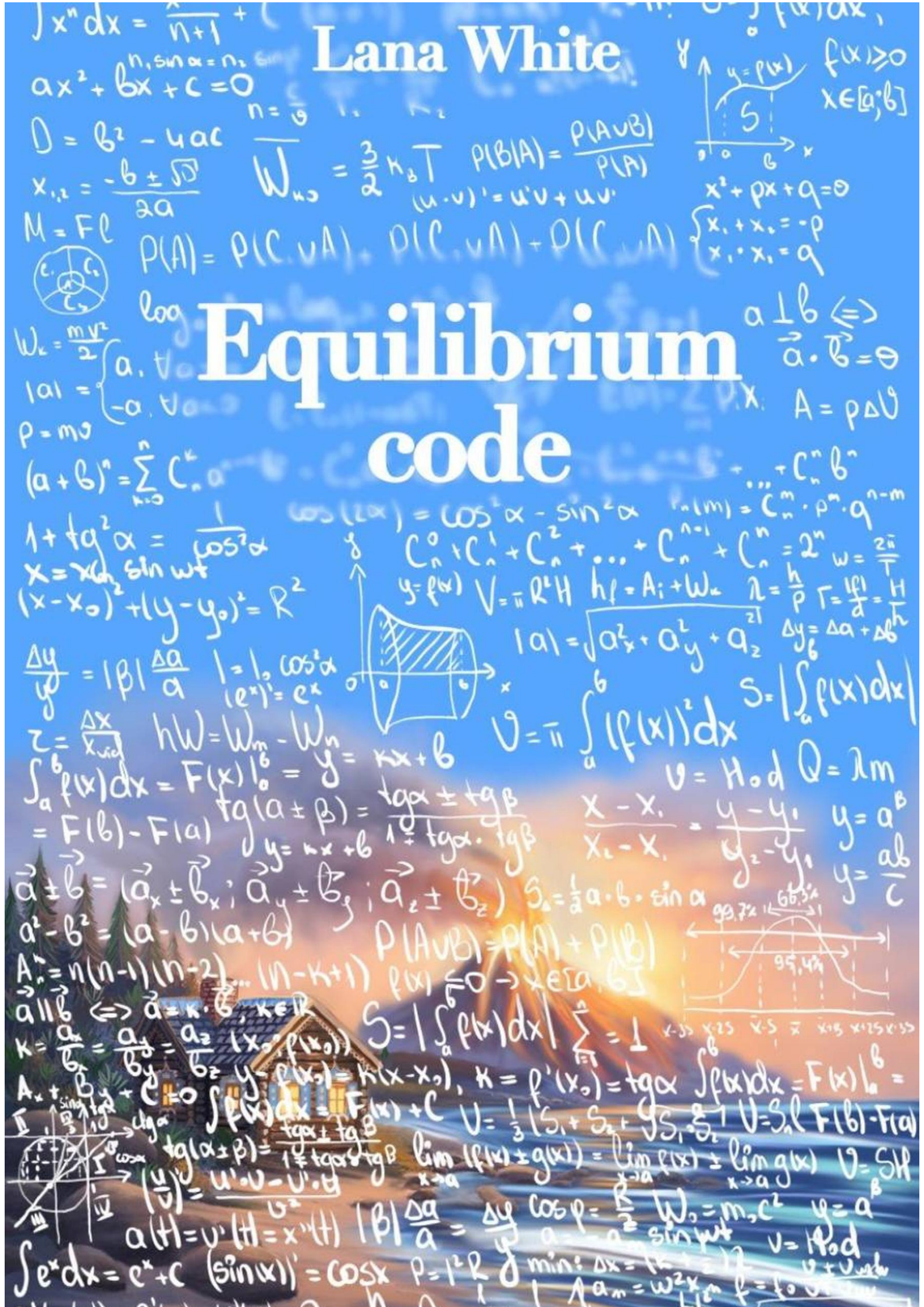


Lana White

Equilibrium code



Лана Вайт

Equilibrium Code

«Автор»

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Вайт Л.

Equilibrium Code / Л. Вайт — «Автор», 2026

What if your thoughts could shape the world — for better or for worse? It feels extraordinarily bright — even though it touches on themes of pain, aggression, and destruction. The Book is the blend of genuine, heartfelt sincerity with subtle philosophy. It feels as though the story begins as a light, almost fairytale-like journey, but gradually draws the reader into deep reflections on real and serious matters: the influence of individuals on the world, the responsibility for our thoughts and actions, and how even small acts of kindness can have immense power. The use of the "Formulas of good and evil" is brilliant — a rare case where a mathematical idea is seamlessly woven into a work of fiction, adding a new dimension without overwhelming the story. In the end, the story leaves behind not just a plot, but a feeling: it makes one want to be better, to treat life — both one's own and others' — more gently. A beautifully told tale that stays with you long after the last page.

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Лана Вайт

Equilibrium Code

Álbert.

Riga'2025

To my dearest daughter and beloved mom,
the most wonderful girls in my life

"The world will never cease to amaze you, as long as you never cease to be amazed"

Good + Evil = ...

Good plus Evil equals... Well, mathematically speaking, this is a simple equation with two variables. Let's not complicate things and consider three scenarios. We'll assign Good and Evil to X and Y, respectively. Proceeding from this, let's assume that Good, carrying a positive sign, is exactly matched in value by Evil with a negative sign. Thus:

$$X + (Y) = 0$$

In this case, no matter how many good deeds are performed, there would be an equal number of evil ones. In the overall balance, it would be as if neither good nor evil ever occurred. Surely, there are those who would favor such a balance. Perhaps this was the state of the world before Eve reached for the apple.

$$X + (Y) > 0$$

Now, let's consider another scenario where the amount of Good outweighs that of Evil. Here, the outcome is most favorable for us — the greater X becomes, the happier each individual and society as a whole will be. It is easy to assume that Y is not only less than X but could even tend toward zero. This sounds delightful, yet, unfortunately, the true value of Good can only be appreciated in contrast — which means Evil must retain at least some presence.

$$X + (Y) < 0$$

This situation is also possible in life and is not uncommon. Here, the amount of Good is less than the amount of Evil, resulting — on a small scale — in sad or unhappy individuals, and on a larger scale — in an unhappy society, an unhappy nation, an unhappy continent, and possibly, an unhappy planet.

Chapter 1

The tops of the pine trees swayed from side to side as the wind kept changing direction. It was a mystery how meteorologists even attempted to make forecasts for such a capricious region.

This small resort island in the Baltics, just before the start of the tourist season, felt surprisingly quiet and lonely. It was hard to imagine that in just a few weeks, Jūrmala¹ would be buzzing with life — its streets overflowing with visitors of every kind and caliber, filling every imaginable and unimaginable space. The little town, now wrapped in serenity, knew that soon everything would transform. Tiny, barely noticeable cottages would turn into havens of charm and luxury, taking on new life and energy from the influx of people. Verandas would become witnesses to joyful moments. Prestigious hotels, cozy guesthouses, charming wooden villas, peculiar little huts and gazebos — all would be ready to welcome their guests.

Golden reflections of sunlight shimmered through the evergreen forest surrounding the seaside town, while tall pine trunks stood like watchful sentinels, reminding one that this place carried the spirit of time. The pine needles whispered softly, like they were telling old secrets and hidden intentions of the land.

And yet, in this pre-season calm, nothing gave away the storm of life that was about to consume the narrow streets and forest paths of Jūrmala. This little corner of nature, seemingly forgotten by the world, stood waiting — waiting for its brief moment of family happiness.

Locals prepared to welcome guests from afar, and maybe even reveal to them the unique character of this place — a seaside town adorned in music and dance.

There was a peaceful stillness to this spring day — a kind of calm that soaked into every corner of the place, like a sleeping beauty tucked behind the walls of her drowsy castle. Here, one could truly feel nature's breath — its constant motion, its quiet shifts.

The wind played with the pine branches, making them dance in gentle spirals and stirring the soul, as if in anticipation of something new.

Among the quiet emptiness, the girl walking along the beach looked even more delicate and alone. Her light blue coat only emphasized that impression. She walked slowly, deep in thought, gazing out toward the sea horizon and breathing in the extraordinarily fresh air, filled with the scent of pine and salt.

It felt like the oxygen content was off the charts — as if a special collaboration between the sea breeze, pine energy, sunlight, and photosynthesis of towering trees had created the perfect storm of purity.

Turning onto a nearby path made of wooden planks, leading from the beach through the dunes, she found herself in front of the first summer houses of Jūrmala. In one row, side by side, stood majestic villas surrounded by neat gardens, crooked old wooden houses from another era, and eccentric constructions with bizarre architecture, painted in wild, almost surreal colors.

Lana admired the variety, smiling to herself. She took in all the little changes that had happened to the town of her childhood. Just like now, she used to wander alone as a little girl, forgetting the errands her grandmother had entrusted her with. She could walk for hours through the “lines” — that's what the streets were called here — and stop at every familiar gate. Here — yes, right here — there used to be a tennis court. And at the next corner, the old wooden cinema, where her grandmother's friend would let her in for free, no matter what time the movie started.

Oh, how magical it felt — free admission!

It made her slightly anxious though. What if someone noticed she didn't have a ticket?

¹ Jūrmala (Latvian: [ˈjuːrmala] #; "seaside") is a state city in the Vidzeme region of Latvia, about 25 kilometres (16 miles) west of Riga. Jūrmala is a resort town stretching 32 km (20 miles) and is sandwiched between the Gulf of Riga and the Lielupe River. It has a 33 km (21 miles) stretch of white-sand beach and is the fifth-largest city in Latvia.

Of course, the ultimate treasure was the ice cream kiosk. Back then, any sum of money could be measured in how many scoops of that heavenly dessert it would buy.

And there was the old lady with the giant scale. Both she and the scale were... intimidating. From a distance, the whole weighing process looked so serious, Lana didn't dare approach. She longed to climb up onto that towering contraption but only managed to overcome her fear when the stern lady took a break.

Across from their house was a kindergarten, set in an ancient mansion that looked like a tiny castle. Little boys and girls filled the yard with laughter, unaware they were playing in a rare architectural gem.

Meanwhile, the wind grew stronger. The pines swayed harder, and every now and then a gust would steal the breath right out of her chest. Raindrops started to dot the asphalt. A strange tension hung in the air.

Lana kept walking, her thoughts getting darker — how had her life become so gray, so monotonous? Every morning felt the same. Every day dragged by. Every evening was dull.

Nothing changed. Nothing was exciting.

Boring. Boring. BOOOOORING!

She ran through memories in her mind, trying to pinpoint where things had gone wrong.

For the longest time, she had been living on autopilot — like one of those wind-up dolls. Everyone else had stopped, but she kept on spinning, kept dancing to a tune long since ended.

Something had jammed in the gears of her life.

Yes, it's good to see reality clearly, to think rationally and analyze things — great.

But it's not enough to change something. Not deeply, not for real.

Because where is that "something"?

What direction should the river of her life even go?

And how do you redirect a river anyway, technically speaking?

And one last question — about energy.

Where do you find it?

What kind of gas station fills your soul?

Where's the right charger?

Which river holds your personal hydroelectric power station?

She felt completely drained. No strength to change anything. No strength to change herself.

In other words — to quote the classics: "Who is to blame? And what is to be done?"

Ah, Vera Pavlovna², you and your dreams! Now we have to figure out how to live them out... while awake.

Modern humans differ from their ancestors in many ways — especially in how broadly, deeply, and in general they can think. No doubt about it: we are experts at analyzing, observing, philosophizing.

Fantastic. But somewhere along the way, we forgot how to act — how to do, build, and create. We've become a world full of theorists, poets, and psychologists... and sorely lacking in hands-on doers, engineers, and makers.

Lana counted herself among the former — but her action-driven nature was getting sick of endless words, dreamy conversations, and weightless thoughts.

² The question "Who is to blame and what is to be done?" was posed in an article by Alexander Herzen, who also authored the novel *Who is to Blame? What Is to Be Done?* (*Tales about New People*) is a novel by Russian philosopher, journalist, and literary critic Nikolay Chernyshevsky.

“Stop talking! If you’re not doing anything — at least shut up!” she snapped at herself, and the force of the thought was so strong, she actually stomped her foot in frustration.

Strangely, the weather seemed to catch her mood. It too was growing more furious — as if they were two opponents arguing, each trying to outdo the other in outrage.

Lana didn’t feel the cold or wind anymore. They were perfectly in sync — two angry, stubborn girls:

One stomping along the coastal paths, the other racing wild across the waves. In a mix of fury and awe, Lana was suddenly struck by the might of the three elements surrounding her. She raised her voice to the sea, the wind, and the sky:

“Help me! Let my life change! Let it be filled with joy, fire, energy — creation!”

The wind howled, raising a monstrous wave that merged into the sea and sky in a single breathtaking motion.

Lana turned her back to the waves and lost in thought, not noticing anything around her, slowly continued walking — no longer along the sand, but on the paved paths of Jurmala’s quiet little streets.

A harsh, metallic screech — so alien to the natural peace around her — jolted her out of her head. There was the sound of scraping metal and a low muttering. She spotted an elderly man struggling with a bizarre, clunky bicycle — rusted, oversized, and clearly past its glory days. His enormous hat, at least two sizes too big, kept slipping down over his eyes.

After several failed attempts, he finally managed to untangle himself from under the machine and began picking up the scattered groceries that had flown across the road — along with his fallen two-wheeled “companion.”

All of this was happening right in the middle of the road, where a car could appear at any moment — not that the unlucky cyclist seemed to care. Lana rushed to help, reaching out a hand — but the old man slapped it away with surprising strength, clearly offended and in no need of assistance.

The rudeness hit her hard. She’d never learned how to handle that kind of behavior.

People’s nastiness always unsettled her — it ruined the whole mood of the walk.

Now her pretty blue coat was no longer so clean, and cold raindrops began to fall. The wind picked up again, cutting and sharp. As she bent down to grab her bag from the grass, she noticed the gate in front of her slowly opening.

A car rolled up a small incline toward the road. The driver wouldn’t be able to see the old man crouching right in the car’s path.

“Oh God!” flashed through Lana’s mind — and she bolted forward, this time toward the moving vehicle.

The grumpy man, still oblivious, reached out to grab a runaway orange. She made it just in time — pushed him out of the way. She just needed one step to the side to get herself clear of the car’s path — but then she slipped.

One of those stupid oranges!

Her foot went out from under her, and she tumbled straight into the car’s trajectory, arms flailing. Apparently, those flailing arms were what caught the driver’s attention — the car slammed on its brakes.

A furious voice roared from the window:

“What the hell?!”

As she fell, Lana saw one of the oranges get crushed beneath the tires.

“Serves you right,” she managed to think bitterly — and then came a shower of silver stars across her vision.

She hit her elbow hard. Pain shot through her arm, but she still had enough awareness to notice a man getting out of the car. He glanced from the old man and his toppled bicycle, to Lana clutching her elbow... and finally down at the squashed orange.

Oddly, it was the fruit that seemed to capture most of his attention.

The old man, completely unfazed, got back on his prehistoric bike and, muttering about “stupid blondes,” “useless drivers,” and who-knows-what-else, wobbled his way down the street as if nothing had happened. Lana tried to stand.

“Need help?” came a polite male voice.

Already shaking her head, she looked up and saw a tall, broad-shouldered man with a not-so-warm expression.

“Well, at least this one has some manners,” she muttered under her breath.

She picked up her bag once again and, cradling her sore arm under the now pouring rain, made her way toward the parking lot where she’d left her car that morning.

Of all the thoughts swirling in her head, one phrase kept ringing loud and clear:

“No good deed goes unpunished.”

That’s what her ex-husband used to say.

When she finally slid into the driver’s seat, she realized that moving her arm even slightly caused intense pain. She somehow made it back to Riga, enduring dirty looks from fellow drivers on the Jurmala highway — thankfully, the trip was short. But by the time she got home, she knew there was no avoiding the ER. The pain was sharp, and the disappointment... sharper still.

“So this is how that long, cursed day ends,” Lana thought, half-asleep, trying for the tenth time to find a position where her arm didn’t throb.

But as we all know...

Man plans, and God laughs.

Chapter 2

The next day, Lana had a very important appointment — one that no girl in her right mind would miss: a visit to the cosmetologist. And she decided: not even a possibly fractured arm was going to stand between her and beauty. Since she couldn’t drive, she set out toward the nearest public transport stop — unaware of the little adventure that awaited her on this seemingly simple trip. Approaching the kiosk, she went to buy a transport pass. A new ticketing system had been introduced recently — she’d heard about it but hadn’t paid much attention to the details. It almost felt like one of those mini adventures, like when you find yourself in a foreign city for the first time and have to figure out how to buy a tram ticket without the faintest idea of where, how much, or how it works.

“Good day! I’d like an e-ticket, please,” she said with a polite smile.

“And would you be kind enough to explain which one I need? I’m a bit inexperienced in these things.”

That, apparently, was a mistake. The response she received was... educational. She learned quite a bit about herself: that “all sorts of people walk around these days,” that “dumb blondes” are everywhere, and that she clearly had no idea what she was doing with her life. Listening to the tirade, Lana remembered a line from a movie and calmly asked:

“Tell me... you don’t happen to have a brother in Jurmala, do you?”

The cashier fell silent, stunned.

Lana seized the moment and made her escape — not waiting for the next round of insults and accepting that she’d have to buy a ticket from the bus driver like a clueless tourist... at a higher price, of course.

Luckily, the appointment lifted her spirits. But the euphoria was short-lived. When she reached for her wallet to pay, it was gone. No matter how many times she turned her bag inside out — once, twice, three times — it wasn’t there.

Frozen in place, Lana tried to retrace her steps.

Apparently, that bus ride had cost her far more than she expected. The same nagging thought kept popping up in her head:

“What is this thing called ‘bad luck’ — and how do you fight it?”

She blocked her bank cards, found some spare change in her coat pocket, and walked to the nearest café.

A little black coffee was urgently needed to calm her nerves and formulate a plan.

One sip of that rich, fragrant espresso, and things started to feel just a little more manageable. Riga cafés, she thought, really did provide a kind of emotional first aid to locals and tourists alike. Just as her mood began to lift, her favorite little white phone rang.

“Yep. Real blonde.”

She chuckled to herself, admiring her phone, while digging around in her bag to find it.

After about two minutes of searching, she finally picked up — on speaker, unfortunately.

A few nearby guests glanced her way with interest as an unfamiliar male voice said:

“Hello. Is this Lana?”

“Yes, speaking.”

“I’m calling about the car you nearly threw yourself under yesterday.”

Uh-oh.

Speakerphone.

Flustered, she switched to private audio and answered cautiously:

“The black one?”

“What, were there others?” the voice replied, clearly amused.

Lana blinked, finally realizing who she was talking to.

“And... how do you know my name, if I may ask?”

“Well, that’s actually why I’m calling,” the man said. “You must’ve dropped your wallet. I found it.”

“You have no idea how happy that makes me! I’d already given up hope of seeing it again.”

“Seeing who again?” he asked, confused.

“My dear little wallet, of course,” she clarified sweetly.

“...Right,” he muttered, sarcasm creeping in. “How would you like me to return it?”

“Tomorrow, maybe? There’s a café called *‘Paldies Dievam, piektdiena ir klāt’*³. Would that work for you?”

“Sure... tomorrow at five,” he agreed.

“Perfect. Thanks again.”

So — the wallet had been found, her beauty restored... Now if only her arm would stop hurting. But as they say — history does not deal in “what ifs.”

Chapter 3

At the agreed time, Lana approached the café. The owner had arranged a few outdoor tables, and despite the lingering chill in the air, she decided to sit outside.

The sun was already gently warming the faces of other brave guests who, like her, weren’t afraid to dine al fresco.

Just as the waiter placed her coffee on the table, a man approached and asked if he could sit beside her. Without even glancing up, Lana declined — assuming he was one of those tourists who always tried to flirt with local girls. But when her refusal didn’t have the desired effect, she looked up — and saw a man around sixty, with intelligent eyes fixed calmly on her.

“Are you Lana?” he asked.

“Yes...” she replied, now a little unsure.

³ A café in Riga called “Paldies Dievam, piektdiena ir klāt” (“Thank God, Friday is here”).

“You see, yesterday you were involved in a certain... incident. It happened with my son’s car. He had to leave the country unexpectedly and asked me to return your wallet.”

“Thank you so much! I really appreciate it,” Lana replied quickly — though she couldn’t help but feel a bit disappointed. She’d actually hoped to see the driver again.

“No, we should be thanking you,” the man said warmly. “Who knows how things might have ended if you hadn’t stepped in? And from the look of it,” — he gestured toward her injured arm — “you paid a price for it.”

There was nothing to argue with, so Lana agreed to another cup of coffee with the stranger.

They sat watching small riverboats pass by and soon fell into an easy conversation. It turned out her new acquaintance — Vladislav — had once worked in diplomatic service, with postings in both Asia and Africa. He was a fascinating storyteller, and Lana found herself genuinely enjoying his company. As the conversation was winding down, he suddenly said:

“You know, Lana, you strike me as a very thoughtful and intelligent person. And I’d like to make you a proposal.”

Lana raised an eyebrow, not sure what was coming.

“The thing is... my son’s going to be away for quite a while. And I’m flying out of the country this very afternoon. Which means our house will be left empty. Unfortunately, we don’t know anyone else in this town. And, as you surely know, once the summer season starts in Jurmala, a vacant home can attract the wrong kind of attention. There’s no time to set up a contract with a security company — my flight is in three hours, and they wouldn’t be able to install anything that fast anyway.”

“So... you’re asking me to... what?” Lana said slowly.

“To stay in our house for the summer,” he said simply. “It would give us peace of mind. And for you — a lovely place to rest.”

Lana listened, utterly bewildered. Her mind buzzed with conflicting thoughts. On one hand, the idea of spending the summer in Jurmala sounded amazing — she had even been thinking about renting a place for the season. But this? This seemed risky. And Lana, being someone with a strong instinct for self-preservation, couldn’t help but be skeptical.

“Please,” Vlad added after a pause, as if sensing her hesitation.

“I’m sorry,” Lana said firmly. “But I can’t accept. I mean, let’s be honest — it sounds... odd. Besides, this is the first time we’ve met. I don’t even know if you have the legal right to make this kind of arrangement. Thank you again for returning my wallet, but I really must go.”

She stood up and placed money on the table, immediately refusing Vlad’s offer to pay — it had long been her principle to always cover her own check.

“Wait,” he said. “What if we make it official? A proper legal agreement. Would you consider it then?”

“Well,” Lana said with a wry smile, “you’ve got half an hour. So, I’ll admit — I’m curious to see how you’d manage that.”

Vlad grinned, clearly enjoying the challenge. He pulled out his phone, issued a few rapid commands, then offered her his arm.

“Come. They’re expecting us — just nearby, at the Ernst & Young office, if that name rings a bell.” It did.

Lana was quite familiar with one of Europe’s most respected consulting firms — in a previous job, she’d often interacted with them. Intrigued, she followed him, wondering how in the world her day had taken such a turn. A few blocks later, they entered a beautiful old mansion — home to the firm’s local office. Clearly, they were expected.

A young man with a plastered-on smile led them to a small conference room, where they waited a few minutes before a woman appeared — short, round, and cheerful, in an impeccably tailored (and undoubtedly very expensive) cashmere suit.

She held a folder of documents in her hand.

“This is Lana, the one I mentioned,” Vlad said.

“Very nice to meet you,” the woman replied with a nod, opening the folder and laying the papers in front of Lana. Looking through them, Lana — who had a background in law — quickly realized everything Vlad had said was true. Included in the paperwork was a contract giving Ms. Lana, and anyone she approved, free and full access to the house for the next several months.

She sat stunned.

The woman left them alone, and Lana looked over at Vlad, completely at a loss for words. He must’ve noticed her hesitation — he smiled, pulled out the agreement, signed it, and handed it to her. Lana was no amateur. She read through the contract carefully and didn’t find a single red flag. No traps. No fine print.

Still... she couldn’t shake the feeling that there had to be a catch. Leaving the office, she drifted into thought — and to his credit, the former diplomat gave her space. Apart from how surreal everything felt, she had another problem:

How on earth was she going to explain this to her family?

She didn’t like lying, but the truth? The truth sounded insane.

She didn’t come to a conclusion.

Instead, she pulled out her lucky coin — a silver dollar — and flipped it into the air.

Heads: I sign.

Tails: Goodbye, sweet summer in Jurmala.

The coin flew up and, as it fell, rolled under a chair in the waiting room. Lana crouched down to retrieve it — and just as her fingers closed around it, a voice said:

“That’s an interesting way to make a decision.”

She looked up from beneath the chair and thought: Wow, the father and son really do look alike. She’d seen the younger man from this same upside-down angle. And once again... something about this man seemed strangely familiar, like she had met him before — but her notoriously unreliable memory just wouldn’t give her the details.

“So, what’s your final answer?” Vlad asked with a teasing grin.

Lana opened her hand.

“Heads,” she said.

Chapter 4

Stepping into the courtyard of her temporary home, Lana looked around. It was a beautiful, slightly neglected mansion with graceful tall windows. The grounds were filled with lush pine trees, and not far from the house stood a small gazebo.

Yes, it was stunning — but definitely in need of some love: spiderwebs in every corner, moss growing through the cracks in the stone path, green streaks of dampness on the walls, wild grass and dandelions poking through the once-trimmed lawn. The lawn, in fact, might have been perfect once — now it was overrun with weeds. Lana tried to estimate how much time it would take to clean up but quickly decided to leave that thought for later.

She stepped onto the porch of what felt like an enchanted castle — her imagination always worked overtime. The house seemed to be looking back at her as she looked at it. She paused, not wanting to break the quiet. Just then, the sun broke through the clouds and lit up the porch. It was as if the house had smiled at its temporary owner. Feeling braver, Lana stepped inside — but didn’t close the door. Just in case she needed a quick escape.

Inside, everything looked as though no one had lived here for a long time. It wasn’t dirty, the air was fresh, but something about it felt untouched — as though the objects in the house were cleaned and maintained but never used. No one had reached for a mug to drink coffee. No one had pulled a book off the shelf to sit in one of those inviting armchairs.

Evening was setting in. Deciding to leave further exploration for the morning, Lana set off in search of a place to sleep. She figured a house this size must have more than one bedroom.

She found a small, lovely room with a white bed and white-framed paintings. The walls were also white, accented with large panels of soft pink fabric. Funny — her bedroom back home was decorated in a similar color palette and style. A warm shower would have been perfect, but her injured arm reminded her that pleasures like that would have to wait. At least, under new medical guidelines, they hadn't put a cast on her elbow.

At night, the house came alive with its own rhythm: creaking sounds, rustling trees, shifting shadows everywhere. Lana couldn't sleep with all those noises. She turned on all the lights, put on the TV for company, brewed some tea, and pulled a book from the shelf — “The Forsyte Saga”⁴. She chose it for a reason — Galsworthy demanded your full attention. If you didn't read every line carefully, the meaning would slip away. Time passed quietly, and morning arrived almost without her noticing. And what a beautiful morning it was. Not just because the weather was clearing — the wind had died down and the blue sky was winning its battle with the gray clouds — but because the day felt fresh, full of unexpected possibilities.

Lana yawned and stretched sweetly. Her mood shimmered like a rainbow, and a soft excitement stirred in her chest — as though something wonderful was on its way. But after a night alone in the house, one thing became clear:

As amazing as it was, this place was meant to be lived in by a large family.

Otherwise, she'd be on the fast track to becoming a nervous wreck. She made herself a fresh cup of morning coffee and continued exploring. The house was magnificent — big, but not too big; the furniture expensive and well-crafted, but not flashy; the interior tasteful and smart, everything functional, nothing excessive.

Lana fell in love with its simplicity. Her contemplation was interrupted by a phone call.

“My wonderful, beloved family must be here,” she thought with a smile, and ran outside to meet the cars.

The gate was already opening, and Lana chuckled, remembering the strange incident from a few days ago that had led to all of this. One by one, the cars pulled into the courtyard, and people began spilling out of them. Instantly, the yard filled with chatter — everyone talking at once.

It was amazing: taken individually, they were intelligent, well-mannered people, but together they gave off strong Italian-family-at-a-wedding energy. Very uncharacteristic for calm, quiet Baltic personalities — to an outsider, it would seem impossible to get a word in.

And they'd be right. You couldn't.

After Lana told her whirlwind story, she waited for their reactions — expecting surprise.

But no one was shocked. They seemed to think this was entirely typical behavior for her.

And maybe they were right. Her life had become a bit dull lately, but thankfully, her family hadn't had time to adjust to that version of her.

Everyone eagerly began exploring the new home, picking rooms, laughing, shouting, marveling at little design details. Lana didn't interfere. The room she had already chosen was perfect — especially for her and her little daughter. It even had a connected room where her mother, Klara, could sleep if Lana needed to step out. Everyone was delighted.

The house was filled with joy.

Once settled, the entire group gathered in the spacious kitchen and began planning a celebratory meal.

“Alright, I guarantee you a fantastic lunch,” announced Lana's brother, Aivar.

⁴ The Forsyte Saga is a major literary work by British author John Galsworthy, written as a monumental series of interconnected narratives portraying the life of the wealthy English Forsyte family.

No one doubted it for a second. Everyone started helping — which, naturally, created a lot of noise and very little progress. Eventually, the head chef kicked them all out of the kitchen. Things went much faster after that.

The day passed in a whirl of cheerful activity.

Little Sintik refused to go to bed — how could she, when everyone was having such a good time? But eventually, after resisting with all her might, she fell asleep curled up in Lana's lap, warm and snuggled like a tiny kitten. No one else was ready for bed just yet. They were still waiting for Lana's nephew to arrive — but he never did. They decided he simply didn't feel like coming, and didn't bother calling him. It was already late.

After putting the now-sleeping child to bed, Lana settled into her own space. The night was full of stars. Tree branches swayed gently, as if lulling the house to sleep. Now that the house was full of people, the night noises didn't feel eerie — they felt like part of something comforting.

"How wonderful," Lana thought, already drifting off.

But sleep didn't come easily. She heard footsteps. He came after all? she thought. Maybe her nephew had arrived late. Wrapping herself in a blanket, she headed downstairs — but instead of her nephew, she saw Aivar, peering intently down the hallway that led to the attic. Lana hadn't even known there was an attic — she hadn't gotten that far on her first day.

"What is it?" she asked. "Is it him?"

"No," Aivar replied. "That's what I thought at first. But I came down here, and... no one. I don't want to scare you, but... I think someone's up there."

"Wh—what? Up where? What do we do?"

Lana felt a wave of cold panic roll through her. Her stomach flipped.

"Stay here," she said. "I'll check on my daughter and come right back. Then we'll figure it out."

She made sure everything was fine upstairs. No one. The first floor? Also clear.

Having secured the "rear line of defense," they carefully made their way up the narrow spiral staircase to the attic. It led to a surprisingly open room, with windows lining the entire perimeter. It looked nothing like a typical attic — no boxes, no darkness. On the floor plan, this space had been marked entirely differently. Maybe it had been renovated without updating the documents. What they did discover was the view — breathtaking. They both froze, staring out at the endless horizon.

First of all, the visibility was incredible — a full panoramic sweep for several kilometers.

Second, the sea looked unbelievably close, even though the house wasn't directly on the coast.

Most importantly — no one else was there. False alarm... probably.

A new beautiful day began. Walking around the house, Lana examined its architecture with fresh curiosity. How could the attic, from the outside, look like a plain, ordinary space — when in fact it held such a view? She looked at the house again, charmed by how gentle and welcoming it seemed. And once again, she had the feeling it was looking right back at her.

She smiled and said:

"Good morning, House."

Then she listened.

The house seemed so mysterious, she half-expected a reply. None came — but she laughed at herself and ran back through the veranda.

The delicious smell of breakfast was already wafting from the kitchen.

"I'm so glad everyone's here," she thought happily.

After breakfast, the group started getting ready for a trip to the beach. As usual, the process was long and chaotic — with so many people in one place, it always took forever.

Little Sintik ran through the house handing out beach gear: a bucket here, a shovel there, tiny rakes for everyone. Everyone got their assigned tool. Lana grabbed the largest beach bag and headed off to find towels — when she heard noise from the kitchen.

Curious, she poked her head in and found her family arguing about who had washed the breakfast dishes. Her mom was thanking Aivar. He denied it, passing the credit to his wife, Valentina. She, in turn, insisted it must've been Lana — the good Samaritan. Of course, no one even considered the nephew — and rightly so. Some things just never happen. Ever. It was sweet to be praised and appreciated, but Lana had to confess she hadn't done it. Still, the result was clear — or rather, shining. Everything sparkled: glassware, porcelain, silverware — polished and pristine.

“You're arguing about the wrong thing,” Lana's nephew said.

“Most people debate over who has to do the dishes. You're all wondering who already did them.”

And on that philosophical note, the debate ended.

Who the mystery dishwasher was... remained a secret.

Chapter 5

To reach the sea, one had to pass through the dunes — the natural shield that protected the town from strong winds and stormy waves. This feature of the Baltic coast was beloved by many fans of the not-so-warm waters of the Riga Gulf.

You climb a gentle slope, surrounded by towering pine trees, and with every step, the air grows fresher. And then, right at the top — always catching you off guard — the view opens up to a vast, shimmering blue expanse and a golden beach stretching as far as the eye can see.

Lana had loved this moment since childhood — that first glimpse of the sea.

Even as a little girl, stepping off a crowded train at any of Jurmala's stations, she could already feel the salty breeze on her face. Then came the quick walk toward the trees, the climb through the dunes, and finally... the Seeeeaaa... the seeeeaa...!

Everyone headed to the beach, basking in the first rays of June sun. To enter the chilly waters of the Riga Gulf, you needed to be brave — and ready for anything. You never knew what you were going to get: gentle, warm waves... or an icy slap in the face. The air temperature didn't matter — it all depended on the mysterious sea currents. Anyone who's been here knows: it takes forever to walk deep enough for the water to even cover your waist. And in late May, even the hardest “sea wolves” won't go in past their knees — let alone regular folks. There were, of course, two types of swimmers. The first group entered the water slowly, inch by inch, gasping and lifting their feet with little squeals, turning blue from the cold.

The second group — a much rarer species, usually only found among children — would dash straight into the sea, yelling and screaming, limbs flailing, splashing into the water the very second they lost their balance.

The time for swimming was rapidly approaching. Just a few final steps remained: lay out your towel and be ready to wrap yourself in it, teeth chattering. Everyone managed to do so... except Lana.

“Ugh! Thanks to all of you, I forgot my towel!” she cried, realizing that entering the water solo would be even harder — as they say, it's easier to die in public. Her daughter was busy building a sandcastle with Aivar, while Grandma was helping by bringing buckets of seawater to solidify the walls.

Without overthinking, Lana took off running back to the house, hoping to return before the slow swimmers of group one finished their epic battle with the waves.

She, after all, belonged to the rare second group — and wanted to make her dramatic splash while she still had moral support nearby.

She rushed into the house and bounced up the stairs.

Opening the bedroom door, she stopped dead in her tracks.

There — on the wall — was a painting.

It had been there before. Lana had noticed it right away.

It showed a stormy seascape: waves crashing, clouds looming, the sky dark and ominous — a sure sign of an approaching storm.

But now?

The image was completely different.

A sunny, calm day. The sea was perfectly still. Not a single cloud on the horizon. Just like that.

Frozen in place, Lana couldn't take her eyes off it. She rubbed her eyes and tried to shake off the strange feeling. Surely someone had just swapped the paintings. But who? And why?

She decided to save those questions for later, grabbed her towel, and ran back to the beach like a whirlwind.

That evening, the house guests gathered in the living room by the fireplace, framed in white stone. Summer was summer, but Jurmala evenings could still be damp and chilly. A fireplace here wasn't just a luxury — it was a necessity and a powerful antidote to the many gray Baltic days. Snuggled in her chair, Lana brought up her mystery.

"You won't believe this," she began.

"The painting in my room... changed moods. Same place, but the weather's different. When we arrived, it was stormy, gray skies, rough seas — and now? Sunshine and calm. Magic."

"Your imagination, dear sister, has always been something special," Aivar chuckled, cozy in a large white armchair.

"Oh, for sure. But this time it wasn't my imagination," she insisted.

"I mean, I don't mind the change — the new version is way nicer. But still..."

She shot a meaningful look at her nephew, but he didn't react.

Everyone was amused by Lana's story, but no one took it seriously. They figured she had simply seen a different seascape somewhere else in the house — after all, the walls were covered in paintings. Lana had no choice but to agree with their logic. Still, deep down, she wasn't so sure.

Chapter 6

Time flew by.

Glorious sunrises and sunsets over the sea, lazy beach days, morning jogs, breakfasts on the terrace... What could be better?

The warmest month of the Latvian summer had arrived. The weather was perfect, and forecasts promised two more weeks of sunshine and heat.

Lana stepped into her room to get ready for the beach. Just as she was about to leave, something caught her attention — a flicker, a movement she couldn't quite place.

She glanced up at that painting — the mysterious one — and froze. It was changing. Rapidly. Clouds rolled in over the sun, waves swelled, wind whipped through the trees — the pines were bending so hard it looked like they might snap. Lana instinctively looked out the window. Outside — beautiful weather. Clear skies. No wind. She slowly made her way downstairs. Everyone else was already gathered and impatiently waiting for their "hostess."

Little Sintik was trying to draw, and that's when she made the mistake of asking a question:

"What color is the sky?"

Such a simple inquiry unleashed a storm of opinions. The adults weren't content to just offer answers — they took over completely, correcting her, suggesting changes, arguing about shades of blue. In the end, the child stood to the side, abandoned, while the grown-ups, tongues sticking out in concentration, gleefully scribbled their own masterpieces. By the time Lana entered the room, almost no one noticed — except for her ever-present nephew.

"Why are you always late, Lanka?" he asked, half-accusing, half-annoyed.

She looked at him, still shaken by what she'd seen. Before she could respond, a gust of wind burst through the open veranda door, scattering papers from the table like leaves in a whirlwind. The sudden disruption jolted Lana out of her daze. She straightened and said firmly:

"Nobody's going to the beach. We're all staying in."

"Why? What's going on?"

"Uhh... they issued a storm warning," she said, improvising quickly.

Everyone stared at her in disbelief. The weather was perfect.

"Oh please," Valya chuckled.

"Those weather forecasters couldn't predict sunrise — they're always off by, like, ten degrees."

"Still," Lana insisted, "let's wait a couple of hours. I have a better idea. Enough with the beach — let's do something different! How about we bake a pie and have a ping-pong tournament on the lawn?"

There was a moment of hesitation. So, she added:

"Whoever wins gets to pick their favorite cake. The losers have to bake it."

"You've brought this on yourself," the nephew smirked.

"You'll be making my Napoleon!"

"You sure you won't be the one baking?" Lana teased.

"Although... that might affect the quality."

She laughed — and kept one little secret to herself: Dad was coming soon. And he'd be the one making that Napoleon. Resistance crumbled. Even Lana wasn't sure why she was so insistent — but something told her she'd done the right thing.

Her intuition had always been a reliable guide.

Lana's mother took charge of the pie, the girls offered to help (but mostly just chatted), and eventually the pie was baked, and the garden table was set.

The wind picked up, and the ping-pong match slowly transitioned into a game of Novuss⁵ — the traditional Baltic board game. The family tournament continued in full swing.

The wind blew harder. Fluffy white clouds drifted in.

"So, this is your scary storm?" the nephew said sarcastically.

Before Lana could fire back a witty retort — a sudden blast of wind overturned the table and everything on it. Heavy raindrops slammed into the ground. Everyone sprang into action — grabbing chips, saving what remained of the feast, running back inside with whatever they could carry.

Lana hesitated — just for a moment — and turned her face to the rain. When she opened her eyes again, she saw it: One of the massive pines was swaying violently, leaning in a direction that made her blood freeze.

It was falling!

Right toward her nephew, who was completely unaware — half-listening to someone on the phone, one hand covering his ear. He couldn't hear. He didn't see. Lana sprinted. She hit him full force, knocking him to the ground. The tree crashed down with a deafening crack — right onto the bench where Lana had been sitting just moments earlier. The impact was brutal — it shattered the bench, crushed the oak table, and embedded the trunk half a meter into the earth.

In the end... the tree didn't fall where Lana had expected.

Her attempt to save her nephew had actually saved herself.

The sky opened up, unleashing a torrential downpour. Lana and her nephew could barely make it across the yard — soaking wet, breathless, practically crawling. They stumbled into the living room,

⁵ The game Novuss is a tabletop sport similar to billiards. You could call it a compact version of billiards, except that instead of rolling ivory balls, players use a striker disc to hit wooden pucks.

dripping from head to toe, lungs heaving. Everyone else had already scattered throughout the house and missed what had happened in those final moments.

“Go take a shower,” Lana said curtly. “Then come back. We need to talk.”

Once everyone had dried off and regrouped, the whole gang gathered again in the living room. The storm still raged outside. Nothing could be seen beyond the windows except streams of water racing down the glass. It felt like the entire house was being carried away by a river.

When Lana returned, she quickly realized — from the commotion and loud gasps — that something unusual was happening.

Her usually reserved nephew... was talking. A lot. He was dramatically recounting the incident — making it sound even more dangerous, even more heroic. The women of the family were eating it up. Lana slipped in quietly and listened, unnoticed, to his version of events. And realized — he still hadn’t figured it out. He thought she had saved him —

But in truth, her actions had ended up saving herself. Once the drama died down, everyone turned to Lana. She raised her hand, looked around with a serious expression, and said:

“That was the story. Now let me tell you the backstory.” And she began to explain what she had seen.

“So, where’s this magical weather forecast of yours?” Aivar teased.

With a sigh, Lana pointed to the wall — at the painting. As she shared her strange suspicions, even she started to doubt herself.

Her story sounded... ridiculous. And the amused glances from her relatives didn’t help. To make matters worse, when they entered her room — *the painting now showed a sunny day*.

Lana was ready to chalk it all up to her imagination. But then... something else caught her eye.

The window. When she’d first arrived, it had been square, halfway up the wall, with a wide windowsill — she remembered it clearly. She had sat there that very night, watching the stars.

Now? It was an arched window. Floor to ceiling. The initial shock passed, and Lana looked around more carefully. The bedspread had changed — now white instead of pink. The bed itself looked different too. She didn’t say a word. Just started walking through the house. And the more she looked, the more subtle changes she noticed. Not just in her room — throughout the entire house. What was happening? At first, she thought maybe she’d missed some things on the first day. After all, everything was new to them. But no — now, she was sure.

Something was changing. It was as if someone had been slowly adjusting everything — leaving behind small “surprises.” But some changes were significant. The stairs, for example, now had a gentler incline — better for a small child. Handrails had appeared where there hadn’t been any before. The couch in the living room had grown — big enough for the entire family to sit comfortably. There was more dishware in the kitchen. The windows had gotten bigger. Lana’s room had actually become slightly smaller, while the living room had gained space. It was as if the house was shifting — adjusting itself to its new inhabitants. The objects, the layout, the proportions... All slowly, quietly changing.

She remembered how, on that first day, she’d had the eerie feeling that the house was watching her. Now she was sure — it had been getting to know her. Getting to know all of them. And drawing its own conclusions.

Lana walked through every room in the house, stopping at each painting. Most of them were landscapes — oceans, mountains, open fields. Some showed famous cities and landmarks: the canals of Venice, the Eiffel Tower, the Roman Colosseum... She pulled out a magnifying glass and took a closer look. The images were moving. Barely — almost imperceptibly — but undeniably. Tiny waves rippled on the water. Clouds shifted slightly in the sky. Flags fluttered. Windows glinted. Her head was spinning.

“Keep calm, just stay calm,” she whispered — channeling her inner Karlsson⁶.

⁶ Karlsson (Swedish: Karlsson) — a literary character created by Swedish author Astrid Lindgren.

But there was no one to talk to. Everyone had gone off somewhere. Even her daughter had asked to visit her beloved grandfather at the other summer house — the one with the “little sea,” which was actually a lake. Both homes were “summer houses” to Sintik. The only difference was: one was by the big sea, the other by the little one.

Lana took a breath.

Step one: calm down.

Step two: find a logical explanation.

Well, step one was clear enough.

Step two? Absolutely not.

“Let’s start with the doable,” she muttered, and went to make some coffee. The coffee turned out perfect — rich and fragrant. She sank into a chair, opened her beloved little laptop, took a small sip of the hot brew — and finally, finally felt herself relax.

“Alright... what’s new in the world?” she said aloud, almost playfully.

She began her usual routine — checking stock markets, RTS⁷/ NYSE⁸ movements, any world events that might affect them. Summer wasn’t usually the time for major changes, but...

Everything had changed. A major player had entered the game. Stocks were surging. Volatility was back. For Lana — this was amazing. She could partially close her positions and wait for the autumn rally.

Feeling like a financial genius, she allowed herself a leisurely detour through the internet, eventually landing in her email inbox. A few messages were waiting. She deleted some spam, then spotted one that made her pause. It was from her recent “acquaintances” — the ones responsible for all the strange, possibly insane events of the past weeks. Vladislav and his son were planning to visit for a few days. The message was polite, assuring her they didn’t want to disturb her or the guests. If anything, they would be the guests.

The email was three days old. Apparently, she had missed it yesterday while skimming through her mail.

“Ugh, blondie strikes again,” she muttered, half embarrassed.

It was a bit awkward. The house had been entrusted to her. But what could she do? She’d accepted the role. And now... here they come. On the bright side, maybe she could finally ask them about all the house’s strange behavior. Sometimes it all seemed so absurd that Lana thought any reasonable person, hearing about what she’d witnessed, would instantly question her sanity.

But deep down, she felt — this story wasn’t over. There had to be more to it. The next issue on her mind was how to accommodate the returning owners. There were only four bedrooms in the house — and all of them were currently occupied. Someone would have to be relocated... or the family would have to squeeze in a bit during their visit. She’d have to either kick someone out... or suggest some creative room-sharing. Still mulling over the logistics, Lana stepped into the hallway and froze.

There were six doors!

She already had a feeling — and yep, there they were. Two extra bedrooms. Ready. Waiting. She stepped outside and walked around the house. No visible change from the outside.

Of course not. Still — for peace of mind — she circled the house one more time. As she neared the garden gazebo and looked up at the tower section of the house...she heard a voice.

“Hello, Lana.”

She jumped. There he was. The man from the car. The one she’d met under the most dramatic circumstances. He was sitting calmly, smoking.

⁷ RTS Stock Exchange

⁸ NYSE is one of the major stock exchanges in the United States.

“I didn’t hear you arrive,” she said, a little flustered. Then quickly added, “Well... this is your house. You can come and go as you please.”

“How are you feeling?” he asked, eyes locking onto hers.

“I’m fine,” she replied automatically, regaining composure.

“I can see that,” he said, leaning back casually.

“But is everything... normal?”

His gaze was penetrating. Lana felt like she was being X-rayed.

“Good thing I’m wearing new underwear,” she thought absurdly — and blushed at herself.

“You’re smiling,” he said, surprised. “After everything that’s been happening to you here?”

“Oh, look out — Mount Vesuvius is about to blow,” Lana teased.

“What exactly are you referring to?”

“You seriously don’t notice anything strange?” he nearly shouted.

But before Lana could deliver another sarcastic comeback, a familiar voice cut in:

“Oh, she got you good.” It was Vlad — approaching with his usual warm, friendly smile.

Lana looked at his son, who stood there completely baffled.

Victory! She’d won that round.

“Alright,” Lana said, suddenly more relaxed.

“What’s your name again?” He told her.

Then repeated it — slowly, syllable by syllable. At that moment, a gust of wind slammed into the window, shutting it with a loud bang — and she never quite caught his name.

* * *

Sometimes, it feels like someone’s watching you — as if the whole world pauses for a moment, silently observing what you’ll do next. When she was a little girl, Lana used to imagine that she wasn’t just a defenseless child — but the very center of a vast and mysterious universe. Everything around her, she believed, had been created just for her. She felt — vaguely, but deeply — that something real was waiting for her out there, somewhere far away. And that right now, in this quiet moment, she was taking a kind of secret test from an unseen teacher. Even when she was completely alone, the little girl tried to behave her best — as if she believed that everything she did mattered, because someone, somewhere, would care. She grew up. But the feeling never truly left. It simply curled up in a quiet corner of her heart, waiting. And now, listening to these two extraordinary men speak, so many things began to make sense. Something within her stirred, rising with strength she didn’t know she had. It felt like the moment a bird opens its wings for flight.

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