear:

— I never knew I was making love with a handsome captain.

After a few minutes, Ethan tells the captain:

— I'll play the passenger again. Thank you very much.

— Why? You can continue to helm.

— You should! Kate says in agreement.

— Thank you, but I want to stay close to you.

The captain takes over the helm. Ethan sits down, very close to Kate and puts his hand on her thigh. She lays her hand on Ethan's.

—I just remembered the joy of sailing a sailboat, especially with such a good headwind. It was fantastic.

—We could rent one again.

—Why not?

She kisses him on the cheek. Then, she continues to admire the scenery. They sail under the two bridges.

The Captain asks:

—Do you want to continue up to Neuville, or do we turn back to get to the south of Ile d'Orléans? You should know there isn't much from here to Neuville.

—What do you think we should do, sir? she asks Ethan in a mocking voice.

—I am no longer in charge, so I am no longer the boss. You're the boss now.

—So, what do you recommend? she asks.

—We change tack.

—Okay. We change tack! she tells the captain.

—Aye, aye. Watch your heads, we're going to gybe.

—Kate, watch the boom.

—The what?

—That big thing under the mainsail, pointing to it. It could swing suddenly. If it does, you want it to go over your head, not chop it off. I don't want you to lose that beautiful head.

—You are so kind to me.

But the captain knows what he's doing. He brings the mainsail back to the centre of the boat and asks them:

—Please cross over. With a tailwind, the mainsail will blow on your side.

They cross over to the other side and Ethan says:

—You'll see, downwind is really nice. Compared to before, you'll have the impression that we're not going forward, but we'll be going even faster. You'll see, it's a lot less windy. And then, we'll pitch even less. It'll feel like you're floating on the top of a wave.

After several minutes, Kate notices:

—Ethan, you were right. The difference is really impressive.

—The wind is actually strong and it always has that effect. The first time, you find it quite strange.

The sailboat travels between Quebec City and Lévis, then Beauport and reaches the tip of the island. It is almost 5 p.m., and the wind has dropped by half. The sailboat slows down a little, helped by the falling tide.

The Captain warns them:

—We'll have to probably go back using the engine.

Ethan says:

—No problem. Kate, look over there, pointing.
That's my house.

—Yes, I can see it. Could we get a little closer? she asks the captain.

—Of course.

He makes the necessary turn.

Kate takes a few pictures of his house. After several minutes, the captain says:

—We'll have to tack so we don't run aground.

He steers the sailboat to the east of the Island, telling them that they should eat now. The crew brought their own food. Kate opens the cooler and pulls out the sandwiches she brought:

—Here, enjoy and remember that I put a lot of love into it.

It is just past 6 p.m. when the boat reaches the eastern tip of the Island. The captain informs them:

—We're going to have to turn back. Ethan, you wanted to see Quebec City at night.

—That's right!

—If we use the engine, we'll be able to go closer to the bridges and get back to the marina around 10 p.m. Is that okay?

—Okay with me. What about you, Kate?

—Of course.

The crewmen bring the sails back up. The captain starts the engine and then sails back towards Quebec. The sun finally sets and darkness sets in. Already at the western tip of the Island, they can make out Quebec City, with its lights.

When they reach the marina, they can see the lights of Lévis. The boat is slowly making its way between the two cities. Kate, still fascinated, is looking everywhere.

They come across a large tanker very closely. Kate looks up and exclaims:

—Wow! It's huge!

Back at the marina, they get their stuff and carry it to Ethan's car, close by. They turn back to go thank the captain and his crewmen for their kindness.

Reaching the car once again, Ethan starts to say something, but Kate takes him by the head and kisses him. The first kiss is small and sweet. The second is longer and wetter. The third is deeply sexual. Then she hugs him around the neck and holds him tightly. Ethan says:

—Whew!

After a few seconds, he continues:

—Listen. You're going to have to be a little careful. Chances are you'll get a little dizzy. It's happened to me once or twice, in the shower, after a good day of sailing. I'm not sure why it happens only in the shower. But when it does come, I have to put my hand on the wall. What it will be for you, we can't know yet. It's the inner ear that has to find its balance. It loses it on a sailboat because the movements on the water force our equilibrium to adapt. Now it must readjust. It doesn't take long, especially if you drink a little alcohol like rum or cognac. Alcohol helps if you don't drink too much. Only a little ounce or two.

—You shower after you go sailing?

—Yes!

—I'd like a shower now.

—Okay! he says.

—But you have to come with me in case I fall.

—Oh! I understand. So, we'll have to take care of each other.

—That's right!

—Does that mean that we each wash the other person?

—You got it.

Ethan starts the car and heads for the Island. On the way, Kate grips Ethan's thigh and slips her hand to his crotch, staying there for a few seconds. Then she takes his hand on the top of the gearshift and caresses it with her thumb.

Once home, they bring in the cooler and the bag with their warm clothes. They drink a glass of cognac and head for the shower, holding each other by the hips.

They set their glasses on the sink counter. Ethan gently undresses Kate, who proceeds to do the same. Naked, she enters the shower first and is followed by Ethan. He turns on the faucet and the hot water gushes out like rain. They enjoy the heat and hug each other for a few minutes. As she closes her eyes, enjoying the moment, she loses her sense of balance ever so slightly. Ethan holds on to her. She opens her eyes and affirms:

—You just saved me again. It's becoming a habit.

She kisses him passionately. Their hands are lathered with soap and they start washing each other's necks,

shoulders, and arms. They synchronize their movements and look into each other's eyes. As their hands move towards their partner's back, they begin caressing and rubbing each other, purposefully making their way to the buttocks. Their hands move up, on the side up to the shoulders. They gently recede back and start washing each other's chests. After a little while, their hands move lower and rub their stomach and finally, pleasurably their sex. They make it to the bed without drying themselves and, in the dark, lie down, tenderly caress each other, and finally make love.

Now November has arrived. The cold heralds the painful end of autumn.

Kate calls Ethan to ask if he can free himself for lunch and meet her at a good restaurant close by.

Seated at the table, she begins:

—Ethan, from the very onset, I want to confess that this is a trap. My boss, the President of the company, will come and meet us in about thirty minutes. Actually, I told him all about you and he wants to meet you.

—You mean he wants to interview me?

—That's right.

—Why?

—He wants to offer you a very important position.

—Okay, I'll play along. I've done a lot of interviews in my career. But usually I know the position or the circumstances before the interview. So, you'll have to fill me in.

—Of course, but I'm going to have to keep some things secret. He wants to expand our financial investment company. He wants someone from the outside in order to reach new markets. Until further notice, it's

top secret. It's a very, very big project that will last one to two years. However, he's offering me the position of Senior Vice-President of Accounting and Finance. He's asking me to move to Montreal.

Suddenly, Ethan feels a quivering growing inside him. He lowers his eyes and thinks:

I am losing my love.

Then he looks to the left and the right, avoiding her gaze. Again, he looks down at his hands.

He is thinking:

I have to trust the universe. It protects me. I have to control myself. I have to calm down.

Kate looks at him and understands what he is going through. To reassure him, she says:

—Hey! Wait a second. I see that you're thinking the worst. But why don't you come to Montreal with me?

—You just said, "why don't you come to Montreal with me?" I see that your decision has already been made. So as far as our relationship is concerned, the ball is in my court. I will have to decide whether we continue seeing each other. I must tell you that hearing this in this restaurant without any prior discussion, it makes me sick. I want to shout out all my anger. Right now, I just want to escape from here, from this restaurant and from you. Besides, I have no idea why I'm still sitting

here. Maybe I'm afraid to end this wonderful relationship that seems to have lasted only four months.

—Geez, Ethan! I have to say that I didn't expect such a strong reaction from you.

—What? You thought I would agree to this without saying anything, just like a dog obeying his master? Come on now! You are much smarter than this. I should leave, he says, turning his head from left to right.

Suddenly, he gets up and grabs his coat that he had left on the back of his chair. Sadly, he announces:

—Listen Kate, obviously, the time has come when we have to go our separate ways. So good luck in Montreal.

He immediately goes towards the exit of the restaurant. Kate launches behind him, without putting on her coat and catches up with him outside the restaurant. She takes his arm with vigour and strength to stop. Crying, she says:

—I just thought this was a great opportunity for the both of us. I made a mistake, and I'm sorry, from the bottom of my heart. Listen to me: if you refuse, I'll also refuse and stay here with you.

—That doesn't make any sense. If you refuse because you want to stay here with me, you will be frustrated and our relationship will be over. That's inevitable. In fact, it will start here, today, at this damn table.

Tearful, she continues:

—Ethan, please. I see that I was in the wrong. But why not just go along? We don't know what's going to

happen. And then we can decide together. Please, let go of this and just have an open mind. I'm begging you to come back inside.

He takes a deep breath and, returning to the restaurant, he says:

—I used to live in Montreal. I hate driving in Montreal. It's crazy there.

She notices her lover's dismay. She thinks:

He's pulled himself together. Now, I have to pull myself together, also. Otherwise, I will lose him. I have been foolish. I must think and act on this, on our future.

Back to the table, nervously, she suggests:

— We could find apartments near our work and even in the same building. We could live near each other. We would be a lot closer. We'll drive as little as possible. There are taxis. Your house is already on sale and you still don't know where you'll live. We could see each other more often. We could make love every day if we want to. We could...

— Tell me about this project, he says, looking at her again.

A little reassured, she continues:

— Okay. I won't tell you the name of the company we're interested in, but it's in the US and six other countries. This company is actually larger than the one I work for. Some bad things have come to light. As a result, their sales are falling. There has been a significant loss of confidence. If the managers want to get back on track, it will take them years. The only way they can is if other people are involved. They've already started some

discussions with my president. They even signed an exclusive agreement. They've agreed to start a financial analysis as soon as possible. Time is of the essence.

At this moment, a man approaches the table. He is rather tall and wears a dark suit with a light-grey shirt, no tie. Ethan gets up and Kate introduces them.

—Ethan, this is Mario, the president. Mario, this is Ethan.

Ethan shakes his hand saying:

—Nice to meet you.

—Nice to meet you. Are we on a first-name basis?

—Of course.

They all sit down. Ethan breaks the ice:

—Mario, Kate told me a little about what we can call “The Project”...

Mario stops him with his hand and says:

—Hold on one moment, Ethan, if I may stop you. I would like to start this meeting by congratulating you for what you did last July. I also want to thank you. Kate is a big part of the company, and she has been a good friend to me for a long time. Also, congratulations on your medal of the National Assembly.

—Thank you. Now, may I continue?

Surprised, Mario answers:

— Of course.

— So, Kate told me about this project. I don't know a lot about it, but I know enough to understand. You ask her to come and be near you. I could understand that. I know you have a plan about me, but I'm not sure which one. I know that we're in the middle of an interview, and it's normal. But I have to say this: I am a consultant and my network is in Quebec City. I used to be a consultant in Montreal, but my network there has dissolved. I have to ask myself if I want to go back there again. There's a lot at stake. And when I say a lot, I'm thinking of Kate. Sorry Kate! But I do have a couple of questions about the project.

— Ethan, I thank you for clarifying and especially your frankness. Now, I understand your sober tone. I will gladly answer your questions.

—Thank you. Is it a takeover or an acquisition? If it's an acquisition, is it a total or a partial merger or not a merger at all?

Mario glances at Kate with a little smile. Ethan sees it and quickly looks at Kate, who also gives him a slight nervous smile.

—We don't know yet, says Mario.

—It would be good to start with clarifying that, wouldn't it?

—Yes.

—I have another question. Something bad happened and now there's a loss of confidence and a drop in sales. Mario, do you trust these managers?

Mario raises his eyebrows and smiles. He answers:

—I'm not sure yet. It seems like I'm the one being interviewed and I'm failing because I don't seem to have many of the answers. I've never been in this position, he admits, looking at Kate.

—I think we're both being interviewed. Mario, let me put your mind at ease, because, in my opinion, not having some of the answers is already knowing something. It's knowing what the priorities will be. As for my

question about trust, the fact that you are not sure, means: caution, caution. So instead of assuming that it's positive, we have to assume that it's negative.

— Exactly. Ethan, I'm sorry for my previous comment to Kate. You're right, caution is necessary. Do you have any other questions?

Ethan goes on:

— I imagine there will be due diligence?

Mario turns to Kate and replies:

— Seeing as this falls under a detailed analysis of the accounts, Kate will be responsible.

Ethan looks at Kate and asks:

— Kate, maybe it's too soon, but I guess you have some ideas.

— I will follow the usual standards and best practices.

In a firm tone, he continues:

— What standards? What good practices?

Surprised at Ethan's tone, she answers:

— In-depth analysis of the financial statements.

Turning to Mario, Ethan then adds:

— Normally, that's fine, but it won't be enough this time.

Astonished, Kate asks him:

— What do you mean by that?

— We have just determined that there is no trust. So, there is a certain amount of mistrust present.

— That's why I said: "an in-depth analysis".

— It still isn't enough, Ethan retorts.

—I guess you have some ideas. What do you suggest? she replies, her anger beginning to rise.

—I want to tell you this story. One day, I was interviewing for a contract with Air Transat. I was asked how I would implement such and such a thing. So, naively and to show that I knew what I was talking about, I explained a few things to them. They asked me a few questions, which I answered. I did not get the contract, but they found out what they had to do, for free. I swore to never to give advice during an interview. And this is an interview.

Kate, barely controlling her anger, responds:

—Are you serious? I'm not Air Transat.

Ethan turns to her, looks her straight in the eyes and very slowly says:

—Look! This is the first time I've seen you angry. What a great interview this is! But I wasn't aware that you were having one also.

Mario immediately speaks up:

—Take it easy, Kate. So far, everything Ethan has said is perfectly accurate and relevant. I think he's right to be cautious about giving out solutions for free, as he said.

Kate looks down for a few seconds to regain her composure and then, slightly regretful, she looks at Ethan:

—I'm really sorry. The goal here is to convince Mario to offer you the position. He's very respectful and frank. If you offer him a solution, he'll acknowledge it, unlike the idiots at Air Transat.

As she sheds a tear, she adds:

—Ethan, I know that if you don't get this job, regardless of the reason, you're not moving to Montreal. You are not the type of man to follow a woman, even if you love her madly. On the other hand, I do not want to force you, because you would be unhappy.

Wiping her tears on her napkin, she continues:

—It will be the end of us, because I won't be able to refuse the position that Mario offers me. I am so very sorry.

Mario goes on:

—Kate, you said I would need convincing. You're wrong, because I'm already convinced. He convinced me from his very first question. No one would ever dare pull a stunt like that. I need someone's who's not afraid. I need a guy who's not going to bow down to me. Also, when he didn't immediately give me the solution he came up with, he totally captivated me. And when he answered you very coldly, I'm sure he knew he was losing you, but he didn't give anything away. But you became angry very quickly. I was surprised because that's really not your style. However, considering your situation, I can understand.

He takes a break:

—But if you work together. Kate, you're gonna have to control yourself, especially considering that Ethan, if he accepts this offer, will be your boss for the project. You will be the Senior Vice-President, but a part of your job will be to work for him.

Ethan speaks up:

—Kate, Mario, I must admit that I didn't push for a smooth discussion, I apologize for that. In my defence, an hour ago, Kate and I were the perfect couple. Regardless of the outcome, this is an important moment.

That being said, if I'm going to be Kate's boss, it'll be very easy, don't worry. I'm the best boss in the world.

They all smile a little nervously, then Kate breaks the silence by saying:

—Ethan, I saw you disappearing from my life and I panicked. God I was so afraid. I'm really sorry, she ends, tearfully.

—Kate, what you felt right now, I felt it twice today. An hour ago, when you told me you were moving to Montreal and again a few seconds ago. As far as I'm concerned, that's enough for today.

—You love each other that much, says Mario. The three of us will agree to never jeopardize that.

—Yes, they all respond together.

After a moment of reflection, Ethan gently says:

—So, Mario, what is the position?

—Ethan, if you agree, you are to run the entire project. But I don't want to discuss the project in a restaurant. Should you agree, would you prefer being a consultant or would you rather be in-house?

—If this is a takeover, then you won't need me. Kate could certainly handle it.

—Ethan, you're right. When you asked me the question, I said I didn't know. In fact, what I don't know

is the extent of the merger, because it is a merger. Should you agree, it will be your responsibility to define the type of merger.

— Perfect. To answer your question, I can see that it will involve a lot of people at the home office and perhaps elsewhere as well. I think an in-house position will be more respected. We'll see about the post-project.

— You are right.

— What would my title be?

— Project Leader?

— I wouldn't advise that. There's no credibility. Who would be my boss?

— I would, says Mario.

— Then I suggest the title of Executive Vice-president. Since I can't be a senior vice-president.

— Great idea. Out of curiosity, why can't you be SVP?

— Because I won't have any VPs beneath me, at least not hierarchically. Kate will be beneath me only in the operational structure.

— You're right, and I accept the title you suggest. Now let's talk salary. Kate's here, but she'll know anyway as she'll be SVP of finance and accounting.

— As for the salary, Mario, I've always hated this moment. So, what do you suggest?

— The same salary and benefits as my VPs.

— Okay. And how much do your VPs make?

— \$250,000 a year.

— That's good, but I want more.

Kate bursts out, discouraged:

— I will definitely kill him.

Mario, laughs asking:

— How much do you want?

— For the first time in my life, I want to reap the benefits of my work. I want a percentage of the growth I'll be bringing.

— What would be this percentage?

— I'm not sure. Just off the top of my head, a percentage of the increase in net assets from the transaction.

— Interesting! says Mario. And what would be such a percentage?

— That sounds rather large, so let's say one percent.

— One percent of the increase in net assets! But that doesn't make any sense, replies Mario, waving to Kate not to interfere.

He goes on to say:

— If I accept this rate, both of you will say that I cheated you. So, I'll offer you 10% based on the calculations you just mentioned.

— At that percentage, you'll say I fleeced you.

— Certainly not. I'm the one who suggested it and I hope you'll get millions out of it. With that in mind, Kate, you should consider maximizing your stock purchases. You too, Ethan. You'll get it when you join the company.

Ethan stands up and reaches his hand out to Mario who does the same:

— Mario, so do we have a deal?

— It's a deal. Kate, you'll take care of it. Plus, I'm going to need to get a ruling from the Board of Directors. You'll take care of that as well?

— Okay. Please sit down for a few more minutes.

She goes on:

— Mario, the high-rise where the head office belongs to our company.

— Correct.

— There are apartments in the building?

— Yes.

— Are these apartments nice?

— Yes. They go for about \$600,000 to \$800,000 each. I'm going to ask a strange question, but here we go: How many will you need?

— Two, she replies with a smile.

— Arrange it with the manager. If you encounter any trouble, tell me. Ethan, you haven't said anything about the apartments.

Ethan answers:

— Why would I intervene? Kate is handling it very well. And about the project, Mario, I'm all for it. When do you want to meet, in your office or wherever?

— I'll check with my assistant and she'll get back to you. I have to go! Ethan, it was a pleasure. I really like your way of doing things. Direct, frank, and respectful. Welcome to the company.

Kate and Ethan remain seated, overcome by a long silence, which she breaks:

—I'm really sorry about all of this. In my defence, this acquisition only started earlier this week. I spoke with Mario this morning. That's when I found out about it and we spoke about you. Also, today he was in Quebec City and asked me to meet you.

—I understand.

—I don't lose control very often, and I hate it. I saw you taking the lead, even Mario saw it.

—Isn't that what he wanted? Mario needs a smart leader. Otherwise, he would have retaken control of the situation. He's a president. In fact, from my very first question, he gave you a discreet smile. All the pieces were set in at that very moment.

—I missed that. I was just losing you at that moment.

—I get it.

—And when you said that \$250,000 a year was okay but not enough, I could have beaten you. Please, don't ever scare me like that again. I love you and I want

to be with you for a very long time. Actually, right now, life is wonderful.

—As I said earlier, when you told me you were moving to Montreal, I could have screamed like I was losing you. My heart stopped beating for a moment. So, I'll repeat your words: "Please, don't ever scare me like that again." I love you and I want to be with you for a long, long time.

Kate takes a deep breath and says:

—Hey, congrats. It's great, you got the job.

—No, what's great is that we're going on this adventure together. Do we go to your place?

—Sure.

Kate arrives home before Ethan and pours two glasses of wine while waiting for him. When Ethan arrives, he takes one of the glasses. Then he sits next to her on the couch in the living room. They look at each other for a moment and take a sip from his wine glass. She reflects:

— I felt like I was on a roller coaster. Enthusiasm, joy, fear, pain, anger. What a day! I hope I never relive it.

— It's true. This day showed us how fragile our relationship actually is. We will have to be more careful as it goes on. I need to turn the page or even lock the book away in a drawer with two locks.

— I agree with the double-locked drawer. But we should keep the page of our maturity in plain sight. I'll find a trinket that will remind us of it.

— That's a good idea.

Looking in front of her, Kate asks him:

— What are you going to do with your house?

— I'm going to hire my neighbour to watch the house until I sell. All the furniture will stay there. A furnished house sells better than an empty one. After the sale, I'll see.

- Ethan, should we still keep our own places?
- Yes. We wouldn't want to change a winning formula.
- I agree.
- Do you want to contact the manager? asks Ethan.
- Yes.
- Wait until I have the date and time of my meeting with Mario. Okay?
- Why?
- We should visit the apartments on the same day as my meeting with Mario. Let's be efficient.
- Good idea!
- It would be great if our apartments were next to each other, but if they're not, that won't stop us.
- Yeah! Ethan, would you like to buy or rent?
- I think I would prefer to rent. It would be easier and faster. I need to get started on this project as soon as I can.
- We'll get the chance to build our new life together. It will be wonderful.
- Our current life is not so bad, you know!
- Yes, of course not, but we'll build it together. Kate takes his hand and says:
- Bring your drink.
- Where are we going?
- Please keep quiet!

Two days later, Mario's assistant schedules the meeting with Ethan:

—Mister Miller, would you mind if Kate Jackson also attended the meeting?

—Of course not. By the way, you can call me Ethan. Okay?

—Okay. See you in two weeks, then.

Ethan phones Kate:

—Hello. Mario's assistant just scheduled a meeting, and you are also invited.

—Yes, I'm aware of that. I called the building manager. He told me that there are a few apartments available, including two, which are side by side. I asked him to keep them for us. He accepted. I scheduled an appointment to visit them, an hour before your meeting with Mario.

—You are the best.

—I know.

Early, on the morning of the meeting, they are driving on the street in Ethan's car, because the weather forecast predicted a snowstorm. The Porsche would have been inadequate.

On the highway, Ethan suggests:

—Currently, we don't show up announced at each other's house. We speak and come up with a plan. It's going very well and we fully respect each other's privacy. Kate, I would like for us to keep it this way, even if our apartments are side by side. I would like us to see each other because we want to. What do you say?

—I agree. You're right, we could fall into the trap that our apartments are side by. Unless it's an emergency or, let's say I know you're at home, but you don't answer your phone after two or three attempts, I might think that there's an emergency.

—True. So, about our privacy, we agree. And for emergencies, we will have to come up with a solution. We'll see what happens when the time comes. By the way, it's not an emergency to deal with the emergencies! Get the pun?

—Not sure I got it.

Their visit of the apartments is going well. They are on the top floor. The view of Montreal is magnificent. Both apartments have the same configuration. There are three large bedrooms each with its own bathroom. In one bathroom, there is no toilet bowl, but the large whirlpool bath could fit two people, as could the large shower. The living room, dining room and kitchen all have an open concept. The kitchen island includes an induction cooktop. The hood, just above it, is made of stainless steel, just like the stove. There is also a room to do laundry; that's where the hot water tank is. They visit both apartments and compare the views. While visiting the second apartment, Ethan gives her the choice:

—Kate, I'll let you choose which apartment you prefer.

—You're giving me the choice?

—Yes.

—So, I'll take the first one.

—Okay.

They go closer to the manager. Ethan asks him:

—You're going to find this a bit strange, but I guess you don't have a generator in case of an outage?

—On the contrary, we do have one, but it's limited.

—What do you mean by limited?

—I mean, it can only supply ten apartments.

—By supply, what do you mean?

—Everything. Lights, appliances, heating, air conditioning. But we don't recommend using the dryer during an outage.

—You mentioned ten apartments. Are they available?

—Not all of them.

—How many?

—Only one.

—And how much does it cost?

—\$1,000 a month.

—Kate, if it's okay with you, I'll take it.

Then he goes on, smiling:

—In case of an outage, I can rent you a room and some space in my fridge. I have to make a profit from my investment.

—Just so we're clear, you're going to want to be paid in money or in kind?

Caught off guard, he mutters:

—I prefer not to answer in front of the gentleman.

All three go to the office of the manager who fills out the leases and has them signed.

—You don't need a down payment? Kate asks.

—No need. Here are your keys. You can move in whenever you want. If there's anything else, please call me.

—Thank you, it's greatly appreciated, says Kate.

They take the elevator down to one of the floors where the company is headquartered. They go to Kate's office, which she sees for the very first time. After the customary greetings, her new assistant brings Ethan's employment contract for him to sign. Ethan signs the contract, without reading it. Surprised, Kate asks him:

— Didn't you read it?

— No time. We have an appointment with Mario, but first I want to go see my office. I will read it later. If there's a problem, I have a few connections around here.

They go out and Kate asks her assistant to show them to Ethan's office. Arriving at his office, she introduces him to his new assistant. A young and pretty girl who shakes his hand and says:

— It's a pleasure, sir.

— No sir. My name is Ethan. After my meeting with Mario, I will come back and give you my contact information. And I'm also gonna ask you for yours.

— Not necessary sir. Oops! I mean Ethan. I already have your information, Ethan. Huh, it won't be easy, she

looks down shyly. And here is my information. I hope you have a nice meeting.

—Thank you, he says as he enters his new office.

Kate notes:

—Our offices are similar. A little decor and it will be perfect. Your assistant seems nice.

—Yeah! You're taking me to Mario's office?

—Yes.

—Let's go now. I always prefer being early.

—Follow me.

—I always like following you. And you know it.

—Yes, I know. So, have a feast, pervert.

—What do you think I'm doing?

She turns around while walking and gives him a naughty smile. They reach Mario's office two minutes early. Mario is in a meeting. Ethan turns to a woman in a nearby office:

—Are you Mario's assistant?

—Yes.

—My name is Ethan Miller.

—Pleased to meet you.

Smiling, she continues:

—You know, I had little doubt.

—You see, Kate, pure foresight.

—Yeah! I'm a clairvoyant. It won't take long, Mr. Miller.

Ethan turns to Kate:

—What is it with everyone here? They find me old, calling me sir.

He looks at the assistant:

— My name is Ethan.

— Okay, Ethan.

— That's better, he says with a smile.

A man exits Mario's office and signals them to enter. After a few customary greetings, Mario asks them:

—The apartments, how were they?

Kate answers:

—Very nice. We even signed the leases.

—That's great.

Ethan looks at the ceiling and says in a dreamy voice:

—It's crazy, I have a strange feeling that it was all arranged before we went, and I suspect it's someone in this office.

Mario resumes, smiling:

—Let's talk about the acquisition project.

He begins with a history of the project. He goes around and defines his expectations and fears. He asks him:

—Finally, what were you thinking about the due diligence we discussed briefly at the restaurant?

—A due diligence review covers both the current and last year's financial statements. I'm going to want to see all the accounts, electronically, for at least the past five years. I want to compare any significant fluctuations, no matter when they occurred. I want to know

if there's been any tampering. If so, where. The difficulty will be to get this without making any waves. What I'm thinking is that many people in our accounting department will be asking for files for a variety of reasons, from their accounting department, all at the same time. Despite that, we should draw their attention elsewhere. To do that, I would ask for someone, preferably someone disliked, to examine very carefully their stock and bond transactions. I'll work it out with Kate.

— Brilliant. It's almost perverse, says Kate.

— She keeps telling me that. I don't know why.

Mario, smiling, finishes up:

— Great idea. By comparing all the information over time, we will be able to see if everything is okay. As for a not-so-nice accountant, Kate, are you thinking what I am thinking?

— Yes, for sure. Mario, I never imagined that I would ever ask him to be unpleasant. Never! Never!

Ethan goes on:

— You're right Mario. So, we're going to see where we should be digging. At the same time, I will start a study to look into different merger scenarios and determine the costs of each.

— Perfect.

— By any chance, Mario, do you know a good interior designer? asks Ethan.

— No. But my wife certainly does. Here's her cell number. By the way, I told her a little bit about you.

She told me we should go out for supper together sometime.

— So, I should deduce that you spoke well of me. It would be my pleasure, says Ethan.

Kate asks Mario sadly:

— And am I not invited to this supper?

— That depends on Ethan.

— So then, Mario, I can guarantee that I'll be invited, she says with a naughty look.

— I have no doubt about that. When do you start? We should get going.

— As far as I'm concerned, this coming Monday morning, Ethan replies.

— I'm just following Ethan. Is that okay with you, Mario?

Mario, surprised, exclaims:

— Kate Jackson just admitted to following a man. I never thought I'd see the day. Wow!

Pointing at Mario, she says:

— Mario, if you ever repeat that to anyone, you have no idea what will happen to you. Next Monday morning it is. Is that okay?

He smiles:

— Yes. Wednesday afternoon, I have a meeting with the Steering Committee. Ethan, can you ask my assistant to see to it that it's in your schedule, that and all other meetings?

— Yep! Are you expecting something from me during this meeting with the SC?

— Not really. We'll just go around the table.

Kate ends by notifying Mario:

— Ethan and I will be off for one or two weeks. We need to move.

— Not a problem.

After leaving the office, Ethan says to Kate:

— Should we stay in Montreal tonight?

— Good idea. You want an interior designer? she asks him with a serious look.

Ethan looks to Mario's assistant:

— Edith, could you pencil me in for Mario's next meeting with the SC starting this Wednesday?

— Consider it done.

Going towards his office, Ethan answers Kate:

— An interior designer, yes, because I won't have time to deal with it.

— But we planned to do it together, she says.

— You're right. I'm going a little fast. Sorry. We're going to do this together. I still have to call Mario's wife. Out of courtesy. Besides, if we need it, we'll at least have the reference.

— Sure, says Kate, reassured.

Arriving at his office, Ethan asks:

— Nancy, could you book a nearby hotel room for two nights?

— Yes.

— Thank you.

They go to Kate's apartment, with its excellent view of Mount Royal and northern Montreal. Ethan opens his briefcase and takes out his notepad. Kate starts with the living room, enthusiastically. She describes her ideas and then asks him what he thinks. He replies:

—It's your apartment. For now, I'd like for us to stick to the large furniture and the windows. As for the details, we could take the time, together, it would be especially nice to do it quietly.

They take pictures of the rooms. Ethan draws out a plan and, walking in large strides, roughly calculates the dimensions of each room.

Then, they go to Ethan's apartment. He begins with his windows, which has a view of the south of Montreal and the old port. He wants semi-opaque blinds. Then he writes down the furniture he'll need. He asks Kate:

—Do you know of any store where we can buy all our furniture at once?

—No, but I can call someone I know here.

They take a taxi to the store.

Ethan asks:

— Hello, are you the salesman?

— I am an advisor!

— All right. We have to furnish two apartments.

Can you help us?

— Of course, he replies as he is getting two purchase orders.

— Kate, is that okay?

— Yes, but we let's not go too fast, please.

— We'll go to whatever speed you like. We can do part of it today and finish up tomorrow, or even the day after that, if we want. I have booked a hotel room for two nights. The advisor can help us take all the time we need, right?

— With pleasure, sir.

They start with the living room section. They look around, discuss a little and make their choices.

Pointing with his hand, Ethan asks:

— That armchair, is it made of real leather?

— Yes.

— I'll take two. One for Kate and one for me.

On his way towards a love seat, he instructs:

— I'll take this love seat. This is for both of us.

— Phew, she sighs.

— Were you scared? I'll take two of this living room table. It's for our glasses of wine, he explains while looking at her.

He gently caresses her back, and she does the same.

— Great idea about the tables. I'll take two as well, but this one over here, she says, going over and pointing.

They go to the bedroom section. Kate focuses on a bedroom set. She asks:

— What do you think?

— It's your room. My opinion doesn't really matter.

— It is my room, but I suspect you'll make use of it from time to time, won't you?

— You could be sure I'll use it. I must admit it's nice to look at.

— Your turn!

— I already saw one bedroom set for my room and one for the guest bedroom. Come on!

Kate asks him:

— You didn't choose anything for the other room?

— No, it'll be my office.

— Ah good!

Kate thinks the set Ethan chose for the guest room is very nice. She orders the same one, but chooses a different set for the second guest room.

The salesman takes down their orders and leads them to the mattresses. He shows them a mattress and a box

spring that suits their needs. Ethan turns to Kate, to say in a serious voice:

—You really have to make sure when it comes to a mattress. You should try it.

The salesman replies:

—You could lie down, you know!

—Do you have any curtains? I'm a little embarrassed.

Kate says to the salesman:

—Forget him. I'll lie down. Ethan, don't move. I don't trust you. He is totally incapable of controlling his sexual urges.

Ethan smiles and the salesman doesn't know what to say.

—This will do. Ethan, don't worry about it, she says getting off the mattress.

—For this matter, I trust you.

He says to the salesman, completely overwhelmed:

—We'll take five of these.

Arriving in the dining room section, Ethan asks:

—Do you have a selection of round tables?

—We have two models.

—Kate, shall we start with that?

—Sure. You always win.

—I know. It's like pool games.

—Speaking of pool, what are we going to do?

—I think it will have to wait. It's exhausting playing pool with you.

— Oh, is it? she says, looking surprised, with a little smile and her tongue out a little on the side.

Ethan is looking at the two round tables. He lingers on a large table made out of semi-dark brown wood with its eight chairs. After having checked that it's solid:

— This one looks great and there's room for your legs. What do you think?

— It's really pretty.

— I'll take it.

— Now it's up to you, Bella.

She approaches him and gives him a quick kiss.

— You never called me that before. I like it.

She turns to the salesman:

— I would like a rectangular one with eight seats.

— Wood?

— No, glass, I think.

— Glass gets dirty quickly, you know, Ethan says.

— You're right, Ethan. Do you have any stone tabletops?

— Yes, we have three, the salesman replies. I'll show you.

— Please.

She examines them carefully and asks:

— Ethan, which one do you prefer?

— The light one. It's pretty and less easy to get dirty.

— I think it's prettier too. I'll take it.

— I'll need an office desk, says Ethan. Do you have any?

—Yes, sir.

—Kate, you want to come with us?

—Hey! We stay together.

Ethan quickly chooses a desk with a credenza. It's modern in style and designed for a computer.

As they go along, they take pictures on their phones, in case they'll need them for the decor. They buy everything they need.

After paying, Ethan asks the salesman:

—Do you know of any good stores to buy blinds?

—Sure. Here are two business cards. I recommend the first one. They're a little more expensive, but they're number one.

Kate informs Ethan:

—I'll try to make an appointment for tomorrow.

Okay?

—Okay.

—Kate dials the number.

—Good Morning.

—Good Morning, Madam.

—We have two six-room apartments to furnish and install blinds. We need to meet one of your representatives tomorrow morning. By the way, the apartments are side by side in the same building in Montreal.

—I see. Please hold the line and I'll go check.

After a few minutes, the person returns:

—Tomorrow at 10 a.m. Is that okay?

—That will be great. I'll give you the information.

They take a taxi to the building parking lot. Ethan asks the driver:

— Sir, can you wait? I won't be long.

— No problem, sir.

— Kate, I'll get our two bags. Can you wait for me?

— I don't really have a choice, but it's nice of you to ask, she says with a smile.

While waiting for Ethan, she addresses the driver:

— The snowstorm is starting. I hear it's going to be pretty bad tomorrow.

— That's the forecast. It's amazing that it's only November.

— Tomorrow we have to take Highway 20 to Quebec City. I hope it'll be a good drive.

— I hope so too.

— Here comes Ethan. We can go to the hotel.

On the way to the hotel:

— Ethan, thank God you have your winter tires. Tomorrow is going to be pretty bad.

— I always get my winter tires put on around the end of October. So it's going to be okay.

In the hotel room, Kate asks him:

— Should we eat at a restaurant or in the room?

— What do you prefer?

— I would stay in. I want to be alone, to relax.

— Do you want me to leave you alone? he asks.

— Are you crazy? I will definitely need you a little bit later.

— I look forward to the later. Should we look at the menu?

They both make their choice. She asks him:

— Can you order? I'm going to take a shower and put on a bathrobe. You should do the same.

— I will, but I'll wait for you to finish. I must say I'm a little tired.

— You mean there will be no "later?"

— No, no, no. I just want to sit down. Besides, what if room service comes while we are in the shower?

The meal is brought and served. Both, in their bathrobes, eat and speak while enjoying their wine.

Ethan asks her:

— Do you think I'm going too fast?

— At first, yes, but after a while, I understood your method. You quickly took care of the essentials, but we'll take our time when it comes to the decor.

— That's exactly it. I had a thought about the project, I...

Kate interrupts him with her hand and says:

— You spoke about falling into a trap, with our apartments being side by side. Now, here's another trap: that we speak about work when we're not in the office. I suggest that if either of us thinks of something regarding work, we write it down and speak of it the next day at work.

— You're absolutely right. But you know it'll happen.

— Yes, and there will be exceptions.

— Agreed.

She finishes her meal, stands up holding her drink and sets it on the bedside table, on the right side of the bed. He follows her and puts his own glass next to hers. He loosens the belt on Kate's bathrobe and takes her waist by pulling her towards him while she does the same to him.

After a very pleasant night, they have lunch at the hotel restaurant. Ethan cancels their reservation for the second night there and pays for the room.

They go to their appointment with the salesman for the curtains and blinds. A snowstorm begins raging outside. They take a taxi even though they are not travelling far.

They begin with Ethan's apartment. The saleswoman shows them some pictures and samples. Ethan, looking at the pictures of his furniture, makes his choice. The saleswoman helps him somewhat while she takes down the dimensions. Then they move on to Kate's apartment. Finally, they agree on an installation time, at the same time the furniture will be delivered.

They go down to the basement parking lot to retrieve Ethan's car and head back to Quebec City. The streets of Montreal are very snowy. Traffic is slow, like during rush hour. Once on the highway, the wind begins to blow more vigorously. Kate looks out:

—It's crazy. How are you driving? We can't see anything!

—Yeah! That's why I'm not looking at you.

—How fast are you going?

—I'm going 30–40 km an hour. I've never been this slow on a highway. Oops! That's right, I did once in Toronto on the 410. It was raining so much that I had to pull over on the ramp. Now, I have to look back in case someone bumps into me. We've done about 100 km and I'm very tired. Look, if I see an exit, I'll take it, do you agree? We'll go to a motel and wait for this damn storm to pass. It's hell out here. I was dumb. We should have stayed at the hotel.

—We didn't think it was going to be this bad. It's as though it's January. I'm looking for an exit.

After several minutes, she points her finger:

—There's a sign for an exit. It shows 5 km more.

After a few minutes. Ethan announces:

—We arrived to 5 km.

He slows down and slowly moves to the right. He continues:

—That's it, I see the exit. And it goes off to the right. I'll slow down. Look for a stop or something.

—I see a stop sign. Stop. Look ahead. There's a yellow sign, with an arrow pointing to the left and the right.

—Obviously, we'll have to choose. Look on your side, do you see any lights. We're near the highway, so there must be a gas station nearby.

They look for several seconds. The wind slows down a little bit and Kate says:

—I don't know if it's a gas station, but I see a light on the right.

—Should we go?

—Yeah!

Relieved, Ethan says:

—We have the wind to our back. It will be less bad.

—It is a gas station, Kate confirms.

—I'll go and ask for a motel.

Upon his return, he says:

—There's a motel about 3 km down this road. The guy at the gas station told me that the news on TV asked all drivers to stay home. The storm should abate during the night. He told me I was right to stop somewhere for the night.

At the reception desk, after booking a room for the night, Ethan asks:

—Is there anywhere to eat around here?

A very nice lady replies:

—It's hell out there. If you would like, I can prepare two pasta dishes that you could eat in your room. You have to know that my spaghetti sauce is the best in the world.

—That's very nice, says Kate. Can I push our luck a little more?

—Sure!

—Would you have a bottle of red wine?

—Yes.

—Fantastic. You'll call us when it's ready?

—Yes. Go ahead and take the bottle.

—Okay, thanks again.

Outside he admits:

—We're lucky, the room is not far from the reception desk.

—Yeah!

—Kate, taste the wine. I'll pay the lady for the food. I would like to know if the wine is cheap.

She opens the bottle:

— It's a decent wine.

— I'll give her a fifty then, for the whole thing.

— Do you have enough money?

— Yes.

When the phone rings. Ethan answers.

— Fantastic, I'll come. Thank you!

During the meal, Ethan says:

— Kate! You know, I'm pretty tired. I drove only about halfway in this hell of a snowstorm in almost two hours and a half. Later tonight, I want to cuddle, but nothing more. Also, the wine will probably knock me out.

— What a disappointment! It's a joke! I completely understand.

The next day, they go to a restaurant nearby and have breakfast. Ethan drives the car to the highway.

— It's snowy and slippery, but there's no wind. It's going to be okay, says Ethan.

— Yes, and the weather is nice.

Back in Quebec City, Ethan takes the day to finish his contract by assigning it to another consultant who has been part of project since the beginning.

Kate spends her day training the person who will replace her.

After their working day, they meet at Kate's place. Sitting in the living room with an aperitif in hand:

— Kate, I want to get the movers to pack the boxes and carry all my stuff.

— Good idea. Can we hire the same movers?

— Of course!

— There are a few boxes I'm going to pack myself. The movers don't need to know the colour of my underwear.

— It's 5 p.m. I'll make an appointment to get an estimate, he says, looking for the number on his phone.

Two days later, Ethan calls Kate:

—Kate, it's Friday, and it's our last weekend in Quebec City. I suggest that tomorrow, we go back to the gourmet restaurant if they have available tables. Otherwise, I know another one.

—Excellent idea.

—Okay. I'll reserve.

—Then we'll go to your place?

—Yes. Can I come to the Island tonight?

—Don't be late.

—Okay.

Together they prepare a fine supper while enjoying a glass of wine accompanied by soft chamber music. From time to time, they bump each other and pretend it's by accident:

—Oops! Sorry.

They eat slowly in silence. They gaze upon the half-frozen river.

—It's delicious, says Ethan.

—Yes. We are the best.

—Yessss!

— I am a little nostalgic, yet at the same time I am looking forward to it all, she admits.

— I'll take care of your nostalgia soon enough.

— That would be very nice of you, she says mockingly with a sad look.

— What will you do with your Porsche? There's no way you're bringing it to Montreal during the winter.

— It's already settled. I sublet a parking spot in my current building. I'll pick it up sometime in the spring.

— Always very effective, ma'am.

— Yeah!

— Is there no dessert? she asks.

— No, but I have to take care of your nostalgia.

Kate hurries in:

— We pick up and take a shower together.

— I'm all for it.

The next day, they go to her apartment and Kate wears a long black silk dress with a plunging neckline that ends at the buckle of his wide belt, revealing part of her chest. There is a slit that begins at the top of her thigh. She warns him:

—You're going to have to be careful. I'm not wearing anything underneath.

—You're wonderful, but you do know it's winter.

—I have a very good coat.

—What about your shoes?

—The entrance to the restaurant is very well kept. If you drop me off, I'll just put on my shoes.

—Okay, but I'll call to ask for a table away from the door.

—That's kind of you.

At the entrance, the doorman opens the passenger door and extends his hand to Kate to help her get out. Her coat is not tied and shows off Kate's dress, and especially her cleavage.

—Thank you, she says.

—It's a pleasure, Madam

They sit at a table far from the door, as he requested. A waiter comes, bringing their aperitifs.

—What exactly did the doorman mean when he said, “It’s a pleasure, Madam?”

—Are you jealous?

—No, but I’m not stupid. What did he mean?

—Who cares!

—Yep! But I know what I would have said.

—Well, you’re a pervert.

They barely speak, each enjoying the appetizers while holding hands. They begin with the tasting. On the third course, Kate sees a tall and very beautiful woman with black hair looking at them, then walking towards their table. Ethan turns around.

Surprised, he asks:

—What do you want?

—I want to talk to you, she answers.

He turns around and sees her partner sitting at a table a little further away. He answers her:

—Nor you nor your boyfriend, especially your boyfriend, have wanted to talk to me or see me, for many years. Why now?

—Because we are here.

—You being here is not reason enough for us to speak. Now you can see that I am with a wonderful woman. Your presence here brings nothing but bad vibes. I don't want them. Go back to your table and pretend we're complete strangers. In fact, it's true, we are strangers. And in closing, you could thank your boyfriend for having worked so hard to destroy our family.

As she returns to her table, he turns to Kate and says:

—I am very sorry. If I had known, we would never have come here.

—That's your eldest daughter? Kate asks him while she watches the woman walk away.

— Yes.

— Ethan, they're leaving the restaurant.

— That's their problem. It's their decision. Let them take responsibility for once.

— Are you okay?

He lowers his eyes and clenches his fists. After a few seconds, he rubs his hands on his thighs several times:

— I have to pull myself together.

He lifts his wet eyes to look at Kate:

— I must admit this was a complete and deeply upsetting surprise. I'm very sorry you saw and heard that, he admits while rubbing his forehead, trying to mask his emotions.

She takes both his hands and squeezes them tightly. She tries to comfort him:

— Don't worry about me. I'm sad for you. I see your pain and I feel it... my heart is heavy with it.

After a few seconds, as her anger begins to rise, she continues:

— She's tall and beautiful, but reconnecting simply because you're both here at the same time, it doesn't...

He interrupts her:

— I don't want to talk about it, not now and not for the next 10 years.

— I completely understand. We'll close the door on it?

— Yes, he says while taking a deep breath.

They finish their third course quietly. At some point, Ethan says:

— I hate her so much, he says, full of anger. She must have her mother's I.Q. Dressed as you are, she has to be very dumb not to realize that it's a romantic supper between lovers. What a complete idiot!

After a few seconds go by and with a deep breath, he adds:

— Well! Kate, are we going to your place after?

— Yes. Are we still leaving tomorrow after lunch?

— Yes. And I booked a suite at the same hotel.

— A suite? Really?

— Yes. We'll be there for a few days and I want us to be comfortable. Besides, you're paying for your half.

— Who decided that?

— Me. But seriously, you're not paying for anything. I want us to be comfortable and it's a small suite, like a two-and-a-half.

— Cool. And I'll pay for my half. Your bags are all ready for tomorrow? she asks.

— No, but it won't take me long. What about yours?

— Mine neither. I'll have time while you go off to the Island. Going and coming back should take you a little over an hour.

— Yeah!

— Listen! In the not-so-distant future, a trip from your house to mine will only take a few seconds, she says with a smile.

She goes on to say:

— Imagine all the time you'll save. That's hours when we can make love.

- That's all you think about! he says with a smile.
- With you, yes. You are a wonderful lover.
- I must return the compliment except to add that you are also exquisitely beautiful.

The tense mood dissipates and their smiles come back. They finish their meal.

Ethan goes out to get his car and drives it to the front of the restaurant. The doorman opens the car door courteously:

—Madam.

—Thank you.

—With pleasure, madam.

In the car she says:

—You see, you pervert, the doorman always says the same thing.

As soon as they get home, Kate takes Ethan's hand and leads him to her bedroom. He stands in front of her and she has her back to the door. He removes her coat and throws it on a nearby chair. He does the same with his. Then, he unties the large belt of her dress. He makes her dress slide over her shoulders. The dress falls gently to the floor, leaving Kate completely naked in front of him.

—Kate, you're wonderful. I want to make love to you so badly.

The next day, Ethan finishes packing and then goes to meet his neighbour in order to pay him for taking care of his house in the coming months. When he gets to Kate's, she is ready. He puts her suitcases in the back of his car and they leave Quebec City.

The road is clear and the journey goes well. They listen to music that they both like. Ethan, as usual, drives to the maximum allowable speed accepted by the police.

Once in Montreal, they first go to the hotel to drop off their luggage and then bring the car to one of their rented parking spaces in the basement of their building. They walk slowly back to the hotel seeing as it's not very far and the weather is nice.

Ethan leaves their room before Kate. He sets off to their work building. Arriving at his office, he says:

— Good Morning, Nancy.

— Good morning, sir. I mean Ethan.

— The computer, the phone. Is everything hooked up?

— Yes.

— Perfect.

He sits down and turns on his computer. Quickly, he glances at his agenda. Then he looks at his emails. He finds a few invitations to meetings. He accepts everything. He schedules a meeting with Kate for that afternoon.

He goes out and asks:

— Nancy, can show me around? You know, the coffee, facilities, supplies, and some explanations about the office layout.

— Certainly Ethan, she answers, and hands him a map of the offices.

— Thank you.

She begins the tour. While Nancy explains the layout, Kate arrives. She greets them with a smile. She's dressed sober and her clothes are well fitted.

— Let's go on, he says.

Back at his desk, he takes a quick look at some of his documents. One particular document catches his eye, so he reads it quickly. He turns to his computer and starts developing the preliminary project plan. He spends more than an hour doing so. He receives a notification on his computer that he has a meeting in 15 minutes. He prints two copies of his plan and picks up the printout from a printer nearby.

He gets to the meeting. A woman welcomes him with a handshake and a smile:

— Good morning, Ethan. I'm Isabelle Boucher, Vice-President of Human Resources.

— I'm delighted.

— If you don't mind, we'll go over everything. Salary, expenses, time sheets, bonuses, stock purchases, etc. I usually don't take care of that, but under the present circumstances, it's best I deal with you.

— What do you mean under the circumstances?

— A new VP and an executive one at that. Besides, no one knows what your role is yet.

— Isabelle, I'll let Mario be the one to announce what I'm doing here.

— I see. Then I'll start.

Back in his office, he notices an invitation to lunch. He also accepts a series of meetings with Mario's Steering Committee. These meetings will be held on Wednesday afternoons, every two weeks.

He leaves his office to go out to lunch.

Once he's back, he reviews the plans he developed in the morning. He writes a few notes on his own printed copy and goes to Kate's office.

—Can I come in?

—Yes, and please close the door, she asks while moving to a round table in her office.

—You look great behind your desk. You seem very comfortable.

—Thank you. So how is your first day as Executive VP?

—It started very well when I found the bathroom, he says with a smile.

Giving her a copy of his plan, he adds:

—I finished the first draft. I would like us to go over it and determine our first steps. Most importantly, feel free to criticize it. By the way, I've noticed that

nobody knows exactly what I'm doing here. I'm guessing Mario will make an announcement.

— You're right. I know he's working on it right now. I think it'll be published somewhere tomorrow. Normally, Mario moves quite fast and his assistant is very efficient.

— Okay. So, you and I can start, but everything remains confidential.

— That's right. Ethan, here's paper, but you know you can also use the screen on the wall.

— I guess, but I'm not there yet. By the way, I don't have a screen in my office.

— Your assistant will take care of it, if it hasn't been done yet.

— Yeah!

— Besides, you are my boss on this project. So, you can summon me to your office.

— You can rest assured that I'll do that, but I like going to people's offices. They're surrounded by their things. They're more comfortable. For example, if I ask: how was your weekend? In your office, you'd tell me part of it. The same question asked in my office, your answer would be much shorter, unless you know the person intimately.

They go through his plan. They easily share their ideas. And respond just as easily to how they will implement them. Ethan takes notes. He concludes:

— So, it's agreed that following Mario's announcement, we'll create six teams. There's the team that will perform the due diligence analysis, the data processing

team, the merger analysis team, the marketing team, the HR team, and undercover team that will obtain the past financial statements and investigate any irregularities, as needed. To this, we'll add a person who will rock the boat.

—That's right.

—You know the company. Do you think that if I ask for names on Wednesday morning, I will have them by Friday?

With a friendly smile, she answers:

—I think you are going a bit fast. I suggest you wait for Mario's SC meeting. There, you can tell the SVP your needs. You'll see, they'll all give you the name of a manager who will be contacted the following day. So, by Thursday afternoon, you can write to the assigned managers and probably give them a week.

—I'll take your advice. It's like the government machine, he says a little disappointed.

—Maybe, but it's a big company here. When the teams are organized, you'll see that they will go all out. In the meantime, you're gonna have to be a little patient. Can I give you some personal advice?

—Of course.

—I know that as a consultant, you never needed to be patient. For now, while you still can, I mean this week and next week, I recommend you to take the organization chart and go meet the SVPs and VPs in-person, as many as you can. You can have your assistant

schedule a half-hour meeting with each one, in their offices.

—Excellent advice. As a consultant, I only met a few managers and never to speak about me.

He stands up and asks:

—The day is almost over. When do you expect to finish?

—In about an hour.

—Okay. I'll wait for you at the hotel bar. Where will we eat?

—I don't know. At the bar, I'll have an aperitif and we'll decide.

—Cool, see you then.

—Till then.

The next day, the announcement gets published around 11 a.m. In the meantime, Ethan reads up on the company using his intranet and the Internet. He looks at the organization chart, the financial statements, and any other thing that could help him out. As soon as the announcement is made, he calls Nancy and asks her:

— Can you come to my office?

She comes in and sits down.

— Did you see the announcement?

— Yes.

— So, now you know what I'm doing here?

— Yes, and it seems to be big.

— Yeah!

— In ten minutes, my agenda will be up to date. By the way, you know that Kate and I are dating?

— I didn't know that, but I'll admit there've been rumours.

— Look, it's not a secret. So, what I'm about to ask you doesn't involve Kate.

— Okay.

And he informs her that he would like to meet the managers, as Kate suggested.

On the morning of the SC meeting, Ethan prepares a one-page document that illustrates the six main topics that he intends to face head on. The meeting begins in the early afternoon.

Mario speaks:

—This is Ethan Miller. In case you didn't know, he saved Kate's life and the lives of four other people while risking his own. He received the Government of Quebec's medal of the National Assembly.

Mario stops. Everyone in the room, including Kate, stands up and applauds for a few seconds. Mario continues:

—Did you see the announcement that came out yesterday?

—Yes, they say.

—I would like us to go around the table.

It's Kate's turn:

—Look, I won't waste any time. Ethan and I know each other. We know each other very well. We are dating. Of course we are, he saved my life.

They all chuckle and one of the SVPs laughingly says:

—Ethan, we need to speak. I want to get to know the guy who tamed this wild tigress.

—“Wild tigress,” says Kate. Careful with my claws.

The round table ends with Ethan introducing himself for a few seconds, then he asks:

—Mario, I have prepared a document quickly explaining the beginning of the project. Five minutes max. Can I show it?

—Yes.

Ethan distributes the copies and presents only the headings. He omits the explanations that are listed. He says:

—At the bottom of the page, there’s a list of administrative departments that will be involved. I may be missing one or have added too many. I would like you give me the names of some managers in your department who will share resources with me. I’d like to be able to contact these managers as early as tomorrow afternoon if that’s at all possible. In the coming days, I will meet with you individually and with the managers involved.

Mario approves:

—Ethan, I like that. That’s how you want to proceed?

—Yes, the SVPs respond.

—On to the next topic.

Ethan glances at Kate who smiles at him discreetly.

After the meeting, Kate approaches Ethan and says, in a low voice:

— Shall we eat in our room tonight?

— Okay. And I guess, we'll take a shower?

— You guessed right.

— Will we shower alone or together? he asks her.

— I would prefer alone. I want to take my time. As for the "Together" alternative, it will have to be after dinner.

She gives him a naughty smile, saying:

— Is that okay with you?

— I'm fine with that. See you then.

— 'Till then.

Ethan writes an email to the appropriate managers to get the names of their resources. He meets all the senior managers in person.

On Saturday, they drive back to Quebec City. Ethan drops off Kate and goes to his house. He packs up everything from his office.

The next morning, the movers arrive and finish packing. The boxes are loaded into the truck. Then they go to Kate's apartment where another team is finishing her packing. Her boxes are loaded.

In the car, on the way to Montreal, Kate finishes up:

—The move is going well.

—Yes.

—Tell me, are you a little sad about leaving your river?

—Not really. You know, with my consultation work, I've had so many clients, places, homes and it's always been for the best. So, I've learned not to look back. This morning, as I left, I thought of you. I couldn't wait to pick you up and come back to Montreal with you. I'm looking forward to Monday and Tuesday. We're off and we'll place everything in our new homes. Also, at work, people are very friendly. As far as I'm concerned, I say: check! What about you, are you nostalgic?

— Not at all. I think exactly like you.

The next morning, they have breakfast at the hotel restaurant. After checking out, they bring their bags to the car. In the car, Ethan starts:

— Check!

— Check! says Kate.

They park in the basement of their building and carry their bags to their apartments. Ethan repeats:

— Check!

— Check! says Kate again. I'm beginning to understand how you see life.

— I've done checks like that a hundred times, all over the place, even in different countries. The movers are coming.

The movers use the freight elevator and they put the labelled boxes in the apartments. Kate and Ethan show them where to set them down.

As soon as they leave, Ethan's phone rings, emitting a little music.

— Ethan Miller.

— Good morning. We're here to deliver the furniture.

— Okay. You can come up.

— We'll call Ms. Jackson.

— No, she is with me.

— Bella! Your furniture has arrived.

Once the delivery men have left their apartments, Kate asks:

— Do you want me to help you unpack your boxes?

— No thanks, I think it's better to do it on our own taking our time.

— You're right. As for lunch, we can order a pizza and we'll have our very first meal, let's say at my place.

— Excellent idea.

The morning passes. Kate unpacks her kitchen boxes first. Ethan starts by placing everything in his room. Around noon, Ethan rings Kate's doorbell. She shouts:

— Come in. You don't have to ring; the door is unlocked.

— I know, but let's not get into bad habits just yet. You want me to order a pizza?

— It's already done and the delivery guy will be here in a few minutes. I'm still unpacking. Could you set the table?

— Okay. Where are your things?

— Look around.

— Okay.

Once they have finished eating, Ethan returns to his apartment. Shortly after, he is notified that the men installing the curtains and blinds are coming. He tells Kate and continues to unpack. Two installers arrive. One for Kate's apartment and the other for Ethan's. After about two hours, Kate knocks on Ethan's door. He shouts for her to enter. Leaning against the wall by the door, she looks at the living room and dining room and says:

— It's starting to look great. Your blinds are very nice.

— Yes, they are, he says as he approaches her.

He hugs her and tells her:

—I've prepared the bedroom, the shower room, and the bathrooms. The living room is ready as well. I still have the kitchen and my office. So, I can invite you to stay here tonight.

—What are you thinking about?

—We'll go to one of the restaurants downstairs, and then we'll come back here. After that, I have nothing planned except spending time with you.

—I love you too. Are we going to listen to music or watch TV on the love seat?

—Yes. We'll cuddle. Tomorrow we'll have breakfast at a restaurant and then I'll finish up here. Afterwards, we can place the furniture a little bit more to our liking.

Upon his return to work, Ethan sees that he received emails with all the names of the people he requested. Nancy quickly schedules a meeting with each team.

The next day, he begins with the five team members who will be in charge of performing the due diligence analysis. Kate and a coordinator are also present. Ethan takes the floor:

— Hello. You all know what I'm doing here?

— Yes, they say.

— Perfect. You will take care of the due diligence analysis with the cooperation of the employees from the company to be acquired. I'll get you their names.

The coordinator is quick to say:

— Mr. Miller...

— Please, just Ethan, for everybody.

— Okay, Ethan, I already have the list. It was sent to Kate a few days ago, and she sent it to me yesterday.

Kate starts to speak:

— That's right. We're efficient! If you don't mind, Ethan, I'd like to say a word.

— Of course.

—You wonder what I'm doing here now. Actually, I'm still SVP. That said, Mario, Ethan and I agreed that I would act as an integrator in the financial work. Ethan is the VP responsible for this project and, as you know, he reports to Mario. So, we are forced to conclude that for this project, Ethan is the boss. In fact, he also is my boss when it comes to some other things, but let's move on.

A few begin to laugh. Then Ethan says:

—You will look into the company's books. I want it to be completely stress-free. Work with the people on your list. If you run into any problems, don't argue with them. Just come see Kate and we'll look into it. Now listen carefully to what I am about to say. While you're busy doing that, they'll certainly ask you about the things we're doing here. I'll explain a few of them to you. But when that happens, I want you to say that you don't know. You're working on the due diligence analysis and that's it. Is that understood?

—Yes, they say.

—While you do that, another team will be working undercover and obtaining financial records for the past several years. We'll try and hide this for as long as we can. And for that to work, someone from our company will cause chaos and fight with them about securities, stocks or shares.

—Why? asks one member. Are there any securities management issues?

—We don't know, and we don't care. We'll check for any irregularities. What we want is for the administration to focus on that while the undercover team gets all the information needed. If you are asked about the securities issue, you will only say that this person is always like that, even on his birthday.

—Not George, says one of them.

—Yes. Please, keep that information to yourselves. I haven't told him yet. He knows he's going to work on this project, but he doesn't know in what capacity. In fact, I'm meeting him in half an hour.

—Ethan, good luck, says one of them with a laugh.

—Don't worry about me. Before you begin, wait for my GO. I have something to plan first. Thanks everybody, he says, rising to leave the room.

Ethan goes back to his office and Kate, following him, closes the door.

—Were you following me?

—Yes!

—Let's be clear about it.

—Excuse me?

—I'll always be following you. Get it?

—Be a little serious.

—Okay. What can I do for you?

—Do you want me to be there when you meet George?

—I don't know. What do you suggest?

—I was going to say yes, but in the end I don't think so. I think you're going to have to make your own place here. For that, I think you'll need all the leeway to do what you must. If that doesn't work for you, then I will make it happen. He listens to me.

George arrives at Ethan's office.

— Good morning George. Come in, says Ethan as he heads to the round table in his office. He continues:

— Sit down. Do you know what my role is here?

George nods.

— You have been told that you will be involved in this project.

— Yeah! But nothing will be taken away from me. I'm not doing any overtime. That means I'm going to fall back on my work. I told my boss not to come crying to me when it happens.

— George, explain to me why you're complaining right now. You don't even know what I'm asking you to do. So, calm down and keep quiet. Got it?

He looks down. Ethan goes ahead:

— I need someone to cause as much chaos as he can for the company we are about to acquire. I want that person to be disliked and I want their management to file a complaint against him. I even hope they'll take legal actions. I want a whiner, a sassy, someone obtuse. What do you say?

— What am I going to have to do for this company?

—With your question, I see that you are comfortable with bothering the people over there? True?

—Yes, it might be fun.

—You will have all the right to laugh over here, but not there.

—I see.

—Shall I continue?

—Of course!

—By the way, it should last about a month. And you'll have to work in New York and come back here regularly. In the meantime, someone will take over your duties here. Still interested?

—Yes.

—I have a silly question, but I want to make sure. You're comfortable with a company's shareholders register.

—Absolutely.

—I want you to analyze all their transactions starting now and make your way back until I tell you it's over. Every single little detail. All their sales and default sales. All their stock acquisitions, stock options. I mean, all of it!

—What are we looking for? Insider trading?

—A discovery of insider trading would be very interesting. Now, you won't be there to find anything really. I want you to complain to people and their boss. That they aren't fast enough or that they didn't understand. If they give you what you asked for, you'll tell them it's not what you wanted. You'll speak behind their

backs, about one another. They must hate you. I want the bosses to file a complaint against you and ask that you be brought back to Quebec.

— Can I ask you why?

— Because there are some things I want to do, you should know that they are perfectly legal, but I want everyone at the Head Office to be looking at you during all this time. As soon as I've finished all these things, then I'll bring you back here.

— What if I find any important irregularities?

— We'll see then how we should act. I don't want to put you at risk. So, for now, just continue your current duties and I'll let you know about a week before you are to leave.

— Okay. Have a good day.

— Same to you.

He leaves the office.

Shortly afterwards, Ethan passes in front of Kate's office. At her door, he asks her:

— Kate, could I come in?

— Yes.

After closing the door, he sits on a chair facing her desk.

— Everything is settled with George. It's true that he's really unpleasant. He didn't even say hi when he arrived. I spoke a little and then, his very first sentence, he started complaining. He told me that he warned his boss not to bitch if he's late. I liked that he used the word "bitching". I said something like: "George, tell me why you're complaining right now. You don't even know what I want. So, you calm down and keep quiet."

— How did he take it?

— He looked down.

— Yessss. You got him. Good for you. You're the best. How did it end?

— Great. He's up for it. I suspect he's already enjoying it. It's crazy, I ask someone to bother people and

he's having fun. In any case, I promised him that I would protect him if necessary.

— Well done. You'll see, he'll do an excellent job.

— Okay. I don't want to bother you any longer, he says as he opens the door to leave the office.

That afternoon, he meets the undercover team.

—Do you all know why I'm here?

—Yes...

—Okay. First of all, what I'm about to tell here is strictly confidential. Don't even tell your spouses. What we're about to do together must remain strictly between us. Then, depending on the results, we'll see. Know that what we're doing is perfectly legal. Now there are six of you and you're going to have a key role to play. Here's the situation: There is a team that will do the due diligence review. You know them?

—Yes.

—On the other hand, there'll be one person who will make a mess in New York, at their head office. You should know him?

—We have a few guesses, admits one of them. Is it George?

—Yes, I met with him this morning and he's on board. His job is to draw all the attention so no one looks at you. You will plan to obtain all the information from their financial statements for at least the past five years. My strategy is that I'll ask for a tour for all the teams.

During your visit, you are to ask questions that will help you determine who will give you the information you want: bookkeepers, accountants, assistants, computer analysts, computer technicians, etc. When you get the go-ahead from me, you will meet with them and you'll have a week to get what you need. By the way, you'll need the digital data. Get them to give you backups if you need them. Are you with me so far?

— Yes...

— Now, talk together to determine your goals. Note that it's not set in stone. Here's the information I want for every year: all their bank accounts, liabilities, assets, individual expense reports. Each revenue and expense item. Each asset and each liability including advances to managers. Understood?

— Yes. Just out of curiosity, what are we going to do with it?

— I want to know any significant disparity in numbers to know where I have to dig.

— But, sir, the due diligence review does that.

— Only for the last two years. And you can bet that for any discrepancy, someone will happily explain it. I want more than that. The agreement for an analysis is only for a two-year period in the due diligence review. If we want more, they will refuse. We want to compare figures to develop a business case. We need to find trends. If anyone asks you, you can say that. If we find discrepancies and we need to dig, that's another story, but I

will figure this out with Mario when the time comes. Are there any questions?

— No, it's clear, says one analyst.

— Thank you.

Ethan returns to his office and writes an email to Kate. He writes:

Hi,

I want us to plan guided tours of the company in New York. One for the finance department. I think it involves about 12 people (the due diligence review team and the undercover one). I'd like you to be there. One visit for IT, that's four people. One for HR, that's two people. One for marketing, two people and me, because I'll have a few questions.

Let me know who is in charge of this.

Thanks.

After a few minutes, Kate picks up her phone:

— Hello. I saw your email. Call the VP of Communications. He'll have everything you need. He'll appoint someone. These visits are a good idea. I'll be there. That way, we can snoop around without being caught.

— You are really good.

— Charmer. Shall we have an aperitif at my place?

— When do you finish?

— In about an hour.

— So, come to my place. I'm leaving the office now and I'm going to have a cognac. I had a big day. Don't ring, the door won't be locked. Come in and come straight to me. Should I make you a drink?

— No, I'll have a cognac like you. See you then.

The next day, shortly after arriving at work, Ethan goes to see the Vice-President of Communications in his office. After a small chit-chat about their careers, Ethan asks him to organize a visit to the head offices in New York.

Then he goes to a conference room with the marketing team to explain their course of action. The meeting ends, but he remains in the room as the HR team comes in.

After lunch, Ethan and Kate do a grocery run in Montreal's underground centre. They can get there from their building. On entering the grocery store, Ethan says:

— Kate, we can't buy much. We each only have two arms.

— Oops! I didn't think of that.

Ethan looks around the grocery store. Pointing his finger, he says:

— Look over there. There's a lady with a basket on wheels. That looks interesting. Come on, we'll ask her where she bought it.

They come up to the lady and Kate says:

— Madam, could I ask you where you bought your basket?

— Madam, you just have to exit the grocery store and turn right. Walk about 4 or 5 minutes. There is a luggage store, they also sell baskets.

— Thank you very much!

They buy their groceries, each one with their very own basket. They come back to the apartments, stress-free. Kate says:

—Tonight, I'm the chef in the kitchen. I bought some food for a very good meal.

—Okay.

—I thought about it, Ethan: I'll miss the pool table.

—If you want an erotic massage, just ask me.

—No. For there to be an erotic massage, we'll need a winner and a loser.

—I see your point. But when it comes to playing pool, I always lose.

—You're finally beginning to understand.

—That's cheating and not very fair. What if we played another game?

—Like what?

Ethan suggests:

—Well! Let's say we each take 10 cards out of a pack. We add up the numbers and the one with the highest number wins.

—Not bad. We can try. If it's not fun, we can find a miniature table game. For example, a small pool table. But, let's add spice it up. As you proposed, we draw 10 cards and add them up, but we do best out of five. We only take the highest of the five scores.

—Okay. Let's try it. When?

—Tonight, she responds with a naughty smile.

She prepares the meal as he helps her. They share glasses of wine while the music is playing. After they finish their meal, they go to Ethan's place because he has their bathrobes. They sit in his whirlpool bath and sip their wine.

After about thirty minutes, they return to the kitchen table to start the game. They each take 10 cards randomly. Kate says:

— I'm going to have to buy bathrobes.

They play their game, and this time, it is Ethan who wins, surprisingly.

— Yes. I finally win. I'll be getting a massage. Yes. I'm going to bed.

He lies naked on his stomach with his head resting on his crossed arms. Kate takes the oil and starts massaging him slowly.

The next day, they explore the Montreal Underground. They visit decor stores found at information booth. Kate buys some stuff. Kate asks:

— I want to decorate my apartment for Christmas. Are you going to decorate too?

— No, no decorations.

— We didn't talk about what we would do for Christmas.

— You're right. Buy your Christmas things then we'll go upstairs, shall we?

— Shopping is not your cup of tea?

— You know, Kate, for me, shopping is for a specific need. I go to one store, I buy what I need, I pay for it and I go back. I never shop. Today, I am watching you and I see you're happy. It seems that you are discovering things.

— It's true that I like it.

— Today, we've been shopping for more than two hours. That's a record for me. I'm here because of you. I like watching you. Otherwise I would never be doing it.

— You know, I don't want to force you.

—Kate, when I feel forced to do something, you'll know. So, you're going to have to be vigilant and involve me when it's necessary. Remember how we purchased my car.

—I remember. At that time, I didn't deduce that you don't like shopping. So, I'll be careful not to ask too much of you, I promise.

—Thank you. Dinner at my place tonight?

—Yes.

—After, if you want, we could go to a Jazz bar. I was told there's a band of black musicians and they play divinely.

—Good idea.

She chooses Christmas decorations for her apartment. They carry their purchases to Kate's apartment and go over to Ethan's. They prepare a meal together. Soup as an appetizer. Two confit duck legs with rice. A small cheesecake with three cheeses and raspberry coulis. All accompanied with wine.

After tidying up, Kate says:

—Ethan, I'm going to go home and take a shower.

—Okay. I'll take a shower too.

—Shall I wear a dress?

—If you want to. I'm going in jeans.

—Good idea, I'll put on jeans too. Can we meet in an hour?

—Okay.

They take a taxi to the bar. There is little light in the alley.

—Ethan, are you sure it's here?

—Yes. But it's not very bright.

—Is this place dangerous? she asks the driver.

—No more than anywhere else. I often come to this bar and I have never heard of any problems.

They enter the bar. It's very crowded. They sit at a table, and a waiter comes to take their order. They leave their coats on the back of their seats. There are mostly people of African descent, and they are of all ages. There are four fairly old musicians on stage. One is on the clarinet, a second is on the guitar, a third musician is on the cello and the last is a percussionist. They play the blues. Often, one can feel them improvising based on their vast experience.

Coming close to Kate's ear, Ethan shouts:

—Now that's music and I like your jeans.

Kate responds by nodding with a smile.

During their second drink, Ethan looks at the audience. He notices 5 people in their twenties. One of them keeps looking at Kate. Ethan continues watching the audience bop to the music with their heads and hands. He notices a

white man at the bar, he's about six feet tall. He has square shoulders and seems to be looking at the group of young men discreetly. He is with a very pretty woman who appears to be in great shape. She is looking in the mirror behind the bar while she drinks her beer.

Ethan gets closer to Kate's ear:

— Kate, it's great, but we should think about going. It's getting late.

— Okay.

— I'll call for a taxi when we're outside. There's too much noise in here.

They put on their coats and head for the exit. The 5 young men follow them outside. While Ethan is calling for a taxi, they approach Kate and one of them starts:

— Hello little lady, I was watching you inside. Yeah! I won't hurt you. You know?

She doesn't answer.

— Am I not good enough for you? he asks as he gets closer.

— Look, you can see that I'm not alone. Leave us alone.

— Listen, you whore...

The tall man from inside the bar approaches them. He asks her:

— Madam, are these bastards bothering you? You, young man, are quite rude calling her that.

— Hey, old man, I'm going to give you a little cut, he threatens, pulling out a knife.

— Are you really sure you want to do that?

— I'm going to cut you, he repeats moving towards the man.

This man, whom Ethan had seen inside the bar watching the young men, moves towards the knife, grabs the

culprit's wrist. With his other hand, he squeezes hard and swiftly guides the knife on the culprit's thigh, who falls to the ground screaming. The man quickly turns to the other 4 and heads for them.

They are searching for their weapons.

—Hey, youngsters, you want to have fun with a woman? Well, here I am, says the woman from the bar.

They don't have time to take out their weapons as the man and the woman both fall upon them. They use their feet, their fists, and elbows to hit them at full force. The young people find themselves lying in the parking lot of the bar, their faces bleeding.

The man and woman approach Kate and Ethan.
The man asks:

—Are you two okay?

Ethan answers:

—Yes, thanks to you.

Kate, agrees nervously:

—It's true. Without you, I would certainly have been raped and not sure if we'd have survived. How can we thank you?

Ethan repeats:

—How can we thank you?

—It's not necessary, answer the man.

The woman repeats:

—It's not necessary.

—I think it's very necessary, says Ethan. How do I get in touch with you? Do you have a business card?

— We're not the type of people who have business cards!

— So, give us your phone numbers. Kate, do you have a pencil and paper?

— Yes.

Ethan asks the man:

— Your name?

— Jim Martin.

And he gives his cell number.

— And you, Madam?

— Sara Talbot.

And she also gives her number.

— Let me introduce ourselves. This is Kate Jackson and I'm Ethan Miller.

The taxi called by Ethan finally shows up.

— Come on, Kate, let's not let the taxi get near. He'll certainly call the cops.

Kate quickly goes to the taxi. Ethan follows her and, turning around, he says:

— Jim, Sara, I'll be sure to get in touch with you.

Sara says:

— Hey! Take care. You seem nice.

— Done, and thanks again, says Ethan.

In the cab, Kate says:

—This time, we barely made it out. I was really scared. You know, when I saw Jim coming towards me, I thought, “This guy is crazy. He’s one against five.”

—I was really scared too. I was sure they were going to rape you. I was looking for something to protect us. Like you, I thought Jim was a complete idiot, but he seemed so sure of himself. And then Sara! She is very pretty, but I feel sorry for anyone who messes with her. Did you see her kicks to the face?

—We owe them.

—Big time.

—What are you going to do? she asks.

—I don’t know, but first I want to find out more about them. There’s the Internet. If that doesn’t work, I know a private investigator. I’m going to ask him for a very discreet little investigation.

—A lot of emotion tonight. I need tenderness tonight.

—Me too, confirm Ethan. Are we going to your place?

—Yes.

The next morning, Ethan gets dressed and returns to his apartment. She asks:

— For lunch, do we go down to the restaurant?

— Good idea.

Back in his apartment, he makes a coffee and sits at his computer. He searches Jim and Sara. He whispers:

— Soldier. He was in Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan. Five medals. Commander. Wounded, he left the army. Bodyguard on his own. Let's see, Sara Talbot... She, too, served in the army. She was in Lebanon and Afghanistan. They must have met over there. Lieutenant. A medal. A self-employed bodyguard. Interesting.

Kate rings Ethan's door. Ethan shouts at her:

— Hold on. I'm coming.

In the elevator, he announces:

— I did some research on Jim and Sara.

— Already?

— Yes.

— Did you find anything?

— Yes, I think so.

At the restaurant, Ethan asks:

— Good morning. Do you have a table for two?

— Yes, sir. Follow me, the waiter asks them.

— Ethan, let's look at the menu first.

He tells her of his discoveries. He asks:

— Does your company use bodyguards?

— No, but with this project, who knows.

— During our visit in New York, I will ask about it.

— Good idea. But we're not supposed to talk about work.

— We are not talking about work; we are talking about two people who saved our lives last night.

— You're right. Sorry. What if we talk about Christmas?

— Okay.

— You're really not decorating your apartment.

— That's right.

— So, if we have a party, it'll be at my place.

— If you want to. I'll help you, offers Ethan.

— Okay. Who are we going to invite? On my side, my son is celebrating with his wife's family. There are a lot of younger people and it's a real party over there. As for my daughter, I'll call her. What about you?

— I'll also call my daughter. She knows that I don't like Christmas. By the way, I usually receive as many people as possible on the first or second of January. For supper, I'll call a caterer. So, no worries. I think it is important to start a new year by shaking hands,

hugging and having a toast. You could invite your daughter and your son? My daughter already expects it.

—I'm with you. I think celebrating the New Year together is a wonderful idea.

Back at the office, Ethan reads his emails. He calls Mario's assistant:

— Good Morning, Edith.

— Good Morning, Ethan.

— The next SC meeting is in two days. Could you reserve fifteen minutes for me?

— Just a moment, let me check. Yes, it's possible. Do you need to submit a document?

— I don't know yet. If I have something, I will bring it to the meeting.

— A topic?

— Status of the Acquisition Project.

— Okay.

— Thank you.

Nancy knocks on his door and opens it slightly. Ethan looks at her and she informs him:

— The business analyst has arrived.

— Please let him in.

He enters. Ethan asks him to sit and points to a chair near the round table. He sits a little to the side.

— Hello Ryan. Do you know who I am?

— Good morning. Yes.

—Do you know what I'm doing here?

—Yes, you're here for the acquisition project.

—Right. Do you already know what your role is?

—Sir, I'm a business analyst. So, I guess you have an analysis to give to me.

—My name is Ethan, that's what you should call me.

—Okay.

—We're gonna have to manage a big business file. In fact, while we examine all the different company sectors to determine if there should be an acquisition, we'll just assume that an acquisition will take place. On that premise, will there be a complete merger or not? Both possibilities would surprise me. It's likely there'll be a partial merger. In that case, what are we merging? For example, we're merging accounting, or payroll, or marketing. With me so far?

—Yes.

—I have teams that will be looking at all the company's departments. You're going to have to work with them. For IT, you'll have to work with the computer specialists from the American company. If you find that you can't do it alone, you'll tell me and I'll fix it. You will soon find out that there will be guided tours. You will not be part of it. These tours will be to hide the fact that we're trying to get to know the people over there. Also, you will find out that someone here will be causing chaos at their headquarters. Don't worry about it, it's all intentional. You will also learn that there is an undercover

team working in secret. Don't worry about it, it's all part of the plan. Are you still with me?

—Yes.

—Fine. Now, tell me about yourself and convince me that you are the best person to do this job.

The analyst speaks up, surprised at having to sell himself. He does everything to convince Ethan that he's qualified. He ends by saying:

—I am the right person. Also, this project is truly exciting. Finally, I have heard a lot about you and I know that I will learn many things. I hope I've convinced you.

—Yes, you have.

Standing up, Ethan asks:

—Let's start with the table of contents for the report you're going to prepare. Will one week be enough?

—Yes, and thank you for your trust in me.

—We'll speak again.

At his desk, Ethan calls his daughter:

—Hi, how are you? he asks.

—I'm good, how about you?

—I'm great. I wanted to know if you're busy on Christmas.

—My boyfriend, my son and I have planned a trip to the Bahamas. We're leaving on the 21st and coming back on the 28th.

—Wow, it's going to be amazing. And as for January 1st or 2nd, are you coming to my place as we discussed?

—Of course. We'll be there.

—If we don't speak again, have a good trip and say hi to your boyfriend and kiss our pumpkin for me.

—Thank you. Will do.

Ethan goes to the conference room, where four individuals and the director of IT are waiting for him.

— Good morning. Do you know why we're here?

— For the acquisition project, says the IT Director.

— Right. You're responsible for investigating their IT systems, of course. You will be asking questions about the technologies they use, their development methodologies, their software packages, etc. I want to find out more about their accounting and HR applications and databases. Also, about their customer data. I also want to know about their backup systems, how many years do they keep them. I want to have a copy of their troubleshooting logs. Pretty much about everything!

— It could be long and expensive, says the director.

— How long?

— Well ... maybe two months.

— Two months is okay. Use other resources if necessary.

— We have other projects, you know.

— I hope you have other projects. Listen carefully. This is a high priority project. That's why I report to the President. So, if we have to adjust any priorities, I'll take

care of it. Tomorrow, as you know, we will pay them a little visit. Immediately after, you'll have the go-ahead. So, you start. Then, I'll expect the report in about 40 working days, say March 2. In the meantime, you'll have to answer Ryan's questions, and quickly. He is in charge of the case study. If you don't have an answer, find it quickly. By the way, you won't see him at tomorrow's visit. Don't be surprised. Are there any questions?

— No...

— Anyway, I'm not very far. If you have a doubt, come and see me. Okay?

— Okay...

— See you tomorrow.

As the evening begins, Ethan calls Kate:

—Hi Bella.

—Hello the Man.

—Kate, I spoke with my daughter and she's going south for Christmas.

Kate tells him:

—My daughter also isn't free. It'll only be the two of us. Okay, kisses and have a great evening.

—You too.

The next morning, a bus is waiting for them in the parking lot, outside the building. About 20 individuals get on, with a few pads to take notes. On the way to the airport, Ethan, sitting alone, stands up to speak. The driver hands him a microphone:

—Thank you!

—No problem, answers the driver.

—Okay, everybody. First of all, good morning.

—Good morning, they all respond in the surrounding chaos.

—You all know what you have to do. I've met all of you, and you each know your roles. Other people will be working on the project. They're not here because either it's not necessary, or there are a few secrets that shouldn't be revealed, right?

Some of them bursts out laughing.

—An important point during these meetings is to meet people and get their phone numbers. The undercover team, have you met the IT team?

—Yes. We agreed upon backups, databases of the accounting systems and development in user environments.

— Perfect. For the IT team, generally, development in user environments doesn't worry me. Encourage whistle-blowers, to find out who is doing what and what these developments are about. Take notes.

He ends by addressing everyone:

— On the plane, you will have time to plan. So good luck to you and have fun. Oops! I almost forgot. I'd like for the teams to sit together on the plane.

Kate is sitting with the coordinator of the due diligence reporting team, who says to her:

— Kate, we know each other, but if I'm being a little indiscreet, you'll tell me. Right?

— Okay.

— Tell me, why aren't you sitting with Ethan?

— Right now, Ethan is the Executive Vice-president and boss of everyone here. If the boss wanted me to sit with him, he would have asked me. Look, he's working. You'll see on the plane: he'll get up and meet with all the members to give them any last-minute instructions. I could bet on it.

— Is he like that at home?

— Not at all. He's relaxed.

— Do you talk about work?

— No. Here, we work and at home, his place or mine, we just love each other and are lovers.

— I've been observing him. He's always controlled, always polite. When there is a problem, he does not get angry, he asks if he can help. We feel he is listening. He

makes decisions without any delay. But what's odd is that he says, "Convince me."

— If you find it odd, it's because there are only few leaders who use this formula. Let me tell you, if he asks you that, you're better off convincing him. See, he lets you succeed or fail on your own. If he says no to your proposal or idea, it's because you haven't convinced him.

The bus reaches the airport gate where there is a small border crossing. The airport staff takes the luggage and puts it on the private jet. The people come into the station and go through customs with their passports in hand. For each person, a custom officer quickly glances on his computer and lets them pass through, wishing them a good trip. Everyone gets on the plane immediately. They are welcomed by a flight attendant:

— Good morning. Welcome aboard. You can sit wherever you want except where there is a “reserved” sign. That’s Mr. Miller’s seat, with a computer and phone if needed.

The plane takes off and reaches a cruising altitude. The sign to fasten your seatbelt turns off. Ethan immediately gets up with his note pad. He talks to one team then another. Kate, sitting next to the coordinator, says:

— See? I told you.

He returns to the reserved seat and, passing by Kate, he asks:

— Sorry to interrupt. Kate, would you be nice enough to come to the desk there?

They talk seriously for quite some time. Their gestures show that they are in agreement. Then Kate returns to the seat next to the coordinator.

The plane lands at La Guardia airport. Passengers get off the plane. A bus is waiting for their group. A driver takes the luggage of the IT team, who is staying at a nearby hotel.

Once at the head office, they are greeted at the door by the tour organizer who brings them to a large conference room. On each table, there is a sign indicating the group. The team members get into their groups and sit based on the indications. Ethan approaches the organizer. They introduce themselves and shake hand. The organizer says:

— Mr. Miller, there are a couple of vice-presidents here who want to meet you.

— Just a moment, please. This wasn't planned.

Ethan asks Kate to come next to him and introduces her to the organizer, who then introduces Kate and Ethan to the VPs of Accounting, IT and Marketing. In front of the Marketing VP, Ethan asks him:

— It's a pleasure. Could we meet in your office to-day?

— How much time do you need?

— I would say half an hour.

— I will see if I can clear up my schedule. The organizer will let you know if and when.

— I appreciate it.

The VPs leave the conference room, and then other people come in. The organizer presents each one as a guide and gives them verbal instructions while handing each one an agenda for the team.

The visits begin. Ethan joins the marketing group, and Kate joins the Accounting group. About half an hour later, the organizer contacts Ethan to tell him that the Marketing VP could see him in an hour. Ethan asks him:

—Would you be so kind as to guide me to his office in an hour?

—It'll be my pleasure.

At the VP's office, Ethan sits down and says:

—Thank you for seeing me on such short notice.

—It's normal. But before we begin, I want to ask you something.

—Of course.

—You were introduced to me as the Executive VP. Can you explain that to me?

—First, I report directly to the President.

—I thought as much. What for?

—Because your company's acquisition is my company's main project. This is my only project. If there is

no acquisition, which I highly doubt, I'll leave. If there is an acquisition, which I think is very likely, I'll stay and I'm sure my title will change. Is that clear enough?

—Yes, thank you. What can I do for you?

—We're alone in your office, and I'm assuming that we're not being recorded and no one can hear us. For the record, I'm not a police officer. What is said here will only be repeated to my president, and that's it. So, I want to know what happened.

—I was expecting you to ask this. Okay, I'll tell you, but I won't give you any names. For the past three years or so, there have been some people here who have given rather large amounts of money to people from other countries so that we can obtain major financing contracts. This is illegal in the United States. We're not sure how, but one of our competitors found out and told the authorities. There was an investigation. This competitor put it on social media, and the damage was done. This competitor had just beaten us, even though we got rid of those involved and notified the press.

—Were sales affected?

—Yes. Majorly affected.

—But you are in many countries. Were sales affected in all countries?

—No. Only three countries reacted negatively.

—And in the United States?

—Yes, there was a fallback, but right now everything is stable.

—Have you considered closing any offices?

— Not yet.

— To conclude, do you know how much money was used for bribes?

— We don't know.

— How much are we talking about? Millions?

— We don't know.

— Okay. Now I understand better, says Ethan, still suspicious.

— Will this affect the acquisition?

— Everything affects the acquisition. That's why I'm here. I want you to know that it would be in bad taste to punish hundreds of workers for the foolishness of a few individuals.

Standing up, he holds out his hand and says:

— Thank you for discussing all this with me and for being transparent.

— It was my pleasure.

— And mine.

— Oh! I almost forgot. You have offices all over the world. Are there any locations that are deemed dangerous?

Speaking to his assistant, he asks her:

— Print up a list of all our offices along with their rate of dangerousness, right now!

— Yes sir!

Ethan thinks:

I hate this type of boss who orders without any respect.

He gets to the rendezvous location for their return trip. He sees that all the teams are there except for the IT team who remains in New York. The undercover team doesn't take long to arrive.

The bus is waiting to take them to the airport. The private jet is ready to take off. Once inside the plane, Ethan asks Kate:

— Do you want to sit next to me?

— Of course.

— How was your visit?

— Enlightening, I think you're really right to be suspicious, she admits. What about you?

— It was really my meeting with the Marketing VP that was enlightening. We knew there were bribes somewhere in the world. The news covered it. He confirmed that. He also confirmed that a few people were fired. In my opinion, it is much bigger than that. Also, there are things he told me that we'll have to dig into. I'm suspicious, to say the least. I don't think I can bring these things to the SC meeting tomorrow. I don't want to bring up anything that would stop the project. I don't

want to show up with my impressions or suspicions. We'll bring it up when we have some evidence. Do you agree?

—Yes, as regards the SC, but not for Mario.

—You're right. In fact, on the bus to the airport, I called my assistant and arranged an emergency meeting with you and Mario.

—Perfect.

—By the way, I got a list of all their offices and their dangerousness ratings.

—Okay and?

—You know, Jim and Sara.

—Oh. I see.

—For now, I want to keep this list a secret. The teams will let me know where they need to be. I don't want to influence anyone. Whether a place is dangerous or not should not affect the acquisition. I will meet with them before Christmas, and I'll get an idea. My impression is that, except for your due diligence review team, everyone else will be working in New York.

He goes on:

—When we arrive, I will go by the office. I want to know when we'll meet with Mario. If it's tomorrow morning, I'll have to work a little tonight. I want to bring a project status report to the SC tomorrow.

—Do you want any help?

—You're not serious. If you're there, I won't be able to work. I'll just imagine making love to you in my office. But thanks for offering.

In his office, he sees that the meeting is scheduled for the next morning. He goes to buy a sandwich and vegetable juice from a convenience store in the building and goes back up to work.

The next day, they arrive at Mario's office together.

— Good Morning, Mario!

— Good Morning to both of you. And how was your trip?

Ethan takes the stage:

— It went smoothly, but I'll find out more in the coming days. Now, we should tell you a few things before we see the SC.

— Go ahead.

— Kate, will you start?

— Okay. At the accounting department, the person who was showing us around was a bookkeeper. So, it already started off badly. In any case, I obtained last year's financial statements. I looked at them quickly, and immediately had three questions. The bookkeeper obviously could not answer me. I asked her to take me to her boss, a director. He couldn't answer me either. It wasn't possible. I wrote down his name. Many times, I asked him a question and his answers were evasive most of the time. I think Ethan is right. We have to assume the worst and be extremely careful.

— Thank you, Kate. Ethan, it's your turn.

— The visit with the marketing team went well. It's marketing after all! However, I managed to meet with the Marketing VP alone. We all know about bribes. But I told him that I wanted to know more. He kept talking to me about bribes. I know that he left some things out and he also lied once or twice. During our conversation, he gave me leads on where to dig, without even knowing it. I will spare you the details. But he gave me the wrong answer on two occasions. I asked him how much money had been given in bribes since the very beginning, three years ago. He said, "We don't know." I asked him, "How much? Millions?" He said, "We don't know." On the second question, he should have told me something like, come on, we're talking about thousands of dollars or, "I don't know", but not "we don't know". Mario, there's no way the senior management isn't aware of the amounts.

— You are absolutely right. If I found out that there were bribes, even without my knowledge, I guarantee you, heads would flip and not just that.

Mario waits a bit and asks:

— Should we stop or do we go on? Ethan?

— I think that currently, we have no proof and no facts. These are just my impressions, suspicions. If we stop now, I don't think the BOD will be very happy. I think we're going to have to dig a little and we'll ask ourselves again in mid-January.

— What about you, Kate?

— I think Ethan is right. I think we should continue.

Ethan speaks again:

— Mario, I'm going to give you my empirical assessment. I think there's been some fraud. However, to me, they seem to amateurs when it comes to an acquisition. So, they're going to make mistakes and they're not going to see us coming. If I'm right, there'll be meetings behind closed doors. We're going to lower the price and not by a bit. If they don't agree, they might be looking at prison. Now, for this afternoon's SC meeting, I recommend not saying anything. It's not because I want to hide anything from your SVPs, but we have no proof yet. All it would do is cause a stir. If you agree, I'll just stick to the project status.

— Okay. See you this afternoon.

At the steering committee meeting, Ethan stands up and walks to the huge screen where a text in point format appears:

— My goal today is to take stock of our progress. All the people who will be contributing have been seen. A review of the subjects covered: Due Diligence, Under-cover Analysis, IT, Marketing, HR, the type of Merger and Securities. Except for the last two, all the others attended yesterday's visits. I will be meeting with all of them over the next few days to discuss their assessments. I didn't wait for your go-ahead as regards the IT team, which stayed in New York. I will meet with them when they return for their Christmas holiday. Mario and I gave each other until mid-January to see where we stand.

One of the SVPs asks:

— Ethan, I understand you met in private with the VP of Marketing.

— Yes.

— Can you give us an update?

— Yes. I wanted him to give me more details about what happened than just the news. He has said a few things, but I am convinced he left some things out,

probably on purpose. Regardless, I will find out. He also gave me a few hints about where I'll have to dig. So, the meeting was not futile. And on the plane ride back, I saw that this visit was useful for the teams as well. As I've said before, we'll see. Now, if you agree, I'll give the go-ahead to the teams.

Everyone nods. Ethan goes back to his seat.

The next day, Ethan starts his meetings with the teams, in a very specific order. First, he meets the due diligence team. Kate is there as well. They discuss the visit and determine an action plan with the cities they'll first have to visit. New York is at the top. Everyone is convinced that there will be other cities. Ethan finishes by giving them the go-ahead.

On the same day, he meets George and Kate in his office:

— Kate, I'd like you to contact the VP of accounting and notify him of George's arrival to analyze their securities management as part of our due diligence review. I would obviously like for you to get the name of a contact for George.

— No problem.

— George, as soon as you get the information, go for it. For a week, you just observe how it works there. On Friday, you'll come back and we'll meet up. Then you can go back and make a mess. All right?

— Yes.

Afterwards, Ethan meets with the marketing and HR teams alone. They talk about the visits and he gives them the go-ahead.

He meets the undercover team:

—The go-ahead will have to wait until after George's first week. This should probably be after the Christmas holidays.

The next day, George schedules his first meeting with his contact for the following Tuesday.

Kate and Ethan take the elevator back to their apartment together. She tells him:

— I'll just change my clothes, make a sandwich and go to the grocery store downstairs. I just need a few things. Then I'll decorate my apartment for Christmas.

— I think that's a great idea.

— Would you like a sandwich made with love?

— Basically, you want me to help you decorate.

— Listen. I offered you a sandwich. I didn't ask you to help me. It annoys me the most when you overanalyze everything I say, she says dryly.

— Kate, don't get mad. No thanks for the sandwich. But if you need any help, just give me a call.

A little later, he knocks on her door. Kate opens it and he says:

— Do you want any help?

— I'd love some, things aren't going too well.

— I thought as much. You should have called me. What is with you today?

— I apologize for the elevator earlier. I don't know what came over me. It must be menopause. Sorry.

— Isn't your menopause over?

— Maybe I'm still in it. In fact, I have a doctor's appointment next week. I'm going to talk to him about my mood swings.

— Is it at the hospital?

— Never. In his private clinic.

— Okay, we move on?

— Sure, thanks and I love you, she replies.

— So, here's my condition if you want my help.

— I know what it is!

— What is it?

— You're gonna want sex afterwards.

— Kate, you're a pervert. I won't say no, but that's not it.

— What is it then?

— No Christmas music. It's nice for a day or two, but I've been hearing it for over two weeks and it's still far from over.

— Okay. Promise.

— After, you'll come to my place for supper. I have a couple of tartars we can enjoy together, he says.

— Tartars! How many do you have?

— A scallop tartare as a starter. Then a two-salmon tartare as the main course with fries. And for dessert, it's a surprise.

— Whew. I'm looking forward to it. Tomorrow I'm inviting you for supper. Then we could rent a movie and watch it while snuggling together on the couch. You know, like young couples do.

— Great idea.

Together, they decorate her living room, dining room and windows. The music envelops the apartment. They drink their wine slowly. The atmosphere becomes more and more relaxed with a sense of warmth. She does not refuse his gentle caresses on her stomach with his both hands while he is behind her. Placing her hands over Ethan's, she says to him:

— I love it when you caress me. I'll take a shower and then come to your place for the tartars you offered.

— Only the tartars?

— And especially for dessert.

— One day I'll buy a real one.

— Yeah! That day, I'm going to be frustrated.

— On that day, there will be two desserts on the menu.

— Wow!

— I'm going to take a shower too. I'll leave my door open.

— Ethan, I have a key. I can use it.

— We'll do that.

Ethan finishes his shower and pours two glasses of white wine and puts them in the refrigerator. He starts making the scallop tartare.

Kate arrives:

—Hi, the Man!

Ethan turns and looks at her, surprised. She is wearing a transparent green dress with nothing underneath. The light from the entrance illuminates her well-toned body.

—Wow. You're gorgeous and really sexy.

—Thank you.

—We'll never make it to dessert.

—You'll have to wait.

—You'll turn me on so much that as soon as you touch me, it'll all be over.

—So, tonight, we'll make love and you will start.

While approaching him, she asks:

—The tartars, did you make them?

—Just the scallop. The two-salmon tartare, I bought them, he says, while getting back to work.

—Can I help you?

—There are two glasses of wine in the fridge. Can you get them?

As she bends over to get the wine glasses:

—You know I love your butt. But now that I can see your entire buttocks, you're breaking all the records.

—Really?

They enjoy the meal and Ethan glances at the breasts quite frequently. He says:

—It's much more exciting to see you like this than when you're totally naked.

—I know. Why don't we go for dessert now?

He gets up and takes Kate's hand and accompanies her to his bedroom.

— Do you want me to keep the dress on?

— Yes.

— But I'll take it off to sleep.

On morning, as she sleeps, Ethan looks at her with love. Then he pushes back a strand of her hair to completely expose her face. She wakes up slowly as she feels this.

— I woke you up! I'm sorry.

— I like to be gently awakened. I love the way we make love. It's so sweet and so tender. How can a man be so tender?

— I have to make up for a lot of time without love. Years. You know, I like to see your excitement slowly rise. It excites me.

— Is this a way to own me? Every time you do this, you're possessing me completely and I love it.

— I don't know if it's to possess you, but it excites me. By the way, when you make love to me, is it to possess me?

— I don't make love to you to possess you. It's because I love you. However, you must know that I want to possess you completely and I know that you want it also.

After a few seconds, she asks:

— Brunch here or at my place?

— Here. If I am not mistaken, we'll have supper at your place.

— That's right. Should we get up?

— Yes.

They put on their bathrobes and prepare eggs, bacon and ham together. They also make hash browns. Some toast and savoury fruit. Finally, well-brewed coffee is also served. They sit at the table and eat while enjoying the moment.

Back at work, the business analyst knocks on Ethan's door.

— Come in and close the door, please. Did you have a good weekend?

— Yes. I'm in the middle of my holiday shopping.

— Do you like shopping?

— Yes.

— I hate it. Should we look at the table of contents?

— Here you go, he answers, giving a one-page document to Ethan.

Ethan reads it and concludes:

— That's fine. The report has to help with our decision-making process. In the event that there is no operational merger, we still have to anticipate a merger of their customer databases.

— Ethan, I have a stupid question.

— Ask.

— Why a client merger?

— We have similar products and we have different products. With such a merger, we will be able to offer different products to the customers of the other company.

—I see. I know the different products are about 50% each. So, to calculate quickly, we could say that each company's sales should increase by about 50% each. That would be about \$500,000,000.

—You'll have to look into that more specifically. Actually, very specifically. Just for this project, it's going to take 3 to 4 weeks. If you need any help, tell me.

Ethan makes a few other comments regarding the table of contents and concludes by saying:

—Good work. Thank you.

The next day, in the middle of the afternoon,
George calls Ethan:

—Ethan Miller.

—Good morning, Ethan. It's George.

—Hello, George. Did you have a good trip?

—Yes, I did, but the customs are hell.

—I know. Did you start?

—Yes. I'm calling to tell you that everything'll be
okay. I've been assigned an office in a little dark corner.

—When you get back after the holidays, you'll be
able to complain about it. But choose the right moment.

—What do you mean?

—I mean, you have to find reasons to get angry.
Also, if you have more than two reasons, it just proves
your anger. But not three reasons, except if there is an
exception.

—I'm supposed to be the expert on complaining!

Ethan starts a laugh and:

—You're right. I'll see you at the office early Friday
morning.

—I'll be there.

—Perfect. See you then.

During the early afternoon on Thursday, the IT team comes back to the office. They meet up with Ethan in a conference room.

— Good morning. Did you have a good trip?

— Excellent, says one of them, and the food on the plane was very good.

— So, we start with architecture.

The manager starts:

— Their architecture is technology oriented. They still have people on procedures and methods. I would say they're at least ten years back.

— Yes, but do they do their jobs well? Ethan asks.

— I would say so, but I'll have to dig a little deeper, to be sure.

They continue their discussion. Ethan ends the discussion by saying:

— Thank you. Let's move on to their operations. I'd like to know if you've had time to look into how they operate their backup systems.

The IT manager shares everything he knows. Ethan asks him:

— For the backup copies, do you know what happens to the accounting data?

— No, I didn't get there.

— Okay, but when you go back there, I want you to make it a priority and as soon as you know, tell me.

— Message received.

Afterwards, Ethan discusses with the head of the development function and the head of security. He concludes:

— Well done, that's a good start.

— Thank you.

The next day, he meets with George.

— Listen, Ethan.

— Go ahead.

— I took a quick look, and at first glance everything seems okay. I let them know so they wouldn't get upset.

— Well done. Is there a "but"?

— Yeah! In the transactions of securities, there are certain things we do to hide any irregularities. If you have nothing to hide, these things aren't there.

— And did they do these things?

— Some. I only had time to dig up two things. The first is about \$50,000 in fraud. It is an insider trading with a small stock sale. The second one is about \$10,000. It's a police case.

— Wait a minute. The police, we're not there yet. Did you tell anyone about this?

— No one.

— Okay, and it has to stay that way. What we say in my office should stay in my office.

Ethan picks up the phone and dials Kate's number.

— Kate, can you come to my office now? Please!

— I'm coming.

Kate sits down and Ethan announces:

— Kate, I want George to tell you what he just told me.

George tells her the entire story...

Kate says:

— Are you serious? We have to tell Mario.

— Kate, wait a minute. First of all, maybe George stumbled on the most severe fraud or even the only two cases of fraud. Perhaps that explains it. Before I called you, George told me about the police. We must remember that we're not here as prosecutors or lawyer or even the police. We are here for an acquisition. This is only business. I am happy with what you've discovered, George. And I hope that you will discover even more. This will give us great leverage to negotiate.

Kate asks him:

— Ethan, what's your idea?

— First of all, I want to come up with an action plan, before I discuss it with Mario. George, you were not sent there to discover fraud. According to the original plan, when you come back from the holidays, you were supposed to create a certain chaos, but only by complaining, not by calling out those involved in the fraud. We have to go over our strategy. Now George, can you keep digging without complaining and especially without anyone knowing?

— If I stay quiet in my little corner, no one will be able to see what I am doing.

— How right do you think you are?

— 99%

— Really! Your searches are done with a computer?

— Yes.

— Can anyone around you see your screen?

— No. I'm in a little corner, and the screen faces the wall.

— That is good.

— How long will it take to go over them?

— I would say two weeks.

— Okay. After these two weeks, you'll be able to get back to what we planned, if we stick to this strategy. I'm going to delay the undercover team for a few weeks. Kate, what do you think?

— George, you're not listening to what I'm about to say. Actually, Ethan, if I understand correctly, this is almost blackmail. To do this, someone will have to talk to them. At that point, it could become dangerous if the cases of fraud are frequent and the amounts increase.

— Yeah! but we only have one chance, says Ethan. George, while you do your search, will you find the names?

— Sure. I already have two.

— So, we will know the names of the bad guys. We'll arrange to protect ourselves, depending on the extent of the problem. Kate, we know some people. You remember?

— That's true and it reassures me.

Back home, Ethan takes out his cell phone and calls
Kate:

—Hi, Bella. We're on vacation. Can I come to see
you?

—Come in half an hour, please.

—Okay.

Ethan rings the doorbell.

—Come in.

—First thing, did you see your doctor this week?

—Yes.

—And?

—He did some tests and prescribed hormones. I'm
having a little hormonal imbalance that makes me im-
patient sometimes. So, in the elevator, that was it.

—Does it mean that when you get impatient, I
have to endure you?

—Exactly and you can't say a word. NO, I'm only
kidding! You're the one who opened that door. The doc-
tor told me that the hormones would stop me from be-
coming impatient.

—So, if you're impatient, I can tease you.

—That is not what I said. You must never argue with me. That is the law.

—If it's the law, it's the law. Look, I've been thinking. We won't have a Christmas party because no one's available.

—It's just the two of us.

—That's right. We could go south and get some sun. We could leave tomorrow or the day after and come back 5 or 6 days later.

—I'm not sure that's possible. It's too last minute. No, last second.

—We'll find out soon enough. I saw a travel agency downstairs. We can go down now.

—Give me 10 minutes to get ready.

—What are you saying? You don't need 10 minutes. But okay. Let me know when you get to my door.

—When you say I don't need 10 minutes, do you mean I need more?

—Of course.

—Look out. You're playing with fire. You look really excited. See you in a bit.

When they reach the agency, Kate takes the lead:

— The gentleman here has just decided that we are going to spend Christmas somewhere South. Do you have something you could offer us?

— Do you have something in mind?

— Beach, sun. We can leave tomorrow or the day after and return in 5, 6 or 7 days.

— Okay, I see. Let me see. I found two packages on sale. Both leave the day after tomorrow and come back next Saturday. It'll be for 7 days then.

— And where is it?

— One is for the Turks and Caicos and the other is in the US Virgin Islands. For Turks and Caicos, it's Club Med. For the Virgin Islands, it's a five-star hotel. It's more expensive than the Club Med.

— How much is each one?

— Club Med is \$2,000 per person, it's all-inclusive, and the hotel one is \$4,000 per person and includes only breakfast.

— Ethan, what a difference.

— Yes. But you should know that Turks and Caicos are British and the Virgin Islands are American.

— So what?

— Well, that's up to you. Kate, forget Turks and Caicos if you want to sunbathe completely naked or just topless. In the Virgin Islands, there are probably places for that.

— He is right.

— You prefer that I have tan lines or not?

— No! I won't go there. So, let's forget tanning because we'll embarrass the lady. Actually, let me say that no matter where we go, I'm going to like it. Now I would prefer the hotel. At that price, it'll be quiet.

— Okay. Then we'll go to the hotel.

Ethan asks:

— Which airline?

— Delta.

— Perfect. Any guidelines?

— From where are you leaving?

— From this building.

— The flight takes about nine and a half-hours because it makes two stops. Leave by taxi around 1 in the morning. You arrive at the airport at 2. You'll depart from Montreal at 5 a.m. and arrive at 3 p.m.

— Kate, people will be snoring on the plane.

— Yeah! But not me. I don't snore.

Once at the hotel in the Virgin Islands, they find that their room is on the fourth floor with a balcony overlooking the sea. A very nice and luxuriously decorated room. Ethan suggests:

- Come, let's have a look around.
- Okay. Should we change first?
- Let's take a walk and we'll come back and change for supper. Actually, I want to see how everyone is dressed here.

They visit the hotel. They look at the menu of both restaurants. In one of the restaurants, a musician plays the harp.

- Ethan, let's make a reservation here. The menu is much fancier than the other one, but the harp is really something.

— Okay.

While she makes the reservation, she asks:

- How do people dress for supper?
- Casual. People are on vacation. Did you just arrive?
- Yes, says Kate. How did you know?

—Your clothes. You must be Canadian, it's cold right now. I suggest you wear lighter clothes. Your reservation has been made. See you then.

—Thank you, says Kate.

—Should we go change?

—Yeah!

The supper goes well under the soft and melodious sounds of the harp.

—Should we get a nightcap? asks Kate.

—After the wine and a nightcap, you'll have to carry me to the bedroom. I have to go to sleep. I barely slept last night.

—I'm also tired.

After an excellent night's sleep, they have breakfast in one of the restaurants. Then they go back up to the room to put on their swimsuits. Ethan wears a lightweight boxer shorts with a matching shirt. Kate wears a black bikini. The top is normal, and the bottom is cut so that each side begins in the middle of her hips and, reaches the front, by dropping to the middle of her pubis.

— Nice bikini. The bottom is sexy.

— Thank you.

— How will you get some sun?

— Naked or topless if I can. I will check at the hotel reception.

She ties a sarong around her waist.

At the reception desk, Kate asks the young woman, who tells her:

— As soon as you get to the beach, you turn right, that's where the nudists are.

After walking for about fifteen minutes, they find the nudist beach, where there are naked people basking in the sun. They spread out their beach towels, take off their swimsuits and go into the water. They lie on their towels, letting the sun caress them.

—This is wonderful, Kate says.

—Yes. We'll put on sunscreen for our first day here. Your butt is starting to burn. Same thing with your breasts. A sunburn is not good, and I won't be able to make love to you.

—Will you take care of it?

—With pleasure, madam.

—I think I've heard that before.

—That doorman was a pervert.

—No, you're the pervert and you know it. Cream me.

He sits next to her and begins applying cream on her shoulders, her back, her butt and legs. Once he reaches her butt, he lingers for a moment.

—Turn around. I'll do your front.

—I think I'll take care of it myself. You won't be able to restrain yourself.

He lies on his stomach, and she puts cream on him. He turns around and she continues applying a little cream, saying:

—You could finish up.

From time to time, they enter the water to cool off. They reapply cream.

—There's a restaurant outside of the hotel, says Kate. I was told the seafood is exquisite. Do you want to go tonight?

—Yes. Do we have to make a reservation?

—Yes. I asked the hotel receptionist to do it, she says.

—You are the best.

—I know, but thank you anyway. When I asked about the beach, I saw some brochures with places to visit. We should keep a day or two free and go visit. What do you think?

—Good idea. We can decide over lunch. Speaking of lunch, where are we going to eat?

—We don't have much choice. We can go back and go to the buffet at the hotel. We'll see if there are any other places that we can go for the next few days.

They continue to enjoy the sun. Ethan goes to cool off in the warm water of the ocean. When he returns, he walks slowly to admire this wonderful woman lying on her back, a little to the side and completely naked.

Sitting next to her, he says:

—I don't understand why you think your breasts are too small. I think they're perfect.

—They are small.

—Do you want to get implants?

—No. No surgery.

—Perfect, I like them just the way they are.

—I know and you enjoy them.

—Who enjoys them?

—To be honest, I have to say we both do.

—You're right. Shall we get dressed and go eat brunch?

—Okay, she says, putting on her bikini again.

During their brunch, they decide to spend a day snorkelling at Magens Bay and a day visiting St John. They make their reservations at the tourism desk. Returning to the beach, always heading to the right side, the sun is slightly in front of them. Ethan takes off her sarong and holds it in his hand.

—Is there a problem? she asks.

—No. I just want the sun to follow the curve of your panties. Just a little colour difference to show me the way.

—You know the path very well.

—You never know. Maybe I need some guidance.

Arriving at their destination, she sits down and removes her bikini top. She puts sunscreen to her entire chest, stomach and legs.

—Ethan, if I take off my panties, you might lose your grip.

—So, okay don't move, I'll take a picture.

—No pictures on this beach. You saw the sign on the way in.

— Okay, I give up. Take off your panties. But to-night, I'm going to have to check all of it.

— I would say double-check, just to make sure.

For Christmas Eve, all vacationers are invited to a huge bonfire on the beach. There is a band of musicians playing island music. A buffet has been set up under a large pavilion, which includes a bar. There are tables and chairs set up.

—Kate!

—Yes.

—I have to tell you this is the best Christmas I've had in my life.

—Come on!

—That's right. I've always hated Christmas.

—One day you will tell me why.

—The day you tell me about your fear of hospitals.

—I don't think I'm going to do that. I don't want to go through that again.

—So, as far as Christmas is concerned, neither do I. There are things we need to put in that drawer with two locks.

He gets up, takes her hands and pulls her towards him. They hug tenderly. They kiss each other. She puts her head on his shoulder and begins crying. The musicians start playing a slow dance, and they sway gently, hugging.

—I'm sorry, he says.

She doesn't answer him, but hugs him tighter. Other vacationers join them. They continue to dance without speaking. The song ends and the musicians start playing a more upbeat song. Upon reaching their table, Kate turns to Ethan, her eyes tearful. She kisses him for a long time then promises him:

—If I ever feel the need to tell you, I will. Until then, don't worry, everything will be fine.

Their trip comes to an end. They get on the bus headed to the airport. In the airplane:

—Kate, I had a wonderful trip.

—Me too.

—Snorkelling was fabulous. The colours, the fish, the corals were all magical.

—Oh yes!

—At St John, we were right to rent a car.

—Yes. And all those beautiful beaches. Ethan, I loved the “Tourist Trap” snack bar. When I saw the trailer, I had my doubts. Thanks for insisting. Their lobster roll was delicious. Imagine that, we ordered two each.

—Kate, I can’t wait to see you put on the T-shirt you bought at the Wharfside Village, braless.

—Braless, I won’t even be able to walk down the hall to your place.

—I don’t understand why you bought it.

—It’s your fault. You told me that you loved it when I put it in front of me to check its size.

They get to the Montreal airport just before midnight. There are not many passengers. They go through the customs and take a taxi home. Ethan breaks the silence:

— A good night's sleep will do us good.

— Yes.

— Tomorrow I'm going to have to buy some groceries.

— Me too. Do we go together?

— For sure.

In front of Ethan's apartment, they kiss each other good night, then she continues to her apartment.

On Monday, Ethan goes to see an excellent caterer and puts in his order. They agree on a time of delivery.

On Tuesday, Kate's two kids, along with their families, arrive at her apartment where they'll be staying for a few days. For the afternoon, Ethan runs back and forth between his apartment and the Montreal Underground, buying gifts for all the little ones. His cell phone rings:

—Ethan, my darlings have arrived.

—Yes.

—You can come now if you want.

—I think it's better that you stay alone. It's been a while since you've seen them. I just got some Chinese food for supper. Then I'll rent a movie. We'll all see each other tomorrow?

—What time should we come?

—Around 4 o'clock.

—Okay. Have a nice evening.

—You too. Say hello from me.

—Sure.

After eating the brunch, he cooked himself, he goes to get the side table along with three chairs that he unfolds. He sets everything up in the dining room. He arranges the two tables, all ready to welcome his guests. The champagne and white wine are chilling. The red wine, aperitifs and after-dinner drinks are all set on the kitchen counter with different glasses.

Shortly thereafter, his doorbell rings. His daughter has arrived with her partner and their young son. They live in Montreal as well. He is a doctor and she is a special education teacher. Ethan hugs his daughter and grandson tightly. He shakes his son-in-law's hand for a long time.

—Come in, come in.

He crouches in front of his grandson with a knee to the floor and says:

—You've grown a lot. How old are you now?

—Six years old.

—You're becoming a real man now. You know that I love you.

—I love you too, Grandpa, he replies and gives him a big hug.

—Whew! On top of that, you're very strong.

Ethan stands up:

— I'll put your coats away. You can go to the living room.

He picks up his phone:

— Kate, my daughter just got here with her husband and son. You can come over as soon as you want. The door is unlocked.

— Okay. We'll be there. I'll send you my two beautiful grandchildren right away.

— Perfect.

The door opens to let in the two young boys, both about eight years. They sit down and talk. Soon after that, Kate arrives along with her daughter, her son and both their spouses. The young children are already in the guest room where there is a large TV screen and some video games.

Kate asks Ethan:

— Where is your grandson?

— In the guest room.

She walks over, followed by Ethan's daughter. After crouching down on her knees, she gives him a hug.

— How are you?

— Fine.

— I can see that. You look great.

Kate gets up and approaches the little boy's mother and gives her a big hug.

Back in the living room, Kate comes closer to the little boy's father. They kiss each other on the cheeks and hug. They all enjoy a glass of champagne while recounting their news since they saw each other last.

The doorbell rings. Ethan brings in the two delivery men from the caterer. They remove the cold and hot dishes from their boxes and place them in the oven or on the kitchen island. Then they take their empty boxes and leave. Ethan returns to the living room and continues to enjoy this wonderful and joyful event. He suggests:

—Should we move to the dining room! Well, today will be self-service. There's an appetizer, a soup, a main course with vegetables and salad and a delicious dessert. Girls, are you gonna take care of your children?

—Yes...

—You'll have to pull them out of the guest room. You can sit anywhere, but I was thinking the adults at the round table and kids at the square table.

They enjoy their delicious meal while talking happily. After the meal, the women decide to clear up the table. Ethan intervenes:

—No way. I'll take care of it later. Let's all go to the living room.

Kate disputes this:

—Men, go sit down. It's going to take us 10 minutes.

Ethan replies:

—Okay, but we'll wait for you to have our last drink.

The conversation continues over a glass of alcohol. Then it's time for coffee. Ethan's daughter leaves the apartment saying:

— We have to go. It's getting late and the little one has to go to bed. Dad, it was a wonderful night. I love you all.

They all say goodbye. The conversation resumes in the living room. Some drink their cup of coffee, while others have a glass of wine. A little while later, Kate says:

— Ethan, we're going to have to go. Excellent meal and a great evening.

She kisses him lovingly.

Thanking Ethan, they leave his apartment.

He sits in the living room, satisfied and happy. To really savour this moment, he pours himself a Godet XO Terre cognac that he sips slowly.

The next day, Kate's daughter leaves with her family. Her son stays one extra day. In the middle of the afternoon, Kate calls Ethan:

— Hello, Bella!

— Hello, the Man! My daughter and her family are back home. They loved the party at your place. My son is leaving tomorrow. Would you like to come to have supper with us?

— I'd like to, but I have already made plans for supper. Sorry.

— I see. Good evening.

— Thanks and good evening to all of you as well.

Back at work after the holidays, everything is going well. George and the IT team take the plane on Monday morning.

Kate asks her assistant:

—I would like you to arrange a meeting with the Vice-President of Accounting. It has to be as early as possible this week. I would like it to be in the early afternoon. I think one hour is enough. I'd like for you to plan a round-trip flight for the same day.

Towards the end of the afternoon, the IT Operations Expert calls:

—Ethan Miller.

—Good morning, Ethan. You asked me about the backup copies of the accounting data.

—Yes.

—All backup copies are kept in a very large safe beneath the building where the head office is located. Their security is not very safe.

—Write this down in your report.

—Sure. I asked how we would go about to get their backup files. I told him that the people from the due diligence team might ask for some files at some point

later on. Not right now. He told me that should they need them, I would only have to ask, and simply mention the years we need. So, no problem there.

—Okay. Hold it there for now. When the time comes, I'll let you know. Thank you and good job.

The next day, the due diligence review, security and HR teams all travel to New York. Kate is on another flight and goes to the Vice-President's office:

— Good morning, she says while holding out her hand.

— Good morning.

— Beautiful office!

— Thank you. Please, have a seat on the couch.

— Thank you.

— You wanted to meet me.

— Yes. Thank you for your prompt response.

— It's my pleasure. So, what can I do for you?

— When I visited in December, I quickly glanced at the latest financial statements. I saw a few accounting items that were not familiar. Maybe American accounting is different from Canadian accounting. For more information, I quickly revised the notes of the financial statements and found no mention for these items. Did you know that a bookkeeper gave us the tour?

— Yes, I know. She's very good.

— I asked her what these accounts were doing in the financial statements. She said she didn't know. I

asked her to take me to her director. I asked him the same questions and he told me he didn't know what they were either. I told him it was okay so as to calm him. He seemed really nervous. I don't know why. So, I'd like to know what it's about. It may affect the due diligence review.

— I see. Just a moment, please.

He goes to his assistant's office and asks:

— I would like two copies of the most recent financial statements, now.

After a few minutes, he comes back with the documents and says:

— Let's see.

— Let's start with the balance sheet, says Kate. I see that you have several bank accounts and some begin with the letters OS. What does that mean?

— This means: Off-Shore.

— So, you have at least one account in every country where you have offices and some accounts where you don't have any offices.

— That's right. It's to facilitate transfers.

— I understand. In the customer accounts, I see that some begin with SC, what does that mean?

— It means: Special clients. These are clients who are considered VIPs.

— I see. You own 10 private jets.

— Correct.

— You invest a lot in your buildings. Is that normal?

— The buildings are aging.

—It's true that everything is aging. Let's look at your liabilities. In the list of suppliers in the appendix, I see that many items begin with SS. Same question?

—Special suppliers.

—It's like special clients?

—Correct.

—I see that you do not give out any loans to the directors. That is good management.

—Thank you.

—I also see that the types of stocks are described in the appendix. Yet some types are not mentioned. What are types T, U, and V.

—That's clearly a mistake. I'll check.

—Good. You've told me a lot. Are things going well with our due diligence review team?

—As far as I know, everything is fine.

—Perfect. If there's a problem, please feel free to contact me. Well, I have to go back to the airport. I have a plane waiting for me. Thank you for your time.

—If there's anything else, don't hesitate. And have a good trip back.

—Thank you.

On the plane, she looks at the financial statements while taking notes. She writes things down, but this time in red. She eats on the plane and finally arrives at her apartment as dusk sets in. She calls Ethan immediately:

—Hi Kate. To what do I owe the honour of this call?

—Listen, can you come to my place and I'll serve you a cognac?

—I'm on my way.

They sit in the living room.

—Did you know that I met the VP of accounting in New York today?

—Yes, I know.

—I asked him a number of questions about their financial statements. The same questions I asked the bookkeeper and her manager. Remember?

—Yes.

—I also asked many other questions. You would not believe it. He gave me short answers without any explanations. I've deduced that these are false accounts. In accounting, we are not allowed to create false accounts.

One sip of wine and she goes on:

—I can't believe it. On the plane, I kept asking myself why. If I look at the type of accounts, the only valid reason is to inflate the assets and reduce liabilities. So, the company's book value goes up, which increases the value of the stocks. Suppose that they even have offshore accounts, that's certainly tax evasion. You were right to be suspicious. Now, I'm convinced of it.

Ethan finishes his glass of cognac and gets up.

—Thank you for the brandy.

—Where are you going?

—Home.

—You're not staying?

—No, and here's why. I see in front of me SVP of Accounting and Finance. I can't stay because I don't have sex with my colleagues.

—You're not serious, she says, surprised and slightly angry.

—I am very serious. You have forgotten our agreement about living next door to each other. We do not talk about work here. I understand your enthusiasm but that doesn't justify breaking the deal. You may not have noticed, but I listened to you without interrupting or asking any questions, just to be polite.

—Please don't be angry. We said there would be exceptions.

—I do not consider this an exception. You called me to tell me about your meeting. It wasn't an emergency. It could have waited until tomorrow. Look, let's stop right here. I want to turn the page and just consider

this a reminder of our agreement. If you ask me to come over one night, it will be because you want to see me, to talk to me or to make love. If I agree to come, to leave my apartment and walk over, I'm definitely looking forward to spending time with you. That's what happened tonight. So, let's forget about it.

— You're absolutely right. I'm really sorry. I promise I won't do it again. I'm sad now. I need a hug. Do you want to give me one?

— Come here.

During the hug, she whispers in his ear:

— Forgive me.

— Let's move on.

— To move on, we'll have to reset. And to reset, we'll have to go to my room. Will you follow me?

Upon arriving at the office, Ethan schedules a meeting with Kate in the early afternoon. Then he phones Mario's assistant:

— Good Morning, Edith.

— Good Morning, Ethan.

— Could you set up a meeting with Mario and Kate? It has to be after 2:30 today or any time tomorrow.

— I'll get right on it.

— Thank you.

Edith schedules the meeting for 9 a.m. the next morning.

Ethan arrives from his lunch and finds Kate is already there for their meeting. He asks her:

— How long have you been here?

— Not long. I just arrived.

— Come in. Sorry, I have a text message. It's the marketing team getting to the head office in New York.

He asks her:

— So how was your trip yesterday?

—What? Please don't overdo it. You told me we were moving on and you enjoyed my making it up to you.

—Okay! I invited the undercover team coordinator. He'll be here in 15 minutes. I want him to prepare an action plan based on your findings and dig deeper. Based on this action plan, we'll be able to discuss it with the SC, after updating Mario, as we had planned for mid-January. Without alarming everyone, we must have a solid idea about the problems and the amounts involved. Besides, Kate, we have a meeting with Mario tomorrow.

—I saw it. But there is no subject.

—I want to talk about getting the necessary bodyguards. The due diligence review team has listed cities they will need to visit. These are dangerous places based on the list given to me by the VP of marketing. The coordinator will join us. After that, we'll be able to conclude our discussion about these dangerous cities.

—Okay, agrees Kate.

—Can I come in?

—Come in and please sit down.

After the coordinator leaves, Ethan says:

— This guy wasn't bad at all. Kate, you were right: things can move very fast here.

— Glad to be right, she says, a little worried.

— Is there a problem?

— You surprise me more and more. I see you maneuvering with your ruthless logic. Earlier, you dominated the conversation without even appearing to do so. On the other hand, you are a soft and compelling lover. In your head, there are like compartments that hold certain roles. When you have to use such or such a role, you are unflinching.

— Kate, I don't know if what you're saying is a compliment or an insult.

— Certainly not an insult. Perhaps a compliment, but I really feel I need to get to know you better.

— You think that I am impassive. A few times in my life, I've been really shaken up. Also, there have been things that made me very angry and my words flew out before I had a chance to think. I hate myself when I'm like that. These are old wounds that must not be touched.

— So, when you're angry, you don't flinch?

— Yes.

— You see, that's why I'm not sure it's a compliment, but it does worry me.

— Listen. I am aware of this character trait. But, as far as you are concerned, if you touch upon one of these points, I will control myself. I'm gonna say something like, "Kate! drop it." And if I can't control myself, which may happen, and I apologize in advance if it does, it will be up to you to control yourself and ask if you've opened an old wound. Kate, above everything else, don't ever leave me angry. Does that make you feel better?

— Yes, she says with a small kiss from the tip of her lips.

She goes on to say:

— Let's discuss the bodyguards.

— Okay. So far, I've identified three places where one or more of your team members will have to go, that are dangerous, according to my list. Some time between now and our meeting with Mario, I would like you to contact whoever you want to find out if they have to go to any other offices. I'll talk to Mario about the list. Then we indicate where we'll go and where it's dangerous. Then, we'll tell him about our night at the jazz bar. For now, it's just a concept. Mario must first accept the concept. Then we'll put money on it. If he agrees, I'll meet Jim and Sara here.

— Why here?

—I want the meeting to be formal and for them to see where we work. If it all works out, we'll see if we need one office or two and where. During my meeting with them, we will have negotiations, appointments and guidelines regarding behaviour and attitude. I will personally take care of this.

—Whew. You've thought of everything!

—Yes. What do you think?

—This need is obvious for the moment. But if there's no acquisition, then the need also disappears.

—I am aware of that and so will they be.

—I will help you.

—By the way, don't forget that you will be travelling as well and you'll also need bodyguards. Maybe I'll need some as well. Okay. You know that yesterday I was angry because of you.

—Yes, but I redeemed myself.

—Not enough.

—Oh!

—So, shall we fix this tonight?

—If I have to redeem myself again then I will redeem myself again. Are we having dinner?

—Yes, and I have something new I want you to taste, he says.

—Will there be dessert?

—Do you want sweet or salty?

—Just like that, I'll say salty. What about you?

—I'll also go for salty.

She rings Ethan's doorbell, and as he opens it, he discovers her in a man's shirt.

—Wow! With you, there's no ambiguity. Your nipples say a lot.

—Of course, she agrees, looking at each one in turn.

—Come in. You know, sometimes dessert is served before the meal.

—No. You'll have to wait. I love watching you wait. By the way, I swear that right now you're not exactly unflinching. Really not. So, you're not perfect.

—I hope that my present torment is reassuring.

—It is but I have to make sure.

She gets closer and slips her hand between Ethan's legs.

—Yeah! I can certainly see that!

—If you continue, I am going to ejaculate prematurely. Let's calm down.

Back at the office, Ethan goes to Mario's office by first passing by Kate's.

—Are you coming?

—Clarify your question!

—Okay, naughty!

In Mario's office, Ethan announces:

—Kate, can you tell Mario about the file? I'm a little tired; I had a hard night last night.

—Did you have any problems yesterday? asks Mario.

Kate responds immediately:

—Mario, just forget it.

—Oh! I see. Kate, maybe you're being too demanding.

—Mario, let it go.

She tells him the events of the night at the jazz bar. She explains the list of dangerous cities. She cites the cities where her team will be travelling. She explains that she and perhaps Ethan will have to travel to one or more of these cities. She explains Ethan's plan in great detail. Ethan takes the floor:

— Mario, there's something that Kate forgot to tell you, which just shows that she's not entirely perfect. If we go ahead with the concept of having our own Guard, I will personally take care of it. We'll set clear instructions regarding their behaviour, attitude and anything else you or the Steering Committee or the Board would like. They will also be told that if there's no acquisition, their duties could be limited to only a few cities in the US for a couple of days. So, what do you think?

— If we take this on as you explained, it seems an excellent idea to me. We will have to agree about payment.

— I have a small list that I've compiled using four security companies. At the bottom, I've made a proposal, considering the fringe benefits as employees. If they want to remain freelancers, there is another proposal right after. Kate, I'm sorry I didn't inform you, but I did it this morning, and considering my great fatigue, I didn't have the time to tell you. You're going to have to examine it.

They each take the sheet of paper and look it over.
Kate says:

— Tired, oh, for sure. It looks good to me.

Mario adds:

— Me too.

— Okay, replies Ethan. Mario, are you comfortable with a 10% leeway?

— Yes.

—Kate, that night, you wrote down their cell number. Do you still have them?

—Yes. I'll give them to you.

—Thanks.

After his business lunch, Ethan picks up his phone and dials Jim's number.

—Hi, am I talking to Jim Martin?

—Yes. Who is speaking?

—Ethan Miller. Do you remember my name?

—Not really.

—About a month ago, on December 7, we were all at a jazz bar. Kate and I went out to wait for a taxi when six men tried to attack us. You and Sara Talbot saved us.

—I remember.

—I promised you I would get in touch.

—Okay. What can I do for you?

—I would like to meet you and Ms. Talbot.

—Not a problem. Sara is next to me. Can I put you on speaker? Sara. This is about the jazz bar last month. It's Mr. Miller.

—Good afternoon, Mr. Miller.

—Good afternoon, Ms. Talbot. I did some research on you both. I found that Mr. Martin was an army commander and that you, Ms. Talbot, were a lieutenant. You have served in some very difficult places. I know that

you are currently working as bodyguards. I would like to discuss a project with you. Could we meet in my office? My office because I want you to see where Kate and I work. So, I could tell you what it's all about. By the way, the president where I work has already accepted this proposal. What do you think?

— It's not a problem for me, says Jim.

— Same here, says Sara.

— Perfect. Can we set up an appointment?

Jim replies:

— Okay and what should we wear?

— Whatever you like. Know that this isn't an employment interview. I'm the one who's offering you something. But we have to meet fairly quickly.

— It could be next Monday, before noon, suggests Jim.

He asks:

— Sara, would that be okay?

— Yes, confirms Sara.

— What about you? Mr. Miller.

— Of course. Just a second... Let's say 10 a.m. and we can have lunch together, whether we reach an agreement or not.

— Perfect! says Sara.

— Perfect! adds Jim.

— Looking forward to meeting you.

Ethan immediately dials Kate's number.

—Are you free right now?

—In fifteen minutes.

—Can I come to your office?

—Yes.

He comes in and closes the door.

—I called Jim Martin and Sara Talbot.

—Did you tell them about your plans?

—No. They're coming here next Monday at 10 a.m.

Then I'm going to have lunch with them.

—Do you want me to be at the meeting?

—No, but I'd like you to join us for lunch.

—Okay. You want me to reserve at a restaurant?

—I would appreciate that. I think the restaurant will have to be somewhere between fancy and fast food. What do you think?

—Fine, I understand. I know just the one. I'll ask for a corner table.

—You are the best.

—I know. By the way, there's something I don't understand.

—What don't you understand?

— You don't look tired anymore.

— It's because I recover very well, he says proudly as he leaves.

— Whew!

The next morning, Kate books the restaurant. She calls Ethan on the phone:

— I booked the restaurant Jérôme Ferrer-Europea. I also reserved a limousine for 11:30 a.m. Are we meeting afternoon?

— Okay for the restaurant. Okay for the limousine. Okay for us getting together. You see how positive I am.

The receptionist calls Ethan:

—Ethan, Ms. Talbot and Mr. Martin have arrived.

—Thank you. I'll come get them.

—Okay Ethan! He'll be here in a minute, the receptionist informs them.

—Thank you, says Jim.

—If you want to leave your coats in the closet, it's right there, she suggests.

Ethan arrives at the reception desk and reaches his hand out:

—Hello, he says, shaking their hands. Please follow me. You didn't have any problems finding the place?

—No, answers Jim.

—We're going to Kate Jackson's office, the woman you saved.

They cross the entrance hall and follow him down the corridor.

—Kate, this is Sara Talbot and Jim Martin.

—Shaking her hand, Sara says:

—I remember you.

—I'm glad to see you're okay, says Jim.

Kate answers:

—Thank you. Ethan will take care of you. In case you don't know, I'll be joining you for lunch. We're going to get to know each other better.

The trio moves on to Ethan's office.

—Please sit down. Would you like some coffee or water?

—Nothing for me. Thank you, says Sara.

—Me too. Thank you, replies Jim.

—First, if you agree, I would like us to call each other by our first names.

—Okay, they say.

—Before I begin, I must have you sign a confidentiality agreement. You could take the time to read it.

Both read the document and sign it.

—I'll start with the context: I'm running a huge acquisition project with a very large American company. To that end, I was appointed Executive Vice-president. Kate is Senior Vice-President of Accounting and Finance. Senior Vice-president because she leads some Vice-Presidents.

—So, Ms. Jackson has a higher rank than you? asks Jim.

—Yes and no. Yes, for as regards her position but no, because the Executive part of my title means that I report only to the President, just like her. You want me to go on?

—Yes, answers Jim.

—It's starting to be intriguing, Sara admits.

—Sara, wait to see. So, let's assume that we're moving forward with the acquisition. Now, in addition to heading the acquisition, I also recommended to my boss that I be in charge of setting up the security detail. He agreed. In fact, I want to create a division that I will call *The Guard*. They will be responsible for the safety of some individuals here in Montreal and other places in the United States as well as six other countries. There will be a director who reports back to me. I won't know anything about it, so I am to have blind faith in that individual. He or she will be the one telling me how to proceed. Are you still following me?

—Yes.

Reassured, Ethan continues:

—I will carry on the development of this division. I do not know where The Guard will be based, depending on the number of people who will be part of it. Depending on the number of individuals and based on needs, I would say somewhere outside Montreal. We'll see. But one thing is for certain: there will be one, two or three offices in this building. Given the nature of The Guard's activities, these offices will be closed, much like this one. I imagine you know other bodyguards.

—Yes, confirms Jim. We know a lot of them.

—We will develop a code of ethics, guidelines for behaviour and attitude. The other guards will have to comply 100% with it. No error in ethics, behaviour or attitude will be tolerated. Are you still with me?

—Definitely, agrees Sara. But Ethan, among all the guards we know, not everyone will be able to work here. Some have been too traumatized by wars.

—I suspected that. If we do not have enough, we will find other people and train them.

Jim asks:

—Is that why you spoke about installing The Guard outside Montreal?

—Exactly. Currently, there is no one to protect, but it will happen soon enough. For outside Canada, I will find out in the next few weeks who will be travelling to dangerous cities in the US. I'm talking about two to three weeks to find out places and time. If you accept this job, we'll figure out how to organize it. If we have to hire people, we will. This will last several months. Say about six to eight months. Now, there is another source of danger. At this point, I don't know the full extent. In fact, in the course of our work, we have identified a few cases of fraud. All types of fraud that we'll have to demonstrate and perhaps prove.

Jim asked:

—Ethan, why continue if there's been fraud?

—Jim, this is a multi-billion dollar transaction. Such fraud is good for me.

—Why, if I can be indiscreet?

—What can I say? Because it gives me bargaining power.

—Oh. I see. You call it bargaining power. Interesting. I feel like I'm going to learn a lot here.

Ethan continues to speak:

— Depending on the amount of the fraud, it can become dangerous. Here is a fictitious example. Let's say three or four people committed fraud for \$10,000,000. If they know they're being watched or found out, it's very likely they're going to pay someone to make the threat go away, one way or another. Is my example sound?

— Yes, says Jim.

— Okay. Now, who would be in danger? The person or people who discovered the fraud. And also their bosses. And guess who the boss is.

— You, of course, answer Jim.

— I think Ms. Jackson as well, because she's in charge of the financing, says Sara.

— You're right, Sara. Not because she's SVP, but because for this project, she works for me and manages all the financial aspects. You should know that she is one of the leading experts in Canada.

Jim shares his thoughts:

— If I put myself in their shoes, I would eliminate the President as well. That's for sure.

—You two are completely right. The danger can happen very quickly, because I have an accountant already in New York who found two individuals involved in fraud, buying and selling shares. He's continuing to look into it. We are all taking a risk, but he especially. It's because no one can see his computer screen seeing as it faces the wall. And these are small amounts. We are talking about \$50,000 and \$10,000 on two separate occasions.

Jim says:

—We'll have to assume that it's a conspiracy and that these offenders realize it. Ethan, these are small amounts we're talking about when we compare it to the billions at stake, but for these perpetrators, these amounts are huge. How long will all of this take?

—About two weeks.

—I suggest we have him watched from a distance. Either one of us can go, but we also know a few guards who live in the US, including New York.

—I appreciate your recommendation. Let's start with step one. Are you interested in this project?

—Absolutely! answers Jim, enthusiastic.

—I find it exciting. Yes! Sara admits.

—Okay. Currently, you are freelancers. Do you want to continue like that or would you rather be employees here? Salary is something, but here there are incredible fringe benefits, including worker's compensation—illness—hospitalization—and dental. All members of The Guard should be covered, given the nature of their work. On the other hand, I don't mind working with subcontractors, but it would be better for those in charge of The Guard to be employees.

—Ethan, it depends on the conditions.

—I'm going to talk about personal salary. I mentioned the fringe benefits. As for compensation, I've been given a salary above \$150,000 per year, depending on your position. So, your salaries will be a little different, but it will be in addition to the benefits I mentioned.

—Ethan, can Sara and I have a moment to talk somewhere, in private? We're in this together, and I think we should make this decision together.

—Stay here. I'll go for a walk, and when you're ready to become employees here, you could tell my assistant to call me. I know I'm trying to strong-arm you

a little. I want you to be in charge of this division, says Ethan with a smile.

They discuss it together then ask Nancy to call Ethan. Having opened his door, Ethan gets in quickly.

— So, what have you decided?

Jim starts to speak:

— Ethan, we agree on the insurances. We can't afford insurances ourselves. As for salary, it's a bit low, but it's not a deal breaker.

— We haven't even started negotiating your salaries, Ethan replies.

— That's right. And you're right that if we have to create a guard division, it would be best that we're both employees. We think this is a fantastic opportunity for a great career. When we helped you out at the Jazz bar, you said you'd thank us. That's what's happening here.

Sara completes:

— Finally, Ethan, it'll be great to work with you. You must be a nice boss.

— That's what I keep telling everyone, but they don't believe me. If I understand correctly, you accept.

— We accept.

— Congratulations. And when I say congratulations, it's for all three of us. Jim, you were a commander in the army. Sara, you were a lieutenant. Jim, you'll be my Director and Sara, you'll be the Department Manager. We'll see which department suits you best. I will have the employee contracts sent to you. We'll negotiate salaries separately.

—Ethan, we can do it right now. Either way, we're going to talk about it.

—Then let's go ahead.

Ethan makes his first offer to Jim, who negotiates a slight increase. They come to an agreement. Ethan makes his offer to Sara, who wants to agree, but Jim negotiates an increase, saying:

—Ethan, she works for me.

—That's right!

They agree about the salaries.

Kate knocks on his door:

— Sorry to interrupt, but the limo is waiting for us.

In the limousine, Ethan joyfully announces:

— Kate, it's all settled with Jim and Sara. Their duties, work conditions, salaries, everything!

— Congrats to the three of you, says Kate. Ethan, what are their job positions?

— Jim is the Director of The Guard. If it gets too big, he can become a VP.

Jim says:

— Ethan, we never spoke about becoming a VP, but I'll live with it.

Ethan replies as follows:

— Yeah! Sara will be Department Manager. For Sara, if The Guard grows as I intend, she'll be promoted before Jim, but I don't know exactly where. There are several possibilities. So, I don't know what her final office will be. But for the next few months, their offices will be on the same floor. I checked and there are four available

spaces, not yet booked. I'll check with the steering committee this Wednesday. This afternoon, I will inform human resources about their conditions for their employee contracts.

—Ethan, these are management positions. So, I'll take care of the contracts with HR. I guess we should hurry up.

—Your right and thanks. I'm going to take care of their offices. When the contracts are signed, I will introduce them to Mario and the SC.

Jim asks:

—The SC?

Ethan replies:

—That means Steering Committee. It's Mario's committee.

—Mario is the President, informs Kate.

—Yes, Ethan told us, says Jim.

Ethan says:

—Jim and Sara, depending on office availability, we can agree on a start date. It should take a week.

—Perfect, says Sara. We have a couple of things to finish up. A week will be enough.

—Excuse me, I have to text my assistant for a meeting this afternoon with the supplies department, for your offices.

—Are you also meeting with me for contracts? asks Kate.

—One moment, I'm a man and we all know that a man can't do two things at once.

He sends his text message.

—So, yes, we'll meet this afternoon. Do you want my assistant to schedule it?

—No. Just call me.

Ethan's phone rings. He looks to see who's calling him.

—It's my assistant.

He gives her instructions to start preparing their offices.

—Are you always like that? asks Sara.

—Like that? asks Kate.

—At maximum speed.

—I must say that during the day we are on the fast track, but in the evening, we are more relaxed together. You should know that we are dating and the entire floor knows it.

—We suspected as much. At the jazz bar, you looked more like lovers than co-workers. Speaking of the floor, where will our offices be, who are working with? asks Jim.

—There are only executives, replies Kate. There is the President, of course. There are all the Senior Vice-Presidents. There are also several vice-presidents. You will be the only executives who are not VP on the floor,

but the nature of your work requires that you are close to Ethan and everyone else.

At the restaurant, they sit down and take a look at the menu. Ethan looks at them to see if they have made their choice. Then Jim speaks:

— Ms. Jackson...

— Jim, please call me Kate.

— So, Kate, I see you're very involved. But I guess that doesn't happen very often.

— I would say almost never. But you should know that what Ethan is asking, the whole floor is with him. This project is so big and important. When someone sees that he can help, he gets involved, just like you said, Jim. Also, I haven't forgotten what you did for us and especially for me.

— We're going to have to turn the page, says Sara.

— I understand, but for me, it's going to take some time.

— For me too, but you should understand that if you're here, it's because I know you're going to do this job, adds Ethan. If it was only to return the favour and

you weren't qualified, I would have found something else for you.

—Thank you.

The waiter comes to take their order.

—Listen, says Jim. I'm not employed yet, but I have to act like I am. I'm not comfortable that your man is in New York right now. What's his name?

—George.

—Can you hire a freelancer for the two weeks that George is there, doing his job? asks Jim.

—Yes, replies Ethan.

—Sara, you know some bodyguards in New York.

—Yes, says Sara. I know several, but I'm thinking of one woman in particular, she's exceptional. I'm talking about Layla da Silva.

—I know her. Ethan, can we hire her?

—What will she do? asks Ethan.

—She will stay with George, replies Jim. Never near him or his office. She'll get in touch with him. I imagine you will notify him first.

—Jim, what's wrong with George's job? asks Kate.

—Ethan told us about his task. If George doesn't uncover anything else, it's likely that nothing will happen. However, should he discover other cases of fraud or any misdemeanours, we can't foresee what will happen.

— George contacted me last Friday, for something else, says Kate. He told me he had made some new discoveries.

— Did you get more details? asks Ethan.

— No, but by the sound of his voice, I think it's big enough.

— Ethan, we have to do this fast.

— Okay. Jim, which one of you is going to call your contact in New York? asks Ethan.

— Sara should do it. They know each other well.

— I'll do it right away. Do you have George's phone number? I'll put on my coat and go call her outside. It won't take long.

— Sara, can you ask Layla to call George in 15 minutes? I will also call him to let him know about Layla's call, says Kate.

Kate uses her cell phone contacts:

— Hello George.

— Hello Kate.

— Listen up. A woman named Layla will call you in 10 to 15 minutes. Don't ask any questions and do what she tells you.

— Does that mean my work stops here?

— No, you should proceed. But do exactly as she says.

— Okay.

— Take care.

She hangs up her phone and a few minutes later, Sara comes back to the table.

— It's all good. Layla will take care of it, she says.

— That's great. I'd like for Sara to manage this: contract, communications, etc., says Jim.

— Okay. Kate, are you going to get involved? asks Ethan.

— Of course. Just a quick question. Who is Layla, other than being a bodyguard?

— We were in the war together, replies Sara. She was a sergeant for the army. She worked under me. Kate, you saw what I could do at the jazz bar.

— Yes, and I remember it very well.

— Well, you haven't seen everything. I want to tell you that I would never fight Layla. She is stronger than me.

— Neither would I, adds Jim. I don't know much about her because in the military, a commander does not speak to a sergeant unless there's a problem. And that's usually not a good sign. But I've seen her in combat, and she's really impressive.

Kate says:

—Sara, when you get back to the office, you can come up with me and I'll introduce you to the person who'll be your contact for this project.

—Okay. Jim, you can go if you want.

In the limo, Ethan says:

—Kate, I'm going to write an email to Mario informing him about all this. I'll copy you. I want to have his go-ahead to talk at the SC meeting about this. I would like to see you on Wednesday morning, to go over a few things.

—I'm looking at my schedule. I'm available at 10 a.m.

—Can you book it?

—Yes, but you're not available at that time.

—Please, keep it for me anyway, I'll work around it.

—Done.

The following morning, Mario calls Ethan.

— Good morning, Ethan. I read your email last night. The Guard is interesting. I look forward to meeting Jim and Sara. Based on what you wrote, they seem to be ready. I'm glad they're taking care of George's safety. Have you heard from him?

— I will call him later today.

— You wrote that he has discovered other infractions.

— Yes, but I don't know more than that. Kate spoke to him. When I call him, I will find out.

— Okay. You'll let me know tomorrow?

— Absolutely.

— For the SC meeting, I would like you to give us an update on the project. Also, about George's discoveries. Finally, you'll discuss The Guard and George's protection.

— Mario, I only have ten minutes.

— Take all the time you need.

— Okay. I'll prepare it now.

At the end of the day, Ethan calls George:

— So, George, how are you?

— Fine, but I was getting very nervous. When Kate called me to tell me about Layla, my anxiety went down a bit.

— Did you meet Layla?

— Yes. Yesterday after work. We met at a bar on the first floor of the building.

— How did you find it?

— Phew. She knows her stuff. And, I'll tell you something, Ethan, we better do what she says. She has a very specific security plan. I got shivers.

— Why the anxiety?

— So far, I have found over \$200,000 in fraud. But Layla told me about some research on Friday a bit before I left the office to return to Montreal. Without digging too much, I took a quick look. I suspect it involves several millions of dollars. I'm an accountant, not a spy. I feel like everyone is watching me. Layla asked me a lot of questions, and then she reassured me. According to her, everything will be fine by next Friday.

—You're supposed to fly back on Friday. Will you be done?

—Yes. But when I explained to Layla my approach and the kind of research I am doing, she believes that I'll only be discovered on Friday morning, if I get discovered at all. So, she decided to pick me up at the office and drive me to the airport herself, right up to the gate. When she gets here, I will do my last bit of research. She's going to be dressed as a limo driver and she's going to pretend she's picking up my luggage. She told me that a woman named Sara, I believe, will be waiting for me at the airport in Montreal. She sent me her picture on my phone so that I could recognize her.

—Sara is someone who will be working for me. You can trust her.

—Okay.

Next morning, Kate and Ethan meet to discuss the SC meeting later that afternoon. He explains:

— I'll start by telling them that all the teams except the undercover team are working. The undercover team will be starting next week and they know where to begin searching, including the items you found with the VP of accounting. I won't list them, only mention the way they add abbreviations before some accounts. I'm going to emphasize that all teams are working to help the undercover team. Then I'm going to talk about George's situation, what he already discovered and what else he might discover, based on what he told me yesterday. I will talk about his bodyguard, Layla. Finally, I will talk about The Guard. I will tell them that so far, nothing has been signed and that I think they need to approve it.

— You are in complete control.

— Yeah! Now you're going to promise me that you're not going to tell anyone and that you're going to remain calm.

— You make me nervous

— Promise.

— Okay, I promise.

— Yesterday, after my conversation with George, I called Layla.

— Now you're scaring me.

— Please allow me to go on. Layla is convinced that George will be found out on Friday and that it will be a very big deal. She has come up with a plan. I will give you the details. She will be in George's office as he conducts his research, a few minutes before he leaves for the airport. She's gonna drive him there. She has asked me to agree to two additional armed bodyguards that will follow in their car and cover them if need be.

— Did you agree?

— I thought about putting an end to it and I told her as much. She told me it was too late. That if we stop now, he'll get caught sooner or later. If we don't stop, he will be discovered this week, but at least we'll have what we are looking for. So, I gave my approval. Then I contacted Jim. He told me it would be fine. He said that Layla is the very best bodyguard and everyone knows her in New York. If the bad guys see her, there's a good chance one of them will recognize her. If that's the case, they won't act, because they know they risk being killed otherwise. Kate, you look pale. Get a grip. This has to stay between us.

— And what would happen when he gets to the Montreal airport?

— Sara will wait for him at the airport here and drive him home.

— And then what?

— I've already talked to Jim. Depending about what will happen on Friday, we can place bodyguards in George's house on Friday, Saturday, Sunday and Monday. On Monday, we will decide what to do and notify Mario. We can even report them to the FBI, or simply proceed. Now, should we report it to the FBI, there may be a case of stealing confidential information. George could be charged. Me and Mario, as well. Remember that George was supposed to cause chaos and that no one could have anticipated such substantial fraud. We'll see how big it is on Monday with George. If nothing happens on Friday, Jim will still have a security plan for George.

— Ethan, you're playing in the big leagues.

— I know, but I'm surrounded by a lot of very professional people.

— I'll grant you that.

— You haven't said if there is trouble on Friday and we decide to proceed.

— I don't know yet. We'll decide that when the time comes. You have to trust me and The Guard.

— I'm afraid something might happen to you.

Later, Ethan describes the whole situation to the SC without mentioning anything about the coming Friday. They say they are satisfied with the developments. They are surprised at all the suspicious accounting. They are stunned at the \$200,000 in fraud and can appreciate Ethan and Mario's tactics. Finally, they accept his plans for a division of The Guard.

The next day, at around 4 p.m., Ethan calls George.

— Good morning, George.

— Good morning, Ethan.

— How was your day?

— Well, it was quiet.

— Have you seen Layla?

— No, but I know she's out here somewhere.

— It's your last night there.

— Ethan, I hope so, and I hope you won't ask me to come back.

— I won't do that, rest assured.

— Thank you.

— Get some rest tonight and be careful tomorrow.

— Okay.

Back at work, as he determined with Layla, George puts away his documents in his suitcase. His phone rings.

— Hello, there is someone at the front entrance asking for you.

— I'm coming, thank you.

George goes to the front entrance.

— Good morning, my name is George.

— Hi, I'm Layla. I'm your driver to the airport. I'm here to pick up your bags.

George asks the receptionist:

— Can she come in? I'll stay with her. I have to finish up a little work. Then, I'll be on my way to Canada.

— Go ahead, says the woman at the reception desk. But be quick. She doesn't have a pass and I'm not supposed to let her in.

— Thank you. That's very nice of you, says George.

Back in his office, he says:

— Please sit down, it will only take me five minutes.

— Thank you, I'm going to stay standing. Take all the time you need. Don't fear, your plane isn't leaving.

He is quick to perform the sensitive searches and saves his results on a USB key. They leave his office. At the reception desk, George says:

— Thanks again.

— Have a safe trip.

— Thank you.

Layla sets the suitcase in the trunk of the car. Then she opens the back door for him. As he enters, she calmly whispers to him:

— George, you shouldn't be nervous. Everything is going to be okay. We don't need to run. We are going to the airport as usual.

— Okay.

— George, did you find anything big?

— Several million in fraud.

— So, we should probably go now.

Layla starts the car and heads for the airport. She informs him:

— George, I asked two of my colleagues, both bodyguards, to follow us and watch our backs. On the drive, I'll talk to them. Whatever I may say, I want you to stay calm. Okay?

— Yes. Does Ethan know?

— Yes, I spoke to him the day before yesterday. He seems nice and direct.

— That's him. He called my office yesterday, late in the afternoon. I think he's concerned.

— Now I will be contacting my friends.

After placing the earpiece in her ear, she turns on the microphone in front of her mouth.

— Hello, guys. Can you see me?

— Yes. We're three cars behind you.

— What car did you take?

— The white van.

— Okay, I see you. We'll do a test. Is it okay?

— Of course.

— We just passed 44th Street. At 43rd Street, I'll turn right. I'll take 9th Avenue and I come back up to 7th Avenue by taking 42nd Street.

— Okay.

Layla performs this maneuver.

— Am I being followed? She asks.

— I don't think so. I'm going to drive away from you for a little bit and do another test. You have the change you need for the tolls? We shouldn't stop.

— No problem. I'll do another test. I'll take 39th Street. On 9th Avenue, I'll turn left on 36th Street and continue straight on I-495.

— Okay.

On 9th Avenue, she asks:

— Am I being followed?

— Yes.

— How many?

— A car with two guys. I'll get close to them.

From a distance, Layla can see that the light on 9th Avenue and 36th Street will turn red. She takes the left lane to turn.

— Layla, they're to your right. I don't know what they're planning, but they're looking right at you.

— What's your plan?

— I'll move up right behind them. Done. I'm going to push their car at the red light. They're going to get bumped.

— Do you have your special bumper?

—Yes. I'll stop when I reach you, then I'll turn left at the red light. You'll let me drive in front of you?

—No problem.

The cars stop. The van pulls up to the suspicious vehicle and pushes it forward. One of the cars driving on the right, hits it. The traffic stops.

—Let's go, guys, pass the red light.

The van makes the turn and Layla follows and drives ahead to pass him. Layla asks:

—Everyone all right?

—Yes. Not bad? But your guy is going to need some help.

She looks at George and:

—Are you all right, George?

—Yes. Are we in trouble?

—Guys, he's asking me if we're in trouble. I don't think so. Do you agree?

—Yes, but we won't let our guard down. Later, we'll do another test. But wait about twenty minutes.

—Okay. It will be a test on the highway. I'll warn you.

—George, I don't think we're in trouble, but we'll make sure.

When they arrive at the airport, she parks the car and accompanies George to the plane. Her colleagues followed her all the way to the parking lot. Once they've exited the car with his suitcase in tow, they head for the tunnel entrance leading to the counters. She orders:

—Okay, guys, you can go now. Thank you. I'll see you soon.

—Okay. See you soon.

She walks with George, turning to look back from time to time. He reaches the metal detectors. He turns around to her and says:

—Layla, I want to thank you. You're not only a very pretty woman, you are in total control. It's extraordinary.

—George, you're going to make me blush, but thanks. Once you get past the metal detectors, I'm going to ask you to go quickly. I'm going to watch you from here. There won't be any problems on the plane because they don't know your flight number. Sara will be waiting for you at the airport. She will be looking around while she waits for you. You have her picture on your cell?

—Yes.

— Please make sure.

— Hold on. Here it is, look.

— Perfect!

She ends it by extending her hand.

When George disappears from her sight, she goes away and calls Sara:

— Hi Sara.

— Hello, Layla.

— How was the trip?

— Okay, but he has been found out. And it's serious.

Two guys in a car were following us.

— Do you know what they wanted?

— Not really. According to my guys, they were tough. We pushed their car forward on a red light, and they were hit. We drove away to the airport.

— Did they have a second vehicle?

— No. Besides, I don't understand.

— Okay. So, they're likely to come here.

— Very likely.

— Layla, thank you and thank your guys.

— It's our job.

— Yes. We let this pass, and we will talk again.

— Okay. Bye.

Sara calls Jim:

— Hi Jim.

— Hi. Have you heard anything?

— Yes. I just spoke with Layla. George has been discovered and they were being followed, but our guards got rid of them, without a single shot. I'm going to the

airport right now. I want to get there early to check it out.

—You want me to come too?

—No. I think you have to tell Ethan and deploy your teams. It's urgent we watch George's house.

—Fine. I'll take care of it. Are you armed?

—Yes. Don't worry.

—Keep me posted.

Jim immediately calls the coordinating bodyguard to set up a team at George's house.

—Hi. It's a go. I want two teams, well armed. Each guard uses his own car. You'll take the first watch. And notify the others. You can go right ahead. Watch for anything that moves.

—Okay and I'm already on my way. I've got my truck with the cameras and everything.

—Okay. Sara's on her way to the airport. She will keep us informed. We use the usual frequency.

—Perfect, Jim. I'll be there in about 20 minutes.

Jim immediately calls Ethan on his cell phone. It's Friday afternoon. Ethan is with Kate, they are shopping.

—Hi Jim.

—Hi Ethan. I have some news.

—Wait a second, I'm going to sit on a bench. I feel like I have to sit down.

—Yes.

—Okay, I'm listening.

—George is on the plane right now and Sara is on her way to the airport. I just ordered two two-men teams to go to George's house. The first team is on its way.

—So, Jim, if I understand correctly, George has been discovered?

—Yes.

—And?

—On the way to the airport, they were followed, but Layla and her team managed to get rid of them without a shot. I have a friend who works the computers at the airport. He will provide me with an electronic passenger lists for all flights to Montreal. He'll transfer the information to one of my servers and I'll check if

anything comes up on the police database that I regularly receive.

— Jim, you didn't tell me that.

— Ethan, there are many things I didn't tell you.

— If I understand correctly, we can sleep soundly tonight?

— Yes.

— Okay. Monday at about 8 a.m., I'll meet George. I need some information. You and Sara will meet Kate and go over the contracts. At 8:30, I want you in my office. We will decide on a plan of action. You're okay with Sara being there?

— Of course.

— You have someone to watch George and his wife for a while?

— Yes. And our equipment is great. Listen, Ethan, rest assured. Sara and I are going to meet them on Saturday. We're going to reassure them. I'm going to put a security bracelet on them. I've also asked four other bodyguards to be on standby. One of them has a helicopter ready. If anything moves, I want to have backup ready.

— Okay, Jim. That's good. See you Monday.

— See you.

Kate, who was sitting next to Ethan, heard their conversation. Ethan turns off his phone and, holding his forehead with both hands, leans his elbows on his legs. Kate waits for him to raise his head.

—Ethan, I didn't hear everything, but from what I heard, it's serious.

—They were followed in New York, but they got rid of them. Layla had backup with two other guys. George will be escorted by Sara. Two teams of two men will watch George and his wife all weekend. On Saturday, Jim and Sara will meet with them to go over the plan and put on security bracelets. As for Monday, you heard me.

—Yes. We go back to our apartments?

—There's a bar nearby. I need a double shot of cognac.

At 8 a.m. on Monday morning, Jim and Sara go to Kate's office, accompanied by an HR Director. They each sign their respective contracts.

George enters Ethan's office. He is with a body-guard who stays standing.

—Are you all right?

—Yes, but my wife and I are afraid.

—I understand. We'll see you this afternoon for the details. But for now, I need to know a few things. First, what is the total amount of the fraud?

—I didn't add it up, but I'm guessing around five million.

—Are you serious?

—Yes

—Okay. How much is the largest single amount?

—Twice it was 2,000,000, and a 100,000, a dozen times.

—Okay. You know the names of the people involved.

—Yes.

—Do you have them on paper?

—No, on a USB key.

— As soon as we leave, can you give it to my assistant?

— Okay.

— The \$2,000,000 transactions, is it different people or the same person?

— It's two people with 2,000,000 each.

— Okay. As for the rest?

— That's four more people.

— So, a total of six offenders.

— Correct.

Ethan addresses the bodyguard:

— Sir, you know you can sit down.

— I know sir, but it's not safe. Also, I'm used to it.

— Do you work for Jim?

— I have a feeling that a number of bodyguards are working for you right now.

— Yeah! I'm impressed with those who have been working so far.

— Glad to hear it.

— George, please go back to your office. I'm going to need a full report.

— Do you want it for our meeting this afternoon?

— I want to say yes, just to annoy you. But I think you've had enough of stress right now. No. This afternoon, I want you to talk to me, to tell me everything. I want to understand what happened.

Ethan's assistant knocks on his door and opens it.

— Kate, Sara and Jim have arrived.

— Thank you, George, and thank you, sir.

On the way out, George's bodyguard greets Sara and Jim. The trio enters and sits down at the round table. As he walks over, Ethan runs his hands through his hair and sits down.

— Well! Here's the story. There's been many cases of fraud in their securities, up to about \$5,000,000. George has identified six individuals, including two major ones who pocketed more than \$2,000,000 each. He has given their names to Nancy, my assistant.

He goes on to say:

— Last night I thought about the situation. Here's what I want to talk about. First, I want to focus on the two biggest ones, to stop any further movement. Nancy will schedule an appointment with them as soon as possible. I assume they'll wait to see what I want. I will tell them that we know everything about them and the other four individuals involved. And we have two choices: I can report them to the FBI or we can make a deal.

He rubs his chin and continues:

—The deal is that, together, we decrease the value of their company by at least \$100,000,000. Once the sale has been signed by their Board of Directors, they can resign and get the hell out of there.

Ethan specifies:

—Let us remember that our job isn't to enforce the law. We buy a company or try to buy it for as little as possible, by any means necessary.

—Ethan, \$100,000,000 is a lot. The financial markets are going to have questions, Kate alleges.

Nancy knocks on his door and opens it. She hands a paper over to Ethan. He looks at it and announces:

—These are the names. The two biggest cases of fraud involve the President and the Vice-President of Marketing. There is also the VP of accounting who extorted \$400,000. So, I'm going to meet these three guys. What do you think?

Jim says right away:

—Ethan, I recommend that you forget the third one, for now. The first two will take care of it. The fewer people are involved, the better.

—Jim and Sara, in terms of ethics, what do you think of my plan? Jim?

—It's a funny situation. It sounds like blackmail, but without any extortion. For there to be blackmailed, somebody has to take advantage. Here, there is no direct personal benefit. It is the shareholders of our company

who will benefit. Those who committed the fraud will also benefit because they are avoiding prison and they get to keep the money they extorted. Also, the American company is failing. As far as I know, they are still holding on because we want to buy it. If we withdraw our offer, the company will keep going under. Now, Ethan, I suggest you speak to a company lawyer.

— Good suggestion. I'll do it quickly.

— Kate, do the company's lawyers have a confidentiality policy?

— Yes.

— Sara, what do you think?

— I think Jim has summarized it well, and I support his recommendation.

— Kate?

— I think Jim and Sara are right. I'm worried about how your meeting with them will go.

— One second please, Ethan asks as he calls his assistant. Nancy, I have to meet with the Director of the Legal Department immediately after my meeting with George, today at about 2 p.m. Tell him I have to talk to them before I speak with Mario. Thank you.

— Okay. Now for the meeting, here's what I came up with. You tell me if it's good. First of all, we all take the private jet. I don't want to be in the open at the airport. Jim, Sara, and Layla will be with me. Jim, do you want to be armed?

— Yes. Layla will take care of that.

— Okay. How do we make sure that we're not being recorded?

— I'm going to bring a device that emits a high-frequency sound that will jam any audio devices within a radius of say a 150 to 200 metres. But the best would be to meet in a private lounge at a hotel.

— Good idea, I'll buy it. How do you find one that quickly?

— I'll call Layla, says Sara.

— Sara, ask her to remain available. You can explain later.

— Okay.

Sara exits the office and then comes back, and remains standing:

— Layla is on the line. She knows of two hotels on the corner of the head office. All she needs to know is the day and time.

— Please ask Nancy to come here.

Ethan hands Nancy a sheet of paper:

— Nancy, I want to meet these two criminals this week. I checked off their names.

— Ethan, he's the President.

— Yes. Nancy, listen carefully. You only contact his assistant. If you don't have her contact information, Mario's assistant has it. Tell her I have a list of six names I want to go over the President and the Vice-President of Marketing. Say both their names are on the list. Say the meeting will be at a private lounge in a hotel nearby.

The reservation will be in my name. The meeting is for some time this week in the early afternoon. Nancy, as soon as you get a date, tell Layla, who will book the lounge. As soon as that's done, Sara will give you the name of the hotel and lounge so you could tell the President's assistant. Finally, you're will book a private jet, we'll be leaving at 10:00 a.m.

—Noted.

—Thank you, Nancy. Can the three of you be free tomorrow?

—Yes.

—Please, hold on a second.

Ethan dials Mario's assistant's number.

—Good morning, Edith.

—Good morning, Ethan.

—Two things. I'll need to talk to Mario for about five minutes today, say about 2:30. Then I have to meet him in his conference room tomorrow sometime during the day. Kate, Jim Martin, The Guard Director, and Sara Talbot, The Guard Manager, will also be there.

—Ethan, could you come today at 2:45?

—I'll be there.

—As for tomorrow, what's The Guard?

—A new division under my management. It hasn't been announced yet.

—So, it's Jim Martin and Sara ...?

—Talbot.

—Okay. I'll figure something out.

— I'll wait for you to tell me the time, they're here with me, they don't have offices yet.

— Yes, just a second. Let's say tomorrow at 3 p.m.

— Is three okay? he asks them.

— Edith, it's okay.

After lunch, Ethan meets up with George who is with his bodyguard. Kate asked to come to this meeting. George describes in great detail what happened during his investigation. He explains how he found the offenders. Kate admits:

— Smart. A due diligence review would never bring that up. George, you're a genius.

— Thanks, Kate, he says. Am I going to have to go back there? I had to make a mess but I didn't.

— George, on our last phone conversation, I said you wouldn't be going back there, Ethan replies. Actually, you had to make a mess in order to get their attention. You have given me everything I need to get attention. So, my goal has been achieved. George, the bodyguards will continue to watch you and your wife for a week. Jim will handle the situation with the bracelets. I'll be meeting with the two big bad guys, the President and his vice-president this week. After that, there's no more danger.

— Ethan, it's going to be dangerous for you there, says George.

—I'm going with Jim, Sara, and Layla. With these three, it's going to be dangerous for them. George, please finish your report and then you can take the rest of the week off.

—Kate, are you okay? I have to get to the legal department.

—Yes, I'm fine. This is completely crazy.

Ethan enters the office of the Director of the Legal Department. He goes over the entire story. He asks:

— Is what I'm doing illegal?

— This is a strange situation. Clearly, what you are about to do is blackmail. However, blackmailing people who have committed fraud... it is quite certain that they won't be pressing charges. Otherwise, they would automatically end up in jail. However, based on the amount of money involved, it would be easier to hire assassins and solve their problem once and for all.

— Then, they would be killing a lot of people, and despite all that, they wouldn't be sure that they've eliminated all the evidence. By the way, are you one of those people?

— For sure! Now that I think about it, it's genius.

Ethan continues:

— Now, my real question is: if I go to the FBI, would George get in trouble?

— What do you mean by that?

— He stole information. Can this be considered theft of trade secrets?

—I see. He used a company computer. He was given access to their securities data. If this data was on industry secrets, George would not have had access to it. If they don't know what they're doing, it's not George's fault. If you go to the FBI, George will be congratulated, not punished.

—Thank you.

Ethan goes to Mario's office. He enters and gives him a brief status on the situation:

— So, everything is under control. The Director of the Legal Department even said it was a genius plan. I'm finalizing the details now. Tomorrow, we'll tell you more about it. I'll take the opportunity to introduce you to Jim and Sara. Jim will be the Director of The Guard, and Sara will be the Department Manager of The Guard.

— Ethan, are you sure about George and his wife?

— They are being watched by the bodyguards, day and night. They also have security bracelets connected to a computer. If their heartbeats accelerate, the computer will sound an alarm and show their locations. The bracelet is equipped with an active GPS. If the bracelets are deactivated, there will be an alarm with their latest location. I forgot to tell you that there's even a bodyguard on standby in his helicopter.

— Phew! Thank you, Ethan. See you tomorrow.

Ethan goes to the conference room to meet the undercover team. There are six people including the coordinator. Kate is also at the meeting.

— Good morning, Ethan says.

— Good morning...

Speaking to the team coordinator, he asks:

— In our previous meeting, when Kate listed the possible irregularities such as offshore accounts, special clients, or suppliers, etc. I asked you to come up with an action plan.

— Yes.

— Can you present it?

— Yes. The presentation is ready.

The coordinator goes over his plan. Ethan says:

— I see that you made connection with the IT team and the due diligence team. That's good. I understand that this is a preliminary plan. So, there will be changes. As for any significant changes, I would like to be notified, especially if it involves the schedule.

— Not a problem.

— Kate, is this action plan okay with you?

—Yes. Congratulations, by the way. It's well thought out.

—We are going to move forward with this, but I'll give you the final go-ahead on Friday, says Ethan.

—Understood, says the coordinator.

The next day, Jim and Sara arrive at Ethan's office.

— Good morning.

— Good morning. Please follow me. We'll go get Kate, and then we'll go to Mario's office.

Near Nancy's desk, Ethan asks:

— Nancy, is everything okay for New York?

— Yes, and the flight leaves on Thursday at 10 a.m.

— Thank you.

The four enter Mario's conference room. Ethan says:

— Good morning. Mario, I'd like to introduce you to Jim, Director of The Guard. Jim, let me introduce Mario, our president.

— Nice to meet you, they say, shaking hands.

— Now, this is Sara, Department Manager of The Guard.

— Nice to meet you, they say while shaking hands.

Mario says:

— Have a seat.

They all sit down. Mario is the first to speak:

— Yesterday, Ethan gave me a very brief summary. So, who will start?

— Me, says Ethan. Mario, this morning I took notes to make sure that I don't forget anything important.

Ethan describes George's discoveries. Kate admits:

— Mario, their way would have totally blindsided the due diligence review team from finding any of this out. Besides, George was a genius, being able to find this.

Ethan goes on:

— I met with the Director of the Legal Department.

He shares their conversation. Then Ethan addresses the security issue. Mario asks a few questions that Sara and Jim answer. Mario concludes:

— All this seems very well managed to me. My main concern is safety, for you Ethan, and for George.

— Listen, Mario, if they agree to this, I'll test them on Thursday. Let me explain.

Kate notes:

— Ethan, we haven't discussed this.

— That's right, Kate. I just thought of it. The undercover team is going to start working next week. They are waiting for my go-ahead this Friday. The undercover team will look into the suspect items that Kate found, without appearing to do so. In New York on Thursday, I will ask questions about several of these points. I'll ask them if they've changed their numbers. If they answer no, I'll get up and call the FBI. Then, we'll see if they decide to cooperate.

Mario interjects:

— Ethan, they may not have changed them.

Kate retorts:

— Mario, they've certainly changed many of their accounting numbers. I don't have the evidence yet, but I'm sure. I can guarantee it.

Mario agrees:

— Right Kate. Ethan, you have the go-ahead. Jim and Sara, take care of him.

Jim answers:

— Mario, I will, for sure. You should know that there'll be someone else named Layla, who also works around here, she'll be with us. She is the one who took care of George last week.

— Okay. Good luck to you all.

On Thursday, at New York, Layla is sitting in the hotel reception room, waiting patiently. Jim and Ethan keep their distance. Sara comes up to her:

—Hi Layla, still so pretty.

—Hi Sara. You look radiant. Actually, it's been a long time since I've seen you like this.

—It's my new job, I love it. Come, let me introduce you. First, this is my boss Jim Martin. Remember him?

—Yes, he was our commander.

—He is now the Director of The Guard.

—Hello, Commander.

—Layla, I am no longer your commander. It's just Jim.

—Okay, Jim.

—Now I would like to introduce you to Ethan Miller, Executive Vice-President and Commander of The Guard.

—Delighted to meet you, sir.

—Nice to meet you too Layla. Call me Ethan. Okay?

—Okay. Let me take you to our private lounge.

Layla is carrying a bag with guns. Ethan sits down while she distributes weapons. The others stay standing.

Shortly afterwards, two individuals enter the private lounge. Ethan gets up and walks over to them to shake their hand. Ethan immediately takes control:

— If you would please have a seat. The people with me are members of a division called *The Guard*. This division is under my purview. Just to be clear, I am the Executive Vice-President, and responsible for this acquisition project. From the onset, I want to be crystal clear. My job is to buy your company at the lowest possible price and nothing else. There are many people in my organization who are working in your company at this time, including one in securities management. In fact, he has finished his work. Are you following me?

— Mr. Miller, I'm with you, says the President.

— I know that you are aware that the individual who analyzed your securities transactions discovered, how shall I say, illicit transactions. We have the names of those involved and the amounts. When he left, two men in a black car followed his limousine, which was headed for *La Guardia*. I was told that these people now have a small problem. See, just before their unfortunate accident, we took some pictures of them. Let's hope that my people at *The Guard* never see them again.

He pauses and asks:

— Are you still with me?

— Yes.

— We have also identified at least seven instances where your company's books were falsified. We're going to examine these very carefully, and we'll certainly find

others. Depending on how this meeting goes, I will give the go-ahead to my team to proceed or not with this. If it's a no-go, I don't have to explain that it would be disastrous for many of you. Are you still following me?

—What do you want?

—You will find out what I want but I want to remind you that my job is to buy your company. Nothing else. So, I want your company's book value to drop by \$500,000,000.

—What are you saying? Are you crazy?

—Then tell me, exactly how much you have inflated the value of your company: 100, 200, 300, 400 million dollars?

—The value has not been inflated.

—I see. Now, let's do it like baseball? Your answer is: Strike one. When you get to your third strike, you won't be OUT, like in baseball, it'll be the FBI. By the way, you keep your strikes until the end of the project. If we are to continue, let's be quick so some of you could run away fast. That being said, I will continue. Don't forget you're playing baseball. So, are we talking about 100, 200, 300, 400, or 500 million dollars?

—200, the President finally admits.

—I'm glad. You and I will certainly get along. Next week, under the watchful eyes of my team, you're going to start changing these inflated numbers, am I right?

—Yes.

—Now that I know it's \$200,000,000, we're talking about, you're going to have to reduce the value by

\$300,000,000. That seems reasonable to me. I'm sure you agree to this slight penalty?

— Okay, but I think you're crazy.

— I would have been crazy had it not been for the securities transactions. Instead I would say I'm an opportunist. I want this decrease, and once I get it, I want a letter of intent signed by you, now, along with a resolution adopted by your Board of Directors.

— They will never accept.

— That's not my problem. It really isn't. Once I have your letter of intent, signed, along with the approved resolution, you two and the other four members of your team will resign. Then, I promise to let you and the four others leave the country, with all the profit from your theft.

— And if we refuse?

— Simply put, it will be the FBI and by necessity, the end of our acquisition, the end of your company. Now, you may leave this private lounge to discuss it. One of my guards will accompany you to make sure you don't do anything stupid.

The President responds with anger:

— There is no need to go outside. I'll agree to collaborate. Now I can't guarantee 300,000,000.

— I'm not asking you to guarantee anything. I'll take care of that. Is that understood?

— Yes.

— Perfect. I won't meet the others. I don't have any time to waste.

—I will take care of it personally, the President promises him.

—You should know that I have enough evidence to come after all of you, either together or one by one. If anyone tries something, either by himself or with others, like any real bad guys, I'll go to the FBI. I hope that these four will listen to you.

He goes on to say:

—So, I'll send you the framework I mentioned. After that, you could come up one or more people who will answer my team's questions and provide them with the necessary documents. We'll call them the Contextual Team. You should know that this Contextual Team knows nothing about your securities stories. They will also not know what transpired here today.

He ends with:

—Now, should your people not answer or if they waste our time or are evasive, I will pay you another visit and I guarantee you there will be no third visit. So, if my assistant should call you to make an appointment, ask yourself why and respond immediately. Is everything clear?

—Everything is very clear. I have a question.

—Go ahead.

—I guess Mario knows.

—Of course.

—And he agrees with what you're doing, blackmailing us?

Ethan does not answer, but warns them:

— By the way, if anyone follows us, my men outside will tell me. This time, it won't simply be an accident. Jim, can you explain it to them?

Jim opens his jacket slightly and shows them his gun in its holster.

— Now you'll have to excuse us, we have a plane to catch.

The two men stay in the lounge.

— I've met this Mr. Miller before. He was less direct. Now I'd say we're in deep shit, admits the VP of marketing.

— Not if we do what he asks. This guy, we shouldn't underestimate him. I didn't know that Mario had a Guard in his company. Did you see the three of them? Miller said he's the Executive VP, which means he reports directly to the President. Set up a meeting with the other four people today. You should know, we'll do exactly what Miller wants and then get the hell out of here.

— But he will be able to denounce us after the letter and the resolution.

— He could, but he won't. He has no interest in letting anyone find out. None. It would be professional suicide for him. Take care of setting up the meeting.

In the car on their way to the airport, Ethan calls Kate.

—Hi.

—Hi. Where are you now?

—We're on our way to the airport. Everything worked very well. But we'll have to test it. We have the list of the items that you found.

—Yes.

—I'd like you to send that list to the President, only. Please ask your assistant to notify his assistant that he'll be receiving your list. Then you could send it. Ask for a confirmation from the President and mention that he should return it with the names of the people who will be answering the undercover team's questions. By the way, the undercover team will be called the contextual team. I'll tell you all about it.

—Okay, Ethan, I'm on it.

—One more thing, if I may?

—Yes, but it'll cost you, she announces.

—When do you want me to pay?

—Tonight.

—I really need it.

- We both need it. What's your other thing?
- Just tell Mario that everything went well. I'll see you both, tomorrow.
- When are you coming back?
- I will be arriving at my place at around 6 p.m.
- Are you coming to my place for supper?
- I'd love to. I have to take a shower and then I'll come.
- See you then.
- See you then.

Ethan changes seats and gets closer to Layla. He says:

—Layla, you did a great job, last week and today. George really appreciates it. So do I.

—Thank you.

—Jim and I are setting up The Guard division. I don't know yet what position I could offer you, but I would like for you to join our team. Jim, what do you think?

— Absolutely.

Layla responds with joy:

—Ethan, thank you. When the time comes, I'll come to Canada and meet both of you.

—When the time comes, you'll be welcome.

The plane lands at Montreal's Pierre Elliott Trudeau Airport. Ethan goes to his apartment to take a shower, and then he goes to see Kate. He rings the bell.

—Come in, it's not locked.

—Hello, he says, before he kisses her.

—Did you have a good trip?

—Yes.

—I guess you want to stick to our rule: no talking about work at home? she asks.

—Yes, but I'll just tell you that it was exciting. A real movie and I was the Godfather. If you could have seen their faces. In front of me, I had two guys who were really worried. Okay. I've broken the rule enough now.

—Okay. How do you feel?

—Relieved. I was afraid of having to stop the project these last few days. I was afraid I would lose the 10% promised to me by Mario. I was afraid of losing my job and all the money that comes with it. I was afraid of losing my apartment. I was afraid of losing you.

—You just added me to the bottom of your list, like that!

—Yes, it's the reverse order technique, he says approaching her, holding her buttocks and pressing her firmly to him.

—You really need to let loose.

—Yes. What about you?

—Me too.

In the morning, Ethan convenes an urgent meeting with the undercover team. Kate reaches him by phone:

—Ethan, I've just had a response from the President in New York.

—How many names did he give you?

—Three.

—Okay. You'll bring this up at the upcoming meeting?

—Yes.

The meeting starts. Ethan begins:

—I brought you all here because many things have changed. I'm not going to explain why or how, but here are the results. You are no longer the Undercover team; you are now the Contextual team. You should know that from now on, you won't have to hide anymore. The President has even given the names of the people who will help you and answer your questions. Kate has those names. George is not going back to New York to make his mess.

He goes on to say:

—Now, should anyone not cooperate enough, or if they're not fast enough, if you feel like they're lying to

you or not telling you the whole truth, if they hide something from you, you will tell them that you will notify me and that I will fix it with their president. If that happens, I want you to tell them that their president is already well aware of the situation. And he's already had his first strike. He won't be happy to get a second one. Is that clear?

Everyone nods in agreement.

—Your priority to start will be to establish with these colleagues if you will have to travel to any other American cities and determine which cities. I need this by next Friday. I am aware that this will be a preliminary list that's going to change and that other cities that will be added. For any changes or additions, I'll tell you who to talk to. Is that okay?

—We will do our best.

—So, you have the go-ahead. Thank you and have fun, but don't take too much advantage. On second thought, why not enjoy it?

Jim arrives at Mario's office. His assistant asks him:

—Do you have an appointment with Mario?

—No, but Ethan asked me to come. Is there a problem?

—No! No! I was just curious.

—It's silly, but I doubt it.

Edith looks at him smiling.

Ethan and Kate arrive. Kate greets him with a smile:

—Good morning, Jim.

—Good morning, Kate.

—Jim, your 2 offices will be ready on Monday, says Ethan.

—Perfect. I'll let Sara know.

They enter Mario's office, who asks them:

—Are we staying in my lounge or going to my conference room?

—Your lounge, Kate answers.

—Ethan, so?

—I'll start at the end. Mario, they're going to co-operate. I have to say that just this morning their President sent us the names I had asked for. Besides, I have

to tell you that he confessed to increasing their company's value by \$200,000,000.

—Ethan, are you serious?

—Yes.

Mario leans on his armchair. He puts his hands behind his head and admits:

—Kate, I'm glad you work for me and you're dating this guy. You, Ethan, I can brag about hiring you.

—Stop, I'm going to blush. Also, I set the company's selling price at about \$300,000,000 less than the current book value. The Undercover team is no longer undercover. We'll call them the Contextual team. They will make the changes to the books to reflect the reality.

—That sounds fantastic. How did it go yesterday?

—Mario, if I may, I would like to go over George's security.

—Go ahead.

—Jim, you are well aware of the situation. What do you recommend?

—Considering your performance yesterday, Ethan, I think we're no longer in any danger. But I should say two things. I asked for a motion detector outside George's house today. This detector will be connected to a security camera that operates day and night. The camera will be connected to my server, which will alert Sara, should anything happen. I want them to continue wearing their security bracelets for a while. As soon as the system outside his house is operational, I will thank

the guards. If you agree, I will take care of that and inform George and his wife.

— It's okay, says Ethan.

Ethan recounts his meeting in New York. He asks:

— Jim, if I forget something, please say so.

— It seems complete to me.

Mario asks:

— For me, there's something missing. Ethan, you can stay or you can leave. I want to ask Jim what you're like.

— Mario, are you worried about me?

— No. I just want to get to know you better. So far, it's only Kate that really knows you. And I would say she's biased. Now I have someone who is neutral.

— Okay. I understand. I'll leave you so as not to influence Jim, who, need I remind, works for me, warns Ethan with a laugh.

— When you leave, close the door behind you. I don't want you to hear anything, asks Mario, laughing.

— Mario, do you want me to leave? asks Kate.

— No.

After a few seconds, Mario addresses Jim:

—Tell me what happened. Behaviours. A few important sentences.

—Okay. First of all, I must say that I've never seen anything like this before. Ethan is a guy with limitless composure. There was the President and a Vice-President of a big American company and Ethan took control from the very start and kept it all the way to the end. He put them up against the wall from the start. He started by saying that we were from The Garde. He lied a little bit about the current members. He talked about the guys who followed George. He said we took pictures of these guys.

—Is that true? asks Mario.

—No, but it added relish.

—I didn't know he was a liar, says Kate.

—Oh, it was just a little lie.

—Yeah! That's how it starts.

Jim continues:

—Ethan went on to say that he was demanding a 500,000,000-dollar drop in the asking price. The President told him that was crazy. Ethan asked him if they

had inflated the numbers so as to increase the value of their company. The President said no. Ethan told him that the meeting was like a baseball game. He told the President that it was his first strike. I smiled because Ethan told him that whereas in baseball, on the third strike, the referee shout: "out!", he would shout: "FBI."

—That's incredible, Mario says. How wild!

Jim corrected:

—Wild yes, but it's the spontaneity that intrigues me. I'll continue. He even said that these strikes will be around during the entire progress of the project. When he made the President admit the actual amount of the fake increase, this man looked down. He had just lost the game. They tried twice to throw him off, but they did not succeed. Even then, Ethan used their arguments against them. Strangely enough, he never even uttered the words: fraud or theft. But he threatened them severely twice.

—I'm impressed, says Mario.

—Even more, he told them that it was due to them, with all the illicit transactions of their securities, that he saw a business opportunity. Either he's a bit of a sadist or he's sure that when he puts someone on the ground, he won't get up again. I think for Ethan, it's the second case. One last point, the President asked Ethan if you, Mario, were aware of the situation. Ethan said: "obviously". Then the President went on to say: "and he accepts what you're doing today, blackmailing us?"

—What did Ethan answer? asked Mario, intrigued.

—He did not answer the question. Instead, he warned them that if anyone followed us back to the airport, it wouldn't just be a small accident at a traffic light. He turned to me and asked me to explain. I showed them my gun.

—Jim, did you have a gun?

—All three of us had guns. Layla must have been carrying something else. She's never happy with just one weapon. She was the one who provided us with guns. It's a custom issue.

—Jim, I didn't know that.

Slowly, Jim answers:

— Mario, you seem surprised. We all have permits to carry weapons. And these permits cover any small arms like knives or revolvers as well as heavier weapons like assault rifles, machine guns, etc. Don't forget that most of our guards were in the army. We also have to get tested every two years in order to hold these special licences to carry weapons. In our work, it's normal. Besides, we all have our own weapons.

— Is Ethan aware of this? asks Mario.

— Of course!

— Okay. Go on.

— So, we left and they stayed in the hotel lounge. Throughout the entire meeting, the Vice-President said nothing and it was obvious that he was very nervous.

Mario turns to Kate and confesses with a smile:

— Kate, you and I will never make Ethan angry. We don't want him for an enemy. Jim, finally, what do you think?

— All I know is that I love working with him.

Kate goes to Ethan's office and asks him:

— It's Friday. Are we going to eat together?

— Look, I have to give you this document. I apologize in advance.

— What is it? she asks a little worried.

— It's a waiver of our agreement not to speak about work at home. I absolutely need to find out what was said in the conference room after I left. Besides, I don't want to have to stay here so as to honour our agreement.

— Wait, I want to read the waiver.

She reads the entire half-page. Then:

— Ethan, you are completely crazy and unpredictable, but I really do love you. Come on, let's go eat at the restaurant. And I'll tell you everything. I have no choice; there's a formal waiver hanging over my head.

— Absolutely right!

At the restaurant, she tells him Jim's impressions.

— Mario and I were surprised. Not only about what Jim told us, but about how you handled this entire situation. We're surprised by how you are managing this project. That was the SVP talking. Now that the waiver has been posed, I am constantly surprised by you. I love it and I love you madly.

They kiss each other over a table that is overrun with dishes.

— Kate, I'd like to say something. I'd like it if you took me out to a high-end restaurant this Saturday. I'd like it if you wore a sexy outfit so I could enjoy my meal, but also to fully enjoy your entire magnificent body.

— You want me to surprise you with my outfit?

— Yes. You've done it to me a couple of times, and I always love it.

— Okay. I'll take care of everything then.

— Moreover, you will be the one paying.

— I got that.

They arrive in the hallway outside their apartments at the same time.

—Kate, I can't see your dress. Your coat is completely closed.

—I see that you are very perceptive. And what do you have to say, the superman?

—I can only deduce that I'll discover everything at the restaurant.

—He also has a lightning-fast analytical mind.

—Thank you for such well-deserved compliments. But I'm still frustrated.

—Well, you can get your revenge after the restaurant.

—You will suffer like never before.

—Promises, promises.

The taxi leaves them at the door of the restaurant. The snow has been clear away entirely. A doorman opens the door for them and invites them in. Ethan leaves him a tip. They approach the coat check. Ethan has already taken off his winter coat. Kate takes her time in unbuttoning her coat. Then she takes it off and leaves it at the coat check, and finally turns to Ethan.

She reveals a wine-red velvet dress that swoops down to her ankles. It has a slight slit on the right side that uncovers her leg from the ankle to the top of her thigh. A well-defined neckline plunges all the way to a belt that is adorned with a square buckle and shiny synthetic diamonds.

Ethan seeing her, declares:

—What a sexy and elegant dress.

—Thank you.

—I love it. I'm under the impression that there's nothing underneath. I didn't even know you had this dress.

—I bought it today. As for beneath it, you're just going to have to check. Do you like it?

—Worn by you, the dress is gorgeous.

—That's kind of you.

Heading towards the table, he comes closer and whispers:

— Plus, the dress curves your butt very well.

— I know, she says while swaying subtly.

The supper was delicious. Kate asks him:

— Are you coming to my place or am I going to yours?

— Kate, it's all about physics.

— What do you mean, all about physics? You're kidding?

— Yes, physics. Let me explain.

— I can't wait to hear this.

— First of all, you have to agree that as we walk down the hallway, the first door we see is mine. Am I right?

— Right.

— So physically, your door is further than mine.

— So what?

— It means that if we go to my house, we'll be able to make love sooner.

— If I understand you correctly, we're going to your place.

— You have understood everything.

At his apartment, Ethan removes Kate's coat and then his own. Then he stands behind her and gently caresses her all over the body, beginning with her neck. She raises her arms, reaching for his neck.

On the following Monday, Jim and Sara arrive at Nancy's desk. They are to share Ethan's assistant. She greets them and shows them to their respective offices, which are side by side. She presents them with a welcome letter addressed to all new employees, which also includes some security information.

— If you need anything, I'm here.

Ethan prepares a draft note for Mario, announcing the establishment of The Guard along with Jim and Sara's arrival. Ethan goes to their office.

— Good morning.

— Good morning...

— So, do you like your offices?

— Yes. It looks like yours, says Jim.

— Yeah! With the exception of the President's office, the rest all look the same. What about you, Sara?

— It'll be perfect with a little decor.

— Do you decorate with bazookas?

— No, only with posters about peace and love. I'm against violence.

— Sara, I can't wait to see that. I prepared a draft note for Mario. I presented you as well as I could. I would

like you to look at it first. You can amend your descriptions. Give that to Nancy and she will finalize it. Jim, I'm going to call on you this afternoon to discuss the due diligence review team and the members who will be travelling to the dangerous cities in the US. You can decide if you want Sara to join you for this meeting.

— No problem.

In the early afternoon, the memo announcing The Guard and Mario's approval, is sent. Jim and Sara read it then head to Ethan's office. Sara says:

—Ethan, one day, we just helped you and Kate out. You promised that you would make it up to us. Well, today you have. You fulfilled your promise. When I read the announcement, my heart skipped three beats. I am touched. You give us a wonderful opportunity to work respectfully and honourably.

—Why the tears? Ethan asks as he approaches her. He offers her his arms, and Sara comes in for a hug. Jim who is nearby can hear Ethan's whisper:

—You saved Kate and me from certain death. So, we are not even, but I'm very happy to be with both of you.

—Thank you, says Sara.

—You're going to make me cry, says Jim, smiling.

—Sara, Jim is calling us back to order. But first we'll go for supper to celebrate with Kate. I'm inviting you.

—That would be nice, says Sara, wiping her tears.

—Sure, says Jim.

—Are you married?

—No...

—What type of restaurant do you prefer?

Jim replies:

—Over the course of our careers, we have eaten in all types of restaurants, in several countries in fact. It varies between eating on the floor to the finest of restaurants. So, you decide.

—Some time ago, Kate and I went to a delicious French gourmet restaurant. We loved the food and the atmosphere. Would that suit you?

—What's the dress code? asks Sara.

—Casual but no Jeans. Okay, back to work.

Ethan goes on:

—The five members of the due diligence team will be travelling to different American cities. Some are safe and some are not. They will be travelling as a group and alone. I have a list of cities where the American company has its offices. It lists the cities that are not very safe. Jim, I'll email it to you. You will need to speak with the team members and come up with an intervention plan with them.

Jim interrupts:

—We will have to hire bodyguards from Canada and the United States.

—I knew you would. Jim, it's up to you.

— It would be easier to use US security, says Sara. They're already there and they're armed. It won't be an issue for customs.

Ethan tells them:

— You'll have to work it out yourselves. Knowing that there should always be at least two bodyguards per person, I don't want to hire ten guards. So, the team will have to choose cities that are safe or not safe at the same time. By the way, Kate will be going to some of these cities.

Jim suggests:

— Ethan, I think Kate should be Sara's priority.

— I support you at 200%. Could she also look into the safety of the other members of the SC?

— Good idea. Sara, is that okay with you?

— Yes, she replies.

— Do I have a limit as to the number of bodyguards?

— No. I want us to move forward, but I want to do it intelligently.

— Of course.

Ethan adds:

— With all the information you will have and based on the fact that the contextual team will probably be travelling, let me know if you think we should hire Layla as an employee.

— I'll think about it. But for now, I'd keep her freelance for a few months. After the acquisition, we can set up a position here.

— This intervention plan, when can I expect it?

— Wednesday, by the end of the day, is that okay?
asks Jim.

— Perfect.

The contextual team goes to New York. The following day, right before lunch, the coordinator calls Ethan:

—Hi Ethan. Here is a first status report, as you requested. This morning we arrived at the office at about 9 a.m., as scheduled, and our contacts from the list were waiting for us at the reception desk. They took us to a conference room. They assured us that we are their top priority. They will do whatever is necessary to make our work easier. Then, we started our work.

—So, if I understand correctly, everything seems to be going well.

—Right. No worries.

—Wrong, my friend. Worry and be vigilant. As I said during our meeting last week, as soon as you have a concern, let me know. That doesn't mean I'm going to do anything, but at least I'll be informed. Listen to me carefully. In that place, it'll be perfect for me if you're paranoid.

—Ethan, are you going to pay for my psychotherapist?

—Yeah! I'm even going to pay for two.

That afternoon, Ethan gives the steering committee an update about his visit to New York, the previous Thursday, and his demand that the asking price to be decreased by \$300,000,000. Then, he talks about establishing The Guard, the coming action plan and the work of the contextual team. Finally, he informs them that Sara's top priority will be to protect Kate whenever she is travelling. Sara will also be responsible for the security of the SC. Mario congratulates Ethan:

— Phew Ethan. Bravo! You're in full control.

— Thank you, Mario.

In the late afternoon, Jim presents his plan to Ethan:

— My plan does not cover the SC. I will see to this with Sara.

— Okay.

— Everything's in sync, even Kate's trips. So, without counting Sara or Layla, I'll need five part-time bodyguards. Layla could take the place of one of them. But let's be realistic. The fifth one is for Sara who'll be watching Kate. All of them will be freelancers. I have made a preliminary estimate of the cost. According to

my plan, it will be for five to six months. When I know more specifically what the contextual team will need, I will assign a team of bodyguards for them.

— Jim, that's absolutely perfect. It's a GO.

The following day, a Thursday, early in the evening, Ethan's cell phone rings:

—Dad it's me, says his daughter crying on the phone.

—What's going on?

—My son was hospitalized early this afternoon. His school called me. He lost consciousness. They called an ambulance, she says, crying even louder. I'm sorry if I'm crying.

—Hey, I get it. Take your time. How is he doing now?

—He's in intensive care. The preliminary tests show kidney failure.

—How serious is that?

—The doctor told me that the school calling an ambulance so quickly saved his life. Now he's stable.

—Are you at the hospital where Jon works?

—Yes.

—I suppose he's there? He's a neurosurgeon after all. What did he say?

—He says that his life is no longer in any danger. He is very shaken up and he's crying. It is horrible.

—I see. What else did he say?

—He says they'll need to do more tests to determine the severity. He tried reassuring me, but I am really scared. Can you come here? He has to get back to work.

—Of course. I want to come, but I don't want to interfere with Jon. That's what I did with your sister's boyfriend after all, which killed our family life.

—Hold on a second.

After a few seconds, she comes back to the phone and says:

—I spoke to him and he wants to talk to you.

—Hello Ethan.

—Hello Jon. Sorry for what's happening.

—Listen, I would be grateful if you came and helped my darling. She really needs you. I finish work at midnight. I'll take your place and you can go get some rest.

—Okay. I'll be there in half an hour.

Ethan knocks on Kate's door. He enters and explains the situation. He asks her:

—I would like it if you came with me.

—Ethan, I'm sorry, I can't do that.

He gets angry and in a dry voice, he says:

—What? My daughter and her son both love you. She told me that he's very sick and you don't care. I don't understand your attitude. You come off as completely insensitive. Thinking only of your own small comfort. You can stay here, but I'm leaving. We'll have to talk about this selfish side of yours, the side I never knew. I don't like it.

She falls to her knees. In tears, she cries out:

—They killed my child. They killed my child.

She lies on the floor, in a fetal position and continues crying. Ethan, shaken, sits behind her and, taking her shoulders, he lifts and hugs her. He moves his arms around her and holds her tightly. Slowly, she begins to calm down.

— I'm sorry, he says.

— You didn't know.

— You should have told me. It's important.

— I lost my child because of a huge medical mistake that was proven. I would go with you if I could, but I can't. Your grandchild is six years old, like mine was when they killed him. I just can't. I'm sorry. Please just go and help them. You could explain it to your daughter. I hope she won't blame me. Could you keep me informed on what's going on? I can't stop crying. I'm so sorry. Just go, go. Leave me here. I'll calm down. You could come see me when you get back, if you want.

— When I get back from the hospital, I'll look and if the light on your balcony is on, I'll come see you. I'll be back around twelve-thirty.

— Okay. And if the light is off, promise me you won't get angry.

— Promise.

At the hospital, Ethan approaches his daughter. As soon as she sees him, she runs towards him, her arms outstretched. They hug for a long time. She starts crying again.

—Carole, let it all out; you'll feel better.

—I was so scared because I didn't know what was happening and now, I'm so scared because I do know. It's completely crazy.

—I completely understand, but right now, you know that they saved him. As for the rest, you don't know what's going to happen. It's easy to imagine the worst. I'm telling you to have hope. Let the universe know that you have hope.

Slowly, she regains her calm. They are sitting side by side. He asks her:

—How's your husband doing?

—Not very well. When he was here, he was holding it together so he wouldn't cry, even though he did let out some tears. I think he's trying to find someone to replace him at work.

They stay sitting like that for one hour. Ethan explains why Kate couldn't come. She starts to cry again, saying:

—That can't be true. Kate must be devastated.

—She is hoping that you won't blame her.

—Of course not, will you tell her?

—Yes.

The doctor from intensive care enters and approaches them.

—Madam, your son is now out of danger. In fact, his condition stabilized so quickly that, in my opinion, it isn't anything severe. If his condition remains stable, tomorrow, I will have him transferred to a room, so we can perform tests for two to three days. Right now, he is sleeping soundly.

The child's father approaches and looks at Ethan:

—Hello Father-in-law.

—Hello Jon.

—The doctor on the next shift came in early.

He turns to the intensive care doctor:

—Good evening, Doc.,

—Good evening.

—So, where are we?

The ICU doctor describes the situation in medical terms. Then he returns to the care unit.

—Ethan, thank you for coming. Honey, it's getting late. We should think about heading home. Our child is sleeping, and you should get your rest for tomorrow. Ethan, if you want to, you can go now and get some rest too. Thank you again.

—Dad, go get some rest. Thank you for coming.

— Okay. I'll get going. I'll come by Friday afternoon, is that okay?

— Ethan, my wife told me the whole story with your other daughter. I want you to know that you don't bother me and should it ever happen, I would tell you before it ever got out of hand. So, you're always welcome, do not worry. Okay?

— Okay.

Kate's balcony light is still on. Ethan opens her door without ringing. Kate is sleeping on the living room sofa, dressed the way he left her. He sits on the edge of the couch and caresses her cheek. She wakes up.

—Hello, you're back.

—Hello. How are you?

—I'm okay. I'm sorry I lost it earlier.

—Don't be sorry. Now I understand why you were afraid when you fractured your leg. But think that were it not for the hospital, we might not be together today.

—That's a bit of a stretch.

—Yeah! But you should seriously go in for a visit. You should go because sooner or later, it'll be inevitable, you'll need to go to the hospital.

—Yes, but you'll be with me. When you're with me, it's okay.

—What if I can't be there?

—I won't go.

—Kate, I love you and I don't want to risk losing you. You have to go in for a visit.

— I'll think about it. How is your grandson?

— He almost died of kidney failure. But the school called an ambulance very quickly and it saved him. When I left the hospital, he was stable and the doctors think it isn't serious. He will stay in the hospital for a day or two to get tested.

— That's great. What about your daughter?

— When I arrived, Jon had just left. He was on call. She was not doing very well. She didn't know how bad it was, and she was spiralling. I calmed her down.

Weeping, Kate confides in him:

— I know exactly how she felt. I'm happy that things are going well. For me, that wasn't the case.

Ethan hugs her, without saying a word, he lets her cry. Slowly, she begins to calm down:

— Ethan, I'm sorry.

— Stop apologizing.

— I am because I am not normally that weak.

After several minutes, she asks him:

— What are you going to do?

— Tomorrow afternoon, I will go back to the hospital.

— I'd like to go with you.

— Hey, you should. If you're not okay, you could take a taxi back.

—Just promise me you won't go too fast when we're there. Give me time so I can control myself.

—Okay. Now let's go to bed. Do you want me to spend the night?

—I'd like that. I'd like to snuggle really hard in your arms.

By midmorning, Ethan receives an email from the coordinator of the contextual team. It specifies the thirteen cities they will be travelling to. Ethan compares this list with the one he previously received regarding the dangerous cities. Then he calls the coordinator:

— Good morning. I just looked at your list. Good work. I just want to know: how confident are you?

— Ethan, when we met with them, we were quite surprised. We asked them why they had offices in these cities. And their answers were clear. My confidence level, I would have to say, is about 95%. And I am convinced that once in these cities, we'll have to add some other cities.

— Okay. That's what I wanted to know. Next week, I'll be going to New York with Kate. We'll meet then. Nancy will call you. Thank you and have a good weekend.

Ethan asks Jim to come to his office:

—Hello Jim. I just spoke to the contextual team coordinator. They have determined that, for now, they will have to travel to more than 10 cities. Four of them are dangerous. I'm sending you their list. Finally, you know that Kate and I will be in New York for two days next week.

—Yes. I'll take care of everything. If we don't see each other again, I hope you have a nice weekend.

—You too.

Ethan asks Nancy to come into his office.

—Next week, Kate and I have to go to New York. We're meeting with all six teams. We'll be there for two days as of Wednesday. So, we'll need one night at a hotel. Sara's definitely going to be there. Could you book it?

—Sure. Are you meeting the team in any specific order?

—No. Go according to their availability.

—What if there is no availability?

—My agenda takes precedence.

- *Got it, boss.*
- *Thank you and enjoy your weekend. I'm leaving.*
- *Have a good weekend.*

Ethan has a quick lunch and then calls Kate:

— I'll be going to the hospital soon. Do you still want to try?

— Yes.

— I'm leaving in 30 minutes. Will you be ready?

— Yes.

They take a taxi. Kate disrupts the silence:

— I am really nervous. My heart wants to explode. I want to scream and to cry. Hold my hand.

— Breathe slowly and deeply. Inhale slowly. Exhale by pressing your lips together... Do it over and over and think about what you're doing.

After a few minutes, she says:

— Ethan, it's working.

— Keep going. That's what I do when my lungs don't cooperate. Keep going a couple times. Then, stop if you don't want to hyperventilate. Tonight, I'll invite you over for supper. I'll prepare some tartars.

— Will there be dessert?

— I don't know. We'll see. But definitely tenderness, a whole lot of tenderness.

They enter the hallway. Ethan holds her hand and looks at her.

—Come on, let's sit down for a few minutes. Breathe, like you did in the cab.

They go to the elevator. Kate starts shaking and Ethan says to her:

—Kate, something's wrong. Should I take you back to the bench to sit down or to the door so you could go back to the apartment?

—Bring me back to the bench and you could leave me there alone. I'll get it together.

At the bench, Ethan kisses her and heads for the elevator. When he enters the elevator, he glances briefly at Kate to make sure everything is fine. He sees her wiping away her tears.

He reaches the room. His daughter is there and his grandson is awake. He gets near his daughter and they hug each other tightly. Then he turns to his grandchild and says:

—Hello, little man. How are you?

—Okay.

—Buddy, you look tired. It's understandable, yesterday you were very sick. Get some rest.

He looks at his daughter and asks her:

—Have they done any tests?

—Yes.

—Did you get the results?

—They are still looking, but they have assured me that his kidneys are fine.

—That's the main thing. Isn't it?

—Yes. They'll come get him a little later, to do some more tests.

—And how's your other love doing?

—He's fine. He's working today. He comes here between two appointments. He's tired, but he's doing okay.

—I have to tell you that Kate came with me, but when she got to the elevator, she couldn't continue. I held her hand and she started shaking. I've never seen her so vulnerable. That's not the Kate I know.

—Dad, I understand. You can call her and see if she's still here. I'll go see her.

—That won't be necessary, announces Kate from the door. I'm here.

Kate enters the room and the two women hug each other. Kate starts crying and trembling. After a while, Kate calms down and they let go of each other. Kate approaches Ethan while wiping her eyes, she hugs him and proudly announces:

— I think I did it.

— I think so too.

She approaches the bed. She takes the child by the forehead and cheek and gently asks him:

— My little man, you were sick at school.

— Yes.

— It's because you wanted a day off, I bet? she asks him with a smile.

— No. Everything around me started to spin. I felt like throwing up and then I can't remember what happened.

— And where did you wake up?

— Here.

— In this bed?

— Yes.

— Your mom was here?

— Yes.

The young boy's father appears at the door. A tall, handsome and well-built man, who is dressed in the usual blue scrubs of a surgeon. He has a tanned complexion and his frizzy hair is black and short. He comes up to Kate and he hugs her:

— Kate, obviously you've overcome your demons?

— Yes, she says, her eyes wet yet again.

— I can see it was very difficult.

— Yes, she says as a tear falls down her cheek.

— So, your visit here means so much more to us, he says, while wiping away her tear.

— Thank you, Jon. And you, how are you?

— I'm tired. But the important thing is the kid is getting out tomorrow.

Kate and Ethan leave the hospital. Arriving at Ethan's door, Kate says:

—Ethan, does your invitation still stand?

—Yes.

—I need a shower. How do you want me to dress?

—Comfortably.

—You don't want to make love?

—Kate, you've been through some very intense emotions yesterday and today. If you want us to make love, we'll make love. But if you want us to just be tender with one another, then we'll make tenderness. I don't think we should force it. After your shower, come over, I won't lock my door.

—You are a dear. See you later.

Ethan takes a shower and dresses casually. While he pours two glasses of wine, Kate arrives and says:

—The wine is a good idea.

—Yeah! Will you help me with the meal?

—Yes. Tell me what to do.

—You'll prepare the scallop tartare.

—Not a problem.

—I'll print the recipe.

— I'll follow you.

As he sits in front of his computer, she stands behind him.

— You have a lot of recipes on your computer.

— Yes. You know that I like to eat well. You surprised me being behind me like that.

— I really need to be close to you. You were right earlier. I don't know if I'm okay or if I'm completely out of it, but what I do know is that I want to stay close to you, she says while putting her arms around his chest and kissing him on the neck.

— It's tenderness that you need.

— I think so.

He takes the page he just printed, gets up and turns towards her. He hugs her tenderly and then brings her to the kitchen. She begins to read the recipe while he plays some ambiance music. At one point, the song is melodious and slow. He stands behind her. He hugs her as he places his hands on her stomach and slowly begins to sway both their bodies to the music. She follows his rhythm and lays her head on his shoulder. At one point, she raises her arms, turns around and then places her arms around his neck, gently kissing him.

On Wednesday morning, they take a private jet to New York. Sara accompanies them and another bodyguard is waiting for them at the airport. They use a limousine to get to the building where they meet the due diligence review team. Kate starts off the meeting:

—Are you all right?

—Yes, Kate, says the coordinator.

—The accounting staff is working well together?

—Yes.

—Give me an update.

The team recounts their work to date. Some mistakes were found. But nothing significant. The coordinator says:

—We have plans to travel to several cities. In some cases, bodyguards will be accompanying us. Jim has called us and made sure everything is in synch. You should know that we'll have to do some digging for two of these cities. Something is not right.

—Okay great, says Kate. Keep going.

The HR team enters the conference room. Ethan says:

—Good morning,

— Good morning...

— So, how are you?

— We are fine.

— Perfect. First of all, I would like to talk about the special audits I asked for.

— We checked the contracts for the senior managers. The President's contract stipulates a bonus of \$1,000,000 per year. The Vice-President's contracts give a bonus of \$500,000 per year. The directors' contracts vary between \$20,000 and \$50,000.

— I see. Give us a general recap.

The two team members discuss their observations.

— In short, says Ethan, does everything seem okay to you?

— If we do not consider the bonuses of the senior management, then everything seems fine to us.

— When do you think you will be done?

— We have some more research to do next week. Then we'll start writing our report. We will stay here to conduct some more research that I think is necessary. We'll leave New York at the end of the month. We will submit the final report in early March. Is that okay?

— Yes, says Ethan.

— That's great. Thank you for all your work, says Kate.

The two team members of the marketing team enter the room. Ethan speaks:

— Good morning.

— Good morning...

— So how is it going?

— Very well. Their marketing is well planned. But the corruption scandal has done its damage. They invested many millions of dollars to get things back on track, but it hasn't worked.

— Have they targeted specific countries?

— We don't think so. Marketing seems to have been widespread.

Ethan exclaims:

— I don't understand. I was told that some countries were affected by the corruption while others weren't. So why put money in countries that haven't been affected?

— We don't know.

— Dig into that. I want to know if there's been embezzlement and fraud, or just sheer incompetence. Kate, at the same time, should we give this over to the contextual team?

— Yes, Ethan. It all sounds suspicious.

— Guys, I want to have some answers before finalizing the report. I'll have a conference call with you and the coordinator of the contextual team.

— The report is to be submitted next Thursday, says the team leader.

— We're going to delay it by a week, decides Ethan. I want one other thing. You know very well our customer data. I want you to consider merging our data with the data from the American company. Someone on the IT team should look at this from a technological standpoint.

Contact their coordinator. Also, notify my business analyst, Ryan Labelle, who will be carrying out the business case. Is that okay?

—Yes.

—Perfect. Thank you for all your good work.

The marketing team leaves the conference room.

Kate and Ethan stay. Kate summarizes:

—Ethan, our guys are not very sharp.

—No. We'll have to keep an eye on them. Yet, our Marketing VP told me that they are his best employees.

—Look, I know him well. As soon as I get back, I'll have lunch with him. I'm going to try to find out what he's thinking.

—Also, remember that I have met with the Marketing VP here in New York. We'll have to discuss the entire marketing with Mario.

—I think so too. Are we having supper together?

—Of course.

—Where are we going?

—Actually, it's a surprise. We'll go to the hotel and have a quiet aperitif, and then we'll go somewhere to eat.

—Will there be dessert?

—Tonight, I'll go for two servings of dessert. One sweet and then one salty.

—It's amazing how our tastes are similar.

They enter a limousine, accompanied by Sara and a bodyguard. Ethan says to the driver:

— Do you know the Birdland?

— Of course.

— So, let's go there.

— Yes sir.

— Ethan, where are we going?

— You're going to love it.

— Sara, do you know what it is?

— Yes.

— It will bring back memories.

— To you both as well, replies Sara.

— Sara and Ethan, stop. You're stressing me out.

They enter a jazz restaurant. The room is small and the guests sit closely to the musicians. A table has been reserved for The Guard and another, a little further away, for Kate and Ethan. After a good meal sizzling with music, they move on to dessert. Kate then consults Ethan:

— And what's next?

— If you want, we could get a drink or two, as we listen to this wonderful music. Then we can go back to the hotel. We'll take a shower together. I'll wash you, and

you'll wash me. Then, I'll make love to you, and you'll make love to me. Then we'll go to sleep. What do you think of my plan?

—A really well-crafted plan, I would even say a perfect plan.

The first meeting of the morning is held with the contextual team. Ethan speaks first:

— Good morning.

— Hello...

— You've only just begun. Nevertheless, how's it going so far?

— Things are going well. The people on the list are cooperating. It's also very surprising how quickly they respond and get us documents. We can say that they've been manipulating the books for quite some time.

— Remember, we're not police officers or investigators. Our job is to see the tampering and determine if we should straighten it out. But mostly we want to lower the asking price. So, no judgment for employees who just followed orders. Moreover, I have the leaders in the palm of my hand and that's what's important. Will you be all right?

— Yes.

— Okay. Now, I want you to know that someone from the marketing team will be looking into some suspicious expenses. This "Sherlock Holmes" will contact you to dig further. I may be wrong, but I strongly suspect

that millions of dollars were given to one or more fake marketing agencies. I want to find out quickly the details of this story. You and the marketing team are going to have to work together.

— Not a problem.

— Are you still submitting your report on March 17?

— Yes.

— Perfect, thank you. Keep up the work.

Employees from IT and the security team enter the conference room. Ethan begins:

— Good morning. Please take your seats.

— Hello...

— So, are we having fun?

— It's not bad in the evening, and during the day, it runs smoothly.

— How's the collaboration going?

— At first, more or less well. But I met with everyone and told them that we were here to save this company. I said that if we didn't work together and we didn't buy their company, they would all be out a job. There were some heated discussions, but in the end, the atmosphere here improved significantly.

— Well done. Is there anything special going on?

— Ethan, I noticed that George didn't come back here to make a mess. Also, the undercover team is no longer undercover. It has now become the contextual team.

— You're right. Things are changing. We were told that the financial information was tampered so as to alter the company's value. How shall I put it? Let's just

say that we came to an agreement about having their full cooperation, with a few conditions. So, we don't need to do anything undercover.

—So, we don't need to dig into their accounting databases?

—I wouldn't say that just yet. Dig so that we can supply the business case and help us make informed decisions, specifically what to do with their accounting systems. But don't go any further than you have to.

—I understand.

—As for security?

—Ethan, everything is going well. So far, I would say they're following good practices. I keep going around and around, but I don't think I'm going to find anything surprising.

—Perfect. Your report is scheduled for March 2nd. Does it still stand?

—Yes.

—Fantastic. Congrats and keep up the good work.

A limousine takes Kate, Sara and Ethan back to La Guardia. Two cars follow them, each with two guards. At the airport, the private jet is waiting to bring them back to Montreal. After arriving at the Pierre-Elliot Trudeau airport, Sara takes a seat on the passenger side of the bodyguard's car, which is following the limousine. Sara retrieves the gun she left behind to enter the United States.

Shortly after Ethan's return to his office, Mario enters and sits down:

— May I?

Ethan smiles.

— How was your trip?

— Wonderful. Kate and I went for supper yesterday at a jazz restaurant. Do you know the Birdland on 44th Street?

— Seriously!

— Yes. And everything is going very well. The teams are working according to the plan. I delayed the report of the marketing team by a week. They told me something I found strange. By the way, we'll have to sit down and discuss the marketing together. But to continue, I suspect another case of fraud involving a few millions of dollars.

— Again. Are you serious?

— Yes. But there's no evidence yet. Our marketing team is going to dig, and the contextual team will assist them. I need to get to the bottom of this. Mario, I'll say it: either there's embezzlement, or the marketing people

over there are complete morons. We'll find out soon enough.

—What do you mean by soon enough?

—By next Tuesday morning.

—Why am I asking stupid questions? But Tuesday, that gives them two working days.

—Yes. This time I put the pressure. I have to find out rather quickly. As soon as I find out, I'm gonna tell you because I want to call the President over there. I want him to have a hard time sleeping on Tuesday night. I'm going to schedule a 15-minute meeting with you late that morning or early in the afternoon.

—You could leave it with me, I'll settle it with my assistant. Anyway, you know, it's always like that with you. You're always first on my list.

—Are you complaining?

—A little bit, just a tiny little bit. Okay, I have to go see Kate. Have a good day.

—Thank you. You too.

—Thank you.

On Friday afternoon, Kate and Ethan go out and do their shopping together. Ethan says to her:

—I like shopping with you after all. Everything is relaxed. There's no stress. You don't act like a woman who must see everything, or read everything, or compare prices, or even go to ten different stores to choose the cheapest thing.

—Are you saying that I'm not feminine?

—Oops! Of course not. Only that you don't have the feminine flaws that I find exasperating.

—I see, but I must tell you that I still have one huge flaw.

—You intrigue me. What is it?

—I like playing cards with you.

—Yes, because I lose most of the time.

—Yeah! So tonight, or tomorrow night?

—Tomorrow night. Tonight, I can't.

—Okay. Tomorrow night, we'll have dinner at my place and then we'll play cards. Okay?

—I'll lose again, but okay.

The next day, towards the end of the afternoon, Ethan rings at Kate's door, and she comes to open.

— Hello, the Man!

— Hi, Bella!

— Ethan, you're good at planning things. Well, so am I. Here's my plan. I'll put on some music. We'll get a glass of wine. You'll help me with supper by taking care of the vegetable soup, which always turns out well. After our meal, we will shower together.

— You don't have any bathrobes.

— Yes, I bought two, two weeks ago. They're Ver-sace bathrobes. They're a lot prettier than your bathrobes. Please don't interrupt me, I haven't finished explaining my plans to you. So, we shower together. Then, we'll put on our wonderful bathrobes. And then, we'll go to bed and play a game, you know, the one where we draw ten cards each and add them up. Best out of five and the highest score wins. The loser will get punished.

— Okay. Shall we start now?

— Yes.

They find themselves sitting on the bed in their very new bathrobes. They are two different horizontal stripes,

one black, one dark gray. On each stripe, the word VERSACE is written. The bottom of the sleeves, the belt and the wide pockets all have the gold band and pattern of the logo. As she shuffles the cards, she says:

— I hope you've calmed down a bit. In the shower, you seemed rather frisky. A true stallion. You should take it easy.

— You must excuse me. I have trouble controlling some of my instincts.

— Yeah! Especially your breeding one. Take ten cards.

They play and Kate says:

— Ethan, you just lost. So...

He cuts her off:

— Wait a minute. If you average it out, then, I win.

— Perhaps, but that's not what we agreed. You don't want to break your word, do you?

Kneeling on the bed, she takes off her bathrobe. Then she lies down on her stomach and says:

— You know where the massage oil is.

— Yes, I know. You look like a 30-year-old woman. You have great genes. And I love your butt.

— Just shut up and massage me.

On Monday morning, the business analyst comes to Ethan's office.

—Ryan, come in and sit down.

—Thank you.

—Last week I met with all the teams in New York. The work is well underway. All the work, including the reports, will be completed by next month. Here is the schedule for the reports. The people that will be notified are me, you, Kate, and all the coordinators. We must analyze the reports as our top priority and look for any gaps. The day after the report, we'll meet and discuss our merger strategy. During these meetings, you could tell me if you'll need any specialists. Is it all right?

—I don't see any problem with that.

The next day, as planned, the head of the marketing team contacts Ethan:

— Good morning, Ethan.

— Hello. Have you found anything?

— Yes. I wanted to call you earlier, but the contextual team had some difficulty getting the information.

— What difficulty?

— Ethan, the contextual team coordinator doesn't want you to act on this. He told me to ask you that.

— Oh, okay! Go on.

— As you suspected, there are three fake marketing companies and each one received \$1,000,000. So, we are talking about 3,000,000 in fraud.

— You have identified the perpetrators?

— The contextual team has the evidence. It's only one offender, the Vice-President of Marketing he's the one who authorized all the bank transfers in Caribbean banks.

— You told me we have hard evidence.

— We have a copy of the authorization slips and a record of the account transfers. We can't go any further without involving the police.

— So, we don't go any further.

— The contextual team suspects that the VP knows we've been searching into this.

— Listen carefully. This VP embezzled somewhere else, and he's not the only one. He knows we know and nor he, nor the others will do anything. Today I'll make some calls. You can tell the contextual team not to worry.

— Certainly.

— Thank you and good work.

Ethan requests an urgent meeting with Mario and Kate that's scheduled for the beginning of that afternoon. He explains:

— Well, there's another case of fraud. The Marketing VP authorized payments of \$1,000,000 to three fake companies.

Mario reacts:

— That makes no sense! I can't believe it. I must be naive. I hope that's not happening here.

— Mario, whether we acquire this company or not, we're going to have to plan something, and I recommend that it's out in the open. It's better to scare people than to report them to the authorities.

— Good idea. You and Kate are going to come up with something.

— Not a problem, says Kate.

Ethan goes on:

— Mario. I have the impression that this embezzlement goes beyond the other cases of fraud.

— Could you specify?

— I mean, I have a hunch that the President doesn't know about this \$3,000,000. And if he finds out, he

won't be happy. In his eyes, he and his VP each have \$2,000,000 in cash. So, they're equal.

— I see Ethan. What are you getting at?

— Either I call the President and screw up the whole thing. It would make a lot of waves and I don't want any more waves in this project. Or I don't do anything. Or I could even call the VP or meet with him to tell him that we know everything but we'll let it rest, that's if he stays quiet. What do you think?

— Kate, what do you think? asks Mario.

— I think this whole thing is a mess. I think Ethan should talk to the VP and keep him quiet.

— I think so too. But shouldn't I be the one calling him? I want to have fun also.

— Mario, I don't want to keep you from having any fun. But I would rather keep you as my ace of spades. If something goes wrong with the VP, I could say that you're going to call the President and he won't like that.

— You're right. That's how we should do it.

— Perfect.

Ethan returns to his office. Kate follows him:

— Could I be present during your call if I keep quiet?

— Why?

— Because I want to have fun too.

— Last Saturday, we played cards. Wasn't that fun enough for you?

— Come on, be nice.

— Okay.

— Nancy, you can put me in touch with the Marketing VP in New York. If he's in a meeting, let's bother him!

— I'll take care of it.

— Kate, come in and please close the door.

The phone rings. Ethan puts it on speaker:

— You're connected.

— Thank you, Nancy.

— Sir, I suspect that you know that my people discovered your three bank accounts in the Caribbean, all with \$1,000,000 in them.

— Indeed.

— Now, you made a rookie mistake. Your name appears in the three fake companies that you created.

Worse yet, they were created in the United States. And I'm sure your friend, the President, doesn't know anything about this. Am I right?

—Yes.

—I've just discussed this with my president, and we've decided not to rock the boat. So, we'll let it rest as long as you don't cause any waves either. Running away or doing anything else isn't an option. You'll leave with the others when I tell you to. Not before and not after. If you do anything else, I'll call your president. I get the feeling he has some very bad friends. Remember the small little accident on the corner of 9th Avenue and 36th Street. By the way, let me tell you that I too have some very bad friends, only mine are completely legal. So, you won't do anything and I won't either. Do I make myself clear?

—Very clear.

—Perfect.

Ethan's hangs up.

Kate tells him:

—No hello and no thanks. I see now what Jim was saying about your meeting with them.

—What do you mean?

—I see that you are entirely capable of playing different roles. To put on different hats without any difficulty. I have just seen a man who is uncompromising and slightly dangerous. A true godfather of the underworld. You scared me.

—As you said, I played a role. I've done this all my life. But I'm the person here right now. I'm the person who's with you. I'm the person at home or at your place. I'm the person whose teams are doing a fantastic job. I'm the person that's there with Mario. So, don't be afraid.

—Yeah! But I don't want you to get too upset with me. I wouldn't want to become your enemy.

—You're right. So, as far as playing cards, we're going to change the rules.

—What?

—You know the deck of cards.

—Yes, what about it? she asks, astonished.

—Yeah! From now on, we'll calculate the average of all five hands.

—I love you too, she says, kissing and wetting his lips.

—You didn't answer me about the cards.

—Okay, she agrees, leaving his office and looking back at him with a smile.

The next day at the SC meeting, Ethan reports the very adequate progress of the work. He also mentions the Marketing VP's fraud and his decision not to do anything. One of the Senior Vice-Presidents interrupts him:

—What are we trying to buy? It's a mess over there. They are all scammers, they'll take us down with them. Ethan, I know you're going to make a lot of money from this deal and so I think you're biased and not a very good advisor to Mario. Mario, I think we should put the brakes on.

Ethan answers firmly:

—Let's all be careful. We should remember that there are 6 offenders in over 10,000 employees. Also, the total amount embezzled is around \$8,000,000 out of an annual revenue of about \$5,000,000,000. Besides, how I advise Mario doesn't concern anyone here except Mario. Mario, if any one of your PVPs is not able to follow the parade, they'll just have to wait on the sidelines. Finally, those in charge of this, will lower the sale price by about \$300,000,000. By the way, you're all aware of the provisions in my contract. If the company value drops by \$300,000,000, then I personally

lose \$30,000,000 in this whole affair. So, if anyone has any complaints, go see Mario. This committee is supposed to help me, not criticize me.

Mario takes the floor vigorously:

—Ethan, we're not sure how you will make money with your 10%, but one thing is certain, at least for now, you're losing that \$30,000,000. Depending on the total amount, I'll see what we can do with my Board. As for all of you here, you are committed to helping Ethan throughout this extremely difficult acquisition. I expect you to act accordingly.

—Sorry, says the offending SVP.

After leaving the committee, Kate asks Ethan:

—Did you bring anything for lunch?

—No.

—Do you want to go somewhere? I feel like you need to decompress a little.

—Okay, but who will be joining me; the SVP or the Bella?

—I have a feeling it may be both.

Kate enters Mario's office and says:

—Whew. That wasn't easy.

—No, not easy at all.

—I'm going out to lunch with him. He needs to decompress a bit.

—Yes, I'm sure he needs to decompress. And I feel for him. I don't know how he does it. This case is hell. It'll be the largest acquisition in Canada. And he has to deal with problems of fraud and corruption. And he's expected to have a solid business proposal.

—Thank you for stepping in.

—Kate, I knew he was losing millions by lowering the value of the company. I didn't think he was going to mention it to the SC.

—Neither did I.

—He was really angry and I'm not too sure why, Mario adds.

—I think he's very tired.

—So, both of you, take a week off and get the hell out of here.

—Good idea. I'll see if it's possible.

— Kate! Possible or not, get out of here and go get some rest. It's not up for discussion. Take the private jet. It will be easier to only book a hotel.

— Are you serious?

— Of course. Look, Kate, if I lose this guy, then I can forget all about the deal. The company would lose billions. I also really like him.

He picks up his phone and says:

— Edith, book the private jet for today and again in seven days. Destination will be determined soon. See with Kate.

— Mario, are you serious?

— More than you think. Your true love must not waver. Today, he almost lost it. So, take care of him. You don't want him to fail, either.

— I'll take care of him.

Kate goes to Ethan's office and says:

— I just spoke with Mario. He thinks we're tired and is ordering us to take a week off. Regardless of whether it's possible or not. He booked the private jet for today and again in seven days. The destination has to be determined quickly. Give me 15 minutes to notify my assistant to reschedule all my meetings and I'll come back to you. Then we'll decide where to go.

— Kate, tell me what's going on.

— Mario wants you to rest. That's all.

Kate returns to Ethan's office while folding a piece of paper. She says:

— Should we go?

— First, I would like us to decide on a destination.

— Okay.

— I just looked. Same time zone and not too much time on the plane. We have a choice of Miami, Florida, which is about three hours and a half by plane or Nassau, in the Bahamas, about five hours and a half. So, now we just have to choose. I have a slight preference for Nassau.

— Okay, Nassau.

Passing by Nancy's office, he asks her:

—Would you be kind enough to book us a suite at the Grand Hyatt Baha Mar in Nassau, in the Bahamas? We'll arrive tonight and come back next Wednesday, so seven nights. It would be nice if we had a view of the sea.

—Do you have a maximum amount?

—Let's say, a \$1,000 a day. If you have any difficulty, use the company's travel agency. But it should be in my name. As soon as you get the confirmation of the hotel, could you notify Edith to tell the pilot of the jet? And could you call or text me to confirm?

—Okay, I'll take care of everything.

—Thank you.

—Hey! Have a good trip, both of you.

—Thank you.

While walking to the elevator, Kate says:

—\$1,000 a day! You're pushing it.

—It's not that bad because you're paying for half.

—When you look at it that way, it's not that bad indeed.

—Kate, we pack our bags and you come meet me at my apartment. While I'm waiting for you, I'll call a limo. How soon will it take you to get ready?

—Give me half an hour.

—Okay.

—Hey.

—What?

—No computer.

—Okay.

In the limousine, Ethan receives a text message from Nancy confirming the hotel and the price:

—Kate, it's Nancy. The reservation at the hotel is confirmed and it costs five \$500 a day.

Ethan approaches her. He puts his fingertips on her cheeks and kisses her tenderly.

On the plane, halfway through their trip, Kate jumps up:

—I almost forgot.

—What?

—You have to read this document. Read it out loud, would you?

He takes the document and reads it. His eyes get tearful.

—Aloud, I asked.

—I'm getting there... Okay. "This is a waiver of the agreement between Kate Jackson and Ethan Miller that prohibits them from talking about work outside of the office. This waiver is intended to allow both parties to act like a normal couple who does not work together, namely that each person may tell the other any good and bad experiences at work, their concerns, their fatigue, their joys, and their jokes."

Ethan stops, he takes a tissue and wipes his tears. She comes to sit next on him. He puts an arm around her waist.

He resumes his reading:

—“The purpose of this waiver is to ensure that both parties also act like a normal couple, so that, outside of their work, they can be two people who love each other and support each other. This waiver is for you, Ethan Miller, my true love, who can depend on me, Kate Jackson. This waiver shall take effect now and shall end in accordance with the date agreed upon by both Parties. Signed: Kate Jackson who truly cares for you above all else.”

Ethan takes another tissue and wipes away his tears. He says:

—I think I’m tired. Crying like this is not my style. But I must confess, what you wrote is very beautiful and touching, filled with love, and humour.

—Yeah! You’re really tired. I wrote this before I left the office, I also shed tears. Mario told me after the steering committee meeting that you were on the verge of snapping. I didn’t see it coming. While writing this document, I saw what was going on. Before I came to join you, Mario came to my office and saw me crying. He walked in and closed the door. I told him that he had

just opened my eyes and that I was embarrassed. He took me in his arms. He told me not to be embarrassed. He told me that the old adage is still very true: behind every great man there is a woman who supports him. He added that the adage is not very up-to-date, because behind every great woman there is a man who supports her. He also said that for us, there are two great people who are going to need each other's support. He told me that he's convinced that everything will be all right. He left me and I came to you with my eyes down so that no one would see that I cried.

—Kate, I accept that this waiver takes effect now and we'll set the end date later. Can we keep it like that?

—Sure. Just a quick question, can I?

—Yes.

—Did you notice that at the steering committee meeting, Mario got mad with the SVPs?

—No. I was really mad. I wanted to yell. I wasn't listening anymore.

—I didn't see your reaction, but Mario did. Actually, Ethan, I didn't see anything that happened at the steering meeting and I'm truly sorry. I blame myself.

—Now you're crying. Come on and hug me.

—You will find me heavy?

—I won't, but don't gain a pound more. Do you understand me?

—Yes, boss. If I'm going to support you, I will have to wake up.

— Right now I am hoping to sleep more rather than to stay awake.

— Are you going to take a nap?

— Yes. I think it will do me some good.

Kate gets up and kisses him.

— Get some rest.

Upon their arrival at the reception desk, Ethan starts:

— Good evening, I'm Ethan Miller.

— Good evening. Just a moment, please.

The receptionist checks his reservation on her computer and says:

— Mr. Miller and Ms. Jackson. Your suite was reserved this afternoon. We will take you there.

— One moment please, Ethan asks. We haven't had any supper tonight, and it's a little past 10. Is it too late to go to a restaurant or order room service?

Kate says:

— I would prefer room service.

— Yes madam, that's not a problem. The kitchens close at midnight. You have a menu next to the telephone in the dining room. A valet will take you to your suite.

— The valet drops their three suitcases on a cart and then heads for the elevators. At the suite, he opens the door and enters, turning on the lights after him. Finally, he drops off their suitcases. Ethan gives him a tip that is satisfactory.

—Thank you very much, sir, and enjoy your stay.

—Thank you.

Kate says:

—Whew. This suite isn't bad at all.

She enters the living room. She looks to her right and sees the dining room. In the middle of the living room, she turns to her left and sees an enormous bed through the large opening in the wall separating the rooms. From the living room, she opens the patio door, overlooking a large balcony with four lounge chairs.

—Look at this magnificent view. We can see the stars and the moon reflecting over the calm waters of the ocean.

Ethan joins her and observes their total privacy. He says:

—I suggest we drink our nightcap here.

On the balcony, she heads to her left, only to discover a second patio door that she then opens. She looks into a large bedroom which has an office with a love seat. Then there is the bed and, further away, she sees the bathroom with its large shower, a whirlpool bath and a makeup station. In the bathroom, there is a door leading to the toilet. The entire suite exudes a feeling of tranquility, some of the walls are painted white while others consist of a golden-brown wood. The ceilings have fitted wooden planks supported by fake white beams crossing the entire suite. The couches in the living room and office are light grey and the furniture is all wood.

—Kate, we should look at the menu and order, then we'll get settled. Okay?

—Okay.

They sit at the dining room table and look at the menu.

After their meal, they shower together and head to the balcony to enjoy their nightcap along with their view.

They lie down and cuddle. With her head lying on Ethan's shoulder:

—Tough day today, she says.

—Yes, tough day. Though I like how it ended.

—Me too.

—You're going to have to watch me so that I don't get tired like that too often.

—Yes. Your work is very stressful. You can't make any mistakes. And on top of that, you're surrounded by perpetrators of fraud and many other very dangerous men. Thank God you have Jim and Sara. They are both really impressive.

—Wait until you meet Layla. Phew.

—Why "pew"? Is it her body?

—She is very beautiful and her body is perfect. She is a very athletic woman. Her self-confidence and leadership are really remarkable.

—Let's talk about her body. Should I be worried?

—Yes, and that's why you should be very nice to me.

—Got it. I'm going to be very nice. She promises as she gently strokes his chest.

Ethan caresses her shoulder, moving down to her waist and slowly coming up again.

—Ethan, I love it when we make tenderness.

—Yes, so do I. It's so very relaxing. Should we go to sleep now?

—Let's go to sleep now.

The next day, they take their time to discover the place. Ethan books a car for Friday and Saturday.

The beach of the hotel is beautiful with its almost-white sand. They enjoy the sun on comfortable chairs and refresh themselves by diving into the barely cold water. Kate removes her bikini top to let the sun caress her breasts. On a few occasions, they recognize some Hollywood stars who are also enjoying this tranquility. No one bothers anyone else here.

The next day, after their delicious breakfast, they get into a convertible SUV and Ethan asks her:

—East or West?

—I would say East. According to the map, there seems to be more action there than in the west.

—For action, you're right, but look at the map right here, pointing with his finger.

—Did you want to start by visiting Love Beach?

—It may be a good idea. You never know.

—Okay.

After a drive of less than thirty minutes, Ethan states:

—My dear love, it's very nice here. We've reached Love Beach, and it's the end of the coastal road. I wonder

why they call it Love Beach. I didn't see any beaches where we could make love.

—I didn't realize that's what you were searching for. If that's what you really want, I could check with the nice receptionist for a hedonistic beach.

—Are you serious?

—Yes.

—And if that's what I wanted, you'd agree?

—Yes.

—But that's not your style?

—No.

—And you would accept?

—Yes. I want to do whatever you want.

—That's so sweet. But I don't want to have sex. I want to make love to you. Making love can only be done in private.

—We went to the West. On our way back, could we stop at the hotel to get some rest. Then we'll head to the East. Do you agree, the Man?

In their bedroom, Ethan stands behind Kate and caresses her belly. He feels her breasts over her clothes and says:

— I love your T-shirt. I'd like you to keep it on.

— Anything you want.

He turns her around to face him and kisses her with a gentle passion. Then, as he goes down, he kisses her all over her T-shirt, which he lifts to give himself access to stomach. At the same time, he takes off her shorts and underwear and continues moving down her body, kissing and licking her. Kate's face and breathing let him know her full pleasure and that is surging towards a fierce orgasm. After a few minutes, she regains her composure and makes him suffer a similar fate, while still remaining standing. They lie on the bed to finally rest a little and start loving each other once again until they both orgasm simultaneously.

After lunch, they set off on the road again to go visit the east side of the island. Every night, they do something different, except for making love. They go to a few shows. They go to the casino. They sit on the balcony, enjoying a good wine, watching the sun set and the moon and stars come to life. During the day, they walk on the beach, holding hands. From time to time, they sit on lounge chairs and rest, letting the sun caress them with its warmth.

On Sunday afternoon, Kate catches Ethan on his cell phone. She asks:

—Ethan, you're not allowed.

—I'm texting Mario. I'm just writing, "thank you!"

—It's crazy. A few minutes ago, I also texted him.

I wrote: I found him again. Thanks!

—Did he answer you?

—No.

On the seventh day, after their breakfast they return to their suite to pack their bags. Ethan pays the bill while telling Kate:

— Whew. We drank quite a lot.

A driver takes them to the airport nearby. The private jet is waiting for them. They get on the plane while the co-pilot takes their luggage. She sits in front of Ethan and, once they are in the air, she takes off her seatbelt and settles down more comfortably by crossing her legs. Her white dress reaches below the knees. The slit on her left leg parts both sides and partly reveals beautiful long legs browned by the sun. Ethan looks at her bare shoulders. Her sleeves are but an extension of the collar that rests just above her breasts. Staring at her face, as she leans towards the window watching the ground recede, he declares:

— You look beautiful in your dress. It highlights your tan.

— Thank you.

— And I haven't even started talking about your legs yet.

— Do you like them tanned?

— I could eat them.

— You did, every night of our trip.

— And as you can see, I'm not fully satiated. Speaking of being full, should we look at the menu? We have two choices.

He presses the intercom button to speak with the pilot:

— Good morning, sir, says the pilot. What can I do for you?

— I have two questions.

— Yes, I am listening.

— We left our winter coats in the jet that brought us to Nassau. Do you have them with you?

— Yes, they're in the closet in the back.

— Perfect.

— And the second question?

— Is it almost time for lunch?

— In a few minutes, the co-pilot will come to see you about lunch and your coats. Is that okay?

— Sure. Thank you.

— It is my pleasure.

The next day, Ethan arrives at the office. In front of his door, his assistant asks him:

—Hi Ethan. Did you have a nice trip?

—Nancy, it was a wonderful trip. It was one of the best trips of my life.

—I'm glad. You look really rested.

—Yes, I am. It did me a lot of good.

—Yesterday, I put the marketing report on your desk.

—Okay. Could you let me know when I have my meeting with the business analyst for the business case?

—It was supposed to be this morning, but I postponed it until two o'clock in the afternoon. The report is quite extensive, you'll need part of the morning to go over it. I made sure the marketing team and the managers are free if you have any questions.

—You are the best.

—I'm the best. I'm the best. I'm trying to convince myself.

Ethan enters his office. He quickly checks his emails and reads the report, taking notes.

—Nancy, can you set up a meeting with the marketing team and the two directors in a conference room?

—Ethan, take Mario's room. He's not here this morning.

—Okay. I'll head there now.

—I'll let them know.

Ethan asks several questions. He states:

—I asked you to consider merging the client databases. I see that you have. It's perfect.

He asks the directors:

—Have you read this report?

—Yes. In fact, we participated in writing it.

—That's good. According to what I read, the merging of databases would result in an annual sales increase for our current clients to about \$200,000,000. I also saw that the sales to the American company's customers would increase by \$500,000,000. Is this correct?

—Correct.

—Do you all agree with these numbers?

—Yes! they all answer.

—Now you have determined the cost of marketing, advertising, etc.

—Yes. In Canada, the cost would be 20% of the anticipated increase in sales. As for the United States and other countries, we must take the scandal into

account. So, it will be longer and more expensive. We're guessing around 30%.

— So let's see. If I calculate correctly, in order to increase our sales by \$700,000,000, we'll need about 190,000,000 in advertising and marketing expenses. So, our increase in gross sales after accounting for advertising and marketing costs would be about \$510,000,000. That seems like a lot, doesn't it?

— Not really, says one of the experts. These figures can be explained as follows: our sales will increase. In fact, in Canada, announcing the American company's products will certainly lead to an increase in our current sales. We will become one of the largest financial investment companies in the world and we'll be offering products that are virtually unknown in Canada at this time. As for the American company, their current sales will stop decreasing. That's what the 10% is for. Our 20% estimate regards the Canadian products that will be exported there from now on. So, for these products, or for products that are very similar, there will only be one competitor.

— And according to your report, I see that in order to achieve this growth, we'll need to change the name of the American company and use only ours.

— Yes.

— What happens if we don't do that?

— Then, the US recovery and sales growth will take several years.

—That means that for several years, we will only see a sales growth in Canada, but the marketing and advertising costs would be the same, approximately. And if we did that, we're looking at a profit of only 10,000,000.

—Correct.

—Okay. What specific calculation method are you using?

—Yes. The calculation method developed by two Harvard graduates with PhDs in finance.

—Perfect. Prepare to be challenged.

—We're ready.

—I'm not sure about that. In this case, no mistakes will be allowed. Too many decisions depend on it. So, be prepared even more. Consider all questions. This is your priority until the end of the month. Get as many people involved as you need. Bring these two doctors if you must. Anything, so that your level of comfort exceeds 90%. I will notify your SVP of this approach. He will have to support it. Finally, it is unnecessary to have to tell you that this information is classified as trade secrets. You all have confidentiality agreements.

One of the managers states:

—Ethan, if it's okay with you, I will personally see to this. By the way, I was told that merging the databases was your idea. It was great. It's not easy to come up with that.

—Thank you. You should know that you could decide to change these figures around. I have no problem if you want to decrease them. But if you want to make an increase, you'll need to convince me. We must be pessimistic. Also, I'll discuss all of this with Mario and determine the strategies with him. Thank you for all your great work.

Ethan picks up his office phone:

— Hello Edith.

— Hello Ethan.

— Can you schedule a meeting with Mario and Kate today? I'll need about 15 minutes.

— Just a moment, I'm checking.

— It would be great to see both as soon as they get back from their lunch.

— Perfect. Thank you, Edith.

— Always a pleasure, Ethan.

Ethan and Kate go to Mario's office:

— Good morning, both of you. So, how was the trip?

Kate admits:

— Wonderful. It's one of the best trips I've ever had.

— I would say the same thing, says Ethan. I really got some rest.

— I could see it from your face, Ethan.

Kate admits:

— Mario, we had decided not to speak about work outside the office. It turns out it was a very bad decision.

Mario replies:

— I didn't know that. But yes, that's not good. It's important for me to talk to my wife. Often, she gives me great advice. And above all, it allows me to decompress.

— Mario, thank you for forcing our hand, admits Ethan.

— Think nothing of it, Ethan. I'm aware that your project is the biggest and most important one in the company. Also, there is fraud, corruption and even some tough guys. Plus, you've got The Guard. I thought about taking you off it, but without you it wouldn't work. I can only imagine how hard it must be to deal with such stress. I know that, somewhere down the line, you won't be able to properly manage your stress. So, Kate and I will have to keep an eye on you.

Ethan answers:

— I appreciate that. Thank you both. Now let's get to the marketing if you want.

Ethan goes over all the data quickly. Finally, he concludes:

— I have given them until the end of the month to fine-tune their proposal. But based on what they showed me, we could expect the sales in Canada and the US to increase by 10%. Only between us, I am convinced that we can double that. After the advertising and marketing expenses, we could expect an increase of about \$510,000,000 in gross profits. Empirically, I would say that this annual increase will be seen after accounting

for all operating costs. The business case must consider all these points.

—Ethan, speaking of business case, you don't talk about it that much.

—Actually, Mario, it will really begin the moment I walk into my office in just few minutes. Kate, right now I'm okay, but I'm definitely gonna need one of your cost accountants.

—Ethan, you have only to ask and I'll get him to you.

—Mario, she just opened the door for me, but I won't take it.

Mario replied:

—Ethan, thank you for not taking advantage of my SVP... here in my office. And welcome back both of you. I can rest easy now.

Ethan meets with the business analyst and says:

— Hi Ryan. We're finally getting started.

— This delay has given me the time to finish two other projects and to refine the table of contents.

— Perfect. This morning I met with the marketing team. They did a good job. I gave them until the end of the month to make a rock-solid case. So, you can expect some adjustments. The basic strategy of their report is merging the client databases. This merger can be realistic or whatever, it's your job to analyze it and make recommendations. We're talking here about an increase of about 510,000,000 in gross profits. That too is your job. I'd like for you to work with the IT team, they'll be finishing their report in two weeks. I would also like for you to build a case that shows all three scenarios.

— Not a problem.

— Listen, Ryan, in speaking with you, I just realized that it'll be too big for just one analyst.

— Actually, Ethan, I was starting to think the same thing. I got a little nervous, but I didn't have the guts to tell you.

—Not telling me would have been a big mistake. I'm here to make sure that this merger goes well, so to help you when you need.

—I completely understand.

—What if you became the content coordinator?

—I'd find it reassuring and I'm sure I will do a great job.

—It's decided then. For now, we're going to go slowly, but we'll need to accelerate soon. Call Kate to get a cost accountant. She already knows about it. You can ask for another business analyst, to help you with the scenarios. I almost wish I could set up an office for all the people working on this project to be together. I'm thinking maybe about ten people. What's your opinion?

—Ethan, that's a great idea. Today is Thursday. Give me until Monday and I'll tell you the exact number of people.

—The exact number. Okay, but add two more.

—Perfect.

The next day, Ethan contacts the Director of Supplies:

— Good morning. I would like to know if there is any available space for about 15 people for one to two months.

— Hello, Ethan. You're in luck. There's an available office that could fit about 50 desks that are currently not being used. It has just been vacated. We'll keep it for us. We'll have to prepare it. Other people will need it for May and June.

— When you say to prepare, you mean to make improvements, painting or whatever?

— No improvements needed. You're really lucky. You should play the lottery. When I say prepare, I mean everything about communications, telecommunications, and computers. Exactly what you'll need. But it doesn't take much time and it is not too expensive.

— Okay. Do you have the plans for the people in May?

— Yes.

— So, on Monday morning, I'm meeting my coordinator who will give me the names of the team

members involved. I'd like you to be there, and we can make arrangements based on your other plans.

— Not a problem. Should I set up a meeting?

— No thanks. Nancy will take care of it.

— Have a good weekend, Ethan. See you on Monday.

— You too.

Sitting in Kate's living room and enjoying his wine, he says:

— You know, Kate, I hadn't seen that side of Mario.

— Clarify please.

— I mean, at the beginning of our meeting on Thursday, he seemed very human.

— Yes. It takes some time for him to reveal his human side and he doesn't show it to just anyone. On Thursday, he was more than just a president of a big company, he became your friend.

— This is the second time in my life that this has happened to me. And just like the first time, I appreciate it immensely. Are you friends with him?

— Yes, and for a long time.

— On the plane, when you said that you cried and he took you in his arms, I understood your friendship.

— You'll see, the day you'll be too exhausted, you'll see how he can give you a boost. And he's not doing it because you're the most important employee in the company who will make us grow, but he's doing it because he likes and respects you.

—That's great. I must tell you that I promoted my business analyst. He became a content coordinator. The business case is going to get too big for just one person.

—I thought as much. Ethan, do not forget to tell HR. Your analyst will be entitled to a bonus.

—Message received. Besides that, I also decided to set up an office for everyone to work together.

—I wouldn't have thought of that. You never cease to surprise me, she says and follows with a small kiss. It's a great idea if the space is available.

—You won't believe it, but there's one that just became free. It was reserved for a team of about 50 people, and I'm not sure what they'll be doing. They will be taking over in May, that's just the time I need for my team to do their job. Tomorrow, I will meet with the Director of Supplies and make the plans I need. The content coordinator will also be present. To speed things up, the office layout will remain an open area. I want to start setting people up during the first week of March.

—An open space will be cool. I'm so surprised.

—Really? And I'll be going there from time to time.

—Do you know if there'll be a conference room?

—No, but that doesn't bother me. We have conference rooms everywhere on our floors.

—You're right. Once again, you'll have everyone talking about you in the company. I swear Mario will appreciate it. Innovation excites him. You'll see during this week's steering committee meeting. Look at his reaction.

— Should I start or finish with this?

— I would start with it.

— Okay.

They continue discussing all kinds of things, including current events.

— Ethan, will we make supper together?

— Yes.

— Yes, but after that, we'll spend the evening alone.
I don't want to be tired tomorrow morning at the office.

— Okay, he says as he stands up and kisses her.

The next day, Nancy knocks on the door of his office and opens it.

—Ethan, the people have arrived.

—Okay. We're done here.

The Director of Supplies and the Content Coordinator enter his office.

—Good morning, says Ethan.

—Good morning...

—Okay. Ryan, have you decided how many people we to need?

—Yes. I would say about twelve people.

—Did you add two other people?

—Yes.

—Are you in the mix?

—No.

—So that's thirteen people. Ryan, I decided to have an open area set up so that you can all work together. This space will be temporary, only for two months. You will keep your current offices obviously, but you'll be moving there for these two months.

—Ethan, that's a great idea.

— Thank you. I could be there every second day, at the very least but I'm not moving my office.

— Perfect.

— Now, let's draw the office plan.

Ethan asks the Director of Supplies:

— By the way, are there any conference rooms in that space?

— There are three. One large conference room for a dozen people and two others for five to six people each.

— That will do. Let's work on the floor plan.

The acquisition project is the first item on the agenda at the SC meeting. So, Ethan begins:

— First of all, I would like to tell you that after the marketing team submitted its report, I reviewed my forecasts to develop the business case. After much consideration and discussion, I determined that left to only one person, it would take well over six months. So, my analyst, Ryan Labelle, was promoted to content coordinator. I notified Human Resources. A team will be set up, consisting of 12 people, excluding the coordinator. For a two-month period, I'm going to move all these people to a space that was recently vacated. On Monday, we developed an open-space floor plan. They will finish setting up the facilities by the first week of next month. The team members will start moving their office by the middle of that week. So, the project will be well underway by early May.

Mario says:

— You see everyone, that's what I call initiative, innovation. Good job Ethan.

— Thanks, Mario. Now, the marketing report shows an annual increase of about \$510,000,000 in gross

profits after accounting for marketing and promotional expenses. I think that this 510,000,000 will be as net profit before taxes. But we'll let them take care of that. Also, our human resources team is back. They will submit their report by the end of the first week of March. As for the IT team, they're submitting their report on the first Monday of March.

— It's going very well, says one of the Senior VPs.

— Yes. The due diligence review team and the contextual team are no longer in New York. The team members are currently in other cities in the US or in other countries. About half of them have at least two bodyguards each. In some cases, there are four bodyguards. So far, there have only been three altercations, without a single gun shot. These altercations were in different cities, two were in the United States and one was in Italy. To summarize, all reports will be submitted in March, except for the business case.

— What's next? asks Kate.

— Next? You will attend several presentations that will enable you to make an informed decision. There will be one presentation or more to the Board of Directors. The American company will also have to submit a letter of intent approved by resolution by the Board of Directors. Mario, I haven't told you about it yet, but I'm thinking of setting up a Projects Office for a period of three to five years. The decisions you will be making involve the scope of mergers. These mergers will generate many more projects. This Projects Office will take care

of their implementation. Kate, does that answer your question?

—Yes, thank you.

Mario asked:

—Are there any other questions?

—Just a comment, if I may? asks Kate.

—Yes.

—Ethan, we see that everything about this huge project is under control. First of all, wow. I tip my hat to you. Finally, I have only one question: Will you be leading this Projects Office?

—First of all, thank you for your comment. As for the Projects Office, we're not there yet. We'll see when the time comes, but I expect that Mario will want me to lead it for a while.

Mario agrees:

—We'll see when the time comes, as Ethan said. Is there anything else?

—As far as I'm concerned, no.

—Thank you, Ethan. Let's move on.

During their shopping on Friday afternoon, Kate asks him:

—Ethan, a few weeks ago, you bought tickets to see Roch Voisine with the Montreal Symphony Orchestra. Remind me when it is again?

—It's tomorrow night.

—Are you serious?

—Yes. Tomorrow we're going out. I didn't tell you, but I booked a table at Bistro Le Seingalt. Do you know it?

—No.

—It's French gourmet with a selection of fine wines. They are used to serving meals before any shows. When I called, they asked me what show I was seeing. I was told to arrive at 6:00 p.m., because the show starts at 8:00. I've never been there. We will discover it together. Oh! I forgot. At the Symphony House, we are in loge 2, row A, in the first two seats. We are on the right side, very close to the stage.

—I can't wait. Ethan! I don't have a dress to wear!

—I bet you want us to go and buy one right now.

—Please. Please, please.

— Let's go to the apartments and drop off our bags. Then, I'll go with you but you know it's going to cost you?

— Yes. Tonight, or tomorrow night?

— I hate shopping. So, it will be both nights.

— This is blackmail, but I accept.

— Promise me we won't go to more than two stores.

— Promise.

They go to their first store. After half an hour of looking, Ethan says:

— Bella, I don't see anything here. Can we go somewhere else?

— Okay.

At the second store, Ethan says:

— Look at this dress. You have to try it on.

The saleswoman approaches and says:

— The size should fit, but we can make adjustments if it doesn't.

— We need it for tomorrow.

— Not a problem. I'll put it aside for you try on. Do you want to keep looking?

— Yes, says Kate.

— Kate, you'll see, you'll end up buying the one I found.

After about ten minutes, Kate sees another dress. She goes to the dressing room. Ethan sits on a comfortable chair. Kate comes out with the dress she chose:

— What do you think?

— Not bad. But you'll end up with the one I chose.

Kate puts on the other dress. She comes out of the dressing room, looks at herself in the large mirror and takes her place before Ethan who says:

— Wow. You look fabulous. It suits you perfectly.
Don't hesitate for even one moment.

— Okay. It'll need some adjustments.

The long black dress has a few ruffles that reveal her legs and even a little glimpse of her black panties. The fitted top and long sleeves are colourless and transparent with only black leaves that barely hide her completely tanned body.

Later, seated at Le Seingalt, a waiter asks them:

— Have you decided?

— Yes.

— Madam?

— I'll have the basil cream mussels with fries. I'll also have a glass of wine.

— Is there a wine you prefer?

— Do you have Brunello di Montalcino?

— Excellent choice.

— Perfect.

— What about you, sir?

— Same thing. Thank you.

— Perfect. It won't be long.

Ethan looks at her for a long moment and says:

— You are absolutely wonderful. This dress is perfect on you. I'm falling in love all over again.

— Thanks, but you'll have to prove that to me tonight, she says as she caresses his hand on top of the table.

The next day at his office, as expected, he receives the IT report by email. He looks it over and prints a few pages here and there. In the afternoon, he sets off for the conference room where he is meeting the team.

— Good morning. You did a great job. I like your recommendations and your cost estimates for the systems mergers. I have a couple of questions to help me understand more clearly.

The meeting goes on, and they discuss and share different information.

The next day, he meets with the content coordinator of the business case and the IT coordinator. They use one of the conference rooms of the temporary office.

— Ryan, this report is excellent. I would like for you to analyze it carefully. This report is very systematic. Now, I want the business case to examine a total, partial or absence of a merger for the two IT divisions. It's not in the team report.

— Indeed, we'll have to analyze it.

On Friday morning, Ethan receives a report from the HR team. He examines it carefully. He sets off to the temporary office space and sees all the team members setting up their space. He asks Ryan:

— Could you gather everyone in the open area?

— Good morning, everyone. I see that you are getting settled. First, I would like to discuss the open area. Obviously, this does not promote privacy. So, I'll ask you to try and be respectful of your colleagues. For example, if you are making or receiving a personal call, do so in your own offices. Any discussions that involve the entire team should be done here, but aside from that, use the conference rooms. If three conference rooms are not enough, you can go to any other conference room or to a bar in the city's underground.

Some quiet laughter emanates from the group.

— Right now, of all the other teams in the company, you are the most important. That being said, we're buying this American company and we'll become one of the largest financial investment firms in America. We only have two months to complete what should normally take over six months. It's possible to meet this deadline because the reports I receive from the teams are simply excellent. In fact, I just received the HR report this morning, and it's perfect. Ryan chose all of you. For

my part, I verified his choices with the senior managers. They say that you are the best. Show me that you are, and you could even surprise me.

The team applauds Ethan. He ends with:

— Have a good weekend, everybody.

The following week, Ethan meets Ryan along with the human resources team. A few days later, he receives the report from the contextual team. He prints it and examines it with great care. He sets up a meeting with the team and Kate.

— Good morning, everyone. I have read your report and find it very interesting and, above all, very professional. Congrats. I would like for us to go through it. Let's go by account. First, you discovered offshore accounts that don't exist.

— Right, says the team coordinator.

— This would superficially increase the assets by about \$42,000,000. Do we have any evidence of this?

— Yes. On the books, these bank accounts have numbers. We've checked every account number, whether it's American or offshore. The American accounts are active, but the offshore accounts don't exist. Also, based on their description in the books, we called the banks in question and were told that these account numbers do not exist. We asked our company's main bank to help us and they came back with nothing.

— And you did all this for every suspicious item?

—Yes.

—So, instead of going through how you checked every account, I'll just ask how confident you are with your results. Okay?

—Yes.

—Okay. Special clients. According to what I read, these are fake client accounts that only increase the assets by 58,000,000. How confident are you?

—99%.

—Phew, you're really that confident. As for the ten private jets, you estimated a 100,000,000 increase in assets. I don't understand. Do these airplanes exist?

—Ethan, I find it interesting that you used the word airplane. In fact, the airplanes do exist and have to be registered. Their registration appears in the books. And we went to see them. It turns out, they're not jets. They are single-engine recreational planes. And we don't even know if those engines will start. We didn't find any reason to go any further.

—So, I take it your confidence level is a 100%?

—Absolutely.

Ethan goes on:

—Now we've reached a sum inflated by 178,000,000. Let us look at building investments. We're talking about 14,000,000.

—The money was for the homes of the President and Vice-Presidents.

—All the Vice-Presidents?

—Yes. However, the amount is significantly higher for the President and the Marketing Vice-President. As for the others, we are talking about five people with approximately 1,000,000 each.

—I, who had faith in humanity. Regarding stocks T, U, and V, I see that they don't exist. This inflates the value of the company by \$22,000,000.

—Correct.

—Level of confidence?

—99%.

—So, all this has inflated the company's value by \$214,000,000.

—That's right.

—They had told me it was only \$200,000,000. And now, moving on to special suppliers.

—Ethan, this doesn't change the value of the company. These accounts have been settled. We think it was \$7,000,000. We have noticed some bizarre descriptions for these suppliers. We think they're fake and that someone is pocketing the money. To go any further, we'll need police warrants to go digging through their personal accounts.

—Perfect, no police. And for loans to senior managers.

—They play with the numbers to avoid paying any interest. This decreases their assets slightly, but only by \$5,000,000.

— So, we have no interest in looking into it. As far as I am concerned, when their assets go down, it suits me.

Ethan asks:

— Kate, do you want to make any points?

— I had found all of these accounts. Did you find anymore?

— Actually, Kate, we weren't looking for any other accounts. It was up to the due diligence team. They signalled four other accounts for us to audit. We did and didn't find anything significant.

— That's fine, says Kate.

— Perfect. Let me tell you that you've done a perfect job, says Ethan.

— I agree, says Kate.

— Thank you, everyone. I'll let you know what happens next. Kate, can you stay for a few minutes?

— Of course.

— Look, Kate, this morning I did some really interesting calculations. It will be more concrete when I receive the report of the due diligence team, but even with changes to the numbers, it doesn't really affect my calculations. I don't want to talk to you as the SVP that you are. So, I'll talk to you outside of the office. And we should talk about it tonight. Tomorrow, I'll meet you and Mario and I want to get Mario ready.

— So, you want me to play both sides?

— No. Just help me get my bearings.

— Said like that, it's fine.

- I don't want to waste any time preparing food.
- Ethan, I can buy a pizza. Would that be okay?
- That would be nice.
- I'm always nice. Meet at your apartment?
- Yes.

Ethan drafts a document to discuss with Kate. While they're eating their pizza slices, Ethan starts:

—Kate, remember when I first met Mario?

—Yes.

—Do you remember that I asked for 1% of the added value brought in by this project?

—I remember.

—And you remember Mario raising it to 10%?

—That's right.

—I skipped ahead of the due diligence report. Mario will regret not having accepted my 1%.

—Ethan, I think it's unfortunate that that's what you think of Mario. You know him and you know his integrity. If you're making these calculations to see what's coming to you, don't you think Mario has already asked me to do the same thing?

—I didn't know that, but you couldn't possibly do these calculations without the results of the contextual team.

—You think so? What about using a phone? This team works for me. And I trust their findings.

—Do you have numbers in mind?

—Yes. But I figured that's what we were discussing tonight. So, I brought the document that Mario has. I see that you have drafted the document next to you. We'll be able to compare.

—Okay.

—You first, suggests Kate.

—Here! states Ethan while pushing the document to Kate.

While Kate is looking over the document, Ethan continues:

—So, to summarize, according to the latest financial statements, the assets would have totalled \$10,000,000,000. The value of the company, without any adjustments, would have totalled about \$5,550,000,000. If I apply the adjustments that I made, then the assets would be about \$9,800,000,000 and the value would be \$5,350,000,000. In order to account for the major fraud, I informed them that our offer would reflect the current value in the books, minus \$300,000,000. So, this acquisition would be for \$5,250,000,000. At 10%, the company would owe me \$525,000,000. Are we in the same ballpark?

—You are a little more specific than I am. I am the one who pointed out that you would lose over \$20,000,000.

—So, Mario knows this?

—Yes.

—Did he almost faint?

—No, she says with a smile. He has seen much worse.

—Will he have any problems with the Board?

—Yes and no. Remember that the Board agreed to your 10%. There is even a signed resolution. Are you worried?

—Not at all. Actually, that's not why I wanted to talk to you tonight.

—Now you intrigue me.

—Yeah! And you like it. I want your help me with what follows. I didn't prepare anything. So, I'll take some notes.

—Get on with it, I'm really intrigued by you.

—Okay. Let's say my income is \$530,000,000. Do you follow me?

—I'm not sure, but I think I do, she replies, mockingly.

—Perfect. With that kind of income, no matter how you break it down, I'll have to pay about 160,000,000 in income taxes.

—Right. Now I'm starting to see where you're going.

—Let me get there. Based on the principle of government inefficiency, 50% of that money would be spent completely unnecessarily. So almost \$80,000,000 of mine would be burned. Poof, up in smoke.

—Maybe even more, Kate adds.

—Yeah!

—Keep going.

— So listen to my plan. We know that I'll be making a few million dollars, just like you, due to the increase in our company's value. Still with me?

— Yes.

— Okay. I won't need all of that to live well. Do you still follow me?

— I'm going to jump ahead. You want to create a charity, and you'll put the money in that account.

— You're strong, but not 100%.

— I am disappointing myself. So?

— But you're still hot. Yes, I'll set up a foundation or something, but it's the company that's going to transfer my 10% into that charity.

— Not a dumb idea. You will keep all the money that is owed to you, about \$530,000,000, and you'll just issue one or more tax receipts as donations. Therefore, it will cost the company about \$370,000,000 and they will save about \$160,000,000 in taxes.

— Precisely.

— Brilliant. Why didn't I think of that? I must be exhausted: too much sex. And what is the point of this charity?

— I don't know yet. But at least I'm saving \$160,000,000 of taxes. And to enjoy it even more, the government loses about \$320,000,000, or twice \$160,000,000, and it's completely legal.

— Exactly. By the way, if we're talking about enjoying yourself, I want to be there when it happens, remember that.

—I won't forget even if you're exhausted.

—I'm counting on it.

—Kate, I'm going to see you and Mario tomorrow. Should I tell him?

—I think so. You should give him time to prepare if he wants to give you a gift, like say the 25,000,000 dollars that you're losing by deflating the value of the American company. My advice, don't mention it to him. Give him the opportunity to offer you something else. But if he doesn't, don't be too disappointed. You knew you were losing it when you adjusted the company's value.

—That's not a problem. There is something else. If I create a charity, I will have to set it up and see what I'll do with the money. This is going to take some time.

—And you won't be able to stay with us for very long.

—That's right, but I'm not leaving the company just yet.

—What are you thinking before you leave?

—Remember that in one of the SC meetings, I spoke about creating a Projects Office that I would lead for a while. I'm looking at one to two years. There will be many projects that stem from the merger and they will be big. From what I've seen, we're going to talk about \$200,000,000 to \$300,000,000. But let's not talk about that just yet; it's up in the air, and it's too soon. Let's give the team doing the business case a chance. The Projects Office will have to set all this up intelligently. In

my past life, I saw multimillion-dollar projects get off the ground foolishly and spend years burning money unnecessarily. That shouldn't happen here.

—You're right. Will you talk to him about it tomorrow?

—No, it's too soon.

—What if he asks me any questions? And he will.

—I don't want to tell you what to say, but I would recommend you to tell him that I am aware of the situation and that when the time comes, I will suggest a solution.

—That won't be enough.

—Listen, Kate, you do whatever you want.

—So, what you told me isn't a secret?

—It's not a secret.

—Okay. I'm going to bed. I have a lot of work tomorrow.

—I will see you out.

—It's not necessary, I know the way.

—That is not why I want to see you out.

—Oh! I see.

In front of the door, they hug tenderly. They kiss one another and Kate leaves.

The next day, Ethan meets the entire business case team:

— Good morning. I gave Ryan the contextual team report. Before you read it, I want to remind you of its sensitivity. It shouldn't leave the office, be it printed or digitally on a USB key, or whatever else. You will not talk about it with anybody except here in the office. I want to make it clear that you are not to tell your spouse, your friends or any loved ones, not even your dog.

They start laughing.

— Be very careful, I am serious. You know that I'm the head of The Guard. You all saw the memo. Why do you think we needed to create this division? You should know that so far, we've only used about 15 bodyguards, and it's still very far from being over. Do I have your attention now?

— Ethan, if there are bodyguards, it is because there was a danger, says one of the team members.

— I'd rather we discussed the potential dangers. If we are aware of the dangers, then we can act and prevent them. As for any unknown dangers, and I sincerely

only hope it doesn't happen, we can only react when the time comes. And lastly, the reason why I am standing in front of you now is to warn you that there are some dangers that we create ourselves, without even knowing it. Today, I want you to save you from creating such dangers for yourselves or your families. So, everything in this report and everything we're doing here must stay in this room and you can never talk about it. Is that understood?

—Yes...

—Perfect. Read it very carefully. This report and the next one about due diligence are the two most important reports you'll read. Today's report will help us determine what purchase price we'll offer. You'll see some unusual things. There's fraud and theft. And the figures are significant. I am also aware of other cases of fraud and theft, with lesser amounts, that are not mentioned in this report. We are dealing with all of it, and if you do exactly what I ask, there won't be any problems. The offenders and thieves are aware that I know. They also know we have The Guard. They know how serious I am, because when we met in New York, I was accompanied by three armed bodyguards. You should know that in about a month, it will all be behind us. But you should never speak about it. Are you with me?

They all agree and Ethan goes on:

—Remember that you have all signed confidentiality agreements. Those who haven't read it, you can do so now. This is all to protect you. Now, if you have any

concerns or misgivings about this situation, I suggest that you meet with Sara Talbot. If I frightened you to open your eyes, she will be able to appease you. Continue with the business case. And you will be able to tell your children and grandchildren that it was one of the biggest acquisitions ever in America. Thank you for your cooperation. Ryan, can you see me in the conference room?

— Of course.

— Okay. Watch their reactions. If anyone panics, they should see Sara or they'll be replaced. Monitor the situation before giving them the report. By the way, how are you doing?

— Not bad. I'll see to it and keep you posted.

— Perfect. Thank you, Ryan.

Ethan goes to Mario's office where he finds Kate:

— Well. Mario, here's where we are. You may recall that when I met with the President and his Marketing VP, they told me that the value of the company had been inflated by about \$200,000,000. In fact, the contextual team found \$214,000,000. Their level of confidence is nearly at 100%, for every instance. I examined their methodology and I'm rather confident. However, there is fraud regarding about \$12,000,000, 7 of which can't be proven without involving the police. 5,000,000 are accounting runoffs for the directors to avoid paying interest on their loans. We could forget about that.

— Okay, says Mario.

— As regards the company's value, the due diligence review team will address it next Thursday. Kate, do they know about this inflation?

— Yes.

— Will their report include the corrections or not?

— No. I want our numbers and theirs to match, and if there are any discrepancies, I want them explained. As for any inflated numbers, we'll deal with it later.

— Good. Mario, is that okay with you?

— Yes.

— Now, I'd like to discuss something else. I just want you to think about it.

— Okay, Ethan, what is it about?

— I have a proposal regarding our 10% agreement.

— Go ahead. By the way, I asked Kate to prepare a report about this.

Kate intervenes:

— Ethan spoke to me about it, last night. His document was more specific than the one I gave you. Obviously, because yesterday he knew the actual value of the amounts inflated. Mario, Ethan has a great proposition for to you.

— Okay Ethan. Tell me.

Ethan passes his document to Mario and says:

— Here you go! As you can see, I prepared a financial forecast based on their numbers. It will be a bit different based on the due diligence report. I can adjust these numbers. Basically, their deflated assets will yield about \$9,800,000,000. Their liabilities won't change. The equity of their shareholders would go from \$5,600,000,000 to \$5,300,000,000, once deflated. Seeing as I said at the very onset that our offer would be \$300,000,000 below the inflated value. Our offer should be \$5,250,000,000. You're obviously with me so far?

— Of course.

— So, we can deduce that my 10% would be about \$525,000,000. So, I am seriously considering starting a foundation like a charity. Why, you may ask? We could discuss that over supper one day. I suggest that the company transfer all these millions into a charity account and they'll receive receipts for one or several charitable donations. You will automatically save about \$160,000,000 in taxes. So the final payout of my 10% would be \$365,000,000 instead of 525.

— Ethan, what you're proposing, I don't know anyone on Earth who would suggest that. You stand to lose \$525,000,000 to the foundation. I really don't understand that.

Edith knocks on the office door:

— Mario, the two individuals you're meeting have arrived.

— Please reschedule our meeting and apologize for me.

— Okay.

— Ethan, will you keep going?

— Mario, I really don't need this money. With the money I currently have, as well as the several million I'll make with the company's shares, I'll have too much anyway.

— You're basing yourself on making millions through stocks. That's a big risk.

— Remember my provisional prediction of an increase of about \$510,000,000 in net annual income, that's before taxes.

— Right. I forgot about the increase in net income, which will boost the value of the shares. Now I understand your plan better. But Ethan, if you create such a charity, you won't be staying with us for very long.

— I know. I expect to stay for about one to two years after this acquisition. I am also throwing this out there for you to consider. In one of the SC meetings, I spoke about creating a Projects Office that I might run for a while. My goal is to ensure complete control over merger projects. Thereby increasing the value of the shares even more quickly.

— Ethan, I must say that I'm happy to hear it. And I like your idea of a charity.

— Good! And I'm sure it will please your Board of Directors.

— Oh that's for sure. Kate, even though you swayed me a little at the beginning of this meeting by saying that Ethan had a great idea, what do you think of this?

— Mario, even if I exclude Ethan's unrealistic forecast to make millions from his shares, it seems rather perfect to me.

Ethan goes on:

— Kate, you're talking about an unrealistic forecast. But if that happens, all I'll have to do is take out a few million dollars as revenue from the charity and just pay the taxes required. Since I will be managing this charity alone, I won't be accountable to anyone.

— Careful, Ethan, you'll be accountable to the government.

— I know. Mario, I'll bring this up with my business lawyer, he's excellent.

— Why not use the company's lawyers?

— Thanks for offering, but I don't want there to be any conflict of interest or the appearance of such a conflict. The cash payments you'll be making will go through my lawyer and the donations' receipts will also go through my lawyer. I don't want there to be any doubt as to the legitimacy of all this.

— I see and you are completely right.

— Now, if you'll agree, can we get back to the acquisition? We will demand that they correct their books. How and when will we do this? Kate, do you want to take care of this?

— Yes.

— Here's what will happen. Tomorrow, I will start the acquisition proposal with a company lawyer. I know he's done this before and I have found a previous one that can be used with just a few adjustments. At next week's SC meeting, the bid will be submitted. The next day, I will receive the due diligence report. This means that, if everything goes as planned, our bid will be submitted to your BOD on Friday afternoon to pass the resolution. Next Monday, the bid will be sent to the President in New York along with a request for a letter of intent.

— Ethan, it's going very fast. Normally this takes much more time.

—Yes, Mario. But usually senior managers do not steal from the securities, or anywhere else. Usually, senior managers are not subject to jail time. So, they're going to have to hurry. By the way, I called their President twice, to tell him that everything was going well and that his team cooperated very well. I also told him that we were reaching the end and that he needs to notify his Board of Directors that it will be our final offer. He'll have to threaten his Board members that if they don't accept the offer, we'll pull out and they'll go bankrupt. I told him that they'll file for bankruptcy very quickly when we hand over all of the information to the authorities. He assured me that the key board members would agree and that everything would be processed very quickly. I said that if that happened, all this would stay between us and he could resign from the company and even leave the country.

The next day, Kate goes to Ethan's office and shows him the document with the required corrections. Ethan looks it over:

— It's great.

— Ethan, I could ask for these corrections or it could be the due diligence team.

— I know, but the fewer people are involved, the less likely there will be any problems.

— You're right.

— So, can you send it to me by email? I'll copy the content and send it to the President for him to take action. Now, Kate, how will we know if he's taken the necessary measures?

— Give it until next Wednesday. I'll ask the team coordinator to check on Thursday. He will still have remote access to the ledger.

— I would like proof, like financial statements printed by the ledger software.

— Okay, I understand.

— Are you going to make sure everything's okay?

— Of course, the Man.

— Thank you, Bella.

Afterwards, Ethan meets one of lawyers from the Legal Department in his office. He says:

— Hello. Have a seat. Do you know what I'm working on?

— Ethan, everyone in the company knows what you're working on.

— Okay, good! Today, we will start by drafting a bid to acquire the American company. We'll find out the final purchase price by next Friday morning. Also, I will review the due diligence report with the business case group. We may have to add a few requirements in the offer's appendix. I'll send for you during this meeting. A bid will be submitted to the steering committee on Wednesday afternoon with a purchase price that has been estimated by me. On Friday afternoon, our Board of Directors will meet and the final purchase offer, along with any necessary amendments will have to be approved. I want to send our offer to their President on Monday morning. Is that all right?

— Yes.

— You sent me an offer that resembles the one we'll be drafting. So, it should go quickly.

— Yes. I already have all the necessary information. It'll be fast.

— Perfect.

Ethan prepares an email for the President in New York. He adds the requirements noted by Kate and gives him three business days to amend the accounting entries.

He calls Kate:

— Hello, I just sent off the email with required accounting corrections. I gave him until Tuesday, end of the day, to get it done. I would like for your coordinator to check on Wednesday morning.

— Ethan, you're really rushing this.

— I know, but I want to be able to notify the steering committee.

— I get it.

— Can you confirm that everything is okay?

— Yes, I will have time to do it at lunch.

— Sorry to rush.

— Not a problem.

Towards the end of his afternoon, Ethan receives a reply to his request, assuring that the corrections would be made by the end of the day, the following Tuesday, at the latest.

On Wednesday morning, the coordinator of the due diligence team goes over the financial statements and sees that several accounts have been altered. He calls Kate:

— Kate, as you requested, this morning when I got to the office, I printed the financial statements and noticed that several asset accounts and even one capital account have been modified. It's really strange. We are talking about some very large sums.

— Listen, I am aware. Could you tell me the accounts and the gaps between what they had and today?

— Yes, no problem.

— I want it ASAP.

— Not a problem. I'll send it to you in fifteen minutes.

— Okay. You can also send me the financial statements from before and those for now.

— I'll scan them and send them to you, as well as a summary of the gaps, in just a few minutes.

— Perfect, and thank you. This is urgent.

— No problem, Kate.

At the afternoon steering committee meeting, Ethan says:

— The team doing the business case has set up temporary offices. They have the IT and HR reports in hand. They also have the report from the contextual team, which relates the values of the illegal accounting. I cautioned them not to discuss this with anyone else. I asked the President in New York to make certain corrections. Kate, it's your turn.

— This morning, we checked the updated financial statements. Their assets have declined by \$214,000,000 and their capital by \$22,000,000.

Ethan goes on to say:

— Tomorrow, the report by the due diligence team will be submitted. The day after that, I'm going to meet with the business case team. On Monday morning, we'll finish the final version of the bid to be presented to the Board of Directors for approval. When we send the offer to the President in New York, I'll also ask for a signed letter of intent granting us exclusive purchasing rights. On the first Monday of April, the business case will be submitted. Then we'll meet again. So finally, here is the bid, with the amount as I estimated, which may change a little. If you have any comments, please send them to me by tomorrow.

The next morning, the due diligence team files its report. Kate and Ethan examine it together. Kate says:

—I was expecting that. There are a few minor gaps in the released financial statements. Probably just rounding numbers off.

Kate backs away her chair from the table and looking at Ethan, she says:

—Incredible, it's really unbelievable. Were it not for you, we would have bought this company for \$240,000,000 more than its actual value. And you're taking more than \$60,000,000 as penalty.

—The fraud from their securities made everything easier. And you were the one who found the suspicious accounts. My initial plan, if you remember, was to compare their statements over the past several years. I would have caught it, that's inevitable.

—True.

—Kate, I have to give this to the business case team. You've got the deflated financial statements in your hands. We agree that the business case group must factor in the deflated sums.

—Yes

— Can you arrange it with Ryan? he asks.

— Yes.

— As for me, I'll take care of the final bid, which will be \$5,250,000,000. Question number one: Should the business case team take into account the \$64,000,000 in penalties we are charging them?

— Yes.

— You'll take care of that too?

— Of course. Do you have a second question?

— Should the business case consider the \$525,000,000 that will be given to my charity?

— Ethan, I don't want to give you any false hope, but I believe Mario will raise it to at least \$550,000,000.

— What about the business case?

— I'll take care of that too. I also have a question. Will your charity be named after you?

— What difference does that make?

— If it's named after you, it may complicate things over here. I'm not sure that I can guarantee that the entire company won't know what you received.

— So, if I understand correctly, I shouldn't use my own name.

— Ethan, listen carefully. I don't want to influence your decision.

— I know that. And I want you to know that I wasn't planning on using my name.

— If I may ask, why not?

— I'm not creating a charity to stroke my own ego. I really want to help people. It will be my legacy.

— Darling, you touch my heart.

— Darling? As I recall, you only ever called me that on the way to the hospital, after the accident. Aside from that, you've never said it. Is there anything funny going on?

— Come on now!

— Okay. This afternoon, I'm seeing Mario. We'll have to make a few decisions that will affect the business case.

— Do you want me to be there?

— No. It's not necessary. Tomorrow morning, I'll be meeting the team. I'd you to be there.

— I'll be there.

Mario arrives at Ethan's office.

—Excuse me for interrupting you.

—Mario, I was just leaving, says Kate.

—You wanted to talk to me? asks Ethan.

—Yes.

—That's funny, me too.

—In fact, I know you're in the thick of it and we're finishing up. I can't wait to hear the details, states Mario.

—Okay. Here's the update, the amounts I gave you remain the same. The due diligence review team did not uncover anything else.

—I remember that's what you said at the restaurant, that time you didn't want to disclose your solutions.

—I remember it well. We have come a long way since then and it's only the beginning. So, if you agree, our bid will stand at \$5,250,000,000. This includes the \$64,000,000 penalty.

—Could we push for more?

—I don't think so. They've probably paid off several members of their BOD, but even I think, there is a limit, without revealing everything.

—You're right. We'll proceed like that. Is there anything else?

—Yes. The President will resign. The VP Marketing is also leaving. What do we do with the other five VPs? They also committed fraud, even though their amounts were less.

—What do you recommend?

—We'll meet them together. We want to get rid of all of them. But we may have to keep one or two for a little while.

—Why?

—To give us information.

—Ethan, as soon as this deal is signed, I'm throwing them all out for sheer incompetence.

—Okay. So, I calculated that if we don't replace any of them, we'll be saving \$3,750,000 annually.

—Are you serious?

—Yes.

—Ethan, you never cease to impress me.

—So, Mario, we should consider these savings in the business case. But I want to proceed carefully. I'd like you to consider hiring five VPs with salaries of \$250,000 each. With that, the saving would still be \$2,500,000. What do you think?

—Okay, seems like a good idea.

The next morning, Ethan calls the lawyer.

— Good morning. I didn't hear anything from the steering committee, so our bid will become our final offer for an amount of \$5,250,000,000. Could you send Edith the document? She's Mario's assistant. She'll prepare the paperwork for the BOD meeting on Monday. I'll let him know.

He goes to Kate's office and asks her:

— I'm headed to the meeting with the business case team. Are you coming?

— Go ahead, I'll be there in five minutes.

— Okay.

He goes to the offices of the business case team and asks Ryan to gather his team. Kate arrives as Ethan starts speaking:

— Good morning, everyone.

— The Due Diligence Review report was submitted. There are a few points for you to consider, but it shouldn't affect our bid of \$5,250,000,000. Mario confirmed the amount again yesterday. The business case must use the amounts on the new balance sheet. As you know, several accounts were overvalued. You're going to

work with the deflated accounts. Finally, you should consider that the President in New York will resign and won't be replaced. The Vice-Presidents will also be dismissed and you could consider that their positions will need replacing. I am leaving you with a document explaining these savings to be included in your business case. Kate, will you be able to finalize it? I only have their bonuses and salaries. Their fringe benefits are not there.

—Ethan, I'll deal with it in the next 15 minutes.

—The bid will be submitted to our Board of Directors on Monday, and sent to New York that afternoon with a request for their letter of intent. As for your team, you'll have one week to submit your report. Will you be able to accomplish this?

—Certainly, says Ryan.

—Perfect. Have a good weekend.

—You too...

As expected, the business case team submits their report on the first Monday of April. Ethan examines it. Then he goes to their office. Kate is already there. He begins:

—Look, the report is great. I don't expect there to be any changes, but I just want to fully understand. Okay?

—Yes...

—First thing, in your opinion, it's quite clear that we must use our name for the company in the US.

—Yes, for sure. The damage caused by scandals seems almost irreversible to us.

—Okay, and I see that you recommend maintaining the IT systems for accounting, payroll and human resources.

—Yes.

—However, you recommend that the mission systems and sales systems should be merged. It is your estimate that these merges will cost of \$250,000,000, spread over the next 10 years. That'll cost us \$25,000,000 annually.

—This estimate came from the IT team.

—I understand, but they also estimated the accounting, payroll, and HR systems, Ethan replies.

—That's right. We looked at their estimates and found it unwise to invest so much. Their systems aren't old, but they do require the normal maintenance.

—Okay. You recommend expanding our internal audit to cover the United States, for an annual cost of \$500,000.

—In fact, this is one of the factors that lets us assume a greater increase in US sales that the marketing team.

—So, this \$500,000 is a marketing cost?

—Yes and no. They used to have internal auditors, but they got rid of them. Probably to be able to pull off all the fraud and manipulate the numbers. Now we'll have to expand our internal audit. But if we do this well, for instance, hire a trained investigator or something like that, we could say it's a remedial action. That would promote us in the US.

—Okay, Ryan, we'll talk about that a little later. Now, the icing on the cake, you recommend closing offices in two countries. Explain why.

—This wasn't easy. The due diligence report shows that these two countries are barely profitable, unlike other countries.

— Was it because of the scandals?

— No. The numbers we looked at were accounted for before any scandals broke out. We asked the contextual team to dig into that. The coordinator and another accountant returned to New York. They saw that these two countries had never been profitable. Who knows why they weren't already closed? But, as you have often mentioned, we're not police officers.

— Okay. All this means is that the annual profits before removing operating costs would be about \$850,000,000.

— Correct.

— We are far from the \$510,000,000 announced by the marketing team. You should have questions, a lot of questions.

Kate says:

— Ethan, I haven't spoken yet.

— I've noticed.

— You should know that I checked every detail of their work. The only numbers we can't control are the IT numbers. It's up to the projects office to do that.

— Okay. You've all answered my questions very well, besides, you have the support of the absolute best of the best. Kate, later, I'll have to go over everything with Mario. You should be there. Besides, I think you're

better at presenting the business case to the steering committee than I am.

—Ethan, I'll be there for your update with Mario. However, I would recommend that Ryan present this to the SC. He knows this case inside and out.

—Great idea. Ryan, it's the day after tomorrow. Will you be ready?

—Not a problem, Ethan.

Ethan and Kate go to Mario's office.

— Mario, the case analysis is finished. As expected, it will be shown at the SC and Ryan will be the one presenting it.

— Okay. Can you summarize?

— We expect that the annual profits, prior to operating costs, will increase by approximately \$850,000,000. That means 15% more than now.

— Ethan, the marketing team announced it was going to be around \$510,000,000.

— That's true, but I've asked the team for a detailed analysis of customer databases to determine if it's possible to increase sales on both sides using their customer data. They found many factors that will lead to additional sales. Marketing couldn't have foreseen that.

— Speaking of whom, do they know yet?

Kate answers:

— Yes. We asked around and they're on board.

— What does this increase in annual profits involve?
asks Mario.

— Marketing costs for an undetermined length of time, replies Ethan. Amortization over ten years for IT

developments. Extending the internal audit to the US and closure of two foreign offices.

—Are you both good with this?

—We have to consider that our IT costs will vary. Despite that, I am good.

—I don't want to repeat what Ethan just said, adds Kate. If you accept this proposal, I could defend it to the SC as needed and to the Board of Directors.

—Perfect, says Mario. Thank you.

As usual, the steering committee meeting begins with the acquisition project. Ryan presents the case brilliantly. During his presentation, he includes his answers to Ethan's questions. Kate finishes up by saying:

—Thank you, Ryan. I'm surprised you didn't have any questions for him.

—Actually, I cheated, says Ryan. Two days ago, Ethan read my report and asked me a few questions. I thought you might ask the same ones, so, I answered them before being asked. Ethan, I took advantage of you.

—Ryan, you can take advantage as much as you want, but only to a certain extent, if you don't want Kate to get involved, says Ethan.

—Mario, is it ready to go to the Board of Directors? asks Kate.

—Yes. And who will present it to them?

—We'll talk about it, says Kate

—Is there anything else?

—Yes, just two or three things, if I may, says Ethan.

—Go ahead.

— As soon as I receive the letter of intent signed by the President, due the day after tomorrow, I will request that their Board of Directors approve it quickly. That gives them six business days. Is that okay with you?

— Yes

— I developed a preliminary plan for the implementation of the Projects Office. You could look it over and ask me any questions you may have. Now, you just have to decide if you want me to set it up and run it for a few years.

— I thought this was already settled, says Mario.

One member replies:

— Mario, this hasn't been approved by the SC.

— That's right, admits Mario. So, we can go around now.

The SC unanimously agrees to Ethan's proposal.

— So that's decided, says Mario.

— Thank you! says Ethan.

On Friday morning, Ethan receives an email from the President in New York. He calls the litigation lawyer:

— Good morning. I just forwarded to you an email I received from the President with the attached letter of intent to accept our bid at the price set in our purchase offer. It has been duly signed by him. Can you tell me quickly if it suffices?

— Wait a minute, Ethan. I'm reading it... yes, it's perfect. We're going to need the approval of their Board of Directors.

— Yes. I'll ask for it now. Thank you.

— My pleasure.

Ethan writes out an email requesting this resolution and sends it to the NY President as he picks up the phone to call him:

— Good morning.

— Good morning. I just sent you an email. Can you please read it and tell me if it works for you?

— Yes, just a moment... It works for me.

— Can you send me a confirmation by email?

— I will send it immediately.

— Thank you.

Before leaving the office for the weekend, Ethan waits for this email. He leaves, satisfied.

Like every other Friday afternoon, Kate and Ethan go shopping together. Kate asks him:

— Shall we have supper together?

— Yes. I kind of want to celebrate. It's been a great week. The President in New York just sent me his letter of intent to accept our offer. Then he confirmed that I would be receiving the resolution by his Board of Directors on Monday, two weeks from now.

— Perfect. Does Mario know?

— No. I'm seeing him on Monday.

— Do you want to come eat at my place?

— Okay. What will you concoct?

— What do you think about mussels?

— Good idea. You know it's an aphrodisiac?

— Yes, but I have a feeling you don't really need it.

— I suggest you get frozen pre-cooked mussels. It's less work.

— Not a bad idea.

— How will you prepare them?

— How about Italian tomatoes and thyme, with fries?

— It's going to be delicious.

After their shopping, they separate and each one takes a shower. It is 6 p.m. Ethan knocks on her door and she opens it.

— You have a new bathrobe?

— Do you like it?

She is wearing a black satin bathrobe with lace trimming. It reaches the middle of her thighs. Quite loose, it reveals a part of her breasts.

— I'd better get inside. If anyone should see you like this, it'll make them jealous.

They hug each other and kiss.

— I love satin, he says caressing her back while gently moving his hands towards her buttocks.

— Phew! You're already excited. Let's take it easy and prepare the meal, shall we? she says, heading to the kitchen.

On Monday morning, Ethan goes to her office.

— Can I come in for 10 minutes?

— Yep!

— I'd like to talk to you about Ryan.

— Of course.

— I think that when he heard about the Projects Office, he showed some interest in being a part of it.

— That's right. He even spoke to me about it.

— What did you tell him?

— I told him to wait for the right time and talk to you.

— I am quite impressed by his work, his leadership, and his presentation to the SC. Even Mario is thinking about the presentation to the Board of Directors.

— What do you have in mind?

— I would like for him to replace me when I leave the company.

— Ethan, I hate it when you talk about leaving the company.

— I know, but I will be staying here, in Montreal, probably in my current apartment. If we're not working together, we can still continue loving each other. In any

case, we'll see when the time comes. But I want us to keep going.

—You reassure me and, I too want to keep seeing you.

—As for Ryan, what do you think?

—I think it's a great idea. You'll have to discuss it with Mario. The job title may prove to be a problem.

—I'll see to that with Mario. Now, I have to leave you, I have to meet my business lawyer at a restaurant to begin setting up my foundation.

—Already!

—Yes. My lawyer will set it up so that it's flawless. I do not want any problems with either government. Besides, he'll need time to set it up. See you later.

—Later.

At the restaurant, Ethan joins his lawyer in a private room. He breaks the ice:

—Hello, how are you? It's been a long time.

—I'm fine. You know, there are rumours about you.

—Yes, like what?

—It appears that you're buying one of the three largest financial investment firms in the US.

—Look, the details of what I am doing are, for now, trade secrets. So today, I need you to act as my lawyer. Your attorney-client privilege allows me to tell you a little.

—Okay, so I am your lawyer now.

—Perfect. You must know that I stand to gain about \$525,000,000 from this transaction.

—Are you serious?

—Yes, maybe even more. Listen, from the onset, I told myself there's no way that I'm giving around \$130,000,000 to the government. I've looked into several possibilities, and I decided to start a charity foundation. I don't know how yet.

—You want me to set up this foundation for you.

—That's right. I want everything to be completely legit. I do not want to give anyone the slightest doubt about my mission to help those in need. I'll make sure to have a very clear definition about my mission.

—Will you be putting part of the money into this charity foundation?

—Not part, all of the money. And I won't be the one putting the money in the foundation. The cheque or cheques will be made out to the foundation.

—The entire sum! Hold on to me, I'm going to fall off my chair. And, of course, the foundation will be issuing receipts.

—Correct.

—Interesting, you and your company will be denying the government about...

—\$300,000,000 if I consider that I won't be paying anything and that the company will receive a major deduction. You now see that everything has to be flawless.

—Oh yes!

—I want you to be the designated lawyer for this foundation. For now, you will be the one depositing the funds and issuing receipts.

—Okay, I'll take care of everything. You'll need to create a Board of Directors.

—Under these circumstances, is there a minimum number of members I'll need?

—Two: You and one other person. And it can't be me, because I'm the foundation's lawyer. Can you think of anyone else?

—Yes.

—I will arrange all of this. In the meantime, you will have to come up with a name.

—What do you mean by "in the meantime"?

—Until early May. I'll need about 20 days.

—Okay. That's how we'll proceed, decides Ethan.

Upon his return to the office, Ethan goes to see Ryan.

— Ryan, I was told that you want to be part of the projects office team.

— That's true.

— I discussed it with Kate, and she thinks that what I'm about to tell you is a good idea. Now, you shouldn't get too excited, because I'll need Mario's approval.

— Mario's approval! What do you mean?

— Let me explain. First of all, you should know that I plan on working here for another year or two. So, I'm gonna need someone to take over the Projects Office and I've been considering you very seriously. Kate agrees with me.

— Whew. I didn't expect that.

— Listen, Ryan, I'm going to need your answer now. But before, you must know that I'm going to have to organize and set up the Projects Office. I want us to do it together so that you could carry it on after. During the time we set it up, you can benefit from my experience in this domain.

— Have you ever done anything like that?

—I've set up about a dozen of them.

—Whew!

—However, I have no idea what your position will be. The same goes for your salary. What I do know is that if you agree, I will discuss it with Mario. You impressed him during your presentation in front of the SC. He found you were composed. You presented it well and you are in full command of your project. So, what do you think?

—Listen Ethan, I'm obviously interested. I don't have the experience, but if you train me, I know I'm going to succeed. You've already prepared me for the business case. So, if Mario agrees, I'm on board.

—I'm meeting with Mario right after this. For me, the Projects Office starts tomorrow morning. Now for today, you'll have to wait until I tell you Mario's decision. Now that I'm thinking about it, he might decide to meet with you after all. That would be a good sign.

—Okay. I'll wait.

Ethan and Kate go to Mario's office. Ethan begins:

— On Friday, I received the letter of intent to accept our bid, signed by the president in New York. He also guaranteed that we'd receive the resolution to accept our bid by his Board of Directors. So next Monday, the acquisition project will be over. The legal department will then take over.

— That's great news, says Mario.

— Now, let's have a look to the future. Today, I had lunch with my lawyer. I appointed him as my charity foundation lawyer. He will set it all up by the start of next month.

— You don't waste any time.

— You and I talked about the Projects Office and my position here for another year or two. Remember?

— Yes.

— I suggest that Ryan become my successor. I will train him and we'll set up the Projects Office together. I saw him establish the business case team and he did excellent work.

Mario looks at Kate and:

— Kate, what do you think? Why am I even asking?

—Ethan and I spoke about this, and I think it's a great idea.

—Ethan, have you already discussed this with him?

—I just did. I told him that it's your decision, considering how important this position is in the company.

—What does he think?

—He's obviously interested. He told me he has no experience, but with my training, he knows he'll succeed. He also mentioned that I really prepared him for the business case. He finished by saying that he's on board should you accept. Oh, and I almost forgot, I mentioned that you might want to see him for an interview.

—There's no need. I've already seen him a couple of times and at the SC particularly. There's also that fact that if you both agree, then I agree.

—For now, he'll become my assistant.

—Okay.

—As such, I recommend that he present the business case to the board. I would like for Kate and me to prepare him for that. With two \$250,000,000 in merger projects, he'll have to do it again and again. These millions of dollars regard IT, but I'm going to present you with a global strategy for the merger. So, it'll be bigger.

—Okay. Kate, will you be at the Board?

—For sure.

—Mario, as regards his current and future position, we'll see. My time here is up.

—Right. We'll talk about the position soon.

Ethan goes to Ryan's office and announces:

— Mario agreed. He would also like for you to present the business case to the Board of Directors. Kate will train you. Congratulations.

— Fantastic. How can I ever thank you?

— Make sure you're the best.

— You can be sure of that.

— We'll meet tomorrow morning. Can you arrange that? If there's a problem, speak to Nancy.

— Perfect.

The next day, Ryan joins Ethan in his office.

— Good morning, Ryan.

— Good morning.

— First of all, Ryan, I want to tell you that if you research the establishment of a Projects Office, you will notice that all the emphasis is placed on the control of the project managers. I want the mission of our Projects Office to rely on the success of the projects. Do you follow me so far?

— Yes.

Ethan hands Ryan a book.

— So, I would like for you to read this book. It's yours. You will see that the ideas described in the book are simple and are oriented towards the success of the projects. Except for the establishment of the Projects Office, which is a project in itself, but the office will not manage projects. It will oversee the project managers. It also monitors the projects' portfolio, namely to prioritize of the projects and their timing, based on capacity. Do you still follow me?

— Yes.

— Okay. Now, in our company and in the company we're acquiring, there are no Projects Offices, but there are project managers. We will have to analyze everything to make our recommendations to the SC, whether we leave things as they are, that is a hierarchical structure or to turn it into a matrix type of organization. I see that what I just said is not very clear to you, but the book will explain it.

— No, it's not very clear to me.

— Don't worry. I suggest that when you read, highlight anything you want us to discuss. I'll set aside an entire day. You'll need a crash course on managing a Projects Office. How long do you think it'll take you to get through the book?

Ryan picks three pages at random and reads a few lines.

— It seems easy to read. Let's say I'll have it done by the end of tomorrow.

— Okay. I'm looking at my schedule. How about all day on Thursday, is that okay?

— Okay. Ethan, are you always this fast?

— Only when it's necessary.

— And now it's necessary?

— You'll understand one day, and I hope that when you do, you'll tell me.

— I promise.

— That being said, whether the project managers end up in the Projects Office or stay in their current

offices, we'll need to evaluate them. We'll need an evaluation grid. Just think about it.

— Okay.

— Ryan, our current project managers aren't just waiting for us. They're working. So, we'll definitely need external project managers. The IT department certainly has tenders and evaluation grids. You'll have to contact them and ask for them.

— Do you want this by Thursday?

— No. I'll have to take the first steps with the American company. As soon as I've received the resolution to accept our acquisition bid, you and I will travel to New York together along with the coordinator of the IT team. We're going to pay a visit to the vice-president and the IT managers.

— What are we looking for?

— We want their opinion about the scope of the Projects Office. It's either an office based solely on this merger or it's for all projects. We'll see what they think about the possibility of bringing all the project managers together in the Projects Office. We want to know the project management methodology they are currently using and how they prioritize their projects. I also want to find out how they evaluate their project manager's workload.

— Phew.

— Yeah! And finally, I want you to register for the course on the project planning software that we use here. It's a good software. Here is the preliminary outline

of the Projects Office. It is now a temporary Projects Office for the merger. We can change its scope, but we will have to discuss it. For now, we should focus on its scope.

— Why?

— Because that's where the profit increases are the greatest.

On Thursday morning, Ryan goes to Ethan's office.

—Ethan, you're the one who wrote this book. I understand why you like the ideas in it.

—I did indeed. That does not mean that it's the whole truth. We'll discuss it thoroughly. You should feel comfortable to agree or disagree about one or more points. If you do not agree with something, we'll have to find another solution and stick to it. Remember that I won't be here for long. You'll be here for years. Also, you should remember that the Projects Office may very well grow. I am willing to bet on it.

—Okay.

—Tomorrow, we'll start working on planning the merger based on the preliminary plans I submitted to the SC.

—Okay.

They are busy getting through the entire book.

The following day:

—Hi Ryan, says Ethan. Not too tired from yesterday?

—I don't even remember putting my head on the pillow.

—We have all morning to think about planning the merger. Shall we get started?

—I'm ready, says Ryan.

—Like yesterday, feel free to stop me or to disagree.

—Not a problem.

—Look, I won't keep telling you to feel comfortable every time. So, consider it said for the future.

—That's okay.

—So, let's get started.

During the afternoon, Ethan and Kate go grocery shopping together, and as they do every week, Kate asks him:

— Shall we have supper tonight?

— I would like to, but I am really tired. But tomorrow we could go out for supper to a good restaurant in Montreal.

— I imagine there will be two desserts?

— Genuine manipulation.

— What do you mean?

— It's not that straightforward, but you ask me the question as if I were the one who decides.

— Not at all.

— Your statement: "I imagine there will be two desserts?" is a closed question. I can only answer with a yes or no. So, the ball is in my court. For instance, you could have said something like: "I hope there's a second dessert. What do you say?" Then I would have said: "That's an excellent idea." And there'd be no manipulation.

Despite all the people walking around the Montreal underground, she stands in front of him, takes him by the neck, and kisses him. Ethan comments:

—That's what you do. When you're at fault, you never admit it. You just hug me and kiss me.

—I do what must be done.

—I'll take your hug and kiss as a confession that I am right.

She stops once again, stands in front of him, takes him by the neck, and kisses him while gently and discreetly passing her tongue over his lips. She whispers in his ear:

—I will never admit that I'm wrong, not without my lawyer present.

—I see that you are taking the high road. So, we'll have supper together tonight.

—Pervert. But we're still going to a restaurant tomorrow.

—Yes.

—We're eating at my house? Kate asks

—Okay. Hey, I have a good idea for tomorrow night. Why don't we try going to Laurie Raphaël?

—Fantastic. Don't move, I'm calling... A table for two tomorrow night?... It's reserved. I'm wondering what dress to wear.

—I am sure you will be very beautiful.

After putting away his purchases, he knocks on Kate's door.

— Come in. It's open.

— I didn't know if I should shower.

— You didn't shower yet?

— No.

— Perfect. We'll eat and then we'll wash each other and then...

— I like the menu. What will we eat?

— I ordered a pizza. Is that okay?

— Yes.

They eat the pizza and head to the bathroom. Ethan starts taking off her blouse as he says:

— I want to wash you, but without using a glove.

— You'll use your hands?

— My hands and fingers too.

— Wow. How would you like me to wash you?

— You decide. I'm getting started.

— No, we do it at the same time, slowly.

The next day, they take care of their chores and then get ready for the gourmet restaurant. Ethan arrives at Kate's door:

— Bella, are you ready?

— Yes, she says as she opens the door.

She is wearing a green spring coat that reaches her knees. It looks rather military. Its folded collar shields her neck from the cold. Two rows of four white buttons and a knotted belt keep it closed.

— Kate, I can only see the bottom of your dress.

— Perhaps it's on purpose.

— That's sadistic.

— No. I just don't want you to rush me to the bedroom right now.

— That is sadistic.

— Shall we go?

The taxi leaves them at the door of the restaurant. They enter and go near the *maître d'* who accompanies them to the coat check. Ethan turns to look at her. She stares back at him with a slight smile as she removes her coat. She reveals a sexy red dress with a stunning neckline. The bottom of the

dress is very loose with two long slits on each side running a little forward and climbing up to her hips.

The maître d' shows them their table and helps Kate sit down.

—You look great, front and back. This dress fits you gracefully.

—Thank you, that's nice.

—Do you know what I'm thinking?

—Of course not.

—I just got a flash from the accident in Quebec City. I am happy that the accident occurred. Because, today I have a woman in front of me whom I love passionately. In addition to being intelligent, she is funny, has a beautiful face and a goddess's body, she makes love to me with so much love and tenderness. Also, considering that I'll soon have a little over half a billion dollars, I would say I'm a very happy man.

—Ethan, you were off to a good start, but you just ruined everything by talking about money. Despite your totally unforgivable blunder, I also love you, but for completely different reasons. You'll have to make it up to me.

—It'll be with great pleasure. I have something to ask you.

—Go ahead.

—When I saw you from the front, in the dressing room, I suspected that you weren't wearing anything underneath your dress.

—You suspected well.

—Then, I have one more thing to ask you.

—Yes.

—When we get home and we're having a glass of wine, do I begin by lowering your two straps that serve as suspenders or do I start with the side of your thighs and move my way up?

—It depends on what you want. I'll let you surprise me.

—I want you so badly.

—I too want you!

In his office, Ethan receives an email with a digital copy of the duly signed resolution of the Board of Directors accepting the bid. Ethan prints it and goes to Mario's office passing by Kate's office, who follows him at his request.

— Edith, I have to see Mario now.

— Okay. Please go to his conference room and I'll let him know.

— What's the emergency? asks Mario.

— Mario, Kate, I have to admit, I'm deeply moved. Ethan sets the resolution on the table in front of them.

Mario and Kate let out a chuckle and then add:

— It's done.

Kate throws her arms around Mario's neck and then Ethan's. Ethan sits down and he begins:

— Yes. Yes. It's done. We got them for \$300,000,000 less than they were asking.

Edith hears all the noise. She enters and asks Mario:

— Is it done?

— Yes, it is.

— Yes!

— Edith, I'd like you to plan a lunch in a private room for this Friday. You'll book from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Invite everyone who was directly involved. You, Kate's and Ethan's assistants as well. Jim, Sara and Layla also. And don't forget George. Ethan, please, can you give her the name of all the team members?

— Not a problem, Mario. I start the acquisition process with the legal department.

— Okay. I have to go back to my office. I have people waiting for me, Mario concludes.

Kate and Ethan remain alone in the conference room. She goes near him and tells him:

— Get up, will you?

She approaches him and hugs him tightly. Then, she kisses him and says:

— Honey, you did it. You really are the best. You just made half a billion dollars.

— Yep! Now we have to set it all up.

— How's Ryan?

— Very good. He's moving very quickly. He's going to be a good leader of the Projects Office.

— Cool. I'm happy for him.

— By the way, I just realized that we won't be able to go shopping on Friday, as we usually do. We'll spend the entire afternoon celebrating.

— Exceptionally, we'll go on Saturday morning.

Ethan provides Edith with the name of everyone who participated first-hand. There are a little more than forty people. Ethan asks:

- Edith, will be taking care of Layla's trip?
- Yes. It's our travel agent.
- Great. I'd like for her to arrive on Friday around 10 a.m. I have to talk to her, Jim and Sara.
- I'll take care of it.
- Thank you, Edith. You are a sweetheart.
- I'm too good, I know.

Ethan contacts the director of the legal department:

— Hello, Ethan.

— Hello.

— What can I do?

— The American Board of Directors has approved our offer.

— Let's just say that the news has already broken out. Congrats.

— Thank you. I looked at your calendar, and you're not free tomorrow.

— I am not.

— Would it be possible for you to make yourself available? We should meet soon to start the acquisition.

— Why soon?

— Because the president over there will be the one signing it and I'm not sure how long he's going to stay. If he resigns, he'll certainly leave the US. You remember what we talked about.

— Yes, I remember. I understand the urgency. Is there any way to calm him down?

— After our call, I'm sending two emails, one to the President and one to the Marketing VP. My emails will calm them down and remind them not to do anything before the acquisition is signed.

— I see. While we were talking, I asked my assistant to free up my schedule for an hour. She tells me that it's done. So, I can see you tomorrow afternoon.

— See you tomorrow and thank you.

During the steering committee meeting, to which Ryan has been invited, Ethan provides an update on the progress of the project. And then he says:

—Let me announce Ryan's appointment to the Projects Office. He will be my replacement.

—Congratulations, Ryan.

—Thank you.

Ethan continues:

—I would like to announce that both presidents will meet in Montreal on May 8th to sign the acquisition. I will soon be going to New York along with Ryan and other coordinators to analyze the merger solutions regarding project management for here and over there. And lastly, we will be presenting the overall preliminary plans for merger projects at the next steering committee meeting. The week after that, I will convene all the project leaders and review the preliminary plans. So, we will be presenting the reviewed general plans at the second SC meeting in May. Ryan, are you comfortable with all of this?

—Yes.

—Perfect.

Ryan stands up and leaves the conference room.

Back at his office, Ethan asks Nancy:

—I'd like for you to schedule a meeting between me, Ryan, the acquisition team coordinators and the New York directors. Can you let Jim know? It'll be in New York and it'll be for two days. We'll need the plane, hotel rooms, all of it.

—I'll take care of it.

—Thank you, Nancy.

The next day, Ethan meets with Jim, Sara and Layla, who just arrived from New York.

— Good morning.

— Good morning...

— Layla, did you have a good trip?

— Top notch.

— My purpose this morning is to let you know what is happening right now and to discuss the future a little bit. First of all, Layla, congratulations on joining our ranks.

— Thank you.

— The acquisition will be signed on the 8th. The President will come here and sign in the presence of Mario. Next week we're going to New York to meet with the vice-presidents and the directors. Jim, have you already been notified?

— Yes, and I've discussed it with Layla. As long as the president and the vice-president of marketing don't resign from the company, or flee the country, I think

we should continue being cautious. Layla will arrange a covert surveillance.

— Perfect. There'll be a lot of movement for about two years. You're going to have to keep up the pace. But in a little while, it will all calm down. What I'm going to discuss now is not about the company. I'd also like to keep it between us, even if Mario and Kate already know. I want to announce that I'm setting up a charity foundation for hundreds of millions of dollars. I am currently considering how to use these millions. One thing is certain, the money goes towards helping others. I have to decide who I'm going to help and how. I want you to know that, without any further commitment on my part, I'm considering bringing you in to work for me.

— All three of us? asks Layla.

— Yes, if you don't mind moving.

— Ethan, when will we know? Jim asks.

— Jim, I'm here for at least another year, maybe even two, replies Ethan. It'll all depend. In a few months, I'll know more. But I have a feeling that I'll be needing you and not 10 years from now. I've discussed this with Kate and she agrees.

— Personal question if I may? Sara asks.

— Of course, replies Ethan.

— And what will Kate do?

— She'll stay here. But I may need her as well. We'll see.

— Ethan, if you're discussing this with us now, it's because you already have some ideas, says Jim.

— Yes, I have a few ideas. I know exactly what I won't do. I have a few ideas about what to do, and that's where you come in. What I don't know right now is how. In fact, we're going to get together and think about it. I'll need all three of you.

— I'm in, says Jim.

— Me too, Sara agrees.

— Me too, adds Layla.

— Wonderful. I'm looking forward to it. Now I would like to thank you for your work so far. I had a bunch of worries, but I didn't even have to think about security, it's crazy. I knew you were there and that was enough for me.

— We only did our job, says Jim.

— It may be that simple for you, but for me, it meant much more. When it comes to security, trust and acceptance are key for me. For instance, about next week, Jim, you said that Layla would take care of everything. That's enough for me. And now I can focus on something else, like the future, mine and ours.

— Thanks...

— Okay. Let's go to Mario's celebration. Do you have a ride?

— No, but we'll take a taxi.

— No, I reserved a limousine. Come with me. Wait for me at the entrance, I'll go and get Kate, and we'll meet you there.

He enters the private room. There are several tables with their names on them. The president and the senior vice-presidents, including Ethan, are seated at one of the eight tables. Once everyone has arrived, Mario stands up and walks over to the podium where there is a microphone.

— Good morning, everyone. Thank you for coming. Today is a very special day. We're becoming one of the largest financial investment firms in America. And it's all because of you. Of course, there is the conductor who contributed just a tad.

Everyone stands up and applauds Ethan, Mario along with them. There is a standing ovation for a few minutes. Then Mario resumes the speech:

— You all know the circumstances, which I would describe as questionable, but you were all able to do your job without too much fear, except for George that is...

Everyone gets up and applauds.

— As I said, without too much fear, and that's thanks to the outstanding work of The Guard. Please stand up.

Jim, Sara and Layla stand up. They receive a warm round of applause. George and a few others stand up and applaud them with huge smiles. Mario continues:

—Ethan and Kate, you've done a tremendous job. I'm very proud to have people like you. Now, Ethan, we all thought you were completely insane, then a great strategist, after that, a unifier, then an excellent planner, and finally, a very respectable and transparent individual. I'd like you to take my place on this podium.

Mario returns to his seat and Ethan goes to the microphone.

—Mario, as you finished, you asked if I wanted to take your place. I felt a shiver because I thought you were referring to your place as president.

They all start laughing.

—But you continued by saying: "on this podium". That I can do. Seriously though. Mario, thank you for your kind words. You should know that I appreciate it very much, coming from you. I would like to say that, without you, Mario, none of this would have been possible.

He motions to everyone to wait to applaud. Then he continues:

—Mario, from the very beginning, I felt your almost unconditional support. Of course, it was always after checking with Kate to see if I was right.

Laughter erupts. Ethan looks Mario in the eye:

—You are a man with determination and I've appreciated that on many occasions. You are also a man of respect and I've appreciated that even more. There you go.

Ethan pauses and everyone gets up and gives Mario a long round of applause. Ethan continues:

—Now everyone else. I don't want to address team by team. We would never finish. So, I will genuinely say that I appreciated the cooperation of each of one you tremendously. In my career, I've had the opportunity to run many projects, but I must say, this has definitely been the best one. At first, I thought it wasn't going fast enough and that there was a lot of red tape, but Kate warned me that when you got started, I would have to run to keep up with you. Kate, you were right.

—As usual, she says loudly.

Laughs and more laughs.

—So, I want to thank you all. You are wonderful individuals. Be proud of what we've achieved. Finally, you will all get to tell your children and grandchildren that you were part of the largest financial transaction in all of Canada. I would like to end with a thank you to Mario. You trusted me and let me interrupt your schedule many times. I am aware that this is extremely exceptional and thank you again for all your support.

There's a big round of applause.

—Congratulations everyone and enjoy your meal.

Ethan leaves the podium as people keep applauding. The food is served and conversation ensues between the various team members. After their lunch, several people go to the microphone and compliment Ethan, Kate, George, Jim, Sara and Layla.

In New York, Ethan starts off the meeting:

— Good afternoon and thank you for being here. We have two very busy days ahead of us. The purpose of this meeting is to become very familiar with everything surrounding the projects. Specifically, project management methodologies, project types, their success rates, efficiency, simply everything. I believe many of my coordinators already know a number of the directors here. Despite that, I would like for us to go around the table and introduce ourselves. I would like to start on my right. Ryan, you can start.

Ryan speaks:

— Hi, I'm Ryan Labelle. I'm an accountant and I just changed jobs. I moved from accounting to the Projects Office.

Ethan speaks again:

— I'll add a little to what you said, Ryan. Right now, I run the Projects Office. I'll be running it for one to two years. Ryan will be my right-hand man during this period. After that, he will be my replacement. So,

you will see him taking up more and more space. Let's continue with the round table.

Everyone introduces themselves and the discussions begin. Ethan and Ryan are the ones asking the questions.

During the following week, Ethan and Ryan keep working on finding projects that affect all the company's departments. This overall preliminary planning has been promised for the next steering committee meeting.

On Friday morning, the president of the American company along with his two bodyguards arrive at the building. Jim and Sara are waiting for them at the entrance. Jim speaks:

— Good morning. I see you came with your bodyguards.

— You can never be too careful.

— Do you have weapons?

— Yes.

— Do you have a Canadian licence to carry your weapons?

— No. We have US licences.

— You will have to hand them over to us for the duration of your meeting.

— That is out of the question.

— Then I will have to report you to my superior. Wait a few seconds, he orders while moving not too far away.

Jim comes back and reports:

— My supervisor will be here shortly.

On the main floor, Ethan walks towards this group. He extends his hand to the president to greet him. He says:

— My Guard director just informed me that your bodyguards have illegal weapons in Canada.

— They are legal in the United States.

— In the United States, everyone has weapons. But not here. So, they can either hand them over and get them back later, or your bodyguards can stay here and wait for you. It's up to you. Just remember that you're just here to sign the contract, then you can disappear from our lives entirely. So, you're not in any danger here.

— There's no way they're waiting for me here. Nor are they handing over their weapons.

— I see.

Ethan waves to two policemen who just arrived nearby. He tells them:

— Officers, we have two so-called bodyguards in possession of guns without a Canadian licence.

Moving his hand towards his gun, the officer asks:

— Is that correct?

They say yes.

— Then we're going to have to arrest you for carrying illegal firearms.

— We have US licences.

— We are not in the United States. Put your hands behind your back.

They refuse to comply. One of the bodyguards tries to pull out his gun. Jim immediately removes the gun and pins the guard down on his stomach. He holds the gun to the bodyguard's head.

Meanwhile, the other bodyguard manages to pull out his weapon. Sara immediately disarms him and sets the gun under his chin. As she does so, she orders him:

— Put your hands behind your back immediately.

The policeman handcuffs him. Sara gives the gun to the policeman. The second police officer comes up to Jim and handcuffs one of the bodyguard's hands, and then the other. Jim gets up and hands the gun over to the policeman. The policeman helps the bodyguard get up. Jim searches the bodyguard's pockets and pulls out an I.D. Jim dials a number and says the name of the bodyguard. Sara approaches Jim and gives him the other guard's ID. After verifying the identity of the second guard, he hangs up the call and comes back to the group. He addresses the police officers:

— Gentlemen, I just checked and they are bodyguards. I believe this is the first time they come to Canada for their work. They don't know our laws. Is it possible to forget all this as a misunderstanding?

— Sorry sir. These people possess illegal firearms. We have to arrest them and take them to court. Then, a judge will decide.

Ethan asks the police:

— Officers, I understand, but please just let me make a call. It won't take long. I just have to call your chief of police.

— Go ahead, sir.

Ethan walks away and comes back after a few seconds:

— He'd like to talk to you.

Ethan hands his phone to the police officer who walks away:

— Yes sir. Yes sir. Good sir.

The policeman returns, he hands the phone over to Ethan. While removing the handcuffs, he tells the bodyguards:

— We're not going to arrest you, but we have to confiscate your weapons. If you want them back, you'll have to submit a written request.

One of the bodyguards wants to object, but the president stops him:

— Shut up. Follow me and do nothing.

Ethan leads the group, followed by the president, then the two bodyguards, and Jim and Sara follow last. One of the bodyguards turns to Jim:

— Who are you to disarm us like that?

— We are soldiers. I am the head of The Guard and I work for the Executive Vice-President who is walking in front of us.

— I see.

Ethan brings them to a small conference room near the reception. Ethan asks the receptionist:

— Can you let Mario know that we're here?

— Yes, sir.

In the conference room, Ethan invites the president to have a seat. The acquisition papers are before him, ready to be signed. Mario arrives and, as a courtesy, greets the president. He takes the seat next to him and says:

— Good morning. If you would read the document and sign both copies.

The American president quickly looks over the document and signs both copies. He passes them to Mario who also signs them. Mario gives him one of the two copies, which he leaves on the table and, out of his briefcase, he draws two letters, which he hands to Mario:

— Sir, as discussed with Mr. Miller, here is my letter of resignation and that of my Vice-President of Marketing. We hope you'll honour our agreement.

Mario reads both letters and says:

— We'll honour the agreement. So, you can resign from the company. Do you need anything from your old office?

— Not as far as I'm concerned. I will notify my VP that he can leave immediately.

— Can you call him right now and tell him to leave immediately? Jim, can you make sure that he leaves right away?

— You don't beat around the bush.

— You have absolutely nothing to say to me about ethics, replies Mario. Please, go ahead.

He calls his VP:

— Everything is signed. Our letters have been given. You can leave the company now. Someone's watching to make sure you leave your office right now. So, nothing stupid.

Then he says to his bodyguards:

— Gentlemen, come with me, we're leaving.

Mario says:

— Ethan, you're coming by my office?

—Yes. Just give me a minute with Jim and Sara.

All three remain in the conference room. Ethan congratulates them:

—You two impressed me yet again. You surprised both bodyguards and the two police officers.

—Bodyguards who haven't been in the army don't receive proper training, says Jim.

—The police training is not as advanced as the one for soldiers, adds Sara.

—They're no match for you anyway. It reminded me of the jazz bar. Thank you both.

Ethan goes to Mario's office where he finds Kate.
Mario asks:

— Did something happen downstairs?

— Yep! Both bodyguards had unlicensed guns and they didn't want to hand them over. Jim called me and I went down there.

Kate interrupts him and says:

— You went downstairs to meet two armed men. What were you thinking? Mario, I'm going to kill him!

— Kate, please stay calm and let me continue. So, while I waited for the elevator, I called 911. Two policemen arrived at the same time as I did. They knew that I called. I waved to them to wait. So, I asked the two bodyguards to hand over their guns or to remain at the entrance. They refused and the former president did not want to either. I waved to the police who approached us. The two bodyguards tried retrieving their guns, but Jim and Sara disarmed them and pinned them down. It was great seeing those guys get screwed. And the two police officers didn't even have the time to move. Except to get their handcuffs once the guards

were pinned down. I had to call the chief of police so that they wouldn't get arrested, but their guns were confiscated.

The following Monday, Mario meets his Board of Directors. Among the items on the agenda is Ethan Miller's contract. Mario speaks:

— The agreement stipulates that Ethan would receive 10% of the equity acquired. There are a few points that we need to consider. First of all, Ethan reduced the net worth of the company by \$300,000,000 knowing he'd lose \$30,000,000. In addition, he is setting up a charity, and he wants all the amount of his bonus from this transaction to go to the charity foundation. This entitles us to a 30% tax credit, about \$160,000,000. On the other hand, he had to deal with embezzlement, fraud and theft. For instance, last Friday he had to confront two American bodyguards and had to call the police. This was during the signing of the purchase documents. He also found a way to increase our sales and the sales of the American company by consolidating the databases. Instead of the projected annual increase of \$510,000,000, he now promises us \$850,000,000. That is \$350,000,000 more annually.

— Mario, what are you getting at?

—I am getting there. I suggest we vote to compensate him for his \$30,000,000 loss. I therefore propose that the sum of \$525,000,000 be increased to 555,000,000. I also propose that Ethan receive 10% of the annual increase in net sales that he brought up. This could be a premium of five years, which would give him \$40,000,000 a year, always as a charitable donation.

The Chairman of the Board says:

—Mario, I understand your request. Moreover, the updates you gave us about his excellent work were always very eloquent. I think Mr. Miller deserves compensation for the loss he suffered when he decreased the value of the American company. I would suggest \$25,000,000, which is the sum of \$550,000,000.

—I support this proposal, says one board member.

—I also support this, says another member.

The Chairman continues:

—The motion is approved. Mario, do you have a proposition as regards payment?

—Tomorrow, Ethan will give me the bank account number. Our current liquidity and our low debt allow us to pay this sum in one instalment later this week. Also, the tax deduction we will get is most welcome for this year. Our respective lawyers will ensure the transfer and the charitable donation receipt.

—I support this proposal, says one board member.

—I also support it, says another.

—The motion is approved, says the Chairman of the Board. Now, I suggest we approve Mario's request regarding Ethan Miller's annual net sales increase.

This proposal is supported by two board members.

—The motion is approved. Next item.

After leaving the Board, Mario asks Edith:

—Can you schedule a 15-minute meeting with Ethan and Kate for tomorrow morning?

As soon as they arrive, Ethan and Kate head to Mario's office, which begins:

—Hello. For once, it won't be Ethan who has something to announce. So, I have to tell you that the Board of Directors approved a premium for Ethan. Your charity foundation will receive \$550,000,000 this week.

—So, I have a premium of \$25,000,000?

—Right. That almost makes up for the \$30,000,000 you put on the table by decreasing their net worth.

—I wasn't expecting that. I appreciate it very much.

—Ethan, it's not over. The Board agreed to pay you 10% over a five-year period, based on the increase in net sales that you determined. I've estimated this at about \$40,000,000 a year.

—I expected even less. Thank you, Mario. The foundation will be doing so much more with these \$200,000,000. Thank you, a million times.

—You've earned it. Kate, can you take care of this with our respective lawyers?

They leave Mario's office and head to Kate's office.

— Congratulations Ethan. Do you know when you'll open the bank account?

— I'm supposed to meet my lawyer in half an hour to sign the documents, including the bank account. He will handle the transfer and issue the receipt. If you are free, would you like to come? I'll introduce you and you can arrange all of it.

— I'm looking at my schedule. I'm going to have to postpone a meeting, but it's possible. Will it be in your office?

— Yes. You want me to send for you?

— No, no.

Ethan's lawyer arrives ushered by the receptionist. Ethan invites him in and shakes his hand:

— Please, come in.

— Someone named Kate Jackson will be joining us. She is the Senior Vice-President of Accounting and Finance. You must know that she and I are dating.

Kate arrives at Ethan's office:

— Hello. May I come in?

— Come in. Kate Jackson, this is Jocelyn Lamonde, Attorney. As I mentioned, Kate is an SVP and a wonderful companion.

— Nice to meet you, says Jocelyn. I see that Ethan is a very lucky man.

— Nice to meet you. Thanks for the compliment, says Kate.

— Have a seat. Jocelyn, Kate and a company lawyer will be working with you for the two upcoming transactions. By the way, the final amount was approved by the Board of Directors yesterday, and it was settled at five \$550,000,000.

— Nice amount.

—Yes. It was also determined that there would be only one transfer, later this week, if possible.

—It's possible. Ethan, you need to sign the documents and everything will be done today. The account will be open today and operational as of tomorrow.

—Perfect. Tell me where to sign. You can discuss the arrangements while I look at the documents.

Kate asks:

—Let's go to my office and let Ethan read quietly.

Ethan signs the documents. He calls Kate:

—I signed the documents. After you're done, Jocelyn can come to my office and pick them up.

—You can leave them with Nancy.

—No, I want to talk to him for a little bit.

—Okay, I'll give him the message.

—Thank you.

Ethan calls up Ryan:

—Good morning, Ryan.

—Good morning, Ethan.

—Tomorrow is the steering committee meeting.

—I know.

—The overall preliminary plans need to be presented. Do you feel comfortable doing it?

—Yes. No problem.

—It'll be like the last time, you could leave the meeting after your presentation.

—Okay.

The steering committee meeting begins. Mario opens with:

— Hello everyone. As usual, we'll start with the acquisition/merger project. Ethan!

— Mario, if I may, Ryan will present the preliminary plans.

— Okay. Go ahead, Ryan.

— From the onset, we want to ensure that all the elements of the merger are settled. So, we considered all projects. The IT projects obviously but also the marketing, accounting, sales, customer service, and human resources ones. Is there a problem of jurisdiction?

The committee members shake their head no. Mario confirms:

— Ryan, I like your statement of jurisdiction problems. As far as I am concerned, there's no problem, quite the contrary in fact. Please, continue.

Ethan looks to Kate, who gives him a slight smile. Ryan continues:

— You should note that this plan is preliminary. Next week we will convene all the project leaders, that's about 30 people. We're going to go through all the

projects that I'll identify today. The purpose is to improve projections and give them certain order as well. We asked the project managers to provide us with a list of their current and their planned projects. This will allow us to develop a project portfolio that will require prioritization. Is that okay?

The Senior Vice-Presidents agree and Ryan continues. Ethan takes down comments and questions. Ryan finishes up and prepares to leave the meeting. Mario asks him:

—Ryan, what are you doing?

—My part is over. I'll let you continue.

—Ethan, I'd like your opinion. I saw Ryan's presentation about planning. I know you developed it together. Since it's widespread and affects everyone here, don't you think Ryan should be present at the steering committee meetings for a while at least? If we have any industry trade secrets, we'll see what we do. What do you think?

—Mario, I'm glad you're asking me. Same as you, during his presentation, I noticed the same thing and would have spoken to you about it.

—So you're okay with him staying?

—Yes.

—What about all of you?

—Yes...

—Then Ryan, you could stay and Edith will schedule you for the next meetings.

—Perfect, says Ryan.

—Ethan, do you have anything else?

—Yes. I didn't mention it to you because I was running out of time. On the last week of April, Ryan, the acquisition coordinators and I spent two days in New York. You already know that. What you don't know is that our first goal was to evaluate the directors in order to determine who could act as an interim for the vice-presidents who will be fired.

Mario, raising both arms in the air, exclaims:

—I just can't believe it. You did this, and you, Ethan, are just now announcing it to us, as if it's normal. I just can't believe it. Did you find any?

—Yes, Mario. Ryan and I used an evaluation grid with several questions. There is one grid for primary functions and one grid per vice-president. When we came back, he and I agreed. That being said, we'll meet with you in private to go over our findings. Today, I would like to know, in light of what I just told you, if you've thought of a layoff strategy. Will it be gradual or all at once?

Mario asks:

—Actually, with your one-on-one meetings, you will move the issue forward. Do you have any names?

—Yes.

—So, if I understand you correctly, it's certain that we'll have interim positions.

—In any case, Mario, there's a good chance we will. I suggest that we bring them here so that you can meet them. It would be an interview disguised as a visit, just

like our very first visit in New York, you remember. What do you think?

They all say it's a good strategy. Mario concludes:

—Then this is how we'll proceed. The communications department can organize it, in sync with the interviews. That will be next week.

—Not a problem, says the SVP in charge.

—Perfect. Anything else, Ethan?

—No, otherwise you'll kill me.

—Right. Next item.

The next day, Ethan receives an email from his lawyer telling him that the money has been deposited. He logs on to the bank's website and checks for himself. He replies to the email, writing, "Hello, Jocelyn. Everything is fine. Thank you."

In the evening, he has supper with Kate:

—Kate, the foundation's bank account shows millions of dollars.

—Bravo, you did it. It's for real now. By the way, we didn't see each other yesterday. I found that you really stood out at the steering committee meeting, as usual and for a number of reasons. You know, I've never seen Mario throw his arms in the air. Yesterday, I was really proud to be your partner.

—I hope wasn't just yesterday that you were proud to be with me.

—Yesterday you accomplished some really great things. And then there's Ryan.

—Yeah! He's quite good. Kate, another subject. There are \$550,000,000 in the account. I did some calculations. If I invest everything except for \$2,000,000,

at an average return of 10%, I would be making about 150,000 a day.

—That sounds right to me, but to get 10%, you'll need some very good investments.

—Kate, I'm certainly not going to invest the money myself. I don't know anything about the stock market. But what I really want to say is that tomorrow I'm losing \$150,000 and again on Saturday I'm losing another \$150,000 and again on Sunday and Monday and Tuesday. In five days, I will have lost a little over half a million dollars. I need to invest this money and it's urgent. Do you know of a good investment firm?

—Ethan, why don't you use the firm we are currently using? They have given us annual returns between 10% and 15% for years now. According to my annual research, they are among the top five firms in Quebec and in the top eight in Canada.

—Hey! That's a great idea. Can you help me?

—Of course. Do you have the approvals of your Board of Directors for the foundation's establishment? The bank accounts, presidency, etc.

—Yes. I have it all back at my apartment.

—Okay. We'll go by your place later and you'll give me the documents. Tomorrow, I will contact the president of the company.

—Do you know him?

—Of course. We speak and meet up regularly. He may give us an appointment on Friday afternoon. Do you want me to be there?

— Oh yes. Now you are outside my comfort zone. I must not make any mistakes. I would appreciate your help.

— Don't get too excited. You'll have to pay for my help.

— I'd love to.

— It's crazy but I don't doubt that for a second. Friday afternoon, does that suit you?

— Yes, and you?

— What wouldn't I do for you? Now, you'll have to ask your lawyer to prepare a bank transfer for the amount you want to invest. You'll need to have access to it when we meet with the president, and when the time comes, you'll have to sign it as president. Why are you keeping \$2,000,000?

— To have a margin to maneuver.

— \$2,000,000, you'll have a margin to maneuver all right. Ethan, you're not going to do much with it in the first six months.

— I am surprised that you say that to me. Yet you know me: when I move into high gear...

— Yes, I do know you, but I also know all the work you'll have at the company and all the work you'll do with me. If you put all your energy on the company and the foundation, our romance will be shorter and shorter. Besides, I don't want you to exhaust yourself and risk a burnout.

— Do you think I should calm down?

— Oh yes. Look, let's rush to invest the money. As you calculated, it's quite urgent. But then, we'll calm down a little and if you want, we can work together and do things the right way. There is no rush. You will have to conduct a business case. And it must be very strong if you want to use that money efficiently.

— You are right. And promise me that if I work too hard, you will tell me and calm me down.

— Tell me how I'm supposed to calm you down. When you start, you're a real stallion who's gone crazy.

— I will answer you with a question, if I may.

— Go ahead.

— How do you stop a stallion that's gone crazy? Think about it.

— Oh, yes! We bring in a mare in heat.

— You understood everything.

— You really are a pervert. Yeah! A real pervert. Have you finished your meal?

— Yes.

— Me too. Shall we go to your apartment? And no sex.

— Sniff.

The next day, Ethan contacts his lawyer for a bank draft and Kate calls the president who schedules an appointment in his office. Kate emails him the charity foundation's information to begin setting up the account.

Mario, for his part, gives a press conference announcing the acquisition for more than \$5,300,000,000, making his company one of the three largest financial investment firms in North America.

Throughout the entire week that follows, the project managers discuss their current and future projects. During all this time, the American directors visit the company's headquarters in Montreal for two days. They are met by the Senior Vice-Presidents who evaluate them secretly.

On the following Saturday afternoon, Kate goes to Ethan's apartment. She kisses him and asks:

—I bet you're working on your foundation?

—Yes. I must clarify the mission entered in the foundation's declaration form.

—Do you want us to look at it together?

—I'd love to. Would you like a glass of wine?

—Yes.

Ethan pours two glasses of red.

—I'll start. The foundation wants to help those in need. But there are people in need everywhere. Let's start with whatever is closest to us. So, even flourishing countries, must take care of the poor population, this includes Quebec.

—That makes sense.

—Destitute people are created during a natural disaster, like floods, cyclones, earthquakes, etc. There are organizations such as the Red Cross, government public safety agencies, the United Nations and many others who are equipped to help these people. The foundation cannot intervene, knowing nothing about it.

—That makes sense again.

—There are also people in need who were born in poor countries. The United Nations calls these countries the “least developed countries”. They use the acronym: LDCs. I did some research and found that there are just under fifty LDCs in the world. If the foundation can help some of these countries, that would be great.

—You’re only talking about some of them. With \$550,000,000, the foundation will be able to help only one or two.

—Probably. Even if it’s only one and I can really help a million people over there, who are in need, that would be extraordinary, wouldn’t it?

—You’re not wrong.

—So, without being specific, the countries I would be targeting are LDCs. Basically, the countries located in Africa, Asia and Oceania. I would want to exclude Asia altogether. With the exception of one single country, they are currently in a state of war or terrorism. In terms of safety, Oceania is the best. In Africa, it varies.

—Ethan, you just set your purpose.

—I think so, yes. Now, I have to identify the areas of support. Upon reflection, I believe that it’ll vary, on infrastructure, agriculture, tourism, mining, politics, pretty much everything.

—By now, you’ve certainly thought about how.

—You’re right. For me, the basic principle is that I don’t want to give money.

—Why not?

— Let's say the foundation gives \$10,000,000 to a country's leader, it would be optimistic to think that the \$10,000,000 would go to actually helping people. A lot of it would end up in the leader's bank account and then, it would go to his friends and ultimately, very little money would be used to help those in need, if any.

— Ethan, what you're saying is that everyone in power is fundamentally bad.

— Kate, I wouldn't put it that way. I think we have to look outside the Canadian context. In Canada, corruption, collusion and bribes are very badly frowned upon. Elsewhere, let's just say, it is entirely normal, because they are poor. I'm talking about bribes. There, they call it income. So, when an amount comes into their hands, they take some of it. Kate, I don't want to generalize, but just listen to this: let's assume that money has to pass through five hands for a product or service. Only one person may take some money while the other four have some integrity. This doesn't change the fact that, at the end of the day, the amount of money needed to deliver a service or product is very minimal.

— I see. So, what did you come up with?

— I'm going to hire suppliers of products or services. All these suppliers would come from different countries. Then they would travel to the country in question and carry out their work. This way, the foundation has control over the suppliers, the prices and delivery.

— If you're going to send suppliers to these countries, you're going to have to ensure their safety. Let me

guess. You'll use *The Guard*, which won't be needed a much by our company.

— Absolutely right.

— Does Jim know about this?

— Yes.

— And Mario?

— Yes, Bella.

— You're going very fast. It's going to take a lot of work and a lot of money.

— Yes. With the exception of the *Guard*, the foundation will have to respect maximum cost limits. A good business case will have to determine these limits. If it weren't for the *Guard*, I would say right off the bat that it's about 10% of the total aid.

— This percentage would be applied to what?

— Administrative costs and travel expenses for the managers. Operating costs such as management of tenders, analyses and contracting, premises, performance monitoring, etc.

— Okay. You said with the exception of the *Guard*. What do you expect these expenses to be?

— I'm going to have to find other funding sources. The cost of the *Guard* will vary based on the country, how dangerous it is and their cooperation in protecting us.

— I see. You're talking about other sources, what do you mean?

— Part of it will be paid by the suppliers, part of it by the country and part of it through investment

income. I don't know exactly how yet. My business case will clarify that point.

—All this seems very interesting to me. What else?

—To get started and to avoid having to repeat myself, I will get a website. I will define the mission, the goals, the rules, the targets and the selection criteria. In addition, I will describe the process (products and services) and the criteria for selecting suppliers. I'll also include some requests for support. When the time comes, I'll add the countries we helped and the financial information related to this aid. I'll put the financial statements on it as well.

—Writing all of this down will take a long time.

—Yes.

—Let me know if I can help you in any way. How much time have you given yourself?

—For the first version of all this, I have given myself a month.

—Ethan, you're not serious, murmurs Kate. That means we won't see each other for the next month, except at work.

—No way. If it takes two or three months or more, then so be it. Here is the proof: today we worked together. With you, I managed to progress a lot in this project. Now if you don't mind, we'll stop and I'll cook us a good supper. Then we'll decide on a nice dessert.

—For dessert, everything is already decided. We will play cards.

—I must inform you that today is my lucky day. So, you will lose.

—It's not done yet. My luck is always natural and consistent. What's on the menu?

—I'd like to cook chicken breasts in a Dijon and honey sauce, accompanied by Asian vegetables and rice. What do you think?

—You make my mouth water.

—Are you talking about the menu or the dessert?

—Both.

After the meal, they exit the shower together. Ethan kneels on the bed. He takes off his bathrobe and lies on his stomach.

—I told you I was going to win. Get to work!

At the usual steering committee meeting on Wednesday afternoon, Ethan starts:

— Good afternoon. Last week, we held a meeting with most of the Canadian and American project managers. It's been a tough week, but the results will certainly please you. Ryan will present the reviewed version of the merger project. Thereafter, he will present the portfolios of all current and future projects, excluding those for the merger. Afterwards, I'll discuss the prioritization. Also, you met with American directors to determine potential right-hand men. Before I turn it over to Ryan, I'd like to go around the table to get your impressions. If you don't mind, let's start to my right.

Each senior vice-president briefly recounts their meeting. Ethan speaks again:

— Thank you. I can see that each one of you identified their first and second choice for interim vice-president?

— Correct...

— So, from an operational standpoint, the merger, if it is well managed and we'll make sure that it is, shouldn't cause any significant problems.

— Probably...

— Thank you. Ryan, you're up.

Ryan presents his list of mergers and the two portfolios on the giant screen.

On the following Friday morning, Ethan calls the company's stockbroker. He says:

— I want to sell 50% of my company shares.

— Sir, if you do that, you'll get a capital gain of \$2,000,000, which would give you a net gain of about \$1,400,000 after taxes. The value of the stock keeps climbing. If you wait, you'll get much greater profits.

— First of all, my net capital gain is \$1,500,000, because I paid \$500,000 for these shares. I purchased these in compliance with the maximum legal amount I could buy. So, my gain after-taxes will be \$1,775,000. The second point is, this net gain is enough for me. And I still keep 50% that can either grow or not. So, I'm asking you to sell 50% of my company shares.

— Perfect, sir.

— I believe you already have my bank account number?

— Yes, sir.

— When will the money be in my account?

—The money will be deposited today before the banks close, but it will only be available on Tuesday. The banks are slow.

—Thank you.

After their Friday shopping, Kate says:

—Ethan, tonight, unless you have other plans, you're coming to my house for supper.

—Okay. You want me to bring something?

—No, I have everything I need.

—Really everything you need?

—You only think about one thing.

Later, Ethan knocks on her door.

—Come in, it's not locked, she shouts.

He enters. Kate says:

—Why do you knock? You know that it's never locked whenever I expect you.

—I want to respect your privacy.

—That's very kind of you. Please pour us a glass and sit down while I prepare the meal.

—I'd rather participate.

—You can't this time. Just talk to me.

—Okay. Today I sold 50% of my company shares.

—You could have waited. They're still going up.

—Right, but they'll go down very soon. Their current price is a little too high.

—Did you make a decent profit?

—Yes. Once I clear the taxes, I have about \$1,800,000.

—That's a lot, isn't it?

—Not really. With my savings, I bought as much as I could legally.

—I see. As for me, I didn't use the full advantage of the company.

—For the entire time you've been working there, you've probably made a few million dollars?

—Yes. I think I have about \$5,000,000 range. And the foundation, it's progressing a little?

—Yes. I took notes for my case analysis. I was wondering if you would like to work on it.

—Sure. Tomorrow, you could go over your notes with me and I could start. Are we going to work here or at your place?

—My place, because I have all the things we'll need. I knew you would want to get involved. So, I set up a worktable in my office. I even bought you a real desk chair. You know, with different settings.

—It's nice how you take care of me.

—It's just normal because my bedroom is right next to the office.

—No sex at work.

—So, we'll have to come here and make love.

—Keep going.

—I started the website. Here's what I plan to put on it. Do you want me to continue or should I wait for

us to eat? But not after the meal. I have other things to tell you.

— I have a few things to say to you after the meal as well. Keep going. If I need to focus, I'll ask you to stop.

— Okay. At first, the site will be informational. Later, I will pay someone to make it more transactional if it's needed. As I already mentioned, it will include the foundation's mission, its goals and rules, the targets with their selection criteria, the suppliers with their selection criteria, and forms requesting support as well as a call for tenders, for both types.

— Two types?

— Yes. We'll have tenders for products and for services.

— I see.

— After that, there will be a list of countries that we support and the financial information related to that aid. In summary, I explain the current situation, then I leave it open for requests for support, I provide calls for tenders, and when the time comes, I'll provide statistics on the help we granted. I will also provide information on the status of the foundation, but I am not sure when.

— That's very interesting.

— Kate, I'm doing all this in order to minimize the number of employees I'll need.

— I see. Can you come and help me, please?

— Of course, he nods as he gets up.

He goes behind her and takes her by the waist. He kisses her neck. She lets herself go then she says, shaking her shoulders to express her thrill:

—That's not what I was asking your help for.

—So, what do you want me to do?

—You slowly pour the sauce into the pan while I mix. Don't go too fast, the blend should be smooth.

—Blend! Wow. We're serious here.

—Why, don't you use that word? I often do. For example, I blend, you blend, he blends. But I prefer it when you blend with me, she said with a naughty look.

—I like it too when you blend with me. Should I still pour?

—Yes. Slowly.

The next day, on Saturday, he works alone in the morning and she comes to join him after lunch. They work together for most of the afternoon. He asks her:

— Anything to suggest for supper?

— How about a pizza?

— Good idea. I'll call and we'll stop working as soon as it gets here. Do you agree?

— Yes. Ethan, next Saturday, I'd like for us to go out together.

— In the day or the evening?

— In the evening.

— A supper or a show or a dinner show? he asks.

— I wouldn't mind a dinner show.

— Good idea. You can go to Le Balcon or at Cabaret du Casino or La Maison du Jazz or Rasputin or Pat'e Palo.

— After the pizza, we'll look at who's performing.

— Okay. Do you already have a dress for the occasion?

— Do you doubt it?

— Not really. So, the business case is moving forward?

—Do you doubt it? What about you and the web-site?

—I need a name for the site. You want to discuss it with me?

—Of course.

—I checked several names that have no hits on Google. Be it the full name or the acronym. But there's one that may be the right one.

—And what did you find?

—Organization to support the least developed countries. The acronym would be OSLDC and it could even become our logo. We are talking about an umbrella that allows several non-profit organizations to be under it. The foundation would be one of them.

—Ethan, you must be tired!

—Why? You don't agree?

—On the contrary, I think the name and acronym are perfect. It's a perfect example of what you're doing. You put a lot of effort into it.

—I see. So, Bella, do I have my WEB name?

—Yep!

—This will allow me to add metatags.

—Meta tags! You want to teach me?

—It's information that we put on what's called metadata. It's important for HTML pages or WEB pages. Search engines will use it to see what's on the pages. It's necessary if we want search engines to find us and showcase our site.

—Have you done it before?

—Yes. But I'm no expert. For now, this will be enough. Later, I'll hire experts. At least they'll have something to start with.

—Good idea.

—So, I'll be able to create my very first WEB page.

—Not now. Pizza is coming.

They sit at the table and slice the pizza. A glass of red wine, a good Australian Shiraz, completes their menu.

After their meal, they search the web to find shows and the restaurant they'll be going to. Kate says:

—I'm leaning towards the Cabaret du Casino. And we can go play a little in the casino after supper, if we want.

—It'll depend on your dress.

—I know. We'll see if you can restrain yourself.

On Sunday, Kate joins Ethan. As soon as she arrives at his place, she says to him:

—Today, the weather is nice and I'd like to take a walk at the old port.

—Good idea. We'll get some fresh air.

—As for the business case, I want to talk to you about the resources you'll need.

—Okay.

—We have to establish a starting point. It's obvious that right now, there's only you.

—What about you?

—You have me for free.

—Me too.

Together, they develop an operation plan with the associated resources. Around 2 p.m., they go to the port to walk around.

The following week, Ethan works Monday to Thursday evenings. On Friday afternoon, they go shopping, as usual. Ethan suggests:

— Kate, last night I finished the first version of the website. I can show it to you tomorrow.

— Why tomorrow?

— Well, tonight we're not supposed to work.

— We can make an exception if you want. Tomorrow, I want to finish the business case. Tomorrow night we have a date and I want us to forget about everything and just spend time together.

— Okay for spending time together. So tonight, we'll have super and you'll look at the website. You can give me your comments and I'll take notes. Is that okay?

— Yes.

They eat, then Kate sits down at the computer and carefully looks at the website. Ethan stands close to her and takes notes.

The next day, they meet up again and continue working. Kate finishes the business case while Ethan edits the website according to the notes he took on the previous day. Kate tells him:

—Ethan, I'm done. I can tell you that the administrative and operating costs, excluding the Guard, are a little less than 10%.

—Is that true? Let me see.

After a few minutes of reading, he says:

—That's absolutely perfect. You're the best.

—And it's going to cost you very dearly.

—No problem, I have the means to pay you.

—I advise caution at your age.

—Have no fear. You're the one on top, doing all the cardio.

—Yeah!

They leave each other to go and take a shower and get ready for their evening. Ethan arrives at Kate's door and gently knocks. A few seconds later, Kate opens her door. She is wearing a red evening dress. The sleeves are longer than her arms and have a slit on the side above her wrists. An elegant neckline runs down slightly below her breasts to end at the drawstring that serves as her belt. The bottom of the dress lightly reaches the ground and the slits on each side rise above the top of her thighs. Ethan says:

—Damn! Turn around!

Slowly, she turns around. The top of her dress covers her entire back. The bottom of the dress is loose and the light fabric curves her buttocks.

—Your back and your butt! I imagine you have nothing underneath.

—You're perceptive. Do you mind?

—Of course not.

—I like your suit. And I like the colour of your shirt, and no tie. It makes you look distinguished and casual at the same time, very trendy.

—Does it go well with your dress?

- Yes, the Man! Shall we go?
- We'll take a limo.
- Okay.

At the restaurant of the *Casino de Montreal*, the waiter sits them at a table near the window. You can see the Montreal lights starting to brighten. The waiter approaches them:

—Has the lady and gentleman made their choice?

—I have a few questions. Does the special menu only include appetizers?

—Yes, Ma'am.

—Is it enough for one person, only appetizers?

—Yes, it is, Ma'am. In fact, it's a plate for two with a selection of seafood.

—Ethan, if it's all right with you, we'll order the special menu.

—Okay! says Ethan.

—Would you like some wine, do you have any preferences?

Ethan suggests:

—Bella, what do you think about a Pinot noir from Burgundy?

—That would be great, Kate agrees.

—Excellent choice. You will enjoy it.

—Thank you.

After their meal, the waiter offers them a digestif.
Ethan asks Kate:

— Kate, I don't know about you, but I'd like to enjoy
a good cognac while trying my luck at the casino.

— Me too.

— Would you like your bill? the waiter asks.

— Will it be one bill or two?

Ethan answers:

— One. And I'll be taking care of it.

— I'll be right back.

They walk through the casino slowly with a drink in their hand.

—Bella, do you see that? They're looking at us.

—Hey, the Man! They're not looking at us. They're looking at me.

—You're not wrong there. And what does it do to you?

—I love it and it excites me. And you?

—Somehow, I got used to people looking at you and admiring you. That's not true. I like it when guys think: What a lucky guy that is, he says while he gently strokes her back.

They keep walking and occasionally stop to play a few chips.

—Kate, this is the first time we come here together. Do you like gambling?

—Not really. But I like what we're doing together right now. We're walking around slowly with a drink in our hands. We look around and from time to time, we accept losing a little money. I'm enjoying my evening. I adore you and really want to make love to you.

— Me too. I'm enjoying all of it. As for making love, I'm the one who'll start.

— It's always you who starts.

— Yes, because if you start, I'll never be able to make you orgasm many times.

They keep walking and Ethan says:

— Look over there. There are roulette tables. Shall we go?

— Okay.

— I will show you how to play for a long time without losing all your money.

— I can't wait to see that. I presume you have a special strategy that you invented.

— How did you know?

— I know you well enough.

— So, we start by carefully watching the game. Should a colour, say red come out three times in a row, we play black. And if we play black and it comes out another three times, then we automatically play red. That's the strategy.

— Kiss me. I love it when you play dumb.

In the limousine, Kate starts:

— We're going to my house. I've been spending a lot of time at your place lately.

— Okay.

He gets closer to her and lays his hand on her bare knee. Then he moves it up gently to caress the side of her thigh and finally reaches her stomach, just above her pubis. He kisses her, delicately wetting her lips and she responds just as softly.

In her bedroom, he sits on the very edge of the bed, next to the side table and pulls Kate towards him. Her breasts are now at a level with his face. He uncovers her shoulders. She takes her arms out of her sleeves, and the top of her dress falls to her waist.

She grasps his head with both of her hands and savours this precious moment between them. Softly, she whispers:

— Take me into that sensual orgasm cloud.

— Just let yourself go.

— Yesss.

At the steering committee meeting, Ethan starts speaking:

—The merger involves three major themes. First, there's the change in name. We need to notify the current foreign clients that an acquisition took place and there was a change in name. We're going to have to let them know what measures we've taken, namely to correct the falsified accounts, the resignation of all the vice-presidents, and increased oversights. We'll also plan to tell them that we're working on new products. Does everyone follow me?

—Yes...

—To finish with this theme, we'll have to change our website and to review the television ads. We'll come up with estimates and get back to you. Moving on to the second theme, it is essential to merge the client databases. Then, we'll have to come up with a killer campaign to announce the new products. In fact, there will be two campaigns. One in Canada and one in the United States.

—The profits will come mainly from there! Mario anticipates.

— Absolutely. The third theme consists of IT projects related to the merger, of course. I tell this to highlight that all IT people are already busy working on current projects. Managing the project portfolio will be of major strategic importance. Ryan's going to talk to you about it right now. Ryan, you have the floor:

— Ethan and I developed a process to identify the portfolio projects and prioritize them. I'd like to explain it to you.

Ryan provides the explanations to everyone's satisfaction. Ethan speaks up again:

— I would like to mention that a journalist from the Wall Street Journal in New York contacted me earlier this week. He found out that I'm the one managing this acquisition/merger. He wants me to give him an interview.

Mario asks:

— Did you set a date?

— No. I wanted to talk to you about it. In my opinion, the choices are that I do it alone or that Mario takes the lead with or without Kate. Or even that it could be the three of us together. Mario, what do you think?

— Ethan, I have a question.

— I'm listening.

— Are you at all uncomfortable doing this interview alone?

— No.

— Then you should do it.

— Okay. Would you have any conditions?

— Yes. I'd like to see the article before it comes out.

— Okay. Do I need to get the journalist's commitment?

— Not the journalist, but his editor's.

— Okay, I'll get it before the interview.

— Perfect.

After the meeting, Ethan calls the reporter on the phone:

— Good afternoon. I'd be happy to meet you for an interview, but the president here wants your editor's commitment that the article will not be published without his approval.

— That's normal, Mr. Miller. Can we meet this Friday?

— Yes, in the morning.

— Great. I will be arriving at the hotel next to your office on Thursday evening. Could we meet there around 10 a.m., say at the hotel bar?

— Okay.

Ethan goes to the hotel bar and meets up with the journalist.

— Good morning, Ethan says. Did you have a good trip?

— Yes. I'm used to it by now. I come to Montreal very often. Should we get started?

— Yes. But I should tell you that there may be some questions that I won't be able to answer. There are agreements, trade secrets and reputations on the line. In such cases, I hope that you won't seek the answers by other means.

— Mr. Miller, I completely understand. My intention is to credit you for having managed the largest acquisition project in North America. I also found out that you stated a charity foundation and that the resulting contractual revenues generated by this impressive acquisition have been deposited in the foundation. The rumour is that this income, like the acquisition, is huge. There is also the rumour that you're giving several million dollars to this foundation. But, if you don't mind, I'd like to begin with the acquisition.

—Before we do that, it seems to me that we're talking about two articles. Would you agree?

—You're right, it is two articles.

—So, my president is interested in the article about the acquisition. I am interested in both.

—Perfect. But there is a connection between the two.

—The connection is obvious. We'll see how we'll approach it.

The journalist turns on the recorder on his phone and asks the questions written in his notebook.

Then he moves on to the questions about the foundation.

—Is it too invasive if I were to ask how much money you gave the foundation?

—I gave no money. It was the company that deposited the money as a donation.

—And can you tell me how much this was?

—I can because the foundation is subject to disclosure conditions, that information is public. So, the foundation received \$550,000,000 Canadian.

—Are you serious? You turned your back on all those millions?

—Yes. I don't need that money.

—What is the foundation going to do with all this money?

—I've given it a lot of thought. Actually, if you want to know the details, I'm creating a website with the information. This website explains our operations at LDCSO, the Least Developed Countries Support

Organization. For now, the foundation is the only organization under the name LDCSO. The first version of the website is online and it's almost completed. To summarize, LDCSO will provide products and services to countries listed under the United Nations' Least Developed Countries (LDCs).

— Really, I didn't know much about LDCs.

— Yes. That information is available on the website.

Speaking of the website, I'd like to mention that it provides a list of goals, the selection criteria for countries and suppliers. It also includes requests for support. Digital forms will be available in later versions of the website. Eventually, we'll post about the countries that received aid with additional details. I will also be posting financial records. I want there to be complete transparency.

— More specifically, how will you be conducting the work?

— To begin, a country meeting the criteria will be identified. Then I'll meet with the key government officials and determine what's possible. It's not a question of throwing money at them, but determining what they would need in order to improve their situation. Subsequently, I will call for tenders from several so-called developed countries. The chosen suppliers will need to provide the products and services directly in the country receiving the aid. During the delivery of these goods and

products, I will have strict oversight. The foundation will pay the suppliers according to the contracts.

—How many are you at this time?

—I am alone, with the help of a few individuals. For now, I have to set it all up. I have to find a country that can use my support. As such, I will be testing my approach. As I move forward, depending on the work necessary, I will hire staff. In the meantime, I will most likely use outside firms to get occasional help, I mean when I need it.

—You were telling me that there are selection criteria for the LDCs. There are also such criteria for the products and service suppliers. Will there be any constraints regarding the countries where these suppliers are located?

—In fact, even though that would be ideal, I will do everything I can to avoid such a thing. I'm interested in the suppliers, not their country of origin. For instance, if a supplier's home country is not democratic, I need not take it into account if that supplier does his job.

—Do you plan on starting your support efforts soon?

—I am not sure. I also have to consider that I am still the executive vice-president of my company while also the president of my foundation.

—Mr. Miller, I have no further questions. I will make a first draft of each article and send them to you by email. If there is anything, just let me know and I

will make all the necessary corrections. I will also email you the final versions. We will need your approval before publishing the article online.

— Perfect. I want to thank you for your courtesy.

— It was my pleasure.

In the early afternoon, Ethan goes to Kate's:

—Hello, Bella!

—Hello, the Man!

—Where is my drink?

—Take it easy. It's coming. But I need a loving kiss to give me the energy to pour our glasses.

He kisses her softly and gives her a tight hug. She takes him by the neck and holds him tight. Then she goes to get two glasses of wine and comes back to the living room. She asks him:

—I have a strange feeling that you're about to tell me something.

—You are right.

They toast. She says:

—To our health.

—Health and happiness, Bella!

They take a sip of wine while gazing at each other. Ethan continues:

—You're aware that this morning I was interviewed by a reporter from the New York Wall Street Journal?

—Yes. How did it go?

—Very well. In fact, there were two interviews. One was about the acquisition, and the other one was about the foundation.

—Interesting.

—Yes. The interview about the acquisition went well. Mario will be satisfied and he will approve its publishing.

—What about the one on the foundation?

—It also went well and I will have to approve its publishing.

—Of course.

—I talked about the foundation and the LDCSO.

—Good idea.

—Most importantly, I focused on the website. Kate, don't you realize that the stars in the universe are all aligned? Things seem to happen at the right time.

—That's true.

—I have something else to tell you.

—I am all ears.

—Here you go. The month of July is coming up soon. I understand you're taking the whole month off.

—That's right.

—Okay. Me too. So, it would be nice to talk about it.

—That would be very nice indeed. But I know you. You already have something in mind.

—Kate, why don't we go to Europe for the entire month?

—Ethan, my heart just skipped a beat. Are you serious? That would be fantastic. You're gonna think I'm crazy, but for July 3rd, it would be wonderful to be somewhere in Europe. It is exactly one year since the accident where you became my hero. And it would also be one year to the day since we made love for the first time. And I still remember all the details.

—I remember it too. But in Europe, you won't have a cast like you did last July in Quebec City. I didn't expect that reaction from you. I like it.

—What do you have in mind?

—Okay. Do you follow me?

—I'm following you.

—Hypothetically, on June 27 or 28, we leave for Paris. We spend one week there. On July 3, we make love.

—You think it'll only be on July 3. Fasten your seatbelt, it's going to rock and you know where.

— Whew. Shall I continue? So, on July 4, we leave Paris taking the TGV and head to Geneva in Switzerland. We sleep there. I always wanted to say that I made love in Geneva.

— Ethan, why?

— Because I'll be in love. As soon as we get there, we could ask the reception at the hotel for places to visit. Is that okay?

— Okay.

— The next day, we head to Bern. We change trains to get to Spiez. Finally, we take the bus to Interlaken, at the bottom of a glacier in the Alps. That's the final destination. We could fly from Paris to Geneva, but I want to look at the landscapes along the way, it'll be interesting. We'll arrive on Sunday.

— Why Interlaken?

— Because the village is at the foot of one of the highest observatories in the world. That's where we're going.

— Seriously. How will we get there?

— By train.

— A train that climbs the Alps! Are you kidding me?

— Not at all. You'll see, it's really impressive.

— You seem to know all about it. Have you already been there?

— Yes. I just hope there won't be a storm up there.

— You mean at the top of the Alps?

— No. The observatory is very high, but it's not at the top. At the observatory, there is enough oxygen to remain there, but it's not enough to run or climb the stairs quickly. You'll see, it's really impressive.

— I'm really looking forward to it.

— Me too. And specially to experience that with you. Sadly, there is no hotel up there, or we could have made love over there and you could see the effects of a lack of oxygen, which is often how I feel.

She comes to sit on Ethan's lap and kisses him passionately. After their kiss, he says:

— Go sit down if you want me to continue.

— Okay, boss.

— From Interlaken, we travel to Zurich by bus and then by plane to Barcelona.

— Barcelona in Spain?

— There are no others. We spend a few days there. There is Güell Park and many other things to see. You can even tan your lovely breasts on a Mediterranean beach.

— You are really serious. You are aware that you're exciting me.

— In what sense?

— Sexually, what else?

— I'll go on. We spend four or five days in Barcelona and then we fly to Athens, Greece.

— To Greece.

— We'll spend four or five days there and then fly to Brussels, Belgium. We'll spend three days there and then we'll go by train to Bruges, still in Belgium.

— Why Bruges?

— Because it has what they call the Grand Place. The houses date back to the 13th century. They are medieval houses. There are canals where we can visit. It's beautiful and I will do everything in my power to find the best restaurant that makes the most delicious confit duck legs, it's the best I've ever tasted.

— So, you've been there before?

— Yes, I worked there for almost a year.

— Seriously? I didn't know that.

— We can also go to the Atlantic Ocean in Ostend, also in Belgium.

— You came up with all of this?

— It is not over. We'll return to Brussels by train and fly to Amsterdam in the Netherlands.

— Surprise me!

— Listen carefully. Amsterdam is obviously very nice, but there is a Red Light District. There are marijuana cafés. Prostitution is allowed and so are erotic shows. I don't know if erotic is the right word, it's almost pornographic.

— I assume you've been there?

— A few times.

— It's crazy, but I can't imagine you with prostitutes.

— It's not crazy. I can't be with prostitutes.

— How do you know you can't?

— It's a real inquisition. I know because I tried twice and didn't like it. The second time was a complete failure.

— Sorry about my inquisition. I was just bothering you. Your past life doesn't concern me.

— Not a problem. So, we'll be there for two days and then we'll fly to Rome. We'll stay in Rome for five days and then come home on July 31. On August 1st and 2nd, we'll rest. And then it's back to work.

— We would be running around for an entire month?

— Yep! But it can change. We have the week to think about it. Let's just say that next Saturday we go to an agency to make all the reservations. As for now, you said earlier that you were excited. I'd like to see if that's true.

— If you have any doubts, let's go to the bedroom.

Early Monday morning, Mario receives the Wall Street Journal draft about the acquisition. Ethan receives two draft articles that he reads over. He sends the two drafts to Kate. Then he heads to her office:

— Lady, I sent you the two articles. If you can take a look quickly, I would like to take care of it soon.

— Not a problem, Ethan. Give me five minutes.

Kate goes to Ethan's office and sees Mario. She asks him:

— Mario, have you read the articles?

— The articles! I have only received one.

Ethan points out:

— The other article concerns only me, because it is about LDCSO.

— LDCSO? asks Mario.

— That means the Least Developed Countries Support Organization. The organization that includes the foundation.

Kate interrupts:

— Here Mario, I have it on paper.

— I will read it. Ethan, I sent an email to the newspaper approving the publishing.

—I was going to, but I wanted to get your go-ahead.

Kate says:

—Both articles are excellent. What I particularly like is the connection between both.

After a few minutes, Mario says:

—I read your article, Ethan. It's excellent. I didn't know you had advanced so far with your foundation. And Kate, now I understand the connection between both articles. That's great. We're going to have to go out for supper together. I would like to know more about LDCSO.

—In the meantime, Mario, you can visit the website.

—You can be sure that I will.

The article is published on Tuesday morning. The next day, around nine o'clock, Ethan receives an email from Mr. Abdou Ibrahim, Minister of Territorial Development of Lestanil, in Africa.

Ethan immediately looks up the country and its leaders. He checks the time difference and then calls the number written in the email:

— Good afternoon. You have joined Minister Ibrahim's office. How can I help you?

— Good afternoon. I am Ethan Miller from Canada. Minister Ibrahim has just sent me an email. Is it possible to speak with him?

— Absolutely, Mr. Miller.

— Good afternoon, Mr. Ibrahim, I'm Ethan Miller from the LDCSO.

— Good afternoon, Mr. Miller. I see that you received my email.

— Yes. You could give me a synopsis of how the LDCSO can help the Lestanil.

— My country is almost entirely surrounded by mountains. It is like a funnel where the water travels to the centre and gets lost in a volcanic chasm. Our

neighbouring countries don't have enough water. We would like to hold the water before it gets lost and, using a pipeline, we wish to sell it to our neighbours.

—This sounds like a wonderful project that will help your country prosper. Are the countries in question willing to buy your water?

—Indeed. We do not have the technological expertise for this type of architecture, nor to plan or monitor this kind of project.

—Mister Ibrahim, I am quite interested. Is Mr. Diouf, your Head of State aware that you approached me?

—Yes. We met this morning. He hopes you can help us.

—He's not asking me for any money.

—No. On your website, you made it quite clear that you don't give money away. Here, we would certainly need the services of engineers and technicians and perhaps even very specialized equipment. We don't have any of that over here.

—I think we need to have a first meeting, in person, says Ethan.

—Yes, and it would be an honour.

—Next month, I will be travelling to several European countries. I'll see if I can make a detour to Lestani. Do you have any constraints in your schedule?

—Mr. Miller, if there are constraints, it's up to me to deal with it. If you can make such a detour, any time you can will be great for me.

— Perfect. I'll get back to you tomorrow at the latest.

— Thank you for your willingness to help.

— So, Mr. Ibrahim, we'll talk tomorrow.

— Talk to you tomorrow.

Ethan's goes to Kate's office.

— Hello. I just spoke with Mr. Ibrahim. He is the Minister of Territorial Development of Lestanil.

— How come?

— LDCSO. Can you keep some time for me tonight at your apartment?

— Sure. Before or after supper?

— I would say after if it's okay with you.

— Absolutely. See you then.

— See you.

In the evening, after finishing his meal, Ethan knocks on Kate's door. She opens it to him:

— So, the Man, what's going on?

— Mr. Ibrahim and I should meet.

— That was very fast. How did he find out about LDCSO?

— He saw the article in the newspaper. He visited the website, and then spoke to his Head of State.

— All that today?

— Yes. I have to have my first meeting with him to fully assess the situation. In order to travel there, I can either wait until after our vacation or we can modify our plans a bit.

— Changing our plan, what do you mean?

— It means that we would be forgetting Barcelona and Greece. Barcelona could be replaced with Venice in Italy, where we could spend three whole days in gondolas. Then we could go to Casablanca in Morocco and stop by Lestanil. This trip will be exhausting because we will have stopovers and we'll be changing our means of travel.

— How long would we stay in Lestanil?

—Two or three nights. Once we're done, we will go to Brussels. It will probably take two days to get there. The rest remains as is: Brussels, Amsterdam, Rome and Canada. I have not committed yet. If you don't want to, I'll plan something else.

—Ethan, I'm on board. We'll always have time to visit Spain and Greece. By the way, is Greece an LDC?

—No. So we proceed like this?

—Yes.

—We'll go to a travel agency on Saturday. I would like to go before. Are you available tomorrow afternoon? We need about an hour.

—I'll figure it out. Let's say about four o'clock.

—Okay. Have a good night.

—You too.

At the travel agency, everything is going well. As for Lestanil, the agent says:

—Lestanil. Wait a minute, I'm looking. You know that it's not a tourist destination?

—Yes. I need to go there for business, Ethan informs her.

—There are a few hotels in the capital. The best is a three-star. I imagine you want that one?

—Indeed, Kate confirms.

—I'll print you all your reservation details. You're going to be busy in July. I usually wish people a good trip. For you, I'll have to wish you a wonderful month of July.

—Thank you.

Next morning, Ethan calls Mr. Ibrahim. He reaches his assistant:

— Good morning. I'm Ethan Miller from Canada. Is Mr. Ibrahim available?

— Good morning Mr. Miller. Mr. Ibrahim warned me about your call. He's in a meeting right now, but if you wish, I have permission to disturb him.

— That won't be necessary, ma'am. I will email him regarding our meeting in July. Can you make sure that he gets it and that he confirms the date, time and location for our meeting? I'm reserving the two days we're there for him.

— Mr. Miller, I'll take care of it.

— Thank you.

At the following Wednesday's steering committee meeting, Mario begins:

—Ethan, we can start.

—Okay. Two weeks ago, I spoke about changing the name of the company in the United States. I gave you my assessment. I'd like to look at the TV ads. I received three ads they recorded. I analyzed them with marketing and we agree there's nothing to recover. They mention the old name too many times for our montage. We recommend discontinuing these ads immediately. Mario?

—I agree. Are you thinking of a specific strategy?

—I'll let our marketing expert talk to you about that.

—Thank you, Ethan. Now here is the situation. We must consider that we'll be sending a personalized letter to all the former company's current customers. This should settle the case for maintaining the current one temporarily. I think we need to focus all our energy on announcing new products. We're going to need television ads in both Canada and the United States. That is when the name change from the merger will be announced. These announcements will need to be real media bombs.

— And will it cost a lot? asks Mario. Ethan, do you maintain your forecasts regarding the increase in sales that you announced in your business case?

— Yes, Mario. I reviewed them a little while ago. Not only do I maintain them, but I bet a bottle of Godet XO Terre cognac that we were going to exceed my expectations. In fact, that's why I am monitoring our marketing efforts very closely. I'm keeping my eye on them.

At the end of the steering committee meeting, Mario says:

— Ethan and Kate, you're leaving us for a month. I see that you are travelling to eight different countries, including the first country that you're helping with LDCSO. Congratulations on this first country and have a good trip to Europe. I want to tell you that you both really deserve this trip. Have fun and come back in shape.

— Thank you...

At the airport on Sunday night, after going through all the checks, they sit by their boarding gate. Kate is restless:

—Ethan, you're very calm. I don't understand. We're going to eight different countries, and that doesn't excite you.

—Bella, with the exception of Morocco and Lestanil, I've already been to all these countries. In fact, what excites me is anticipating your reactions. When you are faced with something new and beautiful, you overflow with enthusiasm. You are like a teenager again. And I love that. Do you want to know why?

—Yes, tell me.

—Because you get excited and it makes you want me.

—So, if I understand correctly, what drives you is the hotel beds and not the memories you've made.

—Kate, you just said two different things. Regarding the beds, you're right. As for remembering, I don't want to. What I want to remember is what we're building together. As for the past, let it remain in its closed drawers.

—Are you nostalgic?

—Not really. Actually, I can't wait for us to leave. In business class, we'll sleep very well and I need to rest. Having said that, I'm thinking about the LDCSO right now.

—When are you going to let go?

—On the plane. And you better watch out.

—I can't wait. I love you, you know.

—I know, and so do I, he says kissing her tenderly.

They land in Paris on Monday morning. A taxi takes them to the Louvre Hotel at the Place Andre Malraux, which is a mere four minutes away from the Museum, which they visit first.

They look at the Michelin Guide together, to determine their meal for July 3rd. They choose Le Clarence for its warm atmosphere based on its decor from the 1800s and the remote tables. Kate makes the reservation.

They get on a tourist bus. They visit the Versailles palace, the Eiffel Tower, the Arc de Triomphe, and the catacombs. Gourmet meals and dinner cruises follow one another. They go to several shows including one at the Moulin Rouge and the Crazy Horse.

Kate notes that:

- It's July 3rd and our last night in Paris.
- So, there are two things to celebrate.

Kate wears a transparent lacy black dress. Her neckline ends a little below her breasts. The sleeves are long. The bottom has a slit on each side from the top of her legs. Beneath the lace, we are able to see her very traditional black panties.

The hotel doorman called a taxi. Ethan asks the driver:

— 31 Franklin Delano Roosevelt Avenue, please.

— Are you going to a party at the Clarence?

— Yes, but it's for a romantic evening, Ethan adds.

— Without wishing to be indiscreet, you are celebrating a special occasion?

Kate says to him:

— On July 3 of last year, this man here saved my life while risking his own. In fact, he saved several other people and received a medal for it. Also, on July 3 of last year, it was the first time we made love. Tonight is our last night in Paris. Tomorrow we leave for Geneva. We will leave this beautiful city, Paris.

— If you look straight ahead. You can see the lights of the Champs Elysees. Your accent tells me that you are from Quebec.

— You are quite right.

— We have arrived. I wish you a wonderful July 3rd, and a wonderful evening.

— Thank you, you are kind.

— Madam, your dress is simply splendid. Sir, I envy you.

Ethan answers him with a smile. They enter the restaurant, one of the ten best in Paris. They slowly enjoy their gourmet meal and return to the hotel.

Once in their hotel bedroom, Kate comes up to him to give him a gentle hug. She caresses both sides of his face

and, spreading her fingers, she runs them through his hair while kissing him sensually. Ethan tells her:

—A year of happiness, laughter and more especially, love. I love life and it's all thanks to you. A year ago, my life changed so that I may grow next to the most beautiful woman in the world.

—Take my dress off, will you?

He sees her marvellous naked body that will soon become one with his own.

On Saturday, they leave Paris, heading to the Lyon train station, where they will take the TGV to Place Cournavin in Geneva, Switzerland. Despite a nearly two-hundred-and-fifty-kilometres-per-hour ride, they look at the landscape and the cities go by at full speed. Kate says:

—Ethan, it was a wonderful idea to take the train.

When they arrive in Geneva, they go to the hotel. Once settled, they go visit an attraction recommended by the young and pretty receptionist.

The next day, they take the first train up the Alps, it crosses Lausanne and then Fribourg. Once in Bern, they change trains to Spiez where they will continue on a bus to Interlaken. On their way to Spiez, Kate is amazed:

—Ethan, everything is wonderful. The scenery is just marvellous.

She takes Ethan's face to lead him towards her lips. Their kiss is brief, because she doesn't want to miss anything outside.

When they arrive in Interlaken, they go to the wonderful Victoria-Jungfrau Grand Hotel and get settled. Then, they explore the nearby streets before to go to the hotel's restaurant for supper. Ethan tells her:

—I look forward to tomorrow. We will go to the Jungfraujoch. The observatory is just over 3,000 metres tall, just slightly over the threshold where breathing becomes dangerous. And the electric rack railway, I can't believe it.

—You were really impressed.

—Yes. This place has a research lab for geology, climatology, physics, meteorology and astronomy.

—Phew!

—Yes. You'll see. And the food is really good. And the Swiss wine they recommend is just perfect.

—Ethan, everything on this trip is perfect and everything between you and me as well.

—That is true.

The next day, they have breakfast and get to the train station on a tourist bus. Kate looks at the enormous mountain standing in front of them and says:

—I must apologize very sincerely. When you told me that a train would climb to the top, I didn't believe you.

—Wait, you'll see, it's impossible to believe. You just have to live it.

The passengers board. There are many skiers who set their gear in the outside compartment intended for this purpose. The train sets off. It rolls on two rails and is powered by electric engines that drive a cog wheel fitted to the gears fixed to the ground between the rails. The train does not take long to start its ascent. Everyone looks forward. At one point, Ethan says:

—Kate!

—Yes.

—Look in the back of the train.

She turns around and exclaims:

— Oh wow! Ethan, look, the train must be more than forty-five degrees.

— I am not sure how many degrees it is, but around 45, for sure.

— It makes no sense!

— I told you. You'll always remember this but it's not over.

The train makes a few stops to let down the skiers. Further up, it enters a cave dug entirely by hand a very long time ago. Once in the cave, they lose all feeling of ascending.

The train stops at an observation area, where you can walk to a landing overlooking outside. Kate exclaims:

— What a view! These mountains! We are really on the Alps.

— Yep! What a view!

Returning to the train, Ethan informs her:

— Kate, you know that when the train ascends, it needs a lot of electricity that it gets from the wires above it.

— It's obvious.

— But what you don't know and what's really impressive is that the train, on the way down, brakes with its engines and generates the electricity used by the other trains.

— Are you serious?

— Of course.

They reach the observatory. The sun is shining. They sit by a window and eat their lunch. They eat while admiring the Swiss and French Alps. They admire two gigantic glaciers.

When they finish their meal, a storm begins. In just a few minutes, nothing can be seen outside anymore. Ethan says:

—Kate, you are truly blessed. You just saw the two most beautiful shows in the world. You saw the Alps calm, and now you see them angry. I'm going to go outside. I want to feel a winter more powerful than the ones in Quebec.

—I'll come with you.

They spend a few minutes standing outside on the balcony, and then they head back indoors. Kate observes:

—Ethan, I don't feel a lack of oxygen like you said.

—Bella, you see the stairs over there?

—Yes.

—Go there and start climbing up. I'll watch you from here.

She goes to the steps and notices a sign warning people not to run up the stairs. She climbs four steps at a usual pace and then stops, completely out of breath. She catches her breath and continues climbing up. After two more steps, she stops again, bends a little forward and looks at Ethan in a way that confirms that he was right. Ethan waves for her to come back down. She comes back to him and says:

— Don't expect any apologies. You've been here before.

She hugs him very tightly and says:

— Thank you. I love you. I love your generosity.

— And I love you. This trip with you is fantastic.

So, I am purely egocentric.

— I really appreciate your egocentrism. I'll show you tonight.

The next day, they return to Geneva to catch their plane to Venice. The flight takes just over an hour, giving them enough time to enjoy a glass of wine.

Arriving at the Marco Polo Airport, they take two lockers to leave the bags they won't be needing in Venice. Then they take the taxi boat to the [Danieli Hotel](#). A beautiful hotel overlooking the Rio Del Vin Canal and the edge of the Adriatic Sea. All the rooms are different and have their own unique style.

They begin their discoveries on a gondola, as it slowly crosses the Grand Canal. They spend their day visiting, and their evening cuddling and sitting comfortably in a gondola, having a truly romantic trip.

They visit the Doge's Palace and Saint Mark's Square. They take a trip to the islands of Murano, Burano and Torcello.

On Saturday morning, they take a flight to Casablanca, in Morocco. They spend the night at the Atlas Sky Airport Hotel, not too far from the airport. The next day, they get on a plane to Niamey in Niger. The flight lasts about three hours and a half. They spend the night there. The next day, a twin-engine takes them to the outskirts of the Lestani capital.

They spend Monday night at the hotel then go to their meeting. Ethan extends his hand:

— Good morning, Mr. Ibrahim.

— Good morning, Mr. Miller.

— Let me introduce you to Kate Jackson.

— Nice to meet you, Ms. Jackson.

— Nice to meet you too.

— Mr. Miller, Ms. Jackson, I want to thank you for taking the time to come visit us. My collaborators have scheduled visits, meetings and even a dinner show. To ensure your safety, even though there is no crime in my country, we will all be escorted by two army vehicles. I hope you don't mind?

— Not at all. On the contrary, says Ethan.

—Today, we prepared a visit to the capital. Tomorrow, we will visit the bottom of one of our mountains so I can show you the problem. Tonight, of course, it will be my honour to present our cuisine and dances to you.

Ethan says in reply:

—Mr. Ibrahim, we will be honoured.

—So, with your permission, let's get started. By the way, please feel at ease to tell me if you want to go somewhere specifically or want to stop the bus. Right now, we are going to a rich neighbourhood, there are very few in the country.

Ethan says:

—When I look around, I see cars that are relatively old, but they are well kept. People look good. I don't see any extreme poverty. Will we be visiting the areas outside of town?

—We will visit the area outside of the city tomorrow when we travel to the nearest mountain.

—I see a grocery store that also seems to be selling medication. Can we stop there so I can have a look?

—With pleasure, Mr. Miller.

Ethan visits quickly. Then comes back to the bus and says:

—Mr. Ibrahim, I see that in terms of medical supplies, you probably have everything you need. I also saw how clean the store was.

—Thank you, Mr. Miller. Thank you for your analytical methods. Indeed, we can say that in terms of

medicine, we have the essentials. But we are missing a lot of things. Future revenue, coming from the sale of water, will allow us to improve on these things. We are arriving at the richest neighbourhood in the city. As we are travelling through, you will notice the front and back of the residences.

—It's actually very nice, but I don't see anything extravagant, except for a few swimming pools seeing as you are currently running out of drinking water.

—Absolutely, Mr. Miller, we're approaching the residence of our king, His Majesty Achille Rupert. This is the wealthiest residence in all of Lestanil. He sees a lot of people. You will not see his pool, considering the residence is square and the pool is located in the centre.

—Is His Majesty aware your request to the LDCSO?

—I don't think so, Mr. Miller, I wanted to make sure I understood your approach if I may.

—Of course.

—So, I would say that today and tomorrow, we're interviewing each other. When I read your website, I saw that if you decide to move forward, you will choose a team of experts to come and analyze the situation. I understood that, based on their findings, you will develop a proposal that you will then present to us. Then you will issue a call for tenders and the party selected will come and accomplish the work.

—That's exactly right, Mr. Ibrahim.

—Then, Mr. Miller, our king will certainly be notified before you present your proposal.

—You will see this proposal before it is officially submitted, says Ethan.

—Thank you for your courtesy. Now, if you will allow us, we'll show you the residential areas.

The tour continues.

— Mr. Ibrahim, I don't see any tourist places. Besides I haven't seen any tourist brochures at the hotel.

— You're right, Mr. Miller, we don't get tourists, with very few exceptions. That is also something we wish to remedy with new revenue. Now we will be heading to your hotel. You will be able to rest before the reception.

Kate asks:

— Mr. Ibrahim, forgive me this womanly question, but is there a dress code?

— Ms. Jackson, any simple dress will do. Here, women do not wear pants at a reception. What's more, we don't have any designer clothes, we can't afford it.

— Thank you, Mr. Ibrahim, she says as she gets off the bus.

— Mr. Miller, Ms. Jackson, a car is going to pick you up at 9 p.m. Is that all right with you?

— Absolutely. We are looking forward to it.

After a quick shower so as not to waste any water, Kate dons a lacy red dress lined with a similar red satin fabric. Only her left arm is covered by a transparent red lace sleeve. It is tight, without being exaggerated, and comes to her mid-thighs.

For their meal, the female cooks have prepared the typical cuisine of the country, but without overdoing it in terms of either presentation or taste. Mr. Ibrahim asks questions regarding the LDCSO. He understands that Lestanil is the first country to receive aid. Halfway through their meal, a dance show begins in the spotlight. Women and men dance to the rhythm of the string and percussion instruments.

The next day, a bus takes them to the mountain. They pass through several villages. Kate approaches Mr. Ibrahim and asks him:

— Am I mistaken or is there no electricity in the villages?

— You are not mistaken, madam. Indeed, there is no electricity. These villages are located too far from the capital.

— And how do you do it in the capital?

— We have generators.

— I see. But if you have a lot of water in the mountains, you can generate electricity.

— That's right, but we don't have the expertise to build such a thing. It's a huge undertaking.

— Ethan, what do you think?

He answers:

— Mr. Ibrahim, we have the expertise, and I add it in my proposal.

Kate asks:

— Ethan, would you go with Hydro Quebec?

— I don't think so. It's too big. I would see with Rio Tinto Alcan. They're used to smaller dams.

—But Hydro Quebec is very strong when it comes to transportation and distribution, says Kate.

—Mr. Ibrahim, would you like me to add this to my proposal?

—Forgive my hesitation. I am truly moved. But doesn't this exceed our capacity?

—Mr. Ibrahim, you have the ability to brainstorm and plan along with us. For this to materialize, it's really more effective if we work with a ten-year plan. No matter what we accomplish in the short term, the steps need to move in the right direction. It is up to you to decide whether electricity is part of our plans.

—I would be foolish to refuse such an offer. Thank you both. We are arriving at the location that I want to show you.

They all get off the bus. They walk to the edge of a cliff where they can see a large river flowing directly into a huge hole in the ground. Ethan asks:

—Impressive! Mr. Ibrahim, do you know where the water goes?

—No. We've done some research, but we don't have the technology to track the water.

—Doesn't the water resurface somewhere?

—Not in Lestanil, that we know of.

—And in any neighbouring countries?

—No. We believe it goes out into the sea, but we do not know where. Mr. Miller, do you have that expertise as well?

—Mr. Ibrahim, if I may, I would recommend that you do not look into that. Sometimes not knowing is best. However, let me tell you that this water will have to change course and flow to a place of your choosing, be it here or in a neighbouring country. I can't believe that all this drinking water is lost. Mr. Ibrahim, is it the same for all your major rivers?

—Almost all of them. Only one does not lose its waters, it passes through several villages and through the capital. But you must understand that it is very polluted.

—I see.

—Now we can go back to the capital.

—Mr. Ibrahim, are we taking the same way back?

—Yes, why do you ask?

—Is there another possible road we may take to return?

—Yes, but it's a little longer, about an hour. Also, it goes through areas that have wild animals.

—Is it dangerous?

—No. I can ask that we go that way if you'd like.

—I would, if it isn't much of a bother.

—Not at all, Mr. Miller.

Once back at the hotel, Ethan and Kate get off the bus. Ethan says:

—Mr. Ibrahim, I want to thank you for your valuable time. I do not wish to disturb you any further. Can I suggest that you give me the contact information of someone with whom my manager can communicate?

—Not a problem, Mr. Miller.

—Mr. Ibrahim, I enjoyed these two days very much. Rest assured that I will draw up a proposal that you will not be able to refuse. Seriously, I am very interested in this project. I will determine the next steps and advise you and your representative. Feel free to make any changes or precision.

—Ms. Jackson and Mr. Miller, I want to thank you for your kindness and the respect you have shown us. I am confident that the LDCSO will accomplish great things with people like you at the helm. We won't be seeing each other again until tomorrow, so I wish you a great trip home and enjoy the rest of your vacation.

—Thank you, Mr. Ibrahim, and my regards to your wife, Kate responded.

—Thank you and my regards to your wife as well, concluded Ethan.

Early the next day, they head to the small airport where the twin engine is waiting for them. In the plane back to Niamey, in Niger, it is difficult to talk because of all the noise generated by the engines. From Niamey, they take a plane to Casablanca, in Morocco, and another one to Brussels, in Belgium. The whole trip takes more than ten hours. They have lunch on the plane to Casablanca and supper on the plane to Brussels. When they arrive at the Hotel Amigo, they get settled and then head to the bar to enjoy a good glass of wine.

—Ethan, it's been a busy day. Three planes in one day; it may not be a record, but it's a solid number.

—You're right. I'm glad to be in a comfortable chair on the ground. We haven't talked about it much, but I enjoyed my trip to Lestani. And you?

—Me too, Kate agrees. I really liked Mr. Ibrahim and his wife.

—I'm sure they liked you as well. As it will be the first country I'll help, I think I found something that isn't too difficult.

The next day, they visit Brussels on a tourist bus. Then they walk to the main square. While admiring the building architecture, they walk around looking at shop windows, terraces crowded for lunch and shopkeepers in the square centre. Then they walk slowly and head to the Place Royale, near the Royal Palace. In the evening, they go to the restaurant recommended and reserved by the hotel butler. The next day, they visit various sites, like the Place de Brouckere, the Atomium, and the Jacques Brel Foundation.

On Monday, they head to the train station to go to Bruges. The trip takes about an hour. They take a taxi to the Crowne Plaza Hotel Bruges. They visit the Grand Place. Ethan looks for and finds the restaurant where he had the confit duck. They reserve for the following evening. He brings Kate to see the apartment where he lived for several months. Walking on Stalijzerstraat, which runs along Astridpark, he says:

— Look to the left. There is a public urinal.

— Ethan, if you hadn't told me, I could have sworn it was a pay phone. There's also a man using it.

A few steps further, he says, pointing:

— You see there, on the second floor, that's the apartment I lived for a few months.

— You were not far from the Grand Place.

— Even though we're not that far away, we are no longer in the historic area anymore. We are now in the modern world with its square brown brick designs. It's a little strange at first glance.

— Did you have to go to the Grand Place often?

— I went there almost every evening for supper or to get food. A large number of the project team, representatives from twelve different countries and thirty-two service providers, lived nearby. Sometimes we would get together, but most of the time, people remained in groups based on their country. We could go back to the Grand Place if you want.

— Tell me, Ethan, are you a little nostalgic?

— Barely. Except if I hadn't come here, you probably wouldn't have seen this.

Crossing one of the bridges over the canal, Ethan says:

— Follow me. We will reserve tickets for the tourist boat tomorrow. It'll take us around the Bruges canals.

That the evening, they eat calmly at the hotel. Kate asks him:

— I'm surprised. You don't seem to have any emotions or you are hiding them very well.

— Of course, it does a little something to me. I think it's nice to remember, but nothing more. Having said that, I've never been a person who looks back. Obviously, I do it from time to time, but it's incidental. I'm more interested in looking forward. Right now, today and yesterday, and the previous couple of days, I am just enjoying your presence next to me so much. I like to walk slowly holding hands. With you, there's no stress. What we see, we see and what we don't see, well, we don't see it and that's it.

— I'm glad you're happy.

— Are you done? Are we having a drink here or at the bar? asks Ethan.

— I would prefer on the outdoor terrace. It's so beautiful tonight.

— Shall we go?

— Okay.

The next day, they continue to visit. At noon, they eat on a beautiful terrace. They visit the famous canals. For supper, they go to the restaurant and eat the delicious confit duck:

—You're right, Ethan. I've never had confit duck this good. It's absolutely delicious.

—And how about this very expensive wine? The mix is perfect. It's almost indecent.

—Ethan, I don't understand it, but I feel like making love. Even eating excites me now. It's never been like this. With you, I just want to do it all the time.

—It's because you want to set a new record. Every night for a month.

—Not really, because there have been two nights of inaction. One was in Lestani and the other in Brussels. So, our record is ruined.

—Yep! But listen. Tomorrow afternoon, we're taking the train to Amsterdam. That means that tomorrow night, we will be in the Red Light District. There, you will see what the word sex really means.

—I thought you preferred making love to making sex.

— That's true. But we'll see tomorrow. Tonight, we are making love with a capital L. Okay?

— Okay.

During their train ride, which lasts a little over 2 hours, they look outside and observe the villages and towns of Belgium and then of the Netherlands. Upon their arrival in Amsterdam, they take a taxi to the Barbizon Palace Hotel. This elegant hotel is located four hundred metres from the Red Light District. Once settled, Ethan says:

—Kate, come on, we'll go for a walk.

—It would be better to book the restaurant for supper.

—Come on, let's go.

They make their reservation and then they go outside.

—Kate, you have to turn left on Zeedijk.

—How do you know that?

—You see this café, if you want marijuana, you could get it here.

—No need.

—You see over there, it's the Moulin Rouge. There are erotic shows. We will go there tonight. Further up, there is the Casa Rosso. It's an erotic theatre. We'll also go there tonight. You'll see, it's really impressive.

They walk around and enter a sex shop. Kate says:

—Montreal's sex shops are nothing compared to here. Look at this dildo! And these films. I'm not very comfortable.

—Let's just leave.

—Let's.

They turn into an alley lined with glass doors and red curtains or windows with red neon lights. Behind them, scantily dressed girls are waiting. There are a few dim windows, or doors with the curtains drawn.

—Kate, you see, it's very busy here.

—Ethan, I had understood that.

—Look, in this alley, the lights are purple.

—That's right.

—There is a reason for this.

—What?

—They are trans.

—Are you serious?

—Yes. Do you want to go see?

—Yes.

—Look, you can't tell. They're really very beautiful.

—Are you sure they're trans?

—Yes, let's walk again. If you look behind that door, you can see.

—You're right. Let's take a step back.

In front of a door with a beautiful trans woman, Kate asks:

—Do you want to go?

—Are you serious?

—Not really.

— Not really! But you would accept?

— If it's your fantasy, then why not?

— Kate, listen. First of all, it's not my kind of fantasy. Second, we're not here to use any private services. Third, I know that tonight, you will experience a sexuality that is completely unknown to you. I mean that I believe that tonight, I'll be your fantasy and you'll be mine. Okay?

— Absolutely, don't worry.

They start walking again. Kate says:

— Ethan, I'm shocked. Prostitution exists alongside the people who live here. It seems to be normal here. Back home, everything is off-limits.

— Kate, you should really take a look around you. Maybe it is us who have it wrong. Maybe having legal and controlled prostitution decreases the cases of venereal disease, violent behaviour, child prostitution, street gangs, the mafia and organized crime, rape and probably countless instances of conjugal rape. Here, they understand what sexual chemistry is. Here, they get that it's existed since the beginning of time and will continue until the end of time. So, what can't be prevented could be controlled. Now, if it's legal here in the Red Light District, it's punished very severely outside of it. At home and in many other parts of the world, the after-effects of religion are still very present and stop us from emancipating ourselves and, above all else, from understanding.

— That's a very interesting point of view. We'll have to come back to it. I would be interested in discussing it.

— Okay. If you don't mind, we'll go back to the hotel. We'll eat and then come back here. It's really special at night. And there are the shows.

They return to the hotel and go to a restaurant. They eat a good meal, and then they return to the Red Light District. They take their time walking around. They arrive at the Casa Rosso. Ethan buys tickets for the next show. At the appointed time, they enter the theatre. There is a stage and comfortable seats, like at the movie theatre. They sit down and the show begins.

Two women walk onto the stage and start caressing each other while undressing and licking one another. They have sex and then leave the stage after their orgasm.

Then a man and a woman, slightly dressed, take their place and start undressing. They make sex gently and softly. Kate says:

—Ethan, how does he do it? He has an erection! And he's really well built!

—I don't know how he does it, but when you say well built, what do you mean?

—Didn't you see his muscles? And his penis is really nice. They are really making sex in front of all of us. I never imagined seeing all this.

—Does it excite you?

—Of course. Not you?

— Obviously.

— Let me check, she says as she puts her hand between Ethan's legs.

— Bella, don't go too fast. But if you're ready now, we can go back to the hotel.

— Let's wait a little bit, okay?

After a few more performances, they get back to their hotel room and as soon as they close the door, they strip with a tense eagerness. They make sex with an unbridled, almost animal-like passion.

The next day during breakfast, Kate says:

—Ethan, yesterday was an unforgettable day because I realized several of my taboos. In the end, I never knew what making sex meant. Everyone uses the expression “making love” to refer to everything. But for you, it all had a different meaning that I can understand better now.

—Please explain, would you?

—Yes, and tell me if I’m wrong. For you, to make tenderness is to make love without the sex. And you know that I like it. Making love for you means making tenderness and making sex at the same time. Last night, I saw what making sex means to you.

—What do you mean?

—For you, making sex is downright bestial. Everything is on the table. It’s pure sadism without any violence. It’s pure possession. It’s a consensual rape, be it oral, vaginal or anal.

—Okay. So, how did you find it?

— That's the worst part. I really enjoyed the bestiality. But I'm not sure I would do it again.

— For me yesterday was yesterday. I knew the day was going to end like that. We had an intoxicating sexual moment together. But with you, I would never go any further than that. Maybe I wouldn't really want to have that experience again. With you, it's the love that excites me, nourishes me, enthralls me and makes me want to live. To risk losing all of it, simply for bestial sex, it's not even a question.

— Ethan, what you just said is very beautiful. Thank you for the amazing memory that you gave me yesterday. I appreciate it more than you know. I am glad that I can understand you better. And you should know that I will love our tender moments and making love to you even more. All this has taken on a whole new meaning for me and it makes me very happy because I know from now on the extent of what you're giving me.

— Phew! Okay. Should we take a tour bus around Amsterdam?

— Yep! But not before a huge and long hug.

On the bus, they look at different Amsterdam attractions. They write down the places they want to visit after the tour and the next day.

During their bus ride, Ethan points to an art piece. He says:

— Kate, look at this sculpture. The first time I saw it, a few years ago, it made me think that the universe bends, allowing space travel to go much faster than the speed of light.

— Wow! What an imagination!

They sit on a terrace to enjoy a glass of wine:

— So, Kate, did you see anything you want to visit?

— I'm going in order of preference. And you don't really have the right to change the order.

— Yes, but don't forget that I can still use my right to veto.

— So, first, there is the Van Gogh Museum. Second, is the Rembrandt House Museum. As for Dam Square, we saw it all on the bus. Is that all right?

— So far, so good.

— Fine. Tonight, we could go for a walk at Leidseplein Square.

— I don't understand. I thought Led Zeppelin was a British band, wasn't it?

— It's not Led Zeppelin, it's Leidseplein.

— Kate, that's exactly what I said.

— Maybe I'm pronouncing it wrong.

— You say maybe! Bella, you overestimate your capabilities.

— I'm not overestimating anything. Anyway, it's not the band. It's something else.

— So, what is it?

—It has lively nightlife where street performers entertain pedestrians.

—Tomorrow morning, we could go to Albert Cuypmarkt Square.

—What is this?

—I promise you that if you agree, I'll be very nice to you.

—You're becoming more and more predictable. So, it's a market.

—An outdoor market. Please? Please? she says imploring with a kiss on his cheek.

—We're close to blackmail here...

—So, it's yes. It's settled then, she says in a firm tone.

—You didn't give me time to continue what I wanted to say.

—I know. But that's it. Thank you, you're nice, as usual.

—It is not blackmail, it's outright manipulation.

After walking around the Leidseplein Square, they return to the hotel. Ethan asks:

—Shall we have a drink on the terrace?

—Honey, I'd rather go to the bedroom.

—Did you just call me honey? There is something you're hiding.

—It's up to you to find out.

In the bedroom, Kate hugs him tightly. She says:

— I want to take a shower with you and for you to wash me. I'll wash you. Then I have this crazy urge to make love to you very tenderly.

— What about a ton of sex?

— Not too much. I got my fill yesterday. No, just make love as you like it. Just love.

On Saturday, they fly to Rome. A trip of just over two hours. On the plane, Ethan turns to her as much as he can and confesses:

—Now I'm looking forward to this. It's the third time I'm going there. Every time it is really impressive. You'll see. We can touch things that are over 2,000 years old. Imagine. No, you can't possibly. I'll show you the real wonders built by men.

—Ethan, you're making me salivate.

—I'm really looking forward to showing you everything, he concludes as he sits upright on his seat and takes a sip from his glass of wine.

At the airport, they go outside to get a limousine. A man comes up to them and offers to take them in his taxi. Ethan says:

—I'm sorry, but I want a limo.

Kate says to him:

—Ethan, is there a problem?

—Kate, come with me.

They take a few steps, and he says:

—It's a fake taxi and they're dumb. I don't want to die here today. I already took one once and had to

pay for him to slow down. Look, there are some real taxis over there.

—Are you headed to Rome? Ethan asks the driver.

—Yes sir.

—You know the Cavalieri in Rome?

—Yes, sir. Is this your first trip to Rome?

Kate answers him:

—Me, yes, but for this nice gentleman, it's his third time.

—You just said: "this nice gentleman". Does this mean that a wonderful Italian man would have a chance with you?

—That's a good one. But in fact, this nice gentleman is actually my wonderful lover.

—So, no luck for Italian men?

—Not a chance.

—Madam, I saw you at the airport, so I must say that it's a great loss for us, Italian men.

—I'm sorry, but I thank you for the compliment.

—And you, her wonderful lover, do you need any help?

—No. And sorry to all the Italian men.

Once at the Rome Cavalieri, he gives a good tip to the driver and says:

— I really like you. Thank you.

— Thank you. And have a great time.

A bellboy carries their luggage to the so-called Imperial Room that overlooks Rome. After going to the balcony to admire the view of Rome and the dome of Saint Peter's Basilica, Kate excitedly says:

— Ethan, it's fabulous. The hall, our room, not even a suite, the view of outside, and the Vatican not too far away. This is the most luxurious hotel I have ever seen.

— Kate, I'll make you discover some wonderful things. I told you as much on the plane. Let's get settled and then we'll reserve at one of the restaurants. You should know that "the Pergola restaurant" is the only Roman restaurant to have won three Michelin stars.

— Wow!

Ethan suggests:

— If you want, we'll walk around the hotel before our supper. Then we'll take a taxi to the Trevi Fountain. It's beautiful at night, you'll be amazed.

They visit the hotel lobby and lounges, the outdoor terrace, and the indoor and outdoor pools, the spas, the gymnasium with massage rooms and a tennis court.

At the La Pergola restaurant, they decide on the Tasting menu. After their digestifs, they go to the hotel lobby and ask the doorman for a taxi.

They head to the Trevi Fountain. A huge fountain alongside the Palazzo Poli. At night, the spotlights provide an almost-intimate warmth.

— Kate, we're lucky. There aren't too many people.

— Ethan, it's beautiful. It's huge. Look at how high it is. It exceeds the palace.

— We'll sit on the steps and commit it to memory.

— And maybe also on my phone, Kate adds.

After several minutes, Ethan says:

— Now I'm gonna take you to the Pantheon. We're gonna have to walk for about ten minutes. There are many terraces where we can have a drink and enjoy the evening. Before we sit at a terrace, we'll go in the Pantheon.

Once there Kate says:

— Ethan, it's impressive. Look at the height of the columns.

— Come. Touch the column.

She puts her hand on it.

— You should know that this column was built about 2 050 years ago.

— My hand is touching a column older than yours.
I'm not used to it.

— Be serious. Come look inside.

They slowly walk around. They admire its huge dome.

— I wonder how they built this dome back then.
Bella, let's head outside and we'll try to find a table on a terrace.

— OK. Look over there, there's room. Should we go?

— Yes!

They sit down and order a glass of wine. From there, they can see the monument. Ethan points out:

— Kate, look at the wall. It has imperfections.

— I see.

— You know what they are? he asks.

— No.

— They are bullet holes or shells. They fought here.

They slowly finish their glass of wine and take a taxi back to the hotel.

The next day, after a hearty lunch, Ethan hails a cab and takes Kate to the Colosseum. They buy tickets for the guided tour. Afterwards, he suggests:

—Come on, let's go see the Roman ruins. They're very impressive also.

They take an ancient road down the hill. Ethan says:

—Look down. Imagine that these stones that form the pavement were laid at the same time as the Romans, as Caesar. Their horses trotted here.

—It's true, that's very impressive.

They keep walking and reach the ruins.

—Look at these huge columns. At the time, they were used as entrances for the buildings. Imagine such buildings. They must have been phenomenal.

They're walking through the ruins. Kate shares her thoughts:

—We can imagine how great the Roman Empire was. They were the strongest people on Earth. And here was their capital. Fabulous.

—Kate, I told you it's really special here. Now you understand why. I'm starting to get hungry. Can we leave the ruins and go find a restaurant?

—Okay.

They arrive at a busy intersection. Kate comments:

—Ethan, there are no lights, no crosswalks.

—I know. That's how it is in Rome. Listen to what I'll say carefully. Here we are. We're going to start walking with quick steps, but don't run. A sure step. We have to keep up. And above all, we don't stop.

—Are you serious? There must be a way further down.

—There is no other passage, and yes, I am very serious. Look, there are people crossing. Just do what they are doing. Take my hand.

—I am scared.

—Come with me.

—Okay.

They cross without any problems. Once safely on the other side, Kate confesses to him:

—Ethan, this is completely foolish. It's crazy.

—Yes, but that's the way it is. We weren't hit or even grazed by the cars going so fast.

—This can't be the first time you've done this?

—No, the first time, a friend of mine told me what to do and I just followed him, I would even say, blindly.

—Well, what do you think I just did?

—You just followed me blindly.

—You see how much I love you.

—Yep, but at the time, I wasn't in love with my friend.

After the restaurant, they walk around to visit some more. They get inspired by the brochures.

The next day, they take a taxi to Saint Peter's Square. Kate says:

— It's huge. And those columns! It's majestic.

— Yes. Today, you're going to see such enormous and beautifully things. Recently, I read an article saying that the pope prays for the poor. The picture had the pope saying Mass and it showed all the gold around him. Today you will see the real humility of the Catholic Church, both outside and within the basilica.

Once inside the basilica, Ethan points out:

— Look at the floor. It's carved where the length of a cathedral ends, with its name on it. Every cathedral in the world can fit into St Peter's Basilica.

— Ethan, you're right, I see another engraving further up.

— Yes. What humility! And they pray for the poor.

They walk slowly around and admire the masterpieces created by the sculptors of the time. The statues are enormous and magnificent.

— Kate, look at this sculpture. There are several different types of stones. I can't imagine how the artist was able to blend all these stones. Imagine!

—Ethan, this is magnificent.

They continue with their visit. They look at the pope's seat and the tomb of Saint Peter. Then they climb to the top of the basilica dome to admire St Peter's Square and all of Rome.

They climb down and exit the basilica. Outside, they turn left and reach the entrance of the Sistine Chapel. The line of tourists is not too long. They buy tickets.

After they enter, they go through the Vatican Museum and reach the chapel. Ethan says:

—This is where they nominate the new pope.

—Ethan, I know how a pope is nominated. But it seems so small, she comments with surprise.

—Yes. I also had that impression.

—But the ceiling is huge. I wonder how Michelangelo painted it.

—Either way, the scaffolding had to be quite solid. The poor man would not have wanted to fall off.

—Be serious and be respectful, please.

—It is because I'm thinking about the poor for whom the Pope prays.

They take their time visiting several Roman attractions. They stop in front of one such remarkable attraction. Kate asks:

—Ethan, crossing the street stresses me. But look at this magnificent monument. It's the Piazza Venezia. The inscription says that it is a monument dedicated to the first king of Italy, Victor Emmanuel II, who unified the country. There are two museums within, and we can take an elevator to the terrace. Shall we go?

—Of course.

On Friday, they take the plane back to Montreal. Ethan informs her:

—When I fly west, like we are today, I need a day or two to recover. So, we'll take it easy on Saturday.

—Same for me, I guess. Ethan, it's been such a beautiful month for me. I never could have dreamed of such a vacation. I never imagined that I would love a man as much as you. I never dreamed of loving a man as much as I love you right now.

She takes his hand. He confesses to her:

—Me too, it has been a wonderful month. You are and always will be my one and only true love.

On Monday Ethan meets Mario, who asks him:

— So, Ethan, how was your month off?

— Wonderful, super. Although I'm not a very good tourist, I enjoyed walking around with Kate.

— What do you mean?

— She doesn't walk very fast. And she doesn't necessarily want to see everything. She is relaxed and, unlike here, she marvels at everything constantly, like a child. Travelling with her is very nice.

— I'm glad to hear that. And how was Lestanil?

— The trip there went well. The Minister was great. We had dinner with his wife and some other dignitaries, with music and a dance show.

— Will you be able to do something?

— They need pipelines to transport drinking water. They also need to attach a few hydroelectric turbines to the pipelines. I will certainly do something, but I have to meet with engineers who are willing to go there. It will take some time. Here, the projects are all under control. If you allow it, I'd like to continue here but at three or four days per week.

—I don't have a problem with that. Yes, I feel that you are handling the situation well and Ryan is exceeding my expectations.

—I am happy to hear that. As for the steering committee meetings, I think I should attend by invitation or to discuss a major problem. Do you agree?

—Yes.

—By the way, since I am now part-time, it'll affect my salary, a cut.

—Ethan, we won't deal with anything for a few months. When the time comes, we'll see. You can even use your office for the LDCSO.

—Actually, Mario, before I left on vacation, I checked for shared office space. There are some in this building and they seem fine. So, I reserved two, with the possibility of more. But thank you very much for your offer. I don't want to mix up everyone.

—Ethan, I think that's a wise decision.

—Thank you, Mario.

In the evening, Kate is curious. She asks him:

—Ethan, how is the LDCSO coming along?

—Today I visited some job sites. I found a few business analysts who, I believe, have some potential. I will interview them this week in my LDCSO office.

—That's a start, she says enthusiastically.

—Yes, it is a start. Also, I contacted a few engineering firms. I explained to them what my needs are. Two firms are ready to take on the work. I am also meeting their representatives this week.

—You're going to have them competing?

—More or less. I think I'm going to need to hire engineers from both firms.

—You spoke about building a dam with the engineers from Rio Tinto. Does that still hold?

—No, not at the moment. I'm leaning more towards turbines for the pipeline. I'll check with the engineers.

—That sounds like an interesting idea. Besides, everything seems to be lining up nicely.

—Is that the SVP talking?

—Yeah! Occupational hazard.

On Wednesday morning, Ethan interviews three business analysts. He set the appointments by order, starting with the least qualified and finishing with the most qualified analyst. He picks the most qualified analyst to begin on the following Monday.

Ethan tells him:

— Congratulations, Louis. Come, I'll show you to your office and introduce you to the secretary/receptionist who will give you a key. I'm going to have a contract prepared. You should know that I use an HR management firm.

— Thank you, sir.

— Ethan, my name is Ethan.

— Okay, Ethan.

That same day, he meets the two engineering representatives individually. At the end of his first meeting, he asks the representative:

— Could you please wait before leaving the office? I will certainly want to talk to you again.

— Not a problem, Mr. Miller.

At the end of his second meeting, Ethan asks:

— If you don't mind, I'd like to bring the representative from the other firm.

— Can I know why?

— Because, as I suspected, you will be working together.

— Oh, I guess. Why not?

Ethan asks the first representative to come to his office.

— Let's see. After our discussions, I see that one of you only has expertise regarding pipelines. The other has done some pipeline work, but above all, deals with turbines of every kind. So, for now, you'll be working together. Is that a problem?

— Not at all...

— I have to write a proposal quickly for the Minister of Lestanil. To do that, I have to understand how you'll be working. Here's what I think and tell me if I'm wrong.

— Okay...

— So, this whole project will be accomplished in several different phases. The first is that I will obviously want to meet the people who you'll be recommending. Afterwards, your engineers will have to travel there in order to analyze the situation, to take pictures, etc. Then they'll come back here to plan and assess the costs. You will be billing the LDCSO who will be paying you. As for the realization of the work, we'll see.

— Mr. Miller, in order to conduct an analysis, I'll need a surveyor along with his assistant. For a good estimate of the costs of building a pipeline, we'll need to

determine the height differences with a certain degree of precision.

—It's the same thing for the turbines, says the other representative.

Ethan asks them:

—I don't want to have to send two different teams of surveyors. Will one team be enough?

The two representatives quickly discuss and conclude:

—Yes, one team will be enough, states the turbine representative.

—Let's use my pipeline team. They are already used to travelling over vast areas, the representative suggests.

—A good suggestion. Do you agree? asks Ethan.

—No problem.

—So, I'll go over what I saw there, and you can give me some estimates of how the work will be carried out. I want you to know that this is a non-profit operation. I'm not asking you to do it for free, just don't add too much. You should also know that for the work, I'll probably have an international call for tenders.

Ethan goes over his findings, and the two representatives assess together the cost for their efforts. Ethan having heard the discussion, immediately accepts their estimates. He states:

—That's fine. Tomorrow morning, I will email the contracts to conduct the analyses along with the conditions. All you have to do is sign, scan, and return them

to me. I would like to receive the signed contracts quickly.

— No problem, Mr. Miller.

— Me neither! replies the other representative.

— Perfect. So, we move forward.

That same day, Ethan sends the two contracts. Early the next morning, he receives the signed contracts. While he is finishing the proposal for Mr. Ibrahim in his apartment, Kate rings the doorbell.

— Hello, Bella.

— Hey, you look good.

— Yes. Everything is going very well with both Mario and LDCSO.

— For Mario, I know what you asked. You should know that he appreciates you even more with this whole LDCSO thing. I get the impression he wants to be a part of it.

— Seriously?

— It's just a feeling.

— Okay. Look, I'm almost done with my proposal. Actually, for the analysis, there will be three teams. The first, the one for the pipeline, they will remain for ten days. This includes surveyors who will be working with the other teams. The second team, the turbines and pumps, will arrive four days after the first one, and remain there for five days. The last team will be for filtration and distribution. They will arrive seven to eight

days after the first team and will work for two days. They all come back together.

— How much will that cost the LDCSO?

— It will come out to \$110,000 for their work over there. \$25,000 is only for transportation. And then there are meals and accommodations. As far as accommodations, I'll ask Mr. Ibrahim to cover those expenses, so basically, it'll cost about \$150,000. For the development of plans and other specifications, I will see to that later.

— I'll let you get back to work.

— No. I will finish up tomorrow morning. Stay and let's have a drink together.

— Okay.

— Go to the living room and I will join you with the glasses.

— Ethan, I'll take care of the glasses. Go rest and I'll come to join you.

— Okay.

She sits sideways next to him on the couch, her legs folded beneath her. She looks at him and raises her glass:

—A lot of happiness, he wishes.

—I already have it, but I'll accept it. Same to you. Ethan, we've been back a few days and I'm still thinking about our beautiful trip.

—Kate, now I can forget all my old trips and only remember this one. We'll have to do it again.

—No choice. We missed Athens and Barcelona. I'll remember it, you know.

—I can see that.

—Ethan, I'd like to spend the night and make tenderness. You feel like it?

—With immense pleasure.

The next morning, he finishes his proposal and sends it to Mister Abdou Ibrahim. Early in the afternoon, Ethan receives a call from Mr. Ibrahim:

— Good morning, Mr. Ibrahim.

— Good morning, Mr. Miller.

— Have you read my proposal?

— Yes. I thought it was really well developed, very clear and particularly interesting. I sent it to Mr. Mamadou Diouf, our Head of State. He is all the more interested.

— Mr. Ibrahim, I am glad.

— We will obviously take care of the accommodations, and they will get the best.

— Thank you. I will meet all the three teams together over the coming week, and we'll arrange their first trip. Before I sign off on everything, I would like for the proposal to be signed as an agreement, indicating the name of the person who will be in charge of this project within your organization. As for the dates, someone will check availability with your representative.

— Mr. Miller, I already know who I will appoint and it will be carried out by our Head of State. You see how

important this issue is for us. He will be available and dedicated to you. He will take care of all the transport, be it by truck or car. If it is needed, he will give you access to the government helicopter.

— Mr. Ibrahim, this all seems perfect to me.

— Mr. Miller, I will sign the proposal and sending it back to you today.

— Perfect.

— Mr. Diouf asked when you think you will be back?

— I will certainly come back for the presentation of our plans and estimates as well as the work proposal.

— When do you think this presentation will be?

— At this point, I don't know. I realize that Mister Diouf is very busy and we'll have to schedule the meetings well in advance. As soon as it's possible to commit to a date, I will let you know and we can determine the best time for this presentation.

— Perfect, Mr. Miller. We'll wait.

— Thank you.

Ethan quickly receives a duly signed copy of the proposal. He confirms receipt and specifies that he'll continue his work.

On the following Monday, Louis, his business analyst, arrives at his office. Ethan enters the office and hands him a sheet of paper.

—Good morning and welcome to the first employee of the LDCSO.

—Thank you.

—As we discussed, we must fulfill all the roles of this organization. Today, I'd like to schedule a meeting for you, me and the seven people on that list. As for the two engineering representatives, I don't know if they want to attend this meeting. You'll have to ask them. Here, there are several conference rooms. You'll have to take care of this.

—Okay, I'll take care of it. Is there a document I should read?

—Yes. I have a package on my desk. Also, there is my website that explains the many things we're doing here. If you have any questions or comments or anything at all, write them down and we can discuss them later.

—Okay.

—As for the meeting, you will be there only to listen and see what's going on. You will see that we'll be

travelling a lot. I'm going to give you the contact information of a travel agent. She already knows your name. The LDCSO will pay for the flights. So, I'm going to want you to oversee it. You must know all the details, for each country we'll be helping. Think about how you should organize yourself and we can discuss it. You have access to my calendar, which is up to date. So, you can schedule any meeting for me. On this document, there is Nancy's name. She's my assistant in my other life. You also have her phone number and her email. You'll definitely be in touch with her.

A few days later, Ethan meets the seven members of the team along with the two engineering representatives. Ethan explains what the LDCSO is and does. He explains the entire Lestanil project to them, specifying the first phase. Then he asks:

—I'm going to need an analysis leader.

One of the representatives responds by pointing to one of the team members:

—Look, in my opinion, Michel should be in charge of that. He is used to it and you should know that he's already a partner in our firm.

Ethan accepts:

—I find this nomination interesting. Is there an objection?

Not a word.

—So, Michel is in charge of the analysis. Louis, as you plan the arrival of the teams in Lestanil, you could inform the designated person over there.

—No problem, Ethan.

—Okay. I will advise the Minister that everything is under control and that you are communicating with their representative. I will let you take care of the rest.

Michel, this is my cell phone number. When you're done here, I want to talk to you about the political situation and the safety measures that will be required.

— Okay, says Michel. I'll come to your office.

Eleven days later, the pipeline team travels to Lestanil. They begin their field analysis on Monday morning. They are accompanied by an official representative appointed by the Head of State along with two soldiers bearing automatic assault rifles. On the following Sunday, the second team arrives in Lestanil. These are the engineers who specialize in pumps and turbines. During their supper, the members of the first team tell stories about their week. Michel says to them:

—Guys, this is a nice country. If it weren't for the soldiers, everything would be perfect. The soldiers are not the least bit friendly, but they're here to protect us and they do so with all the seriousness in the world. So just do your job. When you need to move, tell them in advance. I think they appreciate it. The representative, I'm not sure if he's shy or just terrified of the Head of State. He wants to do everything in his power to accommodate us. So, we must be very nice to him. Tomorrow, we will follow one another. We have reached the area of the first turbine. And right after that, we'll have a distribution deviation. I don't know if we'll need a pump. We'll see.

The third team arrives on Wednesday. The day after that, all teams get to work. The filtration engineer goes with Michel and two soldiers to the area where the pipeline is set to begin. He takes samples for analysis and they immediately return to the rest of the teams.

The teams continue taking measurements and notes. They travel as far as the border of the two neighbouring countries that want to buy drinking water.

On their last day, two helicopters land near the teams. The members start worrying. Michel, in a reassuring voice, tells them:

—Don't worry, keep working. I'll go see what is happening.

He approaches the two helicopters that turn off their engines gradually. Two men approach Michel. One of them says:

—Good morning, sir. We've both come from a country neighbouring Lestanil. I am the Minister of Natural Resources' chief of staff and my colleague here is the chief of staff for the Minister of Procurement. We'd like to speak with you.

—Nice to meet you both. My name is Michel Levasseur. I am responsible for the teams you see here.

—We know that, Mr. Levasseur. Minister Ibrahim informed us.

—Gentlemen, please, I suggest we go to the tent and sit down to talk, Michel suggests, pointing to the tent behind him.

—Thank you, Mr. Levasseur. The sun is very hot today, as we say.

They head to the tent and sit at the worktable.

— Mister Levasseur, we are aware of the nature of your work and we would like to retain your services to distribute water in our major towns and villages.

— Gentlemen, you will certainly know that we were hired by the LDCSO?

— Yes.

— And I presume that you would like to receive the same help?

— Yes, our countries are very poor and it is difficult for us to build the necessary pipelines.

— I understand, Michel says. He continues: Wait just a moment, I'm looking at the time and I believe the president of the LDCSO is still at work. Would you like me to call him?

— That exceeds our expectations.

— Perfect. His name is Ethan Miller and I'm calling him right now.

— Hello Michel, Ethan answers his phone. What can I do for you? You are nearing the end of your work.

— Good morning, Ethan. Yes, today is our last day. We're coming back to Canada tomorrow. Right now, I'm on speaker and there are two men here, both chiefs of staff, who would like to speak with you.

— With pleasure, Michel. Good morning, gentlemen.

They each introduce themselves and explain their need for assistance. Ethan asks them:

— You know that the LDCSO has a website?

— Yes, Mr. Ibrahim has informed us and we looked at it thoroughly.

— So, you know the conditions we have and all the requirements that come with our assistance?

— Indeed.

— You know that we are seeking the appointment of officials to support the teams.

— Mister Miller, we'll need a couple of days to appoint these officials.

— It's not that urgent. I'd like for my teams to have two weeks to draw the plans and specifications. The Monday following that, I will contact you personally to obtain the names of your officials.

— That would be perfect.

— Normally, I like meeting the ministers in charge, but in this case, we want to do three things at once, so we need to speed up the process.

— That is greatly appreciated, Mr. Miller.

— If you agree, let's take a week and we'll convene next by videoconference to schedule another videoconference with your ministers. Does that suit you?

— Of course, Mr. Miller. Thank you for your availability and mostly your flexibility.

— Gentlemen, it is an honour. Michel, have a safe trip back and have a good weekend all three of you.

— Have a good weekend...

On Friday afternoon, Ethan meets up with Kate for their regular shopping. He does not talk much and seems rather thoughtful. Kate asks him:

— Hey, the Man, what's wrong?

— Everything is fine

— Then why the mood?

— Kate, let's go over there, he suggests by pointing to a café terrace.

He goes on:

— Let's get an espresso and I'll explain everything.

— You're worrying me. Do you know that?

They order their two espressos and sit at a small table. She says to him, in a very worried voice:

— So damn, what's going on?

— Sorry about my mood. Before coming to meet you, I spoke with two ministerial chiefs of staff of two countries neighbouring Lestanil.

— Go on, go on!

— They want the LDCSO to continue their pipelines in their cities and towns.

— They want to do business with the LDCSO, she says in a surprising manner.

—Yes.

—So, I'm going to kill you, you don't know it yet, but one day I'm going to kill you.

—Why?

—You really scared me with your demeanour, this mood, she reprimands him by slapping his arm.

—Sorry for the attitude. I should have stayed by myself. I have to think about this. It's getting more complicated. I have to think.

—Listen carefully to what I'm going to say now. You could think about it on Sunday. Today is Friday. We'll go shopping. Then we'll take a shower alone. You'll have to wash your head. Then you'll come to my place for supper. It's not a choice.

—Okay, boss.

—Please take it easy.

—Okay.

They take their groceries back to their apartments. They put everything away. Ethan takes a long, hot, and relaxing shower. He heads to Kate's apartment. He rings the doorbell and hears:

—It's unlocked.

Ethan enters and closes the door. He sees Kate wearing a very sexy, red silk dress. He can only stand motionless:

—Wow! Wow! Let me look at you.

She turns around only slightly and shows her profile. She asks him:

—Do you like it?

—You're beautiful and sexy.

The top of her dress has two silk bands barely covering her breasts while revealing both her hardening nipples. The two bands are held together by a string around her neck. They join slightly above her waist and form a belt. The bottom of her dress features two silk flaps, completely split on each side. The slot comes up to the waist and clearly show that she isn't wearing anything underneath.

When she moves, the flaps of her dress spread apart to reveal the bottom of her buttocks, that wonderful line between her buttocks and her thighs.

Ethan confesses:

—It's gonna be really hard!

With a slight sway, she approaches him, pushes her upright body against his and sensually whispers close to his ear:

—Honey, tell me what's gonna be hard.

—Pressed against me, you have your answer.

She barely steps back and looks down and confirms:

—Yes, I got my answer, but I have to make sure.

She pushes herself against him once again and kisses him, then she takes out her tongue slightly and licks his lips. He responds by kissing her the way she enjoys. She moves one hand to Ethan's sex and confirms:

—Yes, everything is in position.

He moves his hands to the side of her thighs and slowly pulls up to the side of her buttocks. She puts her hands on Ethan's and says:

—We have to eat first. Everything is ready.

—I agree, everything is ready. Even your breasts are screaming in pleasure.

She looks down at her breasts and sees her very hard nipples. She approves:

—It's true that they are screaming. Come, we will need our energy very soon.

They eat while enjoying a glass of wine. She gets up to remove the empty soup bowls. Leaning forward towards Ethan, the fabric that barely covered her breasts falls back and reveal the almost entirely for just a few seconds. She comes back with their main course. She sets the plates down and Ethan, still in his chair, takes her by the wrists and pulls

her towards him. He presses his head against her chest, and wraps his arms around her waist. He says:

—I love you. You are the energy that moves me forward. You are the muse that guides me towards the right goal. You are the wisdom that grants me wise advice.

—Phew! Honey, you're a poet tonight. I wonder what you'll be like after supper.

They finish the meal and Kate stands up to take away the dishes. Ethan takes her shoulders and lays her down on the table. He moves the dishes aside and places both his hands on her shoulders and slowly lowers them to her breasts. She answers with:

—Oh yes! I need to see you come, right now.

The following Monday in Ethan's office, Michel recounts the events of the past two weeks. Ethan summarizes:

—So, in few words, everything went well. By the way, I was really surprised by your phone call last Friday.

—Ethan, I have to tell you that when we saw the two helicopters approaching, we were a little scared. But when I saw two men in ties come out of the helicopters, I calmed down a little. In the end, it all went well.

—Yes, and I think you did well.

—That's very kind.

—Okay, Michel, I'd like to meet all the teams tomorrow. I would like to have a discussion regarding the direction we'll take for the plans and specifications.

—That's a good idea.

—Could you arrange it with Louis?

—Not a problem at all.

The next day, the teams attend the meeting. Ethan begins:

— I'd like your opinion about this trip.

Everyone gives their impressions, all positive. Ethan concludes:

— I understand that you all enjoyed it. You are aware that the ministers' chiefs of staff for the two neighbouring countries contacted me through Michel.

— Yes...

— Okay. This month, you'll be focusing on Lestanil. For my part, I will synchronize the Lestanil project with the one for the two other countries. Michel, we'll be meeting for this. So, you must prepare the preliminary plans and specifications.

Michel asks:

— Ethan, what do you mean by "preliminary"?

— I mean for a level of accuracy high enough to allow a financial evaluation with an accuracy of plus or minus twenty-five percent.

— I see, says Michel in agreement. They usually ask for a level of accuracy of five percent.

— Michel, for me it's twenty-five.

—Okay. You're the boss.

—It's not a question of being the boss. You will understand later. So now I'll let you discuss the various possibilities. I want us to leave here with a clear direction and for everyone to agree.

They extensively discuss the route of the transportation pipeline, the location of the turbines, and the path of the distribution pipelines. For the placement of the filters, they came to an agreement quickly. Ethan, seeing the consensus, says:

—I see that you all agree on this solution.

—Yes...

—Okay. Now, who's doing what? Again, I want your consensus.

—Michel takes the leadership and suggests a division of tasks. Everyone agrees with it. Ethan speaks again:

—I see that, without taking this week into account, we'll need two to three weeks to complete this project. Afterwards, we can schedule a presentation with the Lestanil Head of State, which will certainly take place in the middle of next month. Do we agree?

—Yes...

—Perfect. Now towards the end of this month, the distribution team and the pump and filter team will return to Africa and visit the two other countries. Will the analysis take you long?

—No, Michel replies. Ethan, we haven't told you this, but we used satellites for mapping. When we left

for Lestanil, we already had the maps. It will be the same for the other two countries. For Lestanil, we had to conduct additional analyses for the turbines. We had no room for errors. For these two other countries, there won't be any turbines. So, we are only going there to observe. We'll need a helicopter around the clock.

Ethan asks in a surprised voice:

— Is it legal to use satellites?

— Of course, Michel laughs as if it were obvious.

At the beginning of the second week, Ethan contacts the two chiefs of staff to schedule a videoconference with the two ministers. They agree on the following morning, EST.

The videoconference with the two ministers is going very well. Ethan explains why Michel and Louis are at his side. He outlines the status of the situation:

— Gentlemen, at the moment we are developing the plans and specifications for Lestanil. Once Mr. Diouf, the Head of State, accepts our solution, we will hold an international call for tenders. Now, what I have to do is synchronize the Lestanil project with yours. I will have to manage your three countries as one project.

— Why? asks one of the ministers.

Surprised by this question, Ethan answers:

— Because I'm the one who manages the LDCSO budget.

— So if I understand correctly, Mr. Miller, you're the one making up the rules, says this same minister.

With no hurry and a firm tone of voice, Ethan replies:

— Minister, that is one point of view. Now, I suggest that you remember that I am the one who is paying,

and so, indeed, I am the one who makes the rules. This is just my point of view. However, if you do not agree with this, we can stop this process right now. I was told that you read the content on the LDCSO website. We are not here to debate it. Would you like to continue this process?

—Mr. Miller, I would like to apologize to you. I just wanted to make sure everything was clear between us. I would like to continue this process, if you agree.

—I agree, Ethan calmly confirms. So as I was saying, I have to synchronize the three projects. In order to do that, I'm going to need one official from each country who will be representing you.

Each Minister gives Ethan the name of his official along with his contact information.

—Thank you. I will contact them and organize a trip for four people: Michel will be our coordinator, we also have a transport and distribution pipeline engineer, a pump engineer as well as a filtration engineer. I want them to leave this weekend and start their analysis early next week. We'll need a helicopter around the clock for two whole days for each of your countries. Are we good so far?

—Yes...

—This work will require two days per country. So, I would like to ask you to take care of the accommodations for three nights in a hotel in each country. Do you agree?

—No problem at all.

— Like Lestanil, I assume you will take care of my staff's safety?

— That goes without saying, says one of the ministers.

— Of course, confirms the other.

— Perfect. This Friday, I will schedule the presentation of our plans and specifications some time next month. The 14th is reserved for Lestanil, the 15th and the 16th will be reserved for you. Is that all right with you?

— Mr. Miller, it is faster than we expected.

— Is it a problem?

— Not at all. But we're going to have to go back to our Heads of State. As far as I know, I am not sure if he's available on the 15th or 16th of next month.

— The same is true for us, says the other minister.

— It doesn't matter. If they are not available, either they will let you give the approval or they can come to Canada for a quick visit. Should they choose the latter, they'll need winter coats, because it'll start getting cold during that time. And second, the call for tenders will be developed and implemented on Friday, the 23rd. If I do not receive your go-ahead, your call for tenders will be withdrawn.

— Mister Miller, you do not compromise.

— That is right, and I'm sorry to put so much pressure on you. But you should know that if your leaders are not available and don't wish to delegate this power to you, I won't slow down, or even worse, stop this

process. Then we'll see about accomplishing this task at another time. Despite all this, I am really not interested in paying many times to move my teams, equipment and all the supplies needed, be the pipes, pumps, filters, distributors, monitoring gauges and so on. I also do not want to reissue a call for tenders knowing that once would have sufficed. I'm sorry to repeat it, but I'm paying for this.

— Mr. Miller, as far as I'm concerned, a decision will be made on the 15th or 16th of next month.

The other minister replied:

— Mr. Miller, same for me, but if I may ask, will it be on the 15th or the 16th of the month for us here?

— Minister, we can set the date right now. Yours will be on the 15th. Is that okay with both of you?

They nod.

— Gentlemen, I want to thank you for your time and understanding. We'll meet on the 15th and 16th. I will be able to shake your hand at that moment hopefully meet with your respective Heads of State.

Ethan hangs up his phone.

— Louis, you'll take care of the trip?

— No problem at all.

Michel, amazed at the speed of this meeting, says:

— Ethan, you don't beat around the bush.

— You're right, Michel. But you have to consider a few things.

— Can you explain?

— Yep! First of all, these ministers are there because they're natural leaders. Whether they're good leaders or bad ones don't matter. In fact, I was expecting a bigger clash than that.

— Ethan, you didn't give them the chance. Either they follow or they could leave, Michel says with a semi-firm voice.

— That is true. Second, they will discuss all of it with their leaders and also with other ministers in and outside their country. Michel, what do you think will happen?

— They'll give you a hell of a reputation.

— And that's precisely what I want. I don't want to have to argue with everyone. You're on board or

you're not. It's really simple, and I have to make sure it stays that way. Guys, you need to remember this: when someone is helping you, the one and only thing you can do is thank them. That being said, you must also remember that you cannot behave like that towards the people in these countries. Only I can.

— I see, Michel admits.

— Me too, confirms Louis.

— OK. Louis, you're on it?

— Yes!

— Thank you, guys.

On Friday, Louis is getting ready to schedule the meetings for the 14th, 15th and 16th when Kate enters his office.

— Hello, Louis.

— Hi, Kate. Is there anything I can do for you?

— Actually, I wanted to talk to Ethan. He's not here. Do you know if he's coming back today?

— I don't know. You could call him if it's urgent.

— I know.

— Kate, I was at the videoconference with both ministers of the two countries.

— OK. Was there a problem?

— No. But I saw how Ethan negotiates.

Kate bursts out laughing and says:

— Oh! So, what happened?

— I would say this: He has guts all right. He put one of the ministers back in his place politely, but firmly. He basically said: "Either you follow me or you go away."

— Yep! That's his style. But know this Louis: I've seen him worse than that. He was also sure of himself with two guns pointed at him.

— This guy is really amazing.

—Right, and if you give him your full support, he's gonna back you beyond all of your expectations. Right now, there are only two of you to take care of everything, but I can guarantee you it won't be like that for very long. So, Louis, take everything you could get because when the time comes, he'll put you in the right place.

—Thank you for the advice, Kate.

—A pleasure. By the way, if at some point you don't understand what he's doing, ask instead of assuming something. You'll see, he'll answer and explain it all to you when he has time.

—Okay.

Louis sets the meetings to present the plans and specifications. On the next day, Saturday, the analysis team leaves for Africa. That evening, Ethan and Kate prepare a good supper. With a knowing smile, Kate tells him:

—Yesterday, I spoke to Louis.

—So, what happened?

—You impressed him with your composure during the videoconference with the ministers.

Ethan bursts out laughing. He says:

—Really?

—Yes. Are you asking me, “Really?” I have the feeling you don’t see how you act. In fact, I don’t think you really see yourself. I feel like you don’t know yourself. You’re a fantastic leader. You make decisions quickly and firmly. You respect people, regardless of their social or financial status. And when you don’t like someone, you ignore or destroy them.

He approaches her and, taking her by the waist and drawing her towards him, he gently tells her,

—And when it comes to sex, how do you find me?

—Wonderful and I love you.

—I love you more.

—No, I am the one who loves you even more.
Ethan, the food will burn if we keep going.

He lets go of her and quickly mixes the contents in the dish. He says:

—Phew. It mustn't be overcooked. You just saved us.

—I am glad you admit it. You will also have to admit that you're going to pay.

She thinks for a moment and goes on:

—With the cards.

—Do I have a choice? he asks still mixing.

—You have no choice.

He glances at her with a secret little smile and says:

—You called me a pervert many times. You are insatiable.

—It's your fault.

—Oh yes! Why?

—Because you make love so well.

—Phew.

In Africa, the team of engineers conduct their work from a helicopter, landing it occasionally to get a more accurate view of the terrain. They take pictures and write a few notes on the satellite maps. They do the same for both countries.

All weekend, they develop the plans and specifications and work on both presentations.

On Monday, they travel to Lestanil to prepare the three presentations and to finalize their documents.

That same Monday, Ethan, Kate, and the two engineering representatives leave Canada and head for Lestanil. They arrive on Tuesday evening. The next day, they all go to the meeting with Mr. Mamadou Diouf, the Head of State. Mr. Abdou Ibrahim is also there, along with a few other ministers and their chiefs of staff.

After the customary greetings, Michel presents the entire Lestanil project. Whenever there are questions, either Michel answers them or refers to the appropriate expert.

On a few instances, Mr. Ibrahim smiles discreetly at Ethan. He knows that the Head of State is satisfied.

Mr. Ibrahim asks Michel:

—In your presentation, I did not see anything about transporting electricity from the turbines to our populated areas or its distribution to our towns and villages.

—Indeed, Mr. Ibrahim, I...

Ethan interrupts Michel:

—I apologize Michel, but I will answer this question. Mr. Ibrahim, at my request, the team did not consider transporting and distributing electricity. During my first visit to Lestanil, a very pleasant visit indeed I must say, I noticed that you already had electricity in your big cities. So, you have the expertise to build these distribution networks. Despite that, I recently contacted the President of Hydro-Quebec, in Quebec, Canada, and asked that his transportation and distribution engineers come and help you. He is familiar with the LDCSO and let me know that he is open to discussing it with you. So, for this current project, our only concern about electricity is how it will operate pumps and filters. This was included in our plans and specifications.

—Mr. Miller, as usual, you surprise me.

—Mr. Ibrahim, it will always be my pleasure to surprise you. Michel, you can continue.

When Michel mentions that he's finished, Mr. Diouf says:

—Thank you, sir, for that presentation. It's all very clear.

—My pleasure, Mr. Diouf, Michel says.

— Mr. Miller, I want to congratulate you on this achievement, and, as you know, we wish to sell to our neighbours. Mr. Ibrahim informed me that you are involved with both countries to help them distribute water. I don't mean to be indiscreet, but is it possible to get an idea how these projects are progressing?

— Of course, Mr. Diouf. In fact, we will be presenting the results of our plans and specifications tomorrow and the day after tomorrow, just like we did today. If all your three countries agree, we will set up an international call for tenders very soon.

— That's great Mr. Miller.

— Mr. Diouf, I would like to add this. I expect, and I say expect, for the work in all three countries to begin at the same time.

— Mr. Miller, why do you insist on saying that you "expect"?

— Simply because I still don't know if it'll be possible in terms of availability and also in relation to cost. This last point concerns me directly, you understand?

Mr. Diouf retorts:

— I understand for the availability. However, for the costs, I would like to ask that, if it becomes an issue, is it possible for our three countries to sit down together and come up with an overall solution? Do you think that's possible?

— Mr. Diouf, the mere fact that you are suggesting this alternative makes me very optimistic.

—Mr. Miller, I feel that my country can finally start dreaming of its prosperity. We will be able to develop a few tourist attractions. As for water and electricity, I couldn't have even dreamed of such a thing. And on top of that, there's the possible cooperation with one of the world's largest electricity companies, it's all just wonderful.

—Mr. Diouf, I suggest you ask for this company's support. They are extremely knowledgeable about the durability and safety of such facilities. The weather in Quebec demands it.

—I'll take your advice, Mr. Miller. Now you are all invited to a supper where, Mr. Miller, we will let our two wives interact.

—It is an honour, Mr. Diouf.

They go to a reception hall and Mr. Diouf says:

— Mr. Miller and Ms. Jackson, as you can see, our best reception hall is relatively modest.

Ethan hastens to say:

— Mr. Diouf, if this room were gold-gilded and decorated with precious jewels, I wouldn't be here to see it. Quite the opposite. Despite all this, I find this room very beautiful and its decoration makes it cozy. Isn't that right, Kate?

— Mr. Diouf, my husband is quite right.

— Thank you, Mrs. Jackson. Mr. Miller, I'm not surprised by the first part of your answer and I appreciate the second part.

The meal is delicious and all guests savour it. During their meal, the music is subtle and allows for conversation. After their meal, a local and quite delicious digestif is served. A dance show ends their evening in colourful enchantment.

The next day, a twin-engine airplane transport the group to one of the neighbouring countries. At the airport, the minister who attended the videoconference is present to welcome them. Ethan introduces him to Kate and to the two representatives. As for the other team members, they met during the previous week.

Three cars bring them to the location of their meeting. The presentations are held in front of the Head of State and other ministers who are also present. Then, Michel is invited to show his presentation, which he carries out brilliantly. When he finishes, the Head of State speaks:

— Let me congratulate you on your absolutely fantastic work. You should know that having water in our country will reduce the number of accidents and even the deaths related to the transportation of water on foot. Mr. Miller, I've been told about your leadership, and today I see the results. My sincere congratulations. To all, my sincere thanks. To demonstrate my appreciation, kindly come to our reception hall.

The next day, the plane takes them to the second country neighbouring Lestanil, where they are congratulated and thanked once again. A supper and show ensue, just as wonderful as the two previous ones.

They spend the night and then set off to return to Canada.

The following Monday, Ethan has a meeting with Michel and the two representatives. Ethan begins the meeting:

—I would like to begin by mentioning Michel's excellent work.

—Thank you, he replies.

—Now it's time for a call for tenders. I think we should have three calls for tender. I say this because I want to support each country financially. So, I need three different projects. What do you think?

Michel takes the floor:

—I don't think we have much of a choice. Each country has its own characteristics that applicants will need to know. It's going to significantly affect their bids. Now, I guess an applicant could apply to all three?

—Of course, said Ethan.

—Ethan, you asked us for preliminary plans and specifications. Normally, we go beyond that before making a call for tenders.

—I know we spoke about it very briefly. Now, in your opinion, are the current plans and specifications sufficient for the applicants?

—Yes, I think so, but there will be a few gaps in relation to solutions. If we were more specific, there would only be one solution, the one we would have decided.

—Michel, let me explain. It would have taken a long time to determine only one solution. Is that correct?

—Yes.

—More time means more money. Right?

—Yes.

—And I would be the one paying for that. Now, if we ask applicants to come up with solutions, they will be the ones paying for it.

—Oh! I understand.

—The strategy is that when you have a call for tenders, you let the applicants work for free.

—Ethan, this strategy is a bit perverse.

—Michel, don't say that. Kate keeps calling me that.

The atmosphere calms down with slight laughter. Ethan continues:

—Here we are. Michel, I want your opinion on whether the team can propose these three calls for tender.

—Absolutely, says Michel.

One of the representatives says:

—There are standard sentences in these calls. Let's not reinvent them, I can find templates.

—It's the same thing here, says the other representative.

— I would like to see the templates you choose, asks Ethan.

— Okay...

— Michel, I would like for you to continue coordinating these projects.

— No problem. Plus, I like these projects and these guys.

— Do you want an office here or do you want to continue in your office at your firm?

— Ethan, I think I'll need a place here for when the submissions arrive.

— Okay. I will take care of that. How do we notify the applicants?

— There are websites that advertise the calls for submissions. The representatives are used to it. Also, I know a few suppliers, but they're not all in Canada, Michel says with a bit of pride.

— Michel, that's perfect. I'd like to involve more than just one country.

— Oh good. So, when the time comes, I will contact them.

— As for websites, can you tell Louis to take care of it?

— Of course. Louis, we'll look at all this together.

— Okay, Louis answers.

Ethan points out:

— I would like for the call to state that these projects are funded by the LDCSO. I want to clarify that

these are non-profit projects and that only suppliers with a reasonable profit margin will be accepted.

— I understand, says Michel.

— I will not go over the calls for tenders again, except for a few clauses, including the one I just mentioned. Will we have quality assurance?

— I think that would be better, admits Michel.

— Okay. Who can provide that?

A representative from Michel's firm says:

— I have what you need.

— Are you talking about Emmanuelle? asks Michel.

— Yes.

Michel turns to Ethan and quickly adds:

— Ethan, she's the Cadillac of quality assurance. She's obsessed with details. She doesn't let anything pass her by.

— Great, Emmanuelle for the quality assurance. However, when I spoke about quality assurance, I was thinking about the construction work.

— Not to be a salesman, but I think our current team should be responsible for that, suggests one representative.

— I agree, Ethan replies. Also, Michel, would you be comfortable acting like a project leader knowing that the supplier(s) will be recommending one coordinator per project?

— Ethan, I'm comfortable leading the projects, but you need to know that the paperwork, the reports,

tracking costs and accounting are not my cup of tea. The same applies to the politics.

— I suspected that, Ethan affirms. Louis is going to deal with accounting. In my opinion, this should be minimal. As for the political aspects, I will continue dealing with them.

— Then I am happy to oversee the work.

— That's how we'll proceed, concludes Ethan.

— We'll start the calls for tenders tomorrow. I will notify the team, Michel says.

— Perfect. Gentlemen, thank you.

The following Friday morning, Ethan follows up:

— Good morning, Michel.

— Good morning, Ethan.

— So, how are the calls for tender coming along?

— Ethan, you're going to fall off your chair.

— What do you mean?

— Because we'll be finished today.

— Are you serious?

— Yes. We found two templates that are similar to our projects. A real stroke of luck.

— Do we still need Emmanuelle?

— Yes, and I asked her to be available on Monday.

— Perfect. So, I'm going to advise Louis to post the submission requests on the website.

— No need, Ethan, I already did. On Monday, everything will be online and I will make sure there are no errors.

— Great, Michel, we're really moving forward. We'll have to talk about the future.

— I am open.

— I'm just asking you to be a little patient.

— I am patient.

The following Monday, Emmanuelle looks over the documents and makes a few corrections. Ethan, for his part, checks the call for tenders with regard to reasonable profits.

The next day, Michel calls Ethan:

—I contacted a few work coordinators I know to tell them about the calls for tenders.

—Perfect.

—There are two in Canada, one in the United States, two in France, and two in Hungary. Not all of them are available, but I would say that four seemed interested.

—Michel, thank you very much.

—My pleasure.

Two weeks later, Ethan receives submissions from six suppliers. He calls Michel:

— Hi. I received submissions from six suppliers. Each has applied to all three projects. So, we have eighteen submissions to analyze. I set up a place here for you to work.

— Ethan, this weekend I developed some evaluation chart for the submissions. It should go pretty quickly.

— Your wife will end up killing you.

— Yeah! She punished me last night, and I'm a little tired today.

— I don't pity you.

— Okay, we're on our way.

— OK.

Ethan calls Mr. Ibrahim to schedule a meeting to approve the work. Mr. Ibrahim notifies him:

— Mr. Miller, a few days ago our King, Achille Rupert, suggested that we organize a single meeting with all three countries. That is if you agree, of course. The meeting will take place here in Lestanil, at the royal reception hall. I took it upon myself to discuss it with the two representatives of the other countries. They came back to me early this morning saying that their respective kings agreed. There would be a meeting to present the solutions, followed by a gala with sipper, music and a show. As regards the date, I will need to confirm it, but we're thinking Friday, in two weeks. Does that suit you?

— Of course. I couldn't have hoped for better.

— Mr. Miller, all three kings, their ministers and the entire populations could not have hoped for what you are bringing to us. We are indebted to you infinitely.

— Mr. Ibrahim, I have appointed Michel as project manager for all three countries.

— Sir, I congratulate you because he has done very well in all three countries.

—So, he will be coming with me on this trip. I would like it if his wife and mine were to come with us as well.

—Mr. Miller, as far as your wife is concerned, if she were not coming, it would have been a great disappointment to everyone here. As for Michel's wife, it will be my pleasure to meet her.

—Wonderful. So, I'll wait to hear from you.

Ethan calls Michel immediately and tells him about his conversation with Mr. Ibrahim. He ends it by saying:

— Michel, will you be comfortable presenting the approved submissions?

— Not a problem. And I would even say that doing it like this, all at once, will be easier for me. That's great news.

— Michel, there are three more things. First, I'm going to book a private jet.

— It'll be less tiring. The second thing?

— You will have to bring your wife. I already told them.

— We'll have to force ourselves a little. She's clearly used to banquets with three different kings. And the third thing?

— Your wife probably doesn't have a suitable outfit. So, I'm going to pay for a new evening dress.

— Are you serious?

— Yes. By the way, I suggest she avoids a plunging neckline and no... Actually, a dress that's not sexy at all. Sorry. Friday, I'll make sure that Kate dresses appropriately as well. If you want, I will give you the name of the

store she chooses for her dress and I will let them know that the LDCSO will pay for it. Otherwise, you can go wherever you want and I'll just pay you back. Is that okay?

— I'm speechless, Ethan. Thank you.

That Friday, Ethan informs Kate of his plans. She tells him:

—Darling, I have no dress for the occasion.

—When you say darling, it means that you are manipulating me. You know I know that now.

—Absolutely not darling, she replies firmly, as a smile breaks out.

—Well, are we going shopping?

—I would never have dared to ask you, darling.

She gives him a little kiss, and they set off on their way. While walking, Kate points out:

—A private jet for three days is expensive. In principle, you're not supposed to spend that much.

—Kate, to date, the foundation's investments have yielded about \$26,000,000 in dividends. And I'm not counting the increase in assets. So, I have no problem using a private jet. I also want to remind you two things.

—Yes?

—First of all, you are not my auditor.

—That's right, Ethan, and I apologize. It was just my loving opinion, darling.

—Yeah! You said darling again, so I don't trust you.

— And the second thing?

— Unless I am mistaken, I am coming with you to buy you a dress. We remember that I don't like shopping very much. So, I'd like you to enjoy it.

— Hey, the Man! I promise you will enjoy my appreciation.

— Promises, promises, promises!

— We'll see about that.

At the clothing store, they look at several dresses. Kate tries on two. Then she tries on the dress that Ethan pointed to. Ethan exclaims:

—Wow! Now that's a dress. Don't try anything else. Turn around.

A stunning black dress with a see-through top that perfectly defines her chest. It is adorned with a tightly woven lace at the breasts and with lighter lace straps around the neck, the long sleeves and the back. A black belt with a double buckle in gold sits at the front. The black silk bottom caresses her hips and buttocks and then falls straight down to her feet. There is a slight slit on the left side that reaches her knee.

Kate looks into three different mirrors and says:

—It's true, it is beautiful.

—Yes, and it fits your body divinely well.

The pretty assistant looks at Kate and says:

—This is the first time I hear something like that. I feel like it'll be divinely nice tonight.

—I feel the same way, Kate replies with a knowing smile.

—I'm still here, you know, Ethan points out.

—I have to make a few small adjustments to fit the dress to this divine body, the assistant says with a smile.

In the middle of the following week, Minister Ibrahim's chief of staff sends an email confirming that the meeting will take place on the following Friday. Ethan, after checking his schedule, confirms everyone's presence.

On Thursday morning, Ethan and Kate head to the airport. They find Michel and his very pretty wife. Introductions are made and they all get on the private jet. A hostess welcomes them:

— Good morning. Please take your seats and fasten your seatbelts. I must inform you that to get to Lestanil, we will have to make two fifteen minutes stops to refuel.

— Thank you, says Ethan.

Once they arrive in the capital of Lestanil, they are greeted by the Head of State's chief of staff, who shakes their hand:

— Good morning, Mr. Miller, Ms. Jackson. Glad to see you again.

— Our shared pleasure, says Kate.

He shakes hands with Michel, who introduces him to his wife.

He turns to Ethan and says:

—We reserved the best rooms for you. Please get in the limousine and we'll take you to the hotel.

In the car, the chief of staff informs them:

—Tomorrow, the presentation meeting will begin at 3 p.m. Then, we will attend the gala in the same building. Ladies, a car will bring you to the gala after the presentation. Is that okay with you?

—Of course, says Kate. We will be ready.

The meeting to present their solution takes place in a fairly large room, which is arranged in a “U” shape. There are two tables on each side and three thrones connect them. One table is for the LDCSO and one table for each country.

The Lestanil Head of State, standing next to the kings, turns to the LDCSO table and begins:

— Mr. Miller and Mr. Levasseur, if you would be so kind as to approach.

— With the permission of Your Highnesses, I would like to introduce the president of the LDCSO, Mr. Miller and Mr. Levasseur, who is responsible for the execution of the work in for our three countries.

The King on the right extends his hand to Ethan and says:

— It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Miller.

— Your Highness, the honour is all mine.

Then it's Michael's turn, and they proceed like that for each king.

Mr. Diouf takes back the floor:

— Mr. Miller, Mr. Levasseur, I would invite you to return to your seats.

After a moment, he continues:

— May I ask Your Highnesses if we could begin the presentations?

The king of Lestanil looks at the two other kings, who give him a nod of approval. He answers the Head of State:

— Mister Diouf, you may begin.

He turns to Ethan and says:

— Mr. Miller, you may begin.

— Thank you, Mr. Diouf. Michel, please, proceed.

— Certainly.

Michel presents the solution for each country successively. During the three presentations, no one intervenes. Michel heads to the LDCSO table, but is stopped by King Rupert of Lestanil:

— Mr. Levasseur, can you explain to me how my people will benefit from electrical energy if there is no distribution of electricity, save for the one used by the pumps and filters of the pipeline?

— Of course, Your Majesty. Mr. Miller, along with the support of your minister of Territorial Development, Mr. Ibrahim, contacted the president of Hydro-Quebec, Mr. Saint-Clair, in Canada in order to determine the possibility of sending their best engineers to analyze the transport and distribution of electricity in your country. I don't know if Mr. Ibrahim contacted him or his appointed officials.

The king turns to Mr. Ibrahim and asks him:

— Mr. Ibrahim?

—Your Highness, I actually spoke with Mr. Saint-Clair. He confirmed his willingness to come and advise us. He also gave me the name of a person who is responsible for our case. My chief of staff spoke to that individual. They agreed that as soon as the first turbine is installed, a Hydro-Quebec team will arrive here. If your Highness would permit, I would like to highlight two things.

—I'll allow it.

—The transportation and distribution of electricity do not fall under the responsibility of the LDCSO, represented here by Mr. Miller and Mr. Levasseur. Also, your Highness should be aware that Hydro-Quebec is a corporation owned by the Government of Quebec, in Canada. So, it is the Government of Quebec that is offering us their expertise free of charge.

—Thank you, Mr. Ibrahim. When the time comes, we will thank the Government of Quebec and the LDCSO, won't we, Mister Diouf?

—Of course, Your Highness.

King Rupert turns to the other two kings and asks them:

—If you do not have any other questions, we could proceed to the gala.

The two kings demonstrate that they have no other questions.

Ethan stands up and asks:

—If Your Highnesses allow it, I have a question?

—Mister Miller, go ahead.

—I would like to know if I have your approval to begin transporting equipment and materials this December and to start working in January, and this would be applicable to all three countries simultaneously.

Each king gives his approval one after the other. Then they start the march towards the hall.

When they arrive at the hall, the kings, the Heads of State, the Ministers, Ethan and Michel find their wives. Introductions are made based on a well-structured protocol. Immediately after the introductions, the Lestanil king confirms:

—I will go against protocol, but gentlemen, your wives are absolutely stunning. Their dresses are very elegant.

Kate takes the floor:

—Thank you, Your Highness. I must admit that both dresses were made by the same designer.

—Well, if that is the case, Mr. Miller, when I come to Canada, you will have to introduce us to this designer, won't he, my wife?

—It is most assuredly his obligation, she replies with a joy that's barely restrained.

—With great pleasure, Ethan says while bowing his head.

Ethan and Kate are seated at the kings' table. Michel and his wife are seated with the Heads of State.

Early the next day, the group boards the private jet. It takes one entire day to bring them back to Canada. Michel's wife says with feeling:

—What a fantastic evening last night! Three kings, three Heads of State and so many ministers. All these nice individuals were accompanied by their wives. Phew! No one is going to believe me. Does that happen to you often?

Kate answers with a smile:

—Eve, it was our supper with kings and probably our last. But with the Heads of State, it will probably happen again.

Ethan continues:

—Ladies, you did not attend the meeting that preceded the reception. Michel was just perfect. Michel, I think that you're better than I am when it comes to presentations. Congratulations.

—That's my husband! exclaims Eve.

—You should be proud of him, I can tell you that much, Ethan says.

On Monday, Ethan contacts the manager of the company that won the tenders:

—First of all, I would like to announce that you have been chosen for all three tenders. Congratulations.

—Thank you, Mr. Miller, and I appreciate that. I look forward to getting started.

—You should know that Michel Levasseur will be my representative and ensure that everything goes well. The engineers of the team who made the analyses and developed the plans will be the ones performing the quality review.

—That's perfectly normal.

—Last Friday, I met the kings and the leaders of the three countries. I was given the approval to carry out this work. I notified them that the supplies and equipment would be arriving by boat sometime in December and that our work would begin early January. Is that still true?

—Absolutely.

—Okay. I will send you the tender confirmation document. We'll have to meet and sign the contracts. I

will also give you the names of the three immigration department officials that will deal with customs. Be-ware, if anyone asks you for a bribe, simply refuse and notify Michel Levasseur who will also be present at cus-toms, of course.

— I fully understand. I can come to your office and sign the contract.

Ethan quickly replies:

— Thank you, but I'd rather come to your office. I'd like to have a quick visit of your facilities.

— No problem at all.

In December, containers, identified by country, are loaded onto a ship and then taken by truck to transport everything to the countries in question.

On January 4th, Michel and the rest of the team fly to these countries. All three Heads of State agree to provide Michel with a twin-engine airplane whenever necessary. He constantly travels around making sure the teams are synchronized. Every two months, Michel goes on leave and comes back to Canada to spend a week with his family.

Around the middle of January, Ethan receives an email from the Bigamo Minister of Tourism. Ethan checks the time difference and schedules a telephone interview by email.

The next day, he receives the call:

—Ethan Miller speaking.

—Good morning, Mr. Miller.

—Good morning, Mr. Adila. I read your request for LDCSO support. If I may, I will go over it to make sure I understand.

—Mr. Miller, with pleasure.

—Your need is obviously in the field of tourism. It seems you've done a lot of work to increase it, but there hasn't been any significant growth.

—That's right. Clearly, we put our efforts in the wrong place.

—You need experts to direct your activities and you're asking the LDCSO for a grant or a loan that would support your work.

—That's exactly right, Mr. Miller.

—I get it. I would like to visit your country to see for myself and to discuss it further with you. Afterwards, I will be able to choose experts that I could send

to you to analyze the situation over there and to develop a proposal that will later be presented to you. I imagine that you'll want your president to attend this presentation.

—You are right about our president's involvement. It will be my pleasure to meet you.

—The pleasure will be mine. I have someone here, Louis, who will contact your assistant to plan my visit. If it doesn't bother you, I would like to bring my wife, who also works for the LDCSO.

—Your wife will be most welcome.

—I may also have a tourism expert with me. Should that suit you, of course.

—Of course, that suits me.

—We'll proceed in this manner. Thank you, Mr. Adila. I'm looking forward to our meeting.

—I thank you, Mr. Miller, and it will be my pleasure.

Ethan meets one of the company's travel agents, the services of whom he has used several times:

—Hello, Mr. Miller, what can I do for you today?

—Hello Marie. Can I call you Marie?

—Of course.

—I must travel to a country that wants to improve its tourism industry.

—Is this part of your humanitarian work?

—Precisely.

—Which country are we talking about?

—It's the Bigamo.

—Bigamo, let's see. Yes, I see it, but there is hardly anything interesting to tourists.

—Is your information up to date?

—Yes.

—Okay. So, I'd like you to come with Kate and me. You can bring your husband along. We'll be going by private jet.

—And what will I do there?

—Look around, take a few notes. I want to know if there is potential there. I want to know where to

invest. For my part, I will go there assuming there's no potential for tourism and I seek out other possibilities.

—How long will we be there?

—We'll be working over there for two days, and so we'll be staying three nights.

—I guess I won't be getting paid?

—The travel agency belongs to you, doesn't it?

—That is true.

—So far, you've booked several trips for me, not counting my holiday last July. Also, at least 50% of all the LDCSO trips have gone through you. So, yes, I'm not going to pay you anything additionally, because I think there might be potential for you and your agency.

—Your perspective interests me. I will be able to advertise that this is the first agency to offer vacation packages to a country assisted by the LDCSO.

—Exactly. And I may ask you again for other countries.

—Interesting. I have to check with my husband to see if he can take the time off.

—OK. When you know, could you notify Louis, my business analyst that you know, by the way.

After he returns from Bigamo, Ethan sets an aid budget with Louis:

—For the analysis trip where we'll develop the plans and specifications, we will need an architectural designer to improve hotels, an expert in urban planning, in rural development and in communications.

—You got it.

—Okay. We'll also be using Marie Robert to do the quality assurance of our plans and specifications. She is aware of their needs and she can be a good judge.

—I'll take care of everything.

Ethan watches the news on his tablet. He hears:

—Rodaldor, the coastal country in the Northern Pacific Ocean, which suffered a giant tsunami of more than 50 metres just under a year ago, is still in the process of rebuilding. The authorities are asking for help.

Ethan heads to Louis's office:

—Louis, I just heard on the news that Rodaldor needs assistance to rebuild all the homes destroyed by the tsunami. Could you find the name of the minister responsible for this reconstruction?

—I'll see.

—Also, could you get me the names of three renowned manufacturers of factory homes and give me the contact information for their sales manager or president?

—Okay.

The next day, Louis delivers the information requested regarding the manufacturers of factory homes

Ethan calls the president of the largest company and explains the situation to him:

— So, how much would a manufactured home cost, including transportation? There is no electricity, no heating, no air conditioning, no insulation. Only walls, single non-thermal windows that open and four rooms with unlined walls.

— Mr. Miller, I will need two days to get you an estimate.

— Okay. Do you have my contact information?

— Yes.

— I'll wait for your call.

Two days later, the president of the factory home construction manufacturer calls Ethan:

— Mr. Miller, I assessed the cost of materials, construction and handling, but I cannot evaluate the transportation costs.

— I understand.

— Perfect. The cost is similar to the one for a large shed and comes to \$5,000.

— Thank you. I have to travel to Rodaldor to assess the situation. If I proceed with this, there will be a call for tenders by invitation only and I'd like for you to be part of it. In the meantime, can you look at transportation options and surprise me when I get back? This would give you a head start on your competitors.

— Thank you for the valuable advice.

— Actually, thank you for giving me your time free of charge, Ethan says.

Ethan's phone rings:

— Good morning, Mr. Miller, my name is David Page.

— Good morning, Mr. Page, what can I do for you?

— Mr. Miller, I would like to meet with you to discuss the future commitments of the LDCSO. I'm in Montreal right now, staying at the Ritz-Carlton. I'll be here for a couple of days. If you'll agree to meet me for a, let's say, business supper, I'll make a reservation at the restaurant.

— Mr. Page, I'm curious to see what you mean by "future commitments of the LDCSO". I can meet you for a business supper, no problem. I'll be accompanied by my life partner who assists me in the LDCSO.

— I would be happy to meet her. Why don't we schedule this for next Monday night?

— Monday night sounds great.

Ethan and Kate arrive at the hotel and head for the entrance of the restaurant. Ethan asks:

— Good evening. There should be a reservation under David Page?

Without even looking, the butler asks them:

— Sir, your name?

— Miller, Ethan Miller.

— And the lady?

— Jackson, Kate Jackson.

— Perfect sir and madam, please follow me.

He brings them to the door of a private room. He knocks gently and hears:

— Come in.

— Gentlemen, this is Ms. Jackson and Mr. Miller.

They enter to see ten men seated around a large oval table. A man stands up and walks towards them, he holds out his hand and says:

— I am David Page.

— Nice to meet you...

— Let me introduce you to everyone.

They go around the table shaking hands. Then they take the remaining seats. Ethan begins:

— Mr. Page, I didn't think there would be so many of you.

— Does it bother you?

— No. During our telephone conversation, you said that this meeting involved the LDCSO.

— Exactly.

— So how can I help you?

— Mr. Miller, allow me to enlighten you.

— I'm listening.

— We've been following you since the beginning of your rather large acquisition project, we must admit. We have also seen your track record in the field of consulting, prior to the acquisition project. You've come a long way. Finally, we are also aware that you have saved the lives of many people, including Ms. Jackson here, and that you were awarded the Government of Quebec's medal of the National Assembly. You have our full respect.

— Thank you.

— And now, you started the LDCSO. We know that you created a foundation, a humanitarian foundation whose funds stem from your income generated by this acquisition.

— That's right. All of this is on the website, Ethan says quite upset.

—Mr. Miller, just a little patience.

—Sorry, Mr. Page. But I must confess that I searched your name, David Page on the web, and I found absolutely nothing relevant. You can now understand my surprise, mistrust and impatience. But please continue.

—Mr. Miller, I and the other nine men here are extremely discreet when it comes to the media. Let me continue. So, we know that the foundation income has reached \$550,000,000. We also know that its returns are about 10%.

—Correct.

—So far, that gives you a little more than \$1,000,000 a week in return for your investment.

—Why do you say: “so far”?

—Because you started helping countries. Your capital is bound to decrease.

—Yes, it will.

—Mr. Miller, I would like to ask you a question.

—Go ahead.

—What will you do when you have, I dare say, run out of money?

—I will have no choice but to stop this aid.

—How will you take that?

—I will think of what I accomplished. Currently, I am actively helping three countries. We’re looking at plans and specifications for a fourth country, as well as a fifth, I’ll soon start a call for tenders. Given my budget,

which announced on the web, so you'll know, I will support those five countries with approximately \$275,000,000. If I simply extrapolate, I could support five more countries. So how do I consider the fact that I will one day have to stop supporting people? If I have been able to help several millions of people in 10 or so countries, I can tell myself on my deathbed that I didn't do so badly.

Ethan continues:

— Now I would like to ask you a question.

— Of course.

— Why are you here? Initially, I expected you to ask me for help, Mr. Page. Obviously, you're not here to ask me for any help.

— You're absolutely right, Mr. Miller. We'd like to know a little bit more about you before telling you our intentions. Allow me to continue?

— If I understand, you're interviewing me?

— That is precisely what it is, Mr. Miller. Ms. Jackson, I hope this does not shock you?

— Absolutely not. You should know that Ethan does very well during interviews, although the last time, I wanted to kill him a couple of times.

— What do you mean by that?

— Ethan was interviewed by our president just before the said acquisition. When he spoke a couple of

times, I thought about killing him, but Mario, my president, appreciated it, obviously.

—Ms. Jackson, I hope you haven't contemplated killing your partner so far tonight, he says with a smile.

—Not yet, she replies with a smile.

—Let us resume. Mr. Miller, the total budget posted on your website does not add up to \$275,000,000, could you kindly explain that to me?

—The total posted on my website shows an amount of \$100,000,000.

—That is correct.

—It does not yet show the cost for the Bigamo analysis and development of plans and specifications. The goal in Bigamo is to emphasize tourism in that country. The site does not yet showcase the \$100,000,000 that the foundation will grant this country. You can see that I operate on a cash-flow basis. Finally, there is also a budget of \$55,000,000 set aside for the construction of approximately 27,000 small factory-built homes specifically for the Rodaldor.

—Mr. Miller, we didn't know the foundation was planning on lending any money.

—Neither did I, Mr. Page. Given that this country is not considered poor, I did not want to take any of those millions of dollars to enrich those people. The millions of dollars must be used to help the poor.

— Now that this money is stockpiled, you can't help the poor anymore. Can you?

— Not necessarily, I planned that the reimbursements would be allocated to local aid in the cities of Quebec. This will ensure the support of humanitarian organizations for at least 10 years. So even if the foundation no longer has any capital, we will be able to continue its contributions.

— That's wise. One last question, as far as I'm concerned.

— Go ahead.

— You use private jets without hiding it.

— That's right. And the question is?

— In a context where the LDCSO wants to help the poor, is it wise to use such expensive planes?

— I see. First of all, you should know that as of today, I've accumulated eight months of investment income that has already generated almost \$34,000,000. Our transportation costs are applied against these revenues and not against the capital. Do you follow me?

— Yes.

— Secondly, considering my age, frequent trips to the other side of the earth are becoming very painful for me. Although I would prefer younger people making these trips, I am nevertheless obligated to meet with senior leaders of these countries. Having said that, right

now I have the very unpleasant impression that you're asking me to justify myself.

— Mr. Miller, rest assured that it's not the case. We just want to understand.

— What do you have to understand?

— That's the question! Mr. Miller, before I can answer you, I need the people here to pass to a vote. I hope you don't mind.

— Not at all.

He asks everyone to vote by nodding. It's either yes or no and everyone nods yes. David Page finishes by saying:

— Mr. Miller, as you can see, everyone voted yes.

— Everyone, but you, Mister Page.

— Clearly, and I vote yes as well. We voted unanimously to move forward with the LDCSO.

— You intrigue me.

— I am getting there. Mr. Miller and Ms. Jackson, we think your idea of assistance is impeccable. Not only does the donor of the foundation regain his donation in terms of income tax credits, but the funds are invested in suppliers who pay their own taxes in their own countries. More than that, you offer products and services to more or less developed countries, without handing out any bribes and without the leaders being able to keep the money for themselves. And finally, as regards administrative costs, even if you include the cost of your private jets, are clearly minimal. Right now, you're down to 5%. I have to admit that's pretty rare. Obviously, the fact that you don't take a salary helps keep these costs down.

—Thank you for analyzing our structure. Is there more?

—You have given over \$500,000,000 to the foundation, and that amount really helps people. So, everyone here wishes to donate \$500,000,000 to your foundation, obviously requiring the receipts.

—I am not sure I understood you correctly. Each of you wants to give me \$500,000,000?

—You have understood very well.

—If I count that correctly, that's 500,000,000 times 10 which is \$5,000,000,000.

—Mr. Miller, may I call you Ethan?

—Sure. Can I call you David?

—Of course. So, Ethan, I see that you can count, David says in mockery.

Nervously, Ethan tries to come back to his senses and wants to buy a few seconds:

—By the way, Kate's the one who taught me how to count.

Kate, equally in shock, immediately replies:

—I have taught this man many things, but counting isn't one of them. Please, call me Kate.

With a smile, David answers:

—Kate, I'm completely convinced that you showed him many things. I just hope that he realizes how much he owes you.

—I must admit that he's been paying me back until now. I just hope that this evening doesn't change everything, which is quite optimistic, isn't it, Ethan?

—Yes, Kate. Gentlemen, I must confess that right now, I'm at a loss and here's why. Prior to today, I was the sole donor and thus the only boss. The only thing I had to worry about was the revenue agency. Now that you're donating all this money, I won't be the only boss any longer. I will have to report back to you.

—Ethan, does that really bother you? David asks.

—Absolutely not. I can't be the only one making the decisions anymore. I have to form an actual Board of Directors.

—Clearly, David says in agreement.

—Here's what I'm thinking. The fact that you are all from different countries shouldn't stand in the way of what I'm about to propose. Would you serve as the Board of Directors of the LDCSO?

—Ethan, what you're suggesting is a great idea, and I'm quite happy that it came from you. We thought about that.

—You thought about it. So, why would you offer the foundation this money without a clause that you should be part of the Board of Directors?

—Because it had to come from you, Ethan.

—What if I hadn't thought about it?

—We would have been quite disappointed and would have asked you to form one anyway, knowing full well that your current Board of Directors is there only for show.

—I am happy I did not disappoint. That being said, you will have to appoint a chairman of the board. I presume you will nominate David.

—Yes...

—So, David, as chairman, you'll need a secretary.

—That's right, Ethan.

David turns to Kate and says:

—Kate, I know you're still the Senior Vice-President of Finance at your company, but we all know this

evening will change many things for you. In a few months, you'll probably want to become more involved in Ethan's work. Am I right?

—I can only answer: most likely.

—Then, Kate, it would be an honour for me, actually for all of us here, if you would consider being on the Board of Directors and accepted the role of Secretary of the Board.

—David, I thank you for your offer and I gladly accept, given that I'll be above Ethan for once.

Ethan replies:

—David, Kate just left the door wide open for me. Should I take the bait?

—By saying these words, you already have, but with great subtlety, tact and respect. I appreciate it, David answers with a barely concealed smile.

He goes on:

—Now, Ethan, there's one last thing we'd like to address.

—I am listening.

—Before this meeting, we discussed and agreed that we should apply your concept on a larger scale. Let me explain. There are currently more than 2,000 multibillionaires in the entire world and that number is constantly increasing. All of them wish to help the poor, but they are not sure how to go about it. They do not want leaders in these countries to pocket their funds. The LDCSO is the perfect solution for them.

—David, I see that there's an opportunity here.

— Oh, it's much more than just an opportunity.

— Okay. So how do I contact them to get their donations?

— Ethan, I think you'll have to fix this organizational problem first.

— David, in my opinion, there's no organizational problem because I'll solve it. My question was, how to contact them? I could send them an email, but chances are, they'll never receive it. For them, I do not exist yet.

— You're right, though I'm sure they'll all know you one day. For the moment, let's just assume that they already know all the members of your Board of Directors, here around this table. When the structure is in place and the time is right, then we will act.

— That answers my question. Given that you are describing a milieu that I am not familiar with, I suggest elaborating a funding project that will be submitted to the Board of Directors for discussion and approval.

— That would be perfect. For this project, we could start discussing it now so that you can get on the right track.

They continue their discussions on how to obtain donations and on the future of the LDCSO.

Kate and Ethan are returning to their apartment.
During the taxi ride, Ethan says:

—Bella, I think that tonight we'll take it easy. I'm very tired.

—I get that you are tired. What a night you had! But I want to know how you're feeling.

—It's all becoming very huge.

—You're right.

—Tomorrow I will stay home and quietly think. I have to stop for a moment and come up with a game plan.

—Would you like me to stay with you?

—You're working tomorrow.

—If you want me to stay with you, I will stay.

—Then I want you to stay.

—Okay. Tonight, you want us to make tenderness?

—Okay.

The next day, they calmly discuss:

— I will have to create agencies.

— Go on, I'm listening.

— There will be an agency that takes care of the funding. It will be a profit centre.

— Have you thought about how the agency will do that?

— Not at all, but I must say that I'd really like it if these very wealthy people travelled and attended something really special.

— Ethan, I think it's a good start. We'll see how we can attract them. Any other agencies?

— I won't be able to handle the call for tenders, the contracts nor the construction any longer. So, I'll need an organization for that.

— You won't be able to preside over both these organizations.

— That's right, I'll need two presidents.

— What about you?

— I will preside over both boards.

— Yesterday, you created a Board of Directors.

—Yes, but it was for the LDCSO. Not for its individual agencies.

—Are you sure about this?

—I'll have to check it out.

—And the foundation?

—I will continue to oversee it, for now. But I believe that I'll be asking you to preside over it very soon.

—And you would be the chairman of its Board of Directors.

—Yes. Would you accept that?

—Of course, I would accept. One question. Why not do it now?

—Because I want to set myself up and make sure that I have a very clear overview. You know, Kate, I'm actually a builder. Then, when the time comes to manage, I'm not very good at it because I get bored rather quickly.

—I see. I get the feeling that we'll need another agency. Am I right?

—It's a good guess. Right now, it's not necessary, but I think we'll need an agency for security detail.

—That's exactly what I was thinking. Will you bring in the Guard?

—Yes, but Mario has to agree to it.

—Ethan, don't worry about that. He'll agree. Just recently, I discussed with him decreasing their interventions in the US. As you know, we closed all the offices in cities with a high risk. I think that in a few months, Mario will have to let go of Jim, Sara and Layla. Would

you like me to tell him about it? You're not around as much anymore.

—Yes. As a matter of fact, last night kind of forced me to resign from my position as vice-president.

—You are right.

—As for the Guard, will you appoint Jim as the president?

—I don't think so. Jim is an operation's guy. I would see him more in the role of Chief of operations.

—What do you think?

—Then why not a vice-president?

—Because Sara, Layla and all the others will need a Chief.

—Well done, Ethan.

—Bella, tonight I'd like to go to a dinner show.

—Yes, that's a great idea. And what about dessert?

—It will have to be delicious.

—Do you doubt it?

—I have absolutely no doubt at all. Do you have a dress?

—I think something you'll like.

They get to the restaurant by taxi. They get out under a large archway that shields them from the snow. Kate steps out of the taxi with the help of the doorman. Her winter coat covers most of her dress.

At the coat check, Ethan quickly takes off his coat and helps Kate remove hers. He sees her red velvet dress. She sits on a bench to remove her boots and put on her shoes. He looks at the two intersecting flaps of her dress, which are held together by a belt with a buckle on the side. As she leans forward, she slightly reveals her breasts with grace. She lifts one leg to put on her shoe fully exposing the top of her thigh. She crosses her legs and with a smile, she asks:

—The Man! I think you love it.

—I love it. A simple and sexy dress. I'm having an existential moment.

—And what is your existential moment?

—What if I undid the strap on the side of your dress, what would happen?

—You would see the body of a completely naked woman, ready to receive her wonderful man. Shall we go to our table?

Back at his office, Ethan reads a surprising email. He calls Kate. She picks up the phone and says:

— Hello, Ethan, to what do I owe this pleasure?

— I just received an email from my oldest daughter.

— Oh!

— I would like to read it to you. It's not very long.

— Okay!

— It says: Hi. We hear more and more about you in the media. I would like to meet up with you. I have a few things I'd like to discuss with you. I'll be in Montreal next week, from Tuesday to Thursday. We could have dinner together on Wednesday. Just tell me the name of a restaurant and I'll be there. Have a great day.

— Oh wow! Tell me, Ethan, how did she sign it?

— With an automatic signature from her work.

— What are you going to do?

— I'm not sure.

— You want my opinion?

— That's why I called you.

— Okay. But as I already told you in that restaurant in Quebec City when you first told me about her story, I only wish that your relationship will work itself

out one day. Let me remind you of that quote you like from Harriet Stowe: "The bitterest tears shed over graves are for words left unsaid and deeds left undone." My advice is: make sure you don't have to shed bitter tears in the end.

—Yes, I see. I will meet up with her, but I have a very bad feeling.

—I think you're doing the right thing.

—Thanks for the advice.

