

Lily Risk

PREDATOR R

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18+

Lily Rizk

Predator

«АВТОР»

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Rizk L.

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Cross Begovich, a ruthless enemy and loyal friend, ambitious businessman and devoted son, cold strategist and passionate lover. Everyone who met him saw a different side. To some, he was a pillar of strength; to others, a threat. He kept people from falling but showed no mercy to those in his way. He could offer an enemy his hand, then return fire a second later. Those who loved him could never hate him. Those who wished him harm came to respect him. He built a business from nothing and lifted others with him. Inside a criminal organisation, he fought to save himself and others. He cornered enemies and found a way out where none seemed to exist. He knew when to wait, gather strength and strike when everyone thought him beaten. His charisma was stronger than any weapon. Those above him sought his attention; those below, he helped rise. In him, humanity met an animal strength that drew everything into its orbit.

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PART I

Chapter 1

Some historical film was playing on the television. A half-empty bottle of Coke sat gathering dust on the edge of the table.

Why the hell had he listened to Lance and come all the way out to this godforsaken place? Cross wondered idly. That prick was always getting himself into trouble. And here was the result: Cross was stuck in his room while his friend was off somewhere going wild. He lifted his head from the pillow and glanced at the window. Rain pattered against the glass, threatening to turn into a proper downpour.

“Then again, maybe it’s for the best...” he muttered, barely loud enough to hear himself.

He was reclining on a wide bed in a bathrobe. The small hotel was tucked away somewhere in the mountains, far from the bustle of the city and the endless deals. For a moment, he rather liked the thought of buying a little house here one day, keeping a few animals, and spending his old age in peace.

Then he snorted. What was he thinking? At thirty... six?

Turning the long remote over in his fingers, Cross began switching channels. There was nothing to watch. Nothing to do, either, but he had promised himself: no business over the weekend. He needed to switch off completely.

He kept glancing at his phone. No. He couldn’t turn it on. To hell with everything.

Yet five minutes later, his finger pressed the power button of its own accord. And, as always, it started.

Dozens of notifications. The office. Right, now John. Something about the competition: “urgent,” “immediately,” “important.”

It could wait until Monday. He didn’t care.

Then Lance got through. First a batch of messages, followed by a call.

Cross cursed foully, answered, and put him on speaker.

“Buddy...” he began. “I haven’t read your...”

But Lance wasn’t listening. His voice shook and faltered with genuine, animal fear.

“I don’t know if she’s breathing... Cross... bro... I’m scared to touch her...”

“Who? What did you do, Lance?” Cross’s voice hardened at once, cold as steel.

“A girl... She came and sat with me... I was fucking wasted... Shit, I don’t know!”

“Where are you?”

“I’m... here...”

“Where the fuck is ‘here’?!” Cross barked. “Send me your location. Now.”

“Okay... Man, I... I don’t know what to do...”

“Send me your location. I’m on my way.”

He drove fast, his mind fixed on the road. By then, the rain had become a solid wall. The country road wound through the trees in treacherous bends, and the wet asphalt reflected his headlights like a mirror. Ahead, behind the torrents of water, the forest stretched like a solid wall.

Afraid he wouldn’t get there in time, Cross pressed the accelerator to the floor. Suddenly, just beyond a bend, the shape of a truck appeared at the edge of the road. Too close. Cross slammed on

the brakes. The car skidded. At that very moment, a man stepped out from behind the hood, straight into its path.

Cross jerked the wheel, reacting instantly, but it was too late. There was a dull, heavy thud.

The car lurched sharply and came to an abrupt stop. Cross jumped out. An elderly man lay on the wet asphalt, glistening with rain. His face was deathly pale, his eyes wide open but staring into nothing. He was barely breathing, his fingers clutching desperately at his chest.

“Hey... sir... are you all right? Can you hear me?!” Cross crouched beside him. His whole body was pounding with adrenaline. God, please let him be alive!

With an effort, the old man let out one last, deep breath... and went still.

Cross pressed his fingers to the man’s neck, searching for a pulse. Nothing. He lowered his hands and closed his eyes.

His phone rang in his pocket. Lance again.

Cross answered, but before he could say anything, Lance blurted out with a laugh.

“Cross, forget it! She came round. That... fucking bitch just passed out. From the sex, can you believe it?! And I thought she was dead!”

Cross hung up without a word. Then he dialed 911.

“Car accident. One person injured.” After a strained pause, he added hoarsely, “He’s... not breathing.”

The elderly man had suffered a heart attack, and the impact had been the final push, but not the cause of death. The attack had begun before the collision, and even if Cross hadn’t been driving along that road, the old man would have collapsed anyway.

Begovich’s lawyers handled all the formalities. They went about their work with a cold ruthlessness and no trace of emotion. He paid for everything: medical expenses, the funeral, compensation for the family. But he never appeared in person. He sent no flowers and made no calls.

He simply disappeared from the story. Put it out of his mind, and that was that.

His life was busy enough as it was. He had done everything he could. The relatives ought to be thanking him. After all, if he hadn’t been there in the last minutes of the old man’s life and played a part, however terrible, in his death, they would have had to fork out money, suffer losses, and deal with all the rest... Instead, he had taken care of everything.

Let’s be honest! He wasn’t the one who should be apologizing. They should be apologizing to him.

Adjusting his tie and pressing his lips together, Cross Begovich closed the folder containing the case documents... What was that poor fellow’s name? Oh, never mind...

Faced with a powerful law firm, the investigators wasted no time. They never even opened a case. It disappeared before it had a chance to exist. And life went on as usual. Business, struggles, victories, celebrations...

Six months passed.

Chapter 2

“Congratulations. Great place!” one of his friends said, looking around the spacious office on Park Avenue.

“Thanks.” Cross nodded, shaking hands with his guests as they came in.

“Toby, how’s your little girl?”

“Great, thanks. Growing fast. She’ll be two months old soon! Your turn, brother!” Toby laughed, then pointed around the room. “And yours. Yours too!”

Everyone laughed.

“Oh, come on,” Lance said with a dismissive wave. “Getting married is like turning yourself in to the cops with two kilos of drugs in your pocket. No thanks. Count me out!”

“I’m thinking about it, actually,” Elliot said evenly, hiding a smile.

“Really? Who is she?” Cross clapped him on the shoulder.

Just then, his secretary appeared in the doorway. Cross glanced at her.

“Coffee for everyone, Kristin. Thank you.”

Then he turned straight back to the conversation.

“Come on, Ell. Spill.”

“There’s someone... Nothing serious yet.”

“Oh no. Don’t tell me it’s that girl from the birthday party... What was her name... Danny, help me out?”

“Katie,” Danny supplied.

“That’s it, Katie. Quite a piece of work,” Lance drawled, shaking his head.

Cross laughed, waved a hand, and went over to his chair. The others followed, settling onto the leather sofa and into the armchairs.

Later, over coffee, as they discussed a party to celebrate the move, Cross finally gave in.

“All right... Fine. We’ll have a party.”

“I can help organize it!” Lance winked, as much the life of the party as ever.

“I was just about to ask you,” Cross replied with a grin.

“He’ll bankrupt you,” Danny said, shaking his head.

“Stop it,” Lance protested. “I’m not like that!”

Laughter filled the office again, washing away the last traces of silence.

Before long, the guests left. Someone let the door slam; others lingered by the elevator, discussing what they would bring to the party.

The office felt spacious again. Too spacious.

Cross stood by the window. Rain was falling outside. The same fine, unpleasant rain as that day. It scratched softly at the glass, as though deliberately, persistently knocking at his memory. Lost in thought, Cross stared at nothing. At the moving lights below, at the blurred ribbons of headlights flowing through the evening city like blood through capillaries.

New York went about its life, unaware that for someone on the thirty-sixth floor, everything had stopped.

He remembered the silence after the impact, when all sound had dissolved. That rain and the hollow emptiness. He remembered touching the man’s neck and finding nothing. Then saying into the phone, “He’s... not breathing.”

Now he had a new office, new deals, new goals. And the same old, tormenting truth.

He took a sip of cold coffee. There was only bitterness, no sugar, no meaning. He set the cup on the windowsill.

No, he felt no remorse. He had nothing to feel remorse for. But... he remembered.

Cross Begovich was Bosnian, born in Visoko, a town where every other house bore the scars of war and every house held a memory. He had grown up in an educated but traditional family. His father was a lawyer, a man of firm principles and heavy silences, and his mother taught French. Their household rested on books, old rules, and a clear division of responsibilities. His father always had the final say; compassion belonged to his mother.

From the time they were children, their father took Cross and his older brother, Kenan, into the woods and taught them to shoot. It wasn't about hunting. He wanted the boys to learn discipline and how to achieve a result. There were old plywood targets in their grandfather's shed. They started with air guns and later moved on to a carbine. Their father's brother, Uncle Ibrahim, was the one who dragged them along to boxing. He was a strong man with a temper like gunpowder, but brave and deeply responsible. He used to say a man had to know how to take a blow in any situation. Then Ibrahim was killed in the second year of the war. Ever since, Cross had seen fighting as more than a sport. It was his own way of honoring his uncle's memory.

As a boy, he had wanted to be like his uncle, and when he grew older, people really did begin to see Ibrahim in him.

There were only two sons in the family. Kenan followed in his father's footsteps and graduated from law school, but never practiced. Instead of offices and courtrooms, he chose what had always been closer to his heart: farming and the land. Their grandfather, Hasan Begovich, the father of Ismail and Ibrahim, had instilled that love in him years before. Kenan restored his grandfather's winery, brought the old vineyards back into shape, and put even more land into production. Livestock, harvests, deliveries. Against all predictions, the business flourished. He never argued with his father, but he didn't obey him either. He did things his own way, quietly, persistently, and successfully.

And Cross... In the years after the war, when the country was only beginning to recover, his father insisted that his younger son needed a serious profession too. Cross did as he was told. He entered university, where he initially studied law, just as Kenan had. But he soon realized it wasn't his path. Formulas took the place of texts, calculations the place of interpretations. He switched to economics and immersed himself in the world of strategy. Financial analysis, banking systems, and the mechanics of risk absorbed him completely. He felt far more sure of himself there than among the abstractions of law. And people noticed him. First as a systems analyst at a bank involved in the reconstruction effort, then as someone who could spot a failure before it happened.

Cross moved to the United States at twenty-six. Late by the standards of ambitious young people, but not for him. He knew exactly where he was going and why. He enrolled in a master's program at a university in New York and continued building his knowledge. He studied during the day and worked part-time at a bank in the evenings, first helping out in the back office, then moving into analysis. There, too, people soon valued his analytical mind, his coolness under pressure, and his unconventional approach to numbers. Where others saw static reports, he saw movement, logic, and weaknesses.

The master's program lasted two years, and by the time he finished, around 2005, Cross was already developing a strategy of his own. In those days, volatile markets were a gold mine: options, hedging, short-term trades. Trading was undergoing a transformation, and Cross threw himself into it. Everyone fought, but only a few won. His first trades were painful, and the losses were brutal. But he didn't back down. Gradually, he began turning a profit. Trade by trade, figure by figure, through calculation alone. He started bringing together a team of men as obsessed as he was, sharp and unlikely to panic. Even then, while still working under someone else's name, he began building his own system. Without pomp, banners, or slogans. What worked was cold efficiency and a clear plan. And he made it work.

Chapter 3

The night over Malibu was warm, still, and thick with darkness. Beyond the window, the sea spread like shattered black glass all the way to the horizon. Only a few yachts glimmered in the dark, as though someone had scattered the lights of lovestruck lanterns across the water.

The two-story villa, with its open terraces, white railings, dancing palm shadows, and faint scent of salt in the air, welcomed guests like a hostess sure of herself.

Inside, the music played low, with a rich bassline and a sweet aftertaste of the eighties that made you want to move even while standing still. On the first floor, a long glass table was covered with drinks: whiskey in squat bottles, clear vodka with droplets on the necks, champagne in ice buckets, tequila with lemon wedges. A thin trail of hookah smoke wound lazily from the edge of the bar toward the ceiling, like a snake slowly waking from sleep. Farther along stood two more tables laden with all kinds of appetizers and dishes.

Along the wall stood a pool table, green as a dollar bill, its balls neatly arranged, waiting for someone swaying slightly on their feet to strike them too hard or, perhaps, with excessive grace.

When their hands could no longer hold their glasses, the guests began to play. Everything had already been said, everything drunk, and the room had long since begun to swim. The girls looked as though they had stepped out of a music video: silk dresses, bare backs, moist lips, and looks that needed no words. One had a gleaming belly ring, another had champagne poured into her shoe, another was laughing herself to tears, because the alcohol had long since fermented inside them, and now they laughed more from the exhaustion of being beautiful than from any real amusement.

The men stood with expensive watches on their wrists, two days' stubble, and a faint boredom on their faces that faded only when a woman who had yet to say yes walked past.

Upstairs, a DJ was at work. Well practiced and very good at what he did, he stirred their blood slowly, deeply, almost secretly, or with a sudden rush of adrenaline.

And Cross... He neither took center stage nor hid in a corner. He was simply there, yet everyone felt his presence. He sat back on the sofa with a glass in his hand, listening as the evening scattered around him like sugar over warm glass. He barely drank, taking only small sips of whiskey, watching and remembering.

Now and then, someone came over, clapped him on the shoulder, shook his hand, and told him who had made how much, who had sold what, who had taken whom to bed, and how many minutes had passed before she lit a cigarette. Cross nodded and smiled, but none of it touched him inside. Yes, he liked the lights, the women, the smoke, and the whiskey, but they were not what gave him pleasure. The pleasure came from knowing he could afford all of it. Like a man who needed no introduction.

A hand settled on his shoulder from behind. Cross turned. A man he knew leaned toward him with a polite smile.

"Congratulations, Cross. Excellent results. Park Avenue already! And I hear you're doing business on quite a scale."

Cross smiled politely and nodded.

"Thank you. We're expanding."

The man gave his shoulder a friendly pat and moved on. Cross took a slow sip of whiskey and nodded to someone at the other end of the room.

Just then, a young woman sat down beside him on the sofa. A bare back, a confident gaze. She moved closer, almost touching him, and leaned right up to his ear. Cross went still, listening. The dark amber whiskey barely stirred in his motionless hand, and a heavy ice cube gently split in two.

She whispered something, then drew back, bit her lip, and looked him straight in the eye. The pause lingered. Cross gave the faintest smile, took another slow sip, set his glass on the table, and

rose without hurry, heading toward the glass doors to the terrace. The girl remained seated, watching him go.

Later, when it was completely dark and the sky had finally become an inky bowl flecked with golden drops, someone switched on the outdoor lamps. Candles were lit around the edges, and the entire villa, from the terrace to the pool, began to look like an advertisement for the life dreamers bought. Only it wasn't an advertisement. It was real.

Cross stepped onto the terrace and stopped at the railing. Below, the pool glowed with soft light around its edges. His face remained calm, his gaze assured. At that moment, no one could have told whether he was thinking about the morning that would come again tomorrow, bringing more numbers, faces, challenges, and the business that was always with him.

And the night... The night was merely a setting in which, for an hour, you could feel immortal.

"By the way, Cross, when are you going to Bosnia?" Danny asked as he aimed at the eight ball, leaning slightly over the pool table.

His tone was casual, almost offhand, but there was warmth and understanding in his voice, a gentle reminder that each of them still had roots somewhere.

Cross slowly looked up from his glass, leaned against the table, tapped his fingers against the side of his cue, and narrowed his eyes a little.

"Maybe closer to Christmas... I can't yet. I've got deals pending. I need to see everything through. Then I'll take a break. A couple of weeks, at least."

He set his glass aside and struck the ball. The white projectile shot forward, rolled swiftly across the table, and collided hard with another ball, which gave an obedient shudder and nudged a third. The last ball glided over the green felt and disappeared into a pocket with a dull click. In an instant, the sound of the shot filled the silence with a note of victory.

A minute later, Lance cut in.

"We've been to your place, remember?" he said with a smirk. "What was it... seven years ago? When you dragged us out to your parents' house in the middle of nowhere."

"Visoko. Not the middle of nowhere," Cross corrected him with a grin. He straightened and picked up his glass. "And the air is like champagne."

"And a boxing ring in the basement!" Toby thumped his chest. "We came home covered in bruises. Remember sparring with Lance? We thought you were going to knock him the hell out."

"I went easy on him," Cross said lazily, laughing under his breath. "Otherwise, he wouldn't have made the flight home."

"Don't be modest," Lance said with a wave. "You've still got that certificate hanging there. What was it... a boxing rank?"

"In Bosnia, yes." Cross nodded. "From when I was young. Before the war, everything was... different."

He fell silent for a second. As though electricity had struck his nerves, memory traveled along invisible wires inside him, lighting up distant recollections.

At that very moment, one of the girls came up behind him and draped herself over his shoulder. Tall, wearing a revealing dress with a plunging neckline and a spark in her eyes, she was clearly looking for an excuse to touch him.

"So you're a boxer too?" she asked flirtatiously, leaning toward his ear. "That's... well, that's fucking sexy."

Cross turned his head a little, his eyes gleaming, and replied without changing his expression.

"I'm a good shot too. Want some practice?"

Laughter erupted around the table. Someone missed a shot, someone spilled a little gin, and someone said, "Now it's a proper party."

Cross took another sip and smiled, and something inside him came alive.

“Yeah, sure,” Lance said with a smirk, dropping a ball into a pocket. “Easy for you to say, when Daddy’s money could set you up in a couple of years. Try doing it my way, without any starting capital, connections, or titles.”

He shot Cross a glance. The room grew a little quieter.

“I’m no pretty boy. I don’t have any sporting ranks, and I’m not a good shot, but everything I’ve achieved, I’ve achieved myself. Through my own hard work. Not my family name.”

“Come on, Lance,” Toby interrupted. “Have you forgotten how Cross’s family were almost burned alive in their own house during the war? They had almost everything taken from them.”

Cross sipped his whiskey without taking his eyes off his friend, then calmly set the glass on the edge of the pool table.

“How much have you made on your own?” he asked quietly. “How much is in your account right now?”

Lance shrugged with a crooked smile.

“Enough for me. And a little extra.”

The men laughed, but quietly and without much enthusiasm.

Cross smirked.

“I’ve got enough to buy you and your ‘little extra.’ And as for ‘Daddy’s money,’ it went straight toward debts, lawyers, and staying alive. So, brother, don’t talk about things you know nothing about.”

Lance flushed.

“I remember everything, Cross. Don’t make yourself out to be a martyr. We certainly made use of that money. Parties, cars. Your dad had money stashed away. You don’t need to tell me.”

Tension hung in the room. The laughter faded. Everyone else went quiet.

Cross exhaled and spoke without raising his voice.

“I’m not getting into a contest with you. And I’m not going to prove anything. I know who I am. And I know what I’m capable of. I have no reason to justify myself to you.”

Lance narrowed his eyes and slapped him sharply on the shoulder.

“Then prove it. Don’t just know it. Do it.”

“Lance, stop,” Toby cut in. “Where are you going with this?”

“What?” Lance snapped. “Are you afraid your perfect Cross will fail? That I’ll turn out to be right?”

Cross scratched his chin idly, thinking. For a moment, he seemed to shut everyone out. Then he looked at Lance.

“All right. After Christmas, I’ll go somewhere in the middle of nowhere. No money, no connections, no name. And in a year, I’ll come back with a million.”

“Oh, come on,” Danny muttered. “Why are you letting him get to you?”

Cross lifted his head.

“I’m serious. I accept the challenge. Lance, if I come back with a million, you give me yours. The last million you’ve still got sitting in your account.”

Everyone turned to Lance. He raised an eyebrow.

“And if you don’t?”

Cross shrugged.

“Then you’ll have two million.”

Chapter 4

He arrived in Bosnia early in the morning. Stepping off the plane, he immediately breathed in the air, the scents of home, of winter, stacked firewood, and dusty roads.

Cross rented a car from a place he already knew and headed for his childhood home without switching on the navigation. He drove in silence, with no music, the window open and one hand held outside.

A gray, gloomy sky hung over the hills, stretched unevenly above the old world. Here, childhood returned through touch: the coolness of stone, the warm boards of the porch, his father's familiar hands. The narrow road ran alongside vineyards where a few leaves still clung on, reluctant to let the season go. The drive from the airport passed in what felt like an instant, gradually dissolving the bustle of the city into the quiet of the countryside.

He pulled up outside his parents' house. He had come without warning. Before him stood the old two-story house with carved shutters and a wrought-iron balcony. It was just as it had always been. Time seemed to have stood still. Cross switched off the engine and sat in the car for a few seconds before stepping out and taking a deep breath of the crisp country air, free of the polish and dust of big cities.

Once he crossed the threshold, the house greeted him with warmth, the smell of homemade pie, and the freshness of mint. One of the maids hurried down the hallway without noticing him. He walked farther inside, unhurried, returning to a younger self he had long ago locked away like an attic full of precious memories. His mother, Mrs. Emira, stood at the stove in the kitchen. Her hair was neatly pinned up, and her eyes were stern but warm. She was whisking something in a bowl.

Cross came in without a word, walked around the table, and lifted her into his arms despite her startled cry of protest.

"Cross!" she laughed breathlessly. "Put me down! What are you doing, my boy?"

"Mom..." he exclaimed. "I'm home."

She touched his face with her fingers, and tears instantly shone in her eyes.

"You could have told us you were coming."

"Then you'd have had time to cook ten dishes and scrub the floors three times," he said with a grin. "I wanted to see the house... the way it normally is."

Just then, they heard tires crunching over the gravel. His father had arrived. A couple of minutes later, a familiar voice sounded in the hall.

"What's this? A coup without any warning?"

Ismail Begovich came in wearing a tweed coat, a briefcase in his hand. He stopped at the sight of his son.

"You."

That was all. One word, but it held surprise, joy, and a worry he kept hidden.

"Dad." Cross went over and hugged him tightly.

"You sly fox. No warning again." Ismail patted his shoulder, holding him close. "But good for you. We've missed you."

Then his sister-in-law, Esma, came running in, her hair loose and her face beaming. Behind her walked his brother Kenan, tanned, with a farmer's muscles, followed by three boys as noisy as a band of outlaws. Little Selma came last, carrying a pink rabbit.

"Uncle Cross!" the boys shouted. "Uncle Cross is here! He brought us something! We know he did!"

"Of course I did," he said with a delighted grin. "Where would I be without bribes?"

He picked the children up one after another, hugging and kissing them. Then he took out the neatly wrapped boxes and began handing them around.

"This is for you, Munir. A tablet. Don't break it on the first day."

"Wow!"

"And for you, Hasan, headphones and glasses. You're Agent 007 now."

"Oh yes!"

"And this is for you, little Rasim. A phone with parental controls."

"What does that mean?"

"It means you can call me, but not the police when you break something in the house."

There was laughter, and someone clapped him on the back.

"And who are you?" he asked, looking at the little girl.

"I'm Selma! And this is Rabbit. He bites!"

"Does he?" Cross crouched down. "Tell me, who was the last person he bit?"

She leaned closer and whispered as though revealing a conspiracy.

"Mommy, when she tried to throw him in the wash."

"What a little rascal." Cross touched a finger to the toy's mouth. "I'll have to have a word with him. But we've found him a girlfriend!"

Cross pulled a large wrapped box closer and asked his eldest nephew to cut through the plastic wrapping. Once the gift was unwrapped, a large, beautiful doll appeared, with long curly hair and a bow.

"Wow!" Munir breathed. "She's gorgeous!"

"You can practice kissing with her," Kenan joked, making everyone laugh except Selma. She gave her father a sideways look and reached for the toy.

"She's mine!"

Munir handed her the gift and answered with a laugh.

"Yes, she's yours, she's yours. I don't play with dolls."

Esma nudged her daughter toward Cross.

"Thank your uncle."

Cross was still kneeling in front of the little girl, smiling into her face. She came over, held the doll in one arm, and kissed him on the cheek. Cross closed his eyes and immediately pulled her close.

"Thank you, Uncle Cross," she said.

"You're welcome, my princess."

"Wait, I have something else," he said, taking a narrow case tied with a ribbon from his bag without further preamble. "For the lady of the house," he murmured, offering the little box to his sister-in-law.

Esma opened it and went still. Inside lay a delicate white-gold bracelet, its emeralds gleaming in a straight line like drops of dew on grass. The stones caught the lamplight, their facets coming alive.

"Cross..." Her voice trembled. "How do you know?"

"I know there should be more in your life than making soup. Which is delicious, by the way. I remember," he replied seriously.

She carefully fastened the bracelet around her wrist, her eyes shining. Then Cross took out another envelope and handed her a folder of documents.

"A trip to Thailand for the whole family," he added simply. "You choose the dates."

"Thailand?" Esma covered her mouth with her hand. "You've lost your mind..."

Kenan grinned, but his eyes lit up.

"Well, brother... You've put me in a difficult position. Now I'll have to admit you're the best husband my wife could have."

"Live with it," Cross laughed, turning to him. "And this is for you personally."

He took out a set of keys bearing the Nissan logo and a slim folder of documents.

"A Patrol. Brand-new, already on its way. Fully loaded."

For a moment, no one spoke. Kenan looked from the keys to his brother and smiled.

“Are you serious?”

“When have I ever joked about something like this? The car’s yours. It’ll be sitting in the yard in a couple of weeks.”

Kenan let out a loud breath, settled the keys in his palm, and stepped forward to hug his brother tightly.

“You’re... crazy. But you’re my kind of crazy. Thank you.”

The room filled with laughter, hugs, and jokes. Emira leaned closer to examine the bracelet and said with a smile:

“Well, now you really are going to make me so happy I won’t know what to do with myself.”

Once everyone had gathered at the table, Cross turned to his mother, took out a small velvet-covered case, and offered it to her.

“And this is for you, Mrs. Emira.”

She opened the box and went still. Inside lay a delicate brooch in the shape of a jasmine flower, studded with diamonds. The stones sparkled softly, catching the light from the hearth.

“A brooch...” she whispered. “Jasmine...”

“The flower that has always reminded me of you, Mom,” Cross said. “Resilient, gentle, and stubborn.”

Her fingers trembled slightly. Then he took out a second gift, a perfume bottle bearing a delicate engraving: *Jasmina Noire*.

“And this is so you can always keep the scent of your youth close.”

Emira pressed the brooch to her chest, then breathed in the perfume, her eyes shining through her tears.

“You remember everything...” she whispered with a happy smile.

“I don’t forget anything,” he replied quietly, smiling too.

At dinner, after Cross had rested from the long flight, they all sat together around the table. There was a feeling of comfort and family strength, as though the evening itself confirmed that their foundation could never be shaken.

“Remember when we stole Dad’s old rifle?” Kenan asked, holding his glass.

“You stole it!” Cross objected. “I covered for you.”

“Covered for me? You were shouting all over the forest that we were going to shoot witches!”

“It was a scientific experiment!”

“You split my eyebrow open with the rifle butt!”

“Not on purpose. I just wanted to give you a hug. A bit too suddenly.”

“With the rifle butt?”

Their father joined in after taking a sip of wine.

“And I thought the neighbors had stolen the rifle. I was going to call the police. So now I find out the truth. Wonderful, twenty years later! Never mind, I still have connections. I can have you locked up for a couple of days, just to keep you out of trouble.”

Their mother merely shook her head and grumbled as she sorted the napkins.

“You two again. One always starts it, the other covers for him. Nothing’s changed.”

“Of course,” Cross said with a grin. “We just do things on a bigger scale now.”

The children ran around the house. Esmā brought in an apple pie, and Emira returned to her perfume, dabbing drops onto her wrist and breathing them in like a schoolgirl.

“This scent suits me so perfectly... Cross, you’re still my boy.”

He looked at her without speaking, his eyes holding more gratitude than words could express.

Meanwhile, the wine flowed easily as they talked. There was an extraordinary warmth, the kind found only in a home where everyone had once grown up wearing the same socks. They laughed, interrupting one another, and old stories surfaced on their own, as though they had been waiting beneath a pillow for their moment.

Their father poured himself more wine, leaned back, looked at his two sons, and suddenly said: “Do you know what I remember most? Sneaking out through the shed with you at night so your mother wouldn’t notice.”

Emira rolled her eyes.

“Here we go again...”

“Don’t interrupt. This is an important story.” He pointed his spoon at Cross and Kenan. “These two wolf cubs followed right on my heels. We’d take the old double-barreled shotgun, a thermos of liquor that I passed off as ‘just tea,’ and head into the woods. We sat by the fire. Learned to be quiet and think.”

“And drink,” Kenan added.

“Just a drop!” Ismail raised a finger. “Only to keep warm.”

“I was fourteen!” Kenan exclaimed.

“And already dreaming of becoming a farmer,” Cross snorted. “You tried to tame a hedgehog.”

“So what? It almost listened to me!”

“It bit your finger!”

“Because you kicked its burrow!”

“I nearly left the pair of you in the swamp that night,” Emira muttered. “You came home reeking of campfire smoke, the gun covered in mud, your fingers wrapped in bandages.”

“But we were happy,” their father said, pouring more wine. “You see, son, sometimes what matters isn’t what you did, but who you did it with. That’s all.”

He raised his glass.

“To those who sat by the fire!”

“And those who kept it all from Mom,” Cross added.

“Well, we don’t discuss that,” Kenan said. “You and I have an official conspiracy.”

“Your official conspiracy will end as soon as the grandchildren start following your example,” their mother said, though without anger. “Then we’ll see how you like it.”

“We’ll cover for them,” Cross said. “And give them a drop. Just as we should.”

Dinner went on for a long time. Evening settled outside, moisture crept down the windowpanes, and the familiar smells of the house mingled with the perfume. Inside... it was as though everything had fallen into place. Everyone had their role. Everyone was loved. Even the rabbit, who now sat in a backpack and wasn’t biting anyone.

Later, when the noise in the house had died down and only the warm, lingering glow of the fire remained, father and son sat down to play chess. This time, Cross had brought the set from Prague.

“A chess set...” Ismail’s voice held a note of admiration. “Is this beech root?”

“And walnut. Every piece is handmade. From Prague.”

“You’ve... lost your mind, son.”

“You’re only allowed to lose to me on this set.”

They played in silence. Only the clicks of the pieces moving along familiar routes and the smoke from the pipe disturbed the peace.

“You’re planning something,” his father said quietly.

“I just came to visit.”

“Don’t lie. You never come for no reason. Has something happened?”

Cross smiled.

“Nothing bad.”

“I can feel it.”

“Oh, come on.”

“You seem thoughtful...”

“I’m growing up.”

“Nonsense. Tell me.”

Cross leaned back in his chair.

"I want to go away. For a year. Maybe longer. Somewhere remote. Rent a little house, get away from the city for a while."

"Is it because of a woman?"

"No."

"Because of work?"

"Not that either."

"Then is it because of you?"

Cross took his time answering.

"I want... a simpler life. Nothing more."

"Have you done something? Debts? Enemies?"

"No. I swear."

"You're not lying?"

"I never would."

His father sighed and looked at the fire.

"I understand. I even envy you. But remember, if anything happens, I'll call on everyone."

"I know."

"Then go. But come back."

"I will."

The game ended in a draw. It was the first draw they had ever played.

Every morning in that house felt like a celebration. There were no fireworks or fanfares, but everything was so real, so warm, so full of family. And at the center of that universe was Cross Begovich.

His mother, Emira, seemed to be ready to celebrate from the first light of dawn. Together with Esma and their helper, she bustled around the kitchen as though the president himself were expected for dinner.

Poor boy... she thought, kneading the dough and nodding to herself. Always eating that fast food of his over there in his America. What do they even eat? Boxes, paper, and something reheated. Let him eat properly now. Decent food. Homemade. Our food.

There was enough food for a wedding: pies, meat, vegetables in sauce, soups, fruit compotes, baked treats. It seemed that over those three days, Cross had not only gained a couple of kilos but also regained his taste for ordinary life back home. Kenan, meanwhile, shook his head whenever another dish arrived, although he had put on a barbecue himself for the occasion, setting up a grill under the canopy. The smoky aromas rose into the air and drifted through the neighborhood. Close neighbors joined the feast too. The men stayed by the fire, eating grilled meat and washing it down with whiskey or wine. Inside, the women and children celebrated the homecoming of the Begovich family's fine son. Laughter and conversation filled the whole place.

Still, Kenan pretended to object.

"You're going to overfeed him!" he said with a grin. "He won't be able to fly back to America because he won't fit in the seat."

Deep down, though, he was pleased. The feast wasn't only for Cross. Everyone was at the table: Kenan himself, Esma, and the children. He even joked:

"Well, let him come more often! Maybe I'll put on a little weight from happiness too."

His wife narrowed her eyes and tossed a spoon his way.

"You poor thing, wasting away! Nobody feeds you, do they? How many kilos do you weigh?"

"One hundred and twenty!"

Everyone laughed. Cross felt more than comfortable. He felt happy. Every part of him was at rest: his mind, his back, his chest. He wasn't thinking, planning, or defending himself. He was among his own. And that feeling soaked into him like the smell of fresh bread into the walls of an old house.

Sometimes a dangerous thought even crossed his mind: perhaps... he could stay? What was all the rest for? Money, deals, ambition. Everything here was simple. And clean.

The scents of home, of his native soil, of warm bread on the table, and of everything words could never capture brought an ache of longing, taking him back to being ten years old, when his mother was calling him to dinner again. Here, he didn't have to explain who he was, why he spoke in a certain tone, or why he was silent. Here, one look from his mother could make the day brighter.

And there were the children. Three nephews and little Selma. All four believed that Cross had come into this world exclusively for them. He played soccer with the boys right there in the yard. Snow lay in a thick carpet, the air was dry and fresh, and the ball kept burying itself in the snowdrifts. But that only made it more fun. They ran, fell, squealed, and put together makeshift goals using a bucket and a shovel. Cross laughed with them until he cried.

Then Selma, so serious in her knitted hat with ears, dragged him off to build a snowman. They made a crooked little fellow with such a kind face, a carrot for a nose, two buttons from a coat, and mittens that, of course, had to be washed afterward. Cross tied his old scarf around its neck and said:

"There. Now the whole family's here."

The little girl clapped her hands and laughed. He watched her and felt genuine happiness. No conditions, no catch. The kind that reached... all the way into his heart.

He didn't even notice how he became part of that rhythm. How he let go of control. How his shoulders relaxed and his voice grew softer. In just a couple of days. It was a new feeling, being fully and unconditionally present. Nothing was expected of him. He didn't have to be strong, successful, or ready for anything. He only had to be there. And take it all in... Home. His family. Bread. Snow. The little scarf on the snowman.

Chapter 5

But on the fourth morning, Kenan barged into his room.

“Are you still alive in there?” His brother’s voice was loud as ever. “Come on, Mommy’s boy, get up! Enough lazing around. The barn won’t fall apart without you, but it won’t fix itself either.”

Cross propped himself up on one elbow and frowned.

“I thought you’d let me have at least a week off.”

“I’ll give you a week off! But first, a pitchfork in your ribs.” Kenan was already rummaging around the room. He tossed a warm sweater at him. “It’s below freezing outside. Don’t forget your boots.”

Half an hour later, they were walking over the crisp morning snow. Steam rose from the barn, and the air was thick as broth. The brothers and a couple of helpers cleaned the stalls, carried bales, and checked the feed. They worked in silence, but comfortably. Then Kenan wiped his forehead and chuckled.

“Remember the bull?”

Cross grinned.

“Which one? There are dozens here.”

“That one! With the torn ear. When he charged at me and you threw a sandbag under his feet. You saved me, you know. Though you could have just stood back and watched.”

“I was actually hoping he’d catch you a little,” Cross replied without batting an eye. “Teach you a lesson.”

Kenan snorted, and then they both laughed. It was an easy laugh, warm and familiar. Kenan sat beside him, put an arm around his younger brother’s shoulders, and pulled him close. They were fifteen and thirteen again... Cross smiled broadly and looked at him. Kenan clapped him on the shoulder and nodded, sharing the thought.

When sunlight began streaming through the window, Esma called them in. Breakfast was ready. The smells of freshly cooked eggs, flatbread, and honey filled the house. The children were already at the table, arguing over who would tell Uncle Cross about their dream first. He sat down, and his sister-in-law smiled as she placed a huge mug of milk and some pies before him.

“Eat up, hero. I hear you’ve finally made yourself useful for the first time in three days.”

He grinned, looked at his brother, and gave him a silent nod: *Consider my keep earned.*

After breakfast, they went outside again, and Cross brought the ball along without waiting to be asked. He played with the boys as though he were a kid again himself. Then Selma called him back to the snowman to straighten its scarf “so he won’t get cold.” Cross stood watching her and knew he would never be a stranger here. Never.

The kitchen had emptied out. All that remained on the table were crumbs and a cooled kettle, while the air still held a little warmth from the big dinner. The light had taken on a soft, warm glow. With her sleeves rolled up, Esma washed the dishes to the quiet splash of water. From the next room came the soft breathing of firewood in the stove and the distant voices of children. Someone seemed to be arguing over a book.

Cross stood in the doorway, his shoulder resting against the frame. He didn’t mean to get in the way. He was simply... watching. There was something strangely soothing about standing still in the shadows at the edge of the kitchen light and doing nothing. Esma felt his gaze but didn’t turn at once. She only wiped her hands on her apron and tucked back a loose strand of hair.

“What, hungry again?” she asked with a smile. “Or have you come for a late-night talk?”

“Neither,” he replied. “It just... feels good here.”

She nodded, unsurprised.

“This is our home. It heals. Especially after a long time away.”

He came closer, casually picked up a clean plate, and began drying it with the towel beside the sink.

“You’ve changed,” she said without looking at him. “You’re not just resting. Inside, you seem... quieter. Softer, perhaps... But not weaker, no. More like... you’re no longer being pulled apart.”

Cross gave a brief chuckle.

“Maybe things have just gone quiet for a while.”

“No,” she said slowly, shaking her head. “I don’t mean what’s happening around you. I’ve seen you before. You were all sharp edges, as though you were made of glass. Even your smiles seemed borrowed. But now... there’s warmth in your eyes. Even when you say nothing.”

He said nothing. The plate in his hands was already dry, but he still held it. He didn’t want to let go of the conversation or the moment.

“I’ve just come a little closer to myself,” he finally said with a sigh. “It’s easier here. You... remember who I really am.”

“We never forgot,” she replied calmly. “Even when you were far away. Even when you didn’t call. We still waited for you. Always.”

He nodded and smiled.

“Sometimes I think I lost myself, you know... Over there in New York. Or traded myself for what I can do now.”

“Perhaps,” she said gently. “But you came back. And that always means more than what you lost.”

He looked at her for a long time, thoughtfully. Everything was in that look: gratitude, regret, acceptance.

“Thank you, Esma.”

“For what?”

“For saying things simply. And getting them right.”

She smiled but said nothing. She just put her hands back in the water, and the sound of the faucet grew a little louder. Then she added:

“Go to bed. Your father will drag you off first thing tomorrow,” she said over her shoulder. “He’s been planning a surprise for you all evening.”

Cross laughed.

“Let me guess. The greenhouses?”

“The greenhouses.” She nodded. “But talk to him. He won’t say it, but he’s glad you’re here. Truly glad.”

Cross turned and went to his room. Once again, only the warm lamplight, the sound of dishes, and a woman whose eyes were also full of light and love remained in the kitchen.

As expected, his father looked into Cross’s room the next morning while it was still dark. He knocked once, as always, without ceremony.

“Shall we go?”

“Is it morning already?” Cross asked hoarsely, feeling around for his phone before abandoning the search.

“Life’s already started,” his father said with a grin. “I’m in the truck. There’s water in the thermos. Esma packed sandwiches.”

A few minutes later, Cross had pulled on his jacket and gloves and was sitting beside him in the pickup. It was old, with worn upholstery and a rumbling engine, but it ran reliably. Outside, the sky was gradually lightening. Trees with ice-covered branches slipped past along the roadside, and the road wound through the hills like an old vein.

“The greenhouses have shifted a little,” his father said, keeping his eyes on the road. “The winters have become milder, but more treacherous. Ice one day, rain the next.”

“Global warming,” Cross muttered, stretching.

“Right. Or just these damned times,” his father said curtly.

They drove in silence for a few minutes. Then Cross said:

“You look good, by the way. For an old man.”

“Thank you, son. So do you. For someone I spent half my life thinking of as a problem.”

They both laughed, briefly, in the easy way men do when neither takes offense.

By the time they reached the vineyard, the day was getting underway. The frost-covered fields steamed in the sunlight. The workers, a couple of men from the neighboring village, were already busy with the plastic sheeting, securing the fasteners and checking the tension. His father got straight to work, pointing out a tear, a section of frame that needed replacing, and a leaking joint. Cross went to fetch the tools, took off his gloves, and joined in as though he had never left.

“Remember how you hated these things?” his father asked, fastening a crossbar.

“Yes. Because they never stayed the way they were supposed to. They had a mind of their own. Like you.”

His father grunted, but smiled.

“And now?”

“Now you’ve got worse. More tolerant.”

“You know...” His father straightened and ran a hand over the stubble on his chin. “Three years ago, I thought that was it. Everything was gone. There was hardly any harvest. The winery was losing money. The loans... It was all choking me. Then, just like that, you turned up. Without asking, you paid it all off. You simply did it.”

Cross glanced at him.

“It was my duty as your son. There’s nothing to discuss.”

“I’m not discussing it. I remember. That’s all.”

They fell silent again. For a couple of minutes, Ismail watched his son, his lips pressed together but his eyes full of love. Somewhere, a bird called. The frosty air carried the smell of men at work, but inside, all was peaceful.

“Your grandfather would have been proud of you,” his father added quietly. “And of Kenan. He’s done well too. Keeps everything together. The family and the business.”

“I couldn’t do my work without him,” Cross agreed. “He carries it all himself, without a single word of reproach...”

His father looked at him again and gave the faintest smile. Cross knew how proud he was of his sons. Knowing that was worth every award in the world.

They took a short break. Looking into the distance, Cross spoke almost in a whisper.

“Money will be coming into your accounts in the next few days, Dad. Use it to sort out whatever’s still unresolved. I’m not telling Kenan because he’d never admit things were difficult.” He turned his eyes to his father.

“Son! We’re doing fine.”

Cross shook his head.

“I’m sure if I started looking into things, I’d find plenty that still needed work. But I don’t have time for that.” He looked back at the vineyard. “Though I can see things even from here... And I noticed quite a few things on the farm too, but said nothing.”

His father took a deep breath and shook his head.

“You need money for your business. Don’t, Cross.”

“Dad. I’m not taking money set aside for the business.”

“How much?”

“Five hundred thousand.”

Ismail raised his eyebrows.

“What? That’s half a million! Don’t.”

Cross let out a breath, adjusted his gloves, and walked away toward the workers.

The days passed, and one morning he woke later than usual. Emira had protested loudly, with a mother's authority, refusing to hear any objections.

"Leave my boy alone! He's leaving in two days!"

Neither Ismail nor his son dared defy her. The order came from above their rank. No one disturbed Cross again, and he stayed in bed until lunchtime.

The house was almost empty when he woke. His mother and sister-in-law had gone into town to shop, his father was at a meeting with local winemakers, Kenan was busy somewhere on the farm as usual, and the children were apparently at the neighbors'.

Silence greeted him. Silence could echo, as it did in a hotel, or feel uneasy, as it did in rooms where business was conducted. But here, at home, it felt old and familiar, known since childhood, healing, soothing... Cross walked barefoot across the wooden floor and draped an old, warm cardigan over his shoulders. It had been hanging in the hall on the same hook where his school jacket had once hung. He took a cup of strong tea and went out onto the veranda. The air smelled of wet earth, smoke drifting from chimneys, and, he thought, apples, perhaps left forgotten on a windowsill. The yard stretched before him. The light covering of snow was melting, leaving thin rivulets running over the paving. A sparrow sat on the railing, still and calm, watching him as though they knew each other, as though it remembered Cross too.

He sat down on the steps, slowly and carefully so as not to frighten it away. He felt so good. How good it felt to be home... Here, there was nothing to prove. He didn't have to come first. He didn't have to make decisions, fight, or compete. He could simply breathe deeply and feel protected even by the walls.

Cross closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

He remembered hiding in the vineyard with a book as a child, running to the river with his brother, helping his father repair the old shed. Playing ball with Uncle Ibrahim, just as he now did with his brother's children. Images rose like frames from an old film, slightly faded but alive. Not one of them belonged to his adult life in New York.

He looked out in front of him, picked up his cup, and took a sip of tea, thick steam rising from it. Then he pulled his phone from his pocket to see what had accumulated over the past few days. A few notifications, missed calls, offers of deals, an email from his personal assistant. All business. All familiar. But he simply switched it off, without any strain or regret.

He had no fear that anything would fall apart in his absence. Everything had been built properly.

Cross Begovich was the founder of an investment group and the owner of a large company with an office in New York. His portfolio included exchange-traded instruments, digital assets, venture investments, and commercial real estate. He had started on his own, trading, spending days and nights at his monitors, catching market volatility and turning a profit. But once the business grew to a substantial size, he built a system.

More than five years earlier, he had made a strategic move: he poached one of the leading analysts from Valen & Co. Capital, a private investment firm where employees clung to their jobs with both hands. That was how John Lawrence became his assistant, a solid, reserved, somewhat cold man with a sharp mind and mathematical precision. Then came another trader, Dan Martin.

Cross handed them day-to-day management, entrusting them with everything except the most important decisions. John knew every figure, oversaw the team of risk managers, and monitored the flow of funds: what came in, what was allocated, what was frozen. He stayed out of the public eye but kept his hand on the company's financial pulse. Dan had full responsibility for running and supervising the trading floor.

Cross had accounted for everything: corporate bylaws, notarized restrictions, legal traps. Without his consent, no one could sell an asset, withdraw funds, or change the structure. Yet the business could keep moving in his absence. He had thought through every detail. That was his personal

guarantee: even if he disappeared, everything would remain in place and keep working. And really, true freedom was having a system that could function without you. Just as well as it did with you.

Later, he went down to the basement, a vast space divided into sections. It was old and cold, smelling of wine and oak. Bottles bearing the family label stood on the shelves. Darkened frames holding certificates hung along the walls, beside trophies and old championship belts covered in a fine layer of dust.

In a corner, Cross found boxes of old records and an old suitcase. He sat on a crate beside it and lifted the lid. Inside, black-and-white photographs, newspaper clippings, and worn envelopes lay neatly arranged. One photograph showed his grandfather, Uncle Ibrahim, strong and confident, his father Ismail as a young man, and two boys: Cross and Kenan. Cross ran a finger along the edge of the photograph. For a long moment, he sat still. A faint smile appeared on his face, one with... no weariness, no defenses, and no business plans. He carefully put the photograph back.

Among the newspapers, he noticed a small tin box. He opened it. Inside were a couple of spent cartridge cases and an old rifle scope with chipped paint. Cross picked up the scope and raised it to his eye with a familiar movement from years ago, aiming it for a second through the narrow basement window. A sharp reticle sprang into view, centered on a distant bare tree. Cross exhaled softly and put it back.

Then he walked farther into the basement, into the disused training room. The boxing ring stood dark in a corner, its ropes sagging like tired shoulders. A heavy punching bag hung motionless. He went over to a wooden locker, tugged the door open, and took out his old pair of boxing gloves. The leather had long since cracked and bore the stains of age.

He put them on slowly, tightening the straps with his teeth as he had always done. He approached the bag and paused for a second, his back straight, his breathing calm.

The first punch landed with a dull, powerful thud. Dust swirled up and fell like rain.

The second was harder. Then the third, the fourth... The rhythm quickened, growing harder and more precise. Every movement held a memory. This was where he had once learned to hit, to fall, and to get back up. Uncle Ibrahim's voice sounded in his head: "Strength isn't in throwing a punch. It's in taking one." Cross pushed his muscles to their limit, beating out the doubts lodged somewhere deep inside him.

After a series of sharp, disciplined punches, he delivered one last blow, the hardest of all. The bag swung heavily in the dim light.

Cross stopped. His breathing was steady but deep, and beads of sweat had formed on his forehead. He stood before the swaying bag, watching it without a word in the silence that followed.

"Uncle, I remember..."

Chapter 6

The sun was sinking toward the horizon, turning the streets bronze. The bus rolled slowly toward a small suburb somewhere in western Utah, closer to the mountain ranges. Cross recognized the road. This was the very road he had raced along that ill-fated night when he hit the old man. Yes, it had been somewhere around here... Farther on, closer to the slope, there should be the hotel where he had stayed. For some reason, he had chosen this state again and ended up in the same place. He had wanted to buy a house here. He remembered the forest and the downpour. Cross sighed.

Back then, he had been driving his own car, powerful and expensive, with wide tires and a leather interior. Now he was riding a scheduled bus. Nine hours. Nine fucking hours. His back was stiff, his legs numb. He looked out the window and couldn't believe it. How did people travel like this every day? Or every week? No, he refused to believe it. This was torture.

"Shit..." he whispered. "First things first, a car. Otherwise, I'm sending Lance his million back and getting the hell out of here."

He really was ready to give up on the very first day. He remembered that meeting, all business and cold, without a hint of friendship. Elliot Roseman, Tobias Scott, Daniel Martinelli, and Lance Thorne had sat at the table. All his friends were official participants in the arrangement. Lance was a partner, with an equal stake of one million US dollars. The others were witnesses, serving on a temporary oversight committee with access to key information relating to the agreement.

The partnership agreement signed by Cross Begovich and Lance Thorne set out clearly defined conditions, including Cross's voluntary restriction of access to his existing assets and previous financial channels.

With the consent of all committee members, Lance had the right to initiate an unscheduled review of business activity. An external audit could be conducted and independent experts brought in. If suspicions arose, legal support for managing a potential crisis could also be engaged, even to the point of hiring a private investigator. The agreement also included a clause restricting access to internal information for the entire duration of the experiment, along with a specific provision prohibiting outside interference in Cross's new business ventures. That was a matter of principle, and he had stood firm on it. Anything he created during the agreement would remain entirely independent. Only his previous contacts and sources of funds could be investigated if they gave rise to suspicion.

The wording was clear, with no gray areas. The document had been notarized, and each side's representatives held a copy. It all sounded official, strict, and very real.

The first month was designated an adjustment period. In effect, a head start. The committee undertook not to interfere in his activities, initiate inspections, or request reports. After that, the main oversight arrangements would take effect: observation, financial monitoring, monitoring of digital activity, and, where necessary, requests for documents and explanations.

Cross had signed those conditions himself. He wanted everything on record, with no doubts or disagreements left by the end. He wanted no one to imagine that the game was being played outside the rules.

He remembered the conversation in his office. He had been standing at the window with his hands in his trouser pockets, his gaze thoughtful and his jaw clenched. Daniel had approached from behind and asked quietly:

"Cross, don't you think you've gone too far?"

Cross shook his head without turning.

"If you wanted to give away a million, you could have just handed it over..."

Cross slowly turned and looked at his friend.

"It isn't about the money. Or Lance, Danny."

Daniel sighed.

“I figured that out. Otherwise, you’d have put him to the test too...”

Cross lowered his eyes, a faint smile appearing on his lips.

“Yes. I’m the one who needs the strict limits and everything out in the open.”

He had placed himself within those strict, transparent limits, with no way to back out. It was less about mistrust than about how seriously he took the decision.

The bus stopped.

“Greyfield,” the driver announced, and the doors creaked open.

Cross picked up his backpack, slung it over his shoulder, and stepped outside without hurrying. Cold wind struck his face. He paused, stretched his legs, and looked around.

Quiet. No people, no animals. Only the occasional car crept along the road with a lazy lack of urgency. He adjusted his cap and raised his collar, sheltering his chin from the biting wind, though it wasn’t particularly strong. He should have worn something warmer. Oh well.

He ran his fingers over the bridge of his nose, adjusting his glasses, and briefly squeezed his eyes shut. Then he walked slowly toward the houses. The piercing air reached beneath his jacket and around his lower back, while the slippery asphalt crunched under his heavy boots. One thought kept turning over in his head.

“Grey... field,” he repeated quietly. “Well, then. Here’s to a new life.”

He walked without hurrying, but with a purpose. The long journey had exhausted him to the bone, yet his mind was made up. Tonight, he would sleep either in a car he managed to find or... at some pretty woman’s place.

He grinned to himself.

As he walked, he looked out for garages, repair shops, and yards where cars might be repaired or sold. Whenever he came across a local, he asked casually, without making a nuisance of himself:

“Hey, do you know where I can rent a cheap car around here?”

“There’s a guy,” said a young man in a hoodie, warming his hands around a paper cup. “Garage out on the edge of town, behind the warehouse. Owner’s called Tom Hart. A real tightass, but he rents cars out sometimes. Mostly sells old stuff. If you’re lucky, he’ll let you have one. Give it a try.”

Cross nodded, thanked him, and headed in the direction he had been given.

Just what I need, he thought.

His goal was taking shape. That meant he was getting closer.

Behind the warehouse, just as the young man had said, the road turned toward an unremarkable lot where smooth asphalt gave way to rutted slush and gravel. Cars stood around the edges. Some still looked lively; others were almost corpses, with smashed headlights and torn-off mirrors. A few clearly belonged to another century. Something old, American, and long, with chrome trim and a faded number on its side.

The garage itself stood at the far edge of the lot, a metal building with peeling paint and a sign that had lost a few letters long ago.

HART MOTORS now read HA_T M_T_RS.

Cross approached, adjusted his collar, and bent down to peer through a cloudy window. Beyond the glass were dimness and shadows, as though the garage had long been abandoned. Still, a light glimmered somewhere at the back. He knocked, his knuckles making a dry sound against the metal. Silence. Then he gripped the heavy handle and pulled the door toward him.

It creaked open reluctantly, and Cross stepped inside.

“Anyone alive in here?” he called into the darkness, looking around.

The office looked as though nothing had changed in thirty years. Dusty linoleum, a peeling counter piled with worn folders, a leather chair with a deep hollow in the seat and something propping it up beneath the occupant’s backside. On the wall hung a calendar from 2010, a cracked portrait of some sheriff, and a poster of a girl in a miniskirt, faded with age into a pinkish-beige haze.

A muffled cough came from somewhere at the back.

"I'm fucking coming..." a man's voice muttered.

Hart emerged. He was about fifty, with a round belly, a reddish beard, and a bloated face. He wore oil-stained coveralls and had a cigarette tucked into the corner of his mouth. He looked at Cross like a man who was already sick of everything life had to offer.

It was cool inside. The sharp smell of gasoline and rust had worked its way into the walls. And there was something else... something old and male, the kind of smell that settled on your skin like dust. Hart dropped into the chair behind a heavy wooden desk, opened a bottle of cheap bourbon, and drank straight from it without offering any. Cross stood opposite him, in no hurry to speak, watching him wipe his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Listen, Hart," Cross finally began. "I need a car. Let's make a deal. You give me what I need. I give you what you need."

The man raised an eyebrow skeptically, fiddling with the bottle cap.

"Yeah. Well, go on, pick one. Pay, and we'll draw up a contract. Sign it, then go wherever the hell you like."

Cross pressed his lips together, gave a brief nod, and slowly exhaled.

"Let's see what you've got."

They left the stuffy office and went into the yard. Several old cars stood among scattered tires and fuel cans, their bodies scuffed and scratched, some with no wheels at all. They seemed to have been forgotten while waiting forever for new roads. A van with peeling paint, a sedan with a cracked window, two pickups old enough to remember Christ, and a couple of equally ancient SUVs for the local crowd.

Hart smirked.

"This is all junk. The stuff out here. But if you want something cleaner, follow me."

They went farther into the garage. Inside was a different world altogether. The floodlights came on, their beams cutting through the dimness and reflecting off polished bodies, glass, and clean black tires. A couple of dozen cars stood in close rows, while the corners of the building remained in shadow.

Hart waved a hand as though showing him a shelf of wine.

"There. Take your pick. Just don't touch. Look."

Cross walked along the row, examining the cars. They were in varying condition, but clearly well cared for.

"Dodge Charger, 2015," Hart grunted. "Still got some attitude. Jeep Grand Cherokee, 2013. Drinks gas, but it's king in winter. Toyota Tacoma, 2011. Old pickup, but it'll last forever. Ford Escape, 2014. Economical, but it's got character. Chevy Malibu, 2013. Strictly for cruising down the highway with chicks. And this..." He pointed toward a black SUV. "Nissan Xterra, 2012. A favorite with people who go by instinct. Fully serviced. But it's got a mean face, like my ex."

Cross stopped beside the Xterra, looked over the body, and peered inside.

"An ideal car for winter," he said calmly. "In a town like this, it would be the first to sell."

"Interior's good," Hart added. "Heater, heated seats, winter tires, cargo space the size of a room. You could even sleep in it."

Cross looked around, his eyes moving slowly over the cars. His tone was thoughtful.

"You've got good taste in cars, Tom."

Tom looked at him without speaking.

"Just a bad display out front," Cross continued quietly.

"What?" Hart frowned. "What kind of bullshit are you feeding me? You one of those guys who practices that Latin American 'magical thinking'? Ran out of steam on the way here, so now you're selling miracles?"

Cross grinned and nodded, entirely untroubled by the jabs. Gesturing toward the yard, he added calmly:

“People see that junk first. Then they leave.”

Tom went still, narrowing his eyes slightly. Cross gave a brief sigh and looked at him with a barely perceptible glint of amusement.

“You’re not lazy. You just don’t like people. You sell to whoever comes to you. And I... I can bring in the people who don’t.”

Hart pressed his lips together and said nothing. His gaze sharpened as he took Cross in. Slowly, his eyes traveled upward from the heavy boots to the trousers, the jacket, the confident posture, and finally stopped at his eyes. Cross stood with one hand in his trouser pocket, completely at ease.

“Here’s what I propose.” Cross paused for a second, giving the man time to form the impression he wanted. Then he spoke again, his tone wholly serious. “You let me have the Xterra. No rental fee. No paperwork. I use it, and I bring you buyers. At least two. You get paid. Then we’ll see.”

Tom stared at him in complete bewilderment.

“Give it to you?”

Cross smiled faintly without answering. His eyes remained calm and direct.

“Listen here,” Hart grunted, spitting his gum aside. “I’ll believe you, just for the hell of it. But you’ve got twenty-four hours. Understand? Exactly one day. If at least one customer hasn’t walked through my door by tomorrow evening and said, ‘I want that car,’ you can fuck off back to wherever you came from. Clear?”

Cross held out his hand, a broad smile spreading across his face. He shook Tom Hart’s hand firmly and confidently.

“Deal.”

Hart kept looking at him, still faintly puzzled.

“Now get the fuck out of here and surprise me!”

Cross left the garage with a chuckle, as though he had just finished a business meeting with a rat in a tank top. He adjusted his backpack, glanced at the gray sky, and continued along the slippery road. Hunger made itself felt, dull but persistent, his stomach complaining like an old friend about a miserable life. He looked around. Signs were few and far between, but one caught his eye.

Maggie’s Diner. Peeling letters trying to promise a little comfort.

He pulled the creaking handle and stepped inside. The bells by the door stirred and rang. A woman of about forty-five appeared from behind the counter, wearing a fitted top, her hair straightened to within an inch of its life and styled as though no one would ever forget prom night in 1996. Her makeup said “everything at once,” and her perfume said “no cowboy gets away.” Well groomed, with manicured nails and a plunging neckline, she looked as though she had known a newcomer would walk in that very day.

Without making a production of it, Cross tossed his backpack onto an old sofa in the corner, sagging like the saddle of an old mustang, and approached the counter.

“What’s there to eat?” he asked, looking at her directly but politely.

“We’ve got a Texas-style burger, steak and eggs if you’re not afraid of cholesterol, and the best coffee around,” she said. “I’m Maggie. And you don’t look like you’re from around here.”

“Right on the money, Maggie. I’m just... looking around. Looking for opportunities.”

“Opportunities, you say?” She narrowed her eyes. “Then you’ve certainly come to the right place.”

“You must be psychic.”

“Not psychic. It’s just that every newcomer here is like a comet. Nobody stays very long...”

“I’ll have the steak and eggs. If it’s good.”

“All right, but it’ll take about twenty minutes.”

"I'm in no hurry," Cross said, holding back a grin.

Twenty minutes later, as promised, his order arrived on a plate in front of him.

Maggie moved the bread basket and condiment holder closer, never taking her eyes off him.

Cross ate calmly, then looked up.

"What can you tell me about your town? Anything interesting?"

Maggie coyly traced a finger along the edge of the table.

"It's a terribly uninteresting place. Everybody knows everybody like family, and everybody's sick to death of one another. And you, mister... you're a breath of fresh air."

Cross almost choked and wiped his lips with a napkin.

"Is that so..."

"Are you staying long?"

"Depends on how interesting I find it," Cross replied.

Maggie lightly bit her lip. Cross smiled with his eyes alone, then lowered them. After a pause, he asked:

"By the way... Who runs things around here?"

She gave him a sly smile, her gaze still fixed intently on the newcomer.

"Want to know our secrets, Mr. Back?"

Cross nodded with a smile and put another piece of steak into his mouth.

"Well... if you're willing to share... I'll be a regular customer, Mrs. Maggie."

Maggie perched on the edge of the chair beside him and adjusted her hair. Cross gave her a quick glance.

"We don't have many influential people," she drawled. "Everyone's quiet, peaceful, and... boring."

"But still?" Cross grinned and washed down the meat with tea.

She looked up thoughtfully.

"I can tell you who I respect. Roy Mazur. A good guy. About as down-to-earth as they come. There are a couple of others, but he's the nicest. Only... I feel sorry for him sometimes."

Cross paused with his fork in his hand and looked up.

"Why?"

"His father, Kacper Mazur, is a big shot at the bank," Maggie sighed. "He expected his son to follow in his footsteps, wear suits. But Roy... he's happy up to his elbows in grease."

Cross raised his eyebrows slightly.

"Where does he work?"

"A garage on the edge of town. An old hangar. He's there from morning till night."

Cross nodded, slowly finishing the piece of meat.

"Interesting..."

"Who else would you like to hear about?"

Cross gave a quick smile.

"Who else do you respect, Mrs. Maggie? And who don't you respect?"

After lunch, Cross went to see Roy.

"Hi. I'm Chris."

"Roy," the man said, taking off a glove. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm looking around. People say you know what you're doing. I'd like to settle here."

"What can you do?"

"Sell. I've already made a couple of moves."

"Interesting. Come on in."

Cross stepped into the workshop. His eye caught the rusty parts, wheel rims, and cans hanging on the walls. An old leather sofa stood in the corner with its legs splayed out. Farther in were a table and a stove. Roy offered him a chance to warm up, but Cross declined.

“I still need to find somewhere to live.”

“I understand. So?”

“I’m from New York.”

“What brought you here?”

“Things worked out that way. But I’ve already met Hart.”

“Seriously?”

“I can sell his cars for him. And you can tell me who needs them.”

Roy took a drag on his cigarette and looked into the distance.

“Is that how you’re planning to make money?”

“No. I need a car.”

“You think he’ll give you a car for bringing him a customer?” Roy grinned.

“To use for a while,” Cross clarified.

“Right. Well, in that case... We could work something out. If you really know how to sell, we can work together.”

“Then we’ll work out a deal of our own. What do you say?”

Roy looked him over, weighing him up. Cross had expected that look and met it without flinching, as he did with everyone he encountered. Always. He was used to it by now. Used to winning.

In preparation for his new mission, he had bought clothes suited to his current position. Simpler than what his body was accustomed to, but still well made and chosen with taste. New clothes, a new name, a new life. But the same old habits and manners, impossible to conceal beneath an ordinary exterior. He could neither hide them nor get rid of them. Everything about him spoke of reliability and confidence. It was impossible not to sense it, even when he said nothing.

For a while, the men looked at each other without speaking. Roy weighed his suspicions. Cross brought his charisma to bear.

In the end, the mechanic agreed to work with him.

After Cross left, Roy sat thinking for a while longer. What did he stand to lose, anyway? Nothing. And the possibilities were real enough. There was something about this guy... something strange. He wasn’t ordinary, wasn’t like everyone else. As though he came from another world. And he clearly hadn’t come to their godforsaken little town looking for work or simply to settle down... There was something else behind it, Roy thought. And that intrigued him.

Chapter 7

First on the list the mechanic had given him was a farmer named Bob Colton. Cross immediately felt he should start with him. In places like this, a head-on approach wasn't the way to go. First, you had to come around from the side and get a sense of the person.

It was a little after eleven. The sun hung low, and the damp winter air surrounded him on all sides. The ground smelled of moisture and last year's leaves. Cross turned toward the house at the address he had been given, where a half-rotten fence and barking greeted him. To one side stood a shelter with hay bales neatly stacked beneath it. The barn seemed closed, but someone was at a window in the house. A curtain shifted slightly.

A dirty-white dog with a wet nose was the first to come running out, barking as it headed toward Cross.

"Hey... Easy..." Cross raised a hand without stepping back. "I'm not here for you, buddy."

A man appeared in the doorway. Tall and powerfully built, his jacket open, his expression as gloomy as the sky above him.

"What do you want?" he asked, not loudly, but firmly.

"My name's Chris. I'm here on business. Thought we could talk, if you're not busy."

The man glanced at the dog and gave a short whistle. Whimpering, it retreated to the porch. Then he approached without hurrying. His broad hand felt rough in their firm handshake. Cross noticed the attentive way he was looking at him.

"Bob. I'm listening."

"I'm new in town. Just arrived, and I'd like to stay. I was told you're reliable and well respected around here. I wanted to meet you."

Bob's eyebrows rose slightly, and he gave a small smile. He hadn't expected that.

"Well... thank you. Come in."

A pickup stood in the yard, a blue Chevy with peeling paint, a cracked window, and rust eating into the side of its bed. Cross glanced over the body.

"Yours?"

"Whose else would it be?" Bob grunted.

They went inside. Warm air met them immediately, along with the appetizing smells of fried onions and chicken, mingled with the scent of ashes from the fireplace. The living room was simple, with a rug on the wooden floor and worn furniture around it. But it was clean and comfortable in its own way.

Colton took off his jacket and pointed to a chair.

"Go on, then. Tell me. Just don't say you're looking for somewhere to hang out. You don't look much like a farmer." He grinned and examined Cross's hands. "Too well groomed."

Cross sat down and leaned back.

"I'm a salesman. I can sell anything. My brother runs a farm too... Raises bulls for meat. I make connections."

Bob looked interested.

"Oh, meat? How's business?"

"Steady. He's got his sales channels established."

"I see." Colton nodded. "I've got bulls too. Thirty head. Kept twenty-six for the winter. Already sold a couple."

Cross leaned forward a little, looking at him seriously.

"Who do you sell to?"

"Places around here. Whoever wants something, I supply it. If I can sell it, I sell it. If not, I freeze it. Handle it all myself. Where are you from?"

“A long way away. My family’s in the Balkans. I’ve come out here for now...” Cross let the words trail off as he looked around the room.

“To America, you mean?”

There was a pause. Bob went to the sideboard and took out a bottle and two glasses. Without asking, he poured, studying his guest as he did.

“I’ve been here a long time, but I only arrived in your town today. I don’t want big cities. I like the quiet. Thought I’d give it a try.”

Once again, as usual, Cross found himself being weighed up on someone’s private scales. He leaned back in his chair and let his host take all the time he wanted.

The farmer cleared his throat and sat opposite him at the table. He asked what Chris could offer him and what his plans were.

“I’ll help you reach more buyers. New stores, cafés, private customers. For a percentage,” Cross replied. He took out a pack of cigarettes and silently asked whether he could smoke. Given permission, he flicked his lighter and took a drag. Bob slid his drink toward him.

“If it works out, you’ll get your share. But watch what you promise, son. This isn’t New York.”

Cross picked up the glass. A sharp but warm smell rose to his nose. He took a sip and was quiet for a moment.

“No, it isn’t New York. Thank God.”

They laughed almost at the same time. Bob relaxed, then looked at him again.

“So how are you planning to get into business when you’ve only just arrived?”

“Well, I’m sitting in your living room right now... That’s a start too.”

The farmer watched him without speaking for a minute, then grinned.

“Keeping it simple, then? Just showing up for a conversation?”

“That’s how any business starts,” Cross said, taking a sip without looking away from Bob.

“Agreed. Tell me where you start. With your brother’s business, for example?” the farmer asked, narrowing his eyes a little.

Cross set his glass on the table, cleared his throat, and gathered his thoughts. It was perfectly fair to test whether he knew what he was doing.

“First, let me ask: is all your paperwork in order? Nothing in a gray area?”

The farmer smiled and nodded.

“How you slaughter the cattle, whether the meat meets the standards... If everything’s in order, I’ll collect copies of the documents and put together a price list. We’ll agree on my percentage and the other details, and I’ll start looking.” He lifted his chin slightly. “And I’ll find buyers. Believe me.”

The farmer regarded his guest with a pleased expression, his face serious but his eyes smiling. Like the others, he felt there was something about this stranger that he could understand, something appealing that inspired trust. But feelings were feelings, and there was still reason to be cautious.

“No problem. I’ll give you the documents, and we’ll see what you can do, my friend. See how we work together.”

“Let’s give it a try.”

“Found somewhere to live?”

“Not yet.”

“Well, we’ll find something if you need it. Greyfield doesn’t bite.”

They talked a little longer, then got up and headed for the door. Bob paused there and suddenly asked:

“Listen... Have you been to Hart’s?”

Cross stopped as though he had been waiting for the question.

“I have. This morning. Saw a few things I liked. Speaking of your car, he’s got a 2014 Ford, a Dodge... Miles better than yours. And not expensive.”

Colton shrugged.

“His prices are steep. I stay away.”

“What if I work something out? A discount, installments. Say, you give me a chance with your sales, and I help you get a car?”

Bob narrowed his eyes, grinned, and pointed at him.

“You little devil... You’ve already worked something out, haven’t you?”

“Well... I know how to talk to people.”

“And I like that,” Colton grunted. “When you come back, we’ll drop by Hart’s. See what I’ll be driving by spring.”

“Deal.”

Cross nodded and went through the gate, casting a farewell glance at the dog, now silent, as though it too was wondering whether it had just met a salesman.

He left the farmer’s house, fastening his jacket as he walked, and headed back along the same street. A faint smile lingered on his face, but faded after a few steps as the town reminded him of its familiar silence. It was as though someone had taken away all sound, leaving only the occasional gust striking the sagging wires. Dogs barked behind fences, and gates creaked on their hinges with each gust. Deep in the yards, sparrows tapped their beaks against a tin trough, while an old chain on a gate thrashed in the air as though vainly trying to tear loose and escape.

Winter on the outskirts was never clean. The snow lay not as a white carpet, but mixed with grime from the highway and everyday dust. Trees along the edges stretched upward, weary of holding up their bare skeletons. It was past noon, yet the sun still hadn’t ventured out from behind the opaque, milky sky, which resembled frozen glass. The wind was growing stronger, lashing out in sharp gusts as though determined to wipe the smile from his face altogether.

Cross walked without hurrying, having decided to take a proper look around. Passing wooden houses blackened by damp, along a sidewalk where snow had long since mixed with earth to become a heavy brownish-gray slush, he kept noticing details. Even in these circumstances, the businessman in him was still alive. He thought about what he might open here once all this was over, once the bet paid off, once Lance’s million stopped weighing on him.

He smiled at his own thoughts and stopped. A dog barked in the backyard of the neighboring house, and another flashed past behind it, white, with a broken leash. Farther ahead, two elderly women in headscarves walked arm in arm, talking quietly. As he drew level with them, they looked at him with interest.

“Good afternoon,” he said, nodding.

“And to you, young man,” one replied with a broad, kind smile.

He walked on.

At the corner, beside a shabby newsstand, he stopped, took out a couple of dollars, and approached. A boy of about sixteen sat inside in a puffer jacket, his fluffy chestnut fringe falling over his forehead, his hands tucked into mittens.

“Hi. Got the latest issue?”

“Sure do. Still smells of the printing press.”

Cross smiled, took a newspaper, and handed him the money.

“What’s your name?”

“Sam. I sort of work here. Who are you?”

“A visitor,” he replied, stepping away. He unfolded the paper, automatically scanned the financial column, read a couple of paragraphs, and continued on his way.

“Next on the list...” he murmured. “The couple from Houston. Number thirty-six. Right, should be somewhere across the street.”

He crossed the road and nearly slipped halfway over, his sole sliding across a thin layer of ice. Instinctively, he stepped aside and raised a hand. At that same moment, a dark sedan braked beside him.

The young woman at the wheel looked him over instantly, like a scanner. There was no alarm on her face, only a quick assessment: had he hurt himself, should she get out, did she need to stop? He dipped his head in apology. She nodded and seemed about to smile, then changed her mind. Their eyes met for a fraction of a second. Then she slowly drove on.

He turned away and looked up at the four-story building before him. There were three such buildings here, plain and old, with peeling mailboxes. The other homes in the neighborhood were detached houses. He walked around, looking over the parked cars. They all seemed cut from the same cloth: worn out, lopsided, and hopeless. They belonged in a junkyard, though their owners would hardly agree, he thought, stepping into a little shop tucked into the building's shadow.

The sign read: "Two croissants and a free coffee."

He said hello and placed a couple of dollars on the counter.

"I'll have a coffee, then."

"Hello, sir. Coming right up," replied the shopkeeper, a friendly man of about sixty whose eyes held more energy than those of half the young people around here.

He placed two croissants before Cross, neatly wrapped in crisp paper. Cross partly unwrapped one, raised an eyebrow, and couldn't help grinning. He tucked one into his backpack, almost laughing at himself. This was what hunger did to a man.

A couple of minutes later, he was sitting at a small table by the window, sipping coffee and lazily turning the newspaper pages as though he had an entire Sunday ahead of him.

But ahead of him were Roy and the next step.

Just as Cross, warmed by the coffee and sustained by the croissant, was getting ready to leave, a young woman with disheveled hair rushed into the shop and began shouting from the doorway.

"Damn it, you poisoned my boyfriend! I'll sue you and get your fucking shop shut down!"

"What the hell are you talking about?" demanded the owner, the same man who had so warmly made coffee for the newcomer a short while earlier.

She flung an empty milk carton onto the counter and shouted:

"Look at the expiration date!"

The man glanced at the cut-open carton, its edges crusted with dried milk.

"Why don't you dig through the trash and bring me last year's bottles while you're at it? Have you lost your mind? Call the inspectors if you want. There's nothing expired on my shelves!" He glanced at Cross and raised his chin slightly.

"What? I'll smash this whole place up!" she threatened, striding toward the refrigerated dairy display.

Cross stood rooted to the spot, his mouth slightly open, watching the scene unfold.

The shopkeeper darted around the counter and after her, reaching the display in time to stand with his back against the glass. Behind it were bottles of milk, pieces of cheese, cream, and other products.

"Get out before I call the police!"

"Do you know who you're threatening? If I call them now, you'll really be in trouble!"

"Call them!"

"Oh, is that how it is?"

"I'd rather pay a fine than fall for your tricks!"

The young woman laughed triumphantly, then turned to the only witness.

"Did you hear that?"

"Me?" Cross snapped out of it. "I was actually about to leave. Don't drag me into your argument."

With that, he headed for the exit.

But in the doorway, he walked straight into the local sheriff's chest. The man came in so abruptly that he almost pushed Cross back inside, then closed the door behind him.

“What’s going on here?” he asked in the tone of a man to whom everyone here was answerable.

“Sir, this shopkeeper poisoned my boyfriend, and he nearly died! The carton’s right there! And he attacked me when I complained!”

Cross closed his eyes. *Oh, fuck. Not this...*

“Who attacked you? I attacked you?” the shopkeeper shouted, turning to Cross. “Sir, tell him I’m right and this woman is lying!”

“He saw you run at me! You saw everything, didn’t you?”

The sheriff turned his gaze on Cross.

“Sir, can you confirm either account?”

Cross paused before finally speaking.

“The thing is, they’re both right. And they’re both wrong.”

Silence followed. The sheriff slowly removed his glasses, keeping his expression in check.

“Explain.”

“I... um... can only offer an opinion.”

“Just tell me what happened between these two people.”

At that moment, two more customers entered the shop. The sheriff apologized and asked them to wait outside. They nodded and left. Then he turned back to Cross.

“The woman came in with a complaint. She probably had grounds for it. She put down an empty carton from a product she’d used. The shopkeeper disputed that it had been expired. An argument broke out. In the heat of the moment, she threatened to go after the other products and headed for the refrigerator. He stood in her way. I saw no blow or physical contact. Then you arrived.”

“I was protecting my stock! All I did was stop her from ruining it! I never touched her!” the shopkeeper added.

The sheriff turned to the young woman, who gestured with her index finger.

“I’d like to see how you’d react if someone close to you nearly died because of somebody else! I came here with a complaint, not to ask a favor!”

“I completely agree,” Cross said, nodding.

Why did I even come in here? he wondered. All he had wanted was a croissant and coffee.

“So you threatened to destroy Mr. Jobson’s stock, and he was protecting his property?” the sheriff asked.

“Exactly!” Jobson confirmed, giving Cross a grateful look.

“You’re all in on this together!” the young woman snapped. “I brought evidence, you know!”

“Do you have proof that the product was bought here, and that it had already expired when you bought it?” the sheriff asked.

“It was yesterday. Look at the date. It expired three days ago!” She moved toward the counter.

“Don’t touch it.” The sheriff stopped her. “A forensic examiner will examine the carton if a case is opened.”

“It will be. I intend to pursue a case,” she said confidently, turning to the shopkeeper. He went pale.

“Bear in mind that if you can’t prove you bought the product here after it had expired, you could be fined for making a false accusation.”

“Of course she can’t!” Jobson exclaimed.

“That’s what an investigation is for. Let them check everything on your shelves!” the young woman insisted.

“That isn’t directly related to this incident. Miss...?”

“Bellington. Sarah Bellington. Why isn’t it related?”

“Only indirectly. Do you have a receipt? If you’re willing, we can go to the station and fill out the paperwork.”

Then he turned to Cross.

"I'm sorry, sir. You'll need to sign a witness statement too."

"I've already told you everything. If possible, I'd like to sign it here. I need to go. Sorry."

"I didn't bring the receipt... But I bought it here. I know I did," the young woman said more quietly, lowering her eyes. The shopkeeper smirked and shook his head.

Cross had already turned toward the exit, but he stopped and suddenly turned back to them.

"Sorry to interfere... May I suggest an alternative? Explain how I see the situation?"

"Please do, Mr....?" the sheriff asked.

"Back. Chris Back."

"Sheriff Chain Hamilton. We're listening."

Cross glanced at the shopkeeper and the young woman.

"You'll both lose. Miss Bellington, you're unlikely to prove the milk had already expired when you bought it. You have no receipt, and as far as I can see, there are no security cameras. Just one at the entrance." He briefly looked around the shop, glancing at its owner, then addressed the young woman again. "You'd need a witness like me. But I haven't seen many customers coming through, and most likely you won't find anyone."

He turned to the shopkeeper.

"And you, Mr. Jobson, will lose if an inspection finds even one expired product. Even something minor could cause trouble for you. You're both taking a risk. Neither of you will come out a winner."

The sheriff stepped back and slowly looked over the display. The room went still again.

"I suggest you come to an agreement. Here and now," Cross added calmly.

"I'm willing... Why do we need all this trouble, Miss Bellington?" Jobson immediately replied, his voice gentle.

She bit her lip, looked around, and spoke more quietly.

"I really did buy it here... But perhaps it wasn't yesterday."

"And you forgot to put the milk in the refrigerator?" Cross suggested gently, a slight smile on his lips.

The sheriff studied her, then turned the same searching look on Cross.

Meanwhile, the shopkeeper continued:

"Let me offer you two cartons of fresh milk and three hundred grams of cheese. It's excellent, a new Dutch cheese. Just arrived. Nobody's tried it yet. Would you like some?"

"Is this a bribe?" she asked, narrowing her eyes.

"It's a treat," the man replied calmly. His voice had taken on a pleasant, soothing quality, as though he were speaking to a child. "And you gentlemen should try it too. Tell me what you think."

The sheriff smiled.

"Thank you, Mr. Back." He held out his hand to Cross.

"You're welcome." Cross shook it. "May I go?"

"Yes, of course. We'll find you if we need you."

"I'm not hard to find," Cross said, giving the others a brief nod before heading for the door.

"Would you like a ride?" the sheriff called after him.

"I think I'll walk, sir. Thank you."

Cross stepped outside.

The cold air felt gentle and welcome. He walked on, but about twenty meters later, the sheriff's pickup caught up with him.

"Sir? Mr. Back, won't you let me give you a ride after all? It would give us a chance to get better acquainted. I can see you're not from around here. You've made me curious."

He drove slowly, leaning toward the open window and speaking persuasively, his voice slightly raised.

Cross stopped, looked at the sheriff, and gave an almost imperceptible nod. Then he walked around the truck, opened the door, and sat beside him.

"I'm not heading anywhere in particular. Just looking around, Chief," Cross said, glancing at the officer. "So you choose where we go."

"Where are you from, sir?"

Cross scratched his eyebrow. *A cop is a cop, not a farmer or a mechanic. Better not take chances with him.*

"Ever heard of Cross Begovich?"

The sheriff thought for a moment, then gave him a quick look.

"I've heard something, but I can't quite remember where..."

"Well, that's me. But I don't want to draw attention to myself around here by using my name. Can I count on you?" Cross held his gaze, watching him closely.

"No problem. Unless it becomes absolutely necessary, you can count on my support."

"Thank you. I'll tell you why right away, so there won't be any questions."

"I'd appreciate that."

They drove slowly along the town street.

"Let's put it this way... I'm looking around incognito, seeing what I could set up here, while also working on my survival skills." Cross leaned back in his seat and sighed.

"Is that so? And what are your first impressions?"

"Hard to say yet. I only arrived this morning."

"Where are you staying, sir?"

"Nowhere yet."

"May I offer you a room at my house?" The sheriff still hadn't quite figured out who this Cross Begovich was, but his instincts told him he wasn't an ordinary passerby. With that manner, he could be either a born adventurer or a man from much higher social circles than Greyfield was used to seeing.

Cross looked at him, a faint smile touching his face.

"Thank you, but the whole point is that I don't want to make use of my name. I told you the truth because you represent the law, and I wanted to avoid any misunderstandings later. But..." Cross leaned toward him slightly. "I'm counting on strict confidentiality."

"Sir, you have my word as a man."

Cross held out his hand, and they sealed the understanding with a handshake. Their third in the past half hour.

"Well then, Mr. Back, how about I help you find your way around?" the sheriff suggested, changing his tone, a broad smile on his face.

Cross chuckled too.

"Now you're talking!"

Driving slowly through the streets, Sheriff Chain Hamilton told him the town's history, recalling incidents and even a couple of murders he had either solved himself or helped investigate.

"Not long ago, someone was hit by a car, but the case was handed over to the district attorney's office. They wouldn't even let us near it. Some important man was involved..."

Cross smoked a cigarette and listened, occasionally murmuring agreement, though he was sure most of the stories were invented or, at the very least, embellished. Now and then, he asked a leading question, forming his own picture of the local community.

"And this banker... what sort of man is he?" Cross asked.

"Mr. Kacper Mazur?"

"Unusual name. Is he Polish?"

"Yes, I believe so. Immigrated to the States back in the nineties and came straight here. He has a son, Roy Mazur."

"The one who runs the repair shop?" Cross asked, glancing at the sheriff.

“That’s him. Have you met already?”

“Yes. I liked the guy...”

“I agree. Roy’s a good man. His father’s quiet too, perfectly harmless. Runs our local bank branch.”

“Strange that his son didn’t follow in his footsteps...”

“There was something between them... I don’t know exactly, but Roy tends to keep to himself. Still, he gets along with his father. I’ve never heard of any trouble.”

Cross nodded.

Greyfield’s representative of the law went on to tell him a little about all the town’s leading residents, and even some less important but active figures.

“For the most part, nothing much happens here. Sleepy town. Everybody goes about their own life. Nothing to put us on the map,” Chain Hamilton added with a rueful smile.

“That’s the impression I got. Perhaps it’s for the best,” Cross replied.

“I think about that too.”

After driving around the outskirts for a while longer, the men said goodbye and exchanged phone numbers. Cross took out his new phone, checked his number, and read it aloud.

“You don’t remember your own number?” the officer asked with a smile.

“I haven’t had time to learn it yet. It’s new.” Cross nodded toward the screen and added, “I told you about my secret mission, sir. No names, no connections.”

“You’re sure you’re not in any trouble, sir?” the sheriff asked, a little suspiciously.

“Absolutely.” After a pause, Cross added, “If you decide to look into who I am, I ask that you keep it strictly confidential. Otherwise, my plan will fall apart, and I’ll leave.”

“I gave you my word.”

“Then we have an understanding, sir!”

Cross raised a hand in farewell, adjusted the backpack on his shoulder, and walked away.

The police vehicle remained behind him for a while. Cross had doubts about whether the sheriff would keep quiet, but he set them aside, deciding not to dwell on them and instead think through his next steps on the way to Roy’s repair shop.

“Hey, man, want to grab something to eat?” Cross called as he approached Roy, glancing at his inexpensive wristwatch. Roy was sitting beside a car, repairing a fender.

“What time is it?” he asked without looking away from his work.

“Past two.”

Cross came closer and stopped, examining what appeared to be a wrecked car.

“Yeah, sure. Let me finish this.”

“Whose clunker is this, bro?”

“A local... aristocrat from the slums,” Roy replied. He exchanged a look with Cross, and they laughed.

“Interesting...” Cross chuckled too.

“For thirty-odd years, he’s fancied himself a blue-blooded heir, but in reality...” Roy got up and began wiping his hands on a rag.

“Empty pockets?”

“I wouldn’t say that. He likes expensive things, accessories and all that. But his house doesn’t exactly match his appearance, let’s put it that way. Neither does his car.”

“Maybe he’s saving up?”

Roy shrugged.

“What does he do, and what’s his name?”

“Enzo. Enzo Vitale. Italian. But he’s lived here as long as I can remember.”

“How old is he? What’s he in?”

“About fifty... Trades in something.” Roy looked at Cross. “Maybe you two should meet?”

“Maybe... Does he have a shop or something?”

“Some kind of business, I think, but not here. He mostly comes back on weekends. Has a company or something like that in Salt Lake City.”

Cross raised his eyebrows, clapped Roy on the shoulder, and headed for the door.

Fifteen minutes later, they were sitting at a table at Maggie's.

“What will you boys have?” Maggie asked as they settled at the table, never taking her eyes off Cross. She had clearly touched up her makeup and changed her clothes. Cross gave her a quick glance, then looked at his companion, who couldn't stop staring at her.

“Maggie, why are you all dressed up today?”

Cross smiled. But she wasn't caught off guard. Winking at Roy, she replied:

“Well, I don't always have to welcome nothing but lifeless customers like you.”

Roy put on an astonished expression, which finally made Cross laugh. He leaned back in his chair and chuckled.

“So this is all for him?” Roy looked at his friend. “Well, brother, looks like lunch is on the house today!”

“You can tell this gentleman is a real man who isn't used to living off women!”

Her words amused Cross even more, but he nodded and gestured with his hand.

“Yes, of course. Don't worry. Two steaks for us, Mrs. Maggie.”

She wrote in her order pad, giving him a charming smile, then turned and walked gracefully back behind the counter. Roy called after her:

“And two Cokes, Mrs. Maggie! Please!”

“Yes, I heard you.”

The men joked a little, then began discussing business while their food was being prepared.

“What's new?” Roy asked.

“Quite a lot in the past two hours.”

“Really? You're a quick mover!”

“I didn't expect it myself, to be honest. I've managed to make connections with Bob the farmer and Sheriff Chain Hamilton, and get involved in a dispute between Mr. Jobson and his customer Sarah... um... I've forgotten her last name...” Cross recounted, watching Roy's eyes grow wider with every word.

“And all that by two in the afternoon...”

“Yes.”

Cross sat at ease. He glanced toward the owner of the diner, who was busy at the stove behind the counter, and immediately caught her long, meaningful look.

“And I've also made friends with you and the lovely Mrs. Maggie.”

Roy held out his hand, and Cross shook it automatically.

“Respect, my friend.”

“Thank you.”

“You really know how to do this.”

“Yes.”

By the time they had finished lunch and left the diner, Roy was joining in with Cross's plan, fully convinced and eager to help.

“Here's what I'm thinking...”

“About what?”

They were heading back to the repair shop.

“About Hart.” Roy was serious.

“What do you think?”

“I think it's worth a try. If we bring him a few customers, we could negotiate a good discount and get you a rental car.”

“Yes, that would be great. I really need one.”

“But there’s another option.”

Roy looked at Cross.

“What?”

“I could let you have my car.”

Cross stopped, and so did Roy.

“But...”

“I’m always busy working. I hardly go anywhere, and it just sits there. I think you need it more. And our house isn’t big, but we can find a room for you.”

“Roy, I...”

Cross didn’t know what to say.

“You inspire trust. I can’t explain why, but I want to trust you. And even if I’m wrong, which I doubt, offering a traveler a place to sleep is a good thing to do.”

Cross smiled faintly. He said nothing for a moment as Roy clapped him on the shoulder and added:

“But we’ll still give it a try with Hart.”

Chapter 8

Over the next two days, Cross settled into the home of Mr. Kacper Mazur and his son Roy, who had become a close friend. He drove the Ford F-150 they had kindly lent him and got down to business. He knew people in Salt Lake City, enough people to make it easy to get things going here. But Cross kept his word, and the only thing he feared was running into any of them.

By the evening of the day after they met, Colton the farmer had decided to visit Hart after all. So had Roy's father. At their very first dinner together, Cross offered him a deal he couldn't refuse, once again surprising his friend.

They had already met by the time they sat down to dinner, and Mr. Mazur's hospitality had made a pleasant impression.

"I'm very glad my son finally has a friend," he said, shaking Cross's hand firmly.

"Thank you. I'm very grateful for your kindness."

"No need to thank me, young man. You're the one doing us an honor, really. I can see you're a responsible man."

"Really? Is that the impression I give?" Cross replied with a smile. He was struck by the way complete strangers responded to him.

"Yes... There's something about you..." Mr. Mazur said thoughtfully, then stepped away and suggested they have a glass of cognac.

Cross took a sip, settling into an armchair opposite his host, who seemed ready for a long conversation.

"Yes, I have a feel for people, if you can call it that. I can always recognize their worth."

"And what do you think mine is?" Cross watched him attentively. He was genuinely curious whether the man could work out who he really was beneath the identity he was concealing.

"You, young man... either have enormous potential that you haven't managed to realize before, or..."

"Or...?"

"Or you're a very mysterious man."

A smile spread across Cross's face.

"Thank you. You're very perceptive."

"I seem to have hit the bull's-eye again."

They laughed a little and continued their easy conversation. Cross skillfully steered the subject away from himself and toward Kacper Mazur's work and interests.

"I used to be very keen on fishing..." the older man said nostalgically. "When I was young, back in Poland... That's where I'm from," he added.

"I thought so."

"Yes. Well, our house stood beside a large river, and my father and I often went fishing. Later, I went traveling and met Roy's mother..."

Cross looked at his glass, slowly turning it between his fingers. He understood that some subjects were very painful for Mr. Mazur, and he also understood that the man wanted to talk.

"Yes..." His host broke off.

"How long have you been widowed?" Cross asked gently.

"Fifteen years now. Did Roy tell you?"

"No. I worked it out myself."

Kacper looked at him for a long moment, a bitter smile touching his lips.

"You're certainly no ordinary man... No ordinary man..."

A housekeeper came in to look after their small two-story house and also did the cooking. Before long, the men were seated at a table laid with a hot, delicious dinner.

“Dad, Cross and I are planning to start something of our own. Maybe expand my repair shop,” Roy said.

“Excellent idea, son,” Mr. Mazur replied. Then he turned to their guest. “I would have loved Roy to follow in my footsteps, but he’s been independent since he was little and refuses any help from me. At first, I tried to persuade him, but then I realized it was pointless. So I stopped fighting it.”

He sighed heavily and set down his fork.

“Dad, I don’t think Cross is interested in our affairs.”

“On the contrary, I’m interested in everything. But I won’t press you,” Cross replied. He felt hungry, whether from the awareness of his bleak financial situation or from the cold and exhaustion.

“There’s nothing interesting about it.”

Roy glanced at him and smiled.

“Let’s think about where we can find customers for Hart instead.”

“Yes, speaking of that, maybe your father would like a newer car?”

Roy chuckled.

“Not likely. He’ll never part with his old girl. I’ve tried plenty of times.”

Cross looked at Mr. Mazur, who shook his head.

“I wouldn’t buy so much as a screw from that miser, even if I were planning to change cars.”

“What if I could arrange a discount and offer you a business opportunity of your own?”

Roy leaned back in his chair and looked at Cross.

“Man, you can’t handle that many startups!”

“I can. Believe me,” Cross replied confidently, turning back to Roy’s father with an expectant look.

“I’m listening, young man.”

“Tell me, how are things going at your bank?”

“Slowly. Nothing special. Do you know anything about banking?” Mr. Mazur asked doubtfully.

Roy grinned.

“Why not finance a retail outlet, say, in Salt Lake City, or even a chain of stores selling meat and seafood?” Cross suggested, taking a sip of water. “In return for an agreed percentage of the profits. Try financing that kind of business?”

“I’ve thought about it,” Mr. Mazur said, leaning back in his chair too. “But the bank isn’t mine. To put a business proposal to the people at the top, I need a reliable plan I can be confident in. That’s the hardest part.”

“What if your own son were running the business?” Cross turned to Roy and continued. “A good profit would help you expand your repair business too. Eventually, you could open a chain of repair shops in Salt Lake City alongside the food stores and oversee the businesses instead of lying under cars.”

“Are you serious?”

Cross paused. Kacper Mazur watched them from beneath his brows without saying a word.

“Why not? And I’ll be with you.”

Roy slowly drew a breath, straightened his shoulders, and fell silent.

“If you boys get this started, I’m in.”

After his father’s answer, Cross kept his eyes on Roy. Roy thought in silence, then smiled and gave an almost imperceptible nod.

“I definitely like the way your mind works.”

Cross smiled too. Having received the answer he wanted, he turned to their host.

“Shall we go and look at a new car?”

Roy laughed and held out his hand, which Cross slapped with his own.

After dinner, the men discussed their plans late into the night. Mr. Mazur was taken aback by Cross's knowledge and business acumen. He couldn't understand what had brought such a man to their town, much less why this recent stranger was broke and apparently in serious trouble.

Before bed, he asked Cross to stay a moment and took him into his study. He closed the door and asked him directly:

"I'd like to know the truth, son."

Mr. Mazur poured more whiskey into two glasses and handed one to Cross.

Of course, Cross had expected questions and mistrust. For all his talent and skill, any sensible person would have suspicions and draw their own conclusions, which could become obstacles on his way to his goal.

"Let's put it this way... I had experience in business, and quite a good record, but personal circumstances led me to leave everything behind and start from scratch in a new place, among new people," Cross replied, watching the light reflected in the amber liquid in his glass.

"The thing is, I need details. If this venture goes ahead, I need to be sure of my future partner. I like your ideas and your reasoning. The way you see things and weigh the risks and advantages speaks of experience. Besides, Roy won't manage on his own. He needs a partner who knows the business. And I need someone who can help my son get ahead. That's why I agreed. And that's why we're here talking."

Cross looked at him.

"I understand. That's very fair, and wise."

Kacper Mazur took a sip of whiskey, nodded, and looked at Cross expectantly, waiting for his account.

"For many years in New York, I had the opportunity to be a partner in several companies and take part in running them."

"Which ones?"

"Harrington & Co., an investment fund. East River Realty Group, real estate. Blackwell Industries, logistics and exports. And some banking through First Manhattan Trust, for example." Cross recalled where he had started before establishing his own company, Begovich Trading.

Mazur raised his eyebrows and looked Cross over from head to toe, as though seeing him for the first time.

"But how does such a successful businessman, experienced and knowledgeable, end up in Greyfield without even a car of his own? Were you robbed? Is there not a cent left in your account?"

"A perfectly reasonable question," Cross replied with a smile. He turned away and took a few steps around the room, thinking, while Mr. Mazur continued watching him. "All right. I'll tell you the truth, but I have a very important request. A condition, even. If you refuse, I won't impose on your hospitality any longer, and I'll withdraw all my proposals."

"I'm listening, Chris... Forgive me, I don't know your last name."

"Begovich. My name is Cross Begovich. But even your son must not know the truth. That is my condition and my request."

The man stared at Cross, his mouth slightly open. Then he briefly closed his eyes, turned away, walked to his desk, and sat down. Cross took a sip of whiskey and remained standing where he was.

"Forgive me, are you saying you're Cross Begovich, the Bosnian-born man from New York? The successful businessman worth millions, with shares in major companies and a growing business of his own on the leading exchanges? Have I understood correctly? Are we talking about the same person?"

"Yes, exactly. That's me."

"Are you joking?"

"You must have seen him and know what he looks like, since you're familiar with his business activities," Cross added. He came closer, leaned down a little, and said, "Not a soul must know the

truth, Mr. Mazur. I told you only so you could feel confident about my involvement. And I'll help your son succeed the way you've dreamed of all your life. But..."

Mr. Mazur went pale, then his cheeks flushed dark red, and he seemed utterly at a loss. Cross continued:

"I can't invest a single cent in the business. I can't use my name or my connections. Only my head. If you agree, we'll shake hands. For now, I can't do anything in my capacity as Cross Begovich. In the future, if we stay in touch, yes."

"I... Allow me, I..." Mr. Mazur rose, came around the desk, and said, "That's a very serious statement, Mr.... um... Begovich! I'm... deeply flattered, and of course I'll accept all your conditions. More than that, I'll be extremely grateful. But I still can't grasp how you and Mr. Begovich can be the same person! Here, in my study! In Greyfield!"

Cross sighed and looked at the ceiling, then turned his eyes back to Roy's father.

"Yes. My friends and I signed an agreement that Cross Begovich could start from nothing and make a million dollars without relying on any connections or opportunities already available to him. First and foremost, I want to prove to myself that I can do it. Only then to anyone else. You're the only person outside that circle who knows the secret of my mission. If we can't come to an agreement, I'll leave on the morning service, and you'll never see me again. In your house, at any rate. You have my word."

"I have one last request," Mr. Mazur said firmly but calmly. "If you agree to it, you have my word as a man that your secret will never leave this room. More than that, I'll do everything I can to support your ideas and ventures, with real gratitude."

"All right. What is it?"

Mr. Mazur hesitated, then said quietly:

"Could you call someone well known who knows you, meaning Mr. Begovich, and speak to them where I can hear?"

Cross gave a quiet, barely audible laugh. Then he sighed heavily, nodded, and took out his phone.

"Who shall I call? Name someone," he asked calmly, looking at Mazur.

"Ah... um..." The man was flustered. He began looking around at the surface of his desk, as though trying to find a list of names.

"Perhaps I could call my trusted representative, Mr. John Lawrence? Do you know him?" Cross offered, helping him find a solution.

"No... I mean, yes... God, are you really Mr. Cross Begovich?"

"Please..."

"I... I..."

Cross sighed and dialed. After two rings, a man's voice answered.

"John Lawrence speaking."

Cross looked at the flushed man before him and spoke.

"John, good evening. Sorry to call so late."

"Mr. Begovich? Not a problem. Good evening. I didn't recognize the number. Is everything all right?" Concern entered his assistant's voice, while Cross continued in the same tone.

"Yes, this is my new number. Save it, but only call if it's absolutely necessary. Better still, send a message. I'm perfectly fine. Don't worry."

"I'm very glad. We'd lost touch with you... I emailed you a report. I hope you received it?"

"No, I haven't checked yet. Have there been any changes in the business I should know about?"

Cross had been speaking on speakerphone. Giving Mr. Mazur one last glance, he switched it off and walked over to the window with the phone to his ear.

Meanwhile, Mr. Mazur stood frozen for a couple of minutes, unable to move. Then he took a handkerchief from his trouser pocket, wiped his sweaty forehead, and sat in an armchair.

Cross spoke with his deputy for several minutes, mostly responding with brief remarks such as “Yes, I understand,” “All right,” “Excellent,” “Call and look into it,” “Arrange a meeting for next week. Yes, gather the information by Tuesday and let me know,” “No, you’ll attend the meeting yourself. I’m out of the country,” “Yes, yes, I’ll be available,” and so on. When the conversation ended, Cross remained by the window for a while, absorbed in his own thoughts.

“Forgive me, Mr. Begovich...”

Cross turned and looked at Mr. Mazur for a few more seconds before speaking.

“Please keep calling me Chris, son, and so on, just as before. Don’t change the way you treat me or address me.”

“Yes, yes...” Kacper Mazur still couldn’t collect himself.

Cross came closer and looked him in the eye.

“Mr. Mazur, that is my condition.”

“All right, Chris... Forgive me, I don’t know your last name,” he repeated, holding out his hand to Cross.

“Back. Chris Back.” Cross took his hand and shook it firmly.

“Agreed. Tomorrow morning, we’ll go to Hart’s and buy a new car. By the way, why do you need people to buy from him?”

“That’s also a matter of strategy and business. May I explain?” Cross replied, settling on the arm of a nearby chair.

“Yes, I’d be very interested, Chris.”

Cross gave a quick smile, then continued:

“Leading figures in Greyfield, such as Mr. Hart, Sheriff Hamilton, yourself, and a few others, should ideally be working together. To support one another and strengthen the business network itself.”

Mr. Mazur pressed his lips together, considering the idea.

“In this case, I’ll be the link between you. My original plan, this morning when I first set foot here, was to get a car. But since your son has kindly lent me his, I now intend to negotiate a substantial discount for all of you. There’s Bob Colton, the farmer, too. I also plan to find another couple of customers and earn a commission myself. What do you think?” Cross took a sip of whiskey.

“Bravo... What can I say? I’ll be learning how to do business from you myself.”

“Thank you. Until morning, then?”

“Yes, good night. I’ll be at your service at seven, Mr. Begovich.”

Cross was about to leave the room, but stopped and gave Mazur a resigned look. The man immediately caught himself.

“Yes, son. Let’s see how things go tomorrow!”

Cross gave him a thumbs-up and wished him good night. He was about to cross the threshold when he suddenly turned back.

“Mr. Mazur, I have another request...”

“Of course. I’m listening.”

Cross thought for a moment, choosing his words.

“Find a way to arrange authorization for me to drive your son’s car without Roy seeing my name on either my license or the paperwork.” He looked at Kacper.

The man coughed, paused, and said:

“We’ll arrange everything. I’ll have the authorization made out to me, and then we’ll legally transfer the right to drive the car to you.”

At last, they said good night, and Cross went to the room they had given him. But sleep took a long time to come. He tossed and turned, thinking over his plans and everything that was happening. Two people already knew his real name. Perhaps the secret would soon travel from door to door. Well... In any case, he had never given his word that he would change his name. That had been

entirely his own idea, for convenience and safety. He had only agreed not to do business under the Cross Begovich name. And he was keeping his word.

Let's see what happens next.

Chapter 9

Over the course of a month, Cross gradually settled in and threw himself into business with enthusiasm. Within a week, he had arranged to supply meat products to several stores in Salt Lake City and a couple of nearby small towns. Bob Colton bought himself a new car and paid cash. So did Mr. Kacper Mazur and two new customers Cross had found in Salt Lake City and brought to Tom Hart's dealership in Greyfield after negotiating discounts. Hart, in turn, listened to his successful new partner's advice and began repairing and tidying up his garage. He hired a team, opening up jobs for local young people. Colton did the same.

Cross Begovich continued living at Roy's house. They had already divided their roles in the future partnership and become friends. Their proposal, drawn up as a full business plan, submitted by Mr. Mazur and refined by Cross, went to the bank for consideration. A week later, the answer arrived: no.

"We could put up property as collateral," Mr. Mazur said without looking up from the papers neatly arranged on his desk.

His study was filled with heavy furniture and long cabinets whose shelves held old volumes. The persistent scent of expensive tobacco lingered in the air. Although he rarely smoked cigars, the smell had soaked into the wood a decade earlier.

"No need," Cross replied evenly, leaning back in his chair. "We're not building a business at the risk of losing the roof over our heads."

He said it calmly, but in a way that closed the subject without room for appeal.

After that, he became quiet and withdrew into his work. For several days, he barely left his room, spending hours at the small laptop he had bought in a hurry earlier. He read market updates, reviewed reports, noted trends, searched for patterns, and calculated possible scenarios. He built a plan in his head, putting his cool logic to work at full capacity and allowing no outside discussions to distract him.

One morning, over a cup of strong tea in the kitchen, when he and Kacper were alone, Cross said almost casually:

"Mr. Mazur, I'd like to come by the bank in the next few days. Tomorrow, perhaps. There's something we should discuss there, in your office."

Mazur raised his eyebrows slightly, but nodded.

"Of course, Mr. Begovich. I'll make time tomorrow. Is it important?"

"Important," Cross replied briefly.

The following day, in the formal quiet of the bank manager's office, Cross explained his idea. He needed neither a loan nor a guarantee. He proposed that Mr. Mazur open a separate trading account in his own name to take part in the evaluation process at one of the proprietary trading firms that admitted traders by selection. Cross would have full responsibility for managing it.

"We'll put the terms into a legal agreement," he said. "I'll start working with a prop firm. It's the best way to raise the initial capital I can put into our project. The account will be in your name, with separate access for trading. I'll take on all the risks and responsibility."

He paused briefly, considered everything, and added:

"We'll also need an additional subaccount in your name so the funds can be withdrawn separately and I can manage them. We'll need powers of attorney authorizing me to operate both accounts. But only the two of us should know about it." He held Mazur's gaze. "Do you have someone you trust?"

Mazur thought for a moment. After a minute's pause, he replied:

"Yes. A licensed attorney. He's handled corporate transactions for both the bank and me personally. He'll draw up an agreement that won't raise any questions."

“Excellent,” Cross replied briefly. “Arrange a time.”

The meeting took place in the same office at the bank. Time was pressing, and just a day later, a man of about forty walked in carrying a briefcase. His suit fitted perfectly. A stylish, tightly knotted tie and neatly smoothed hair gave him an air of authority and seriousness. He greeted them, looked a little more closely at Cross, and suddenly asked:

“Mr. Begovich... that Mr. Begovich?”

Mazur calmly stepped in.

“That’s precisely why we need you. Mr. Begovich’s name must stay between us.” Then he turned to Cross. “Allow me to introduce Andrew Caldwell.”

Cross rose from the sofa, where he had been sitting at ease with one leg crossed over the other. They greeted each other.

“It’s a pleasure to be of service,” Caldwell said.

“Thank you,” Cross replied, returning to his seat and leaving their host to lead the discussion.

Mr. Mazur invited the lawyer to sit at the desk and briefly explained the situation, emphasizing the requirement for complete confidentiality.

Mr. Caldwell gave Cross a brief, understanding look and nodded. Then he took a pen from the breast pocket of his jacket, wrote a figure on a sticky note lying on the desk, and slid it toward Kacper: \$5,000.

Mazur quietly read the amount aloud and looked at Cross. Cross gave an almost imperceptible signal with his eyes, then said:

“Five hundred now. The rest in three months.”

The lawyer smiled faintly and agreed.

While he prepared the paperwork, Cross ordered a complete trading workstation. The technician arrived with boxes and bags full of cables. Something didn’t fit, one component had to be replaced, and another required a trip to the neighboring town. For two days, the sounds of a screwdriver, brief curses, and tapping keys drifted through the house. Roy watched with curiosity and confusion as some strange machine grew in their study like a black monolith.

On the third day, the equipment stood ready in Kacper Mazur’s study, which he had kindly made available: two wide monitors, a wireless keyboard, and cables neatly gathered into bundles.

A cup of black coffee stood on the desk. Cold air came through the window as the town settled toward evening. Cross sat down, looked around the space, and began doing what he did best. Finding vulnerabilities in the chaos of the market.

He was a trader again. This time, not in a skyscraper overlooking Manhattan, but in an old house on the outskirts of Greyfield. Sometimes a window shutter banged in the wind outside, firewood crackled in the fireplace, and only the light from the screen reflected in his intent eyes.

The first stage wasn’t the trading itself, but an evaluation. The prop firm didn’t hand money to anyone who wanted it. First, he had to pass their selection process. It was a kind of exam: trading on a demo account under their rules, with limits on losses and a profit target. Cross knew the conditions thoroughly, having studied them before proposing the idea to Mr. Mazur. Only after the trial period would the serious game begin, with profits split eighty-twenty in the trader’s favor.

On the first day, he laid his notebook open on the desk and launched both trading platforms. The market was nervous, but to him it was music. Sharp moves, false breakouts, panic selling. He worked quietly and attentively, barely moving, making notes only now and then.

Roy looked into the study a couple of times, trying to understand what his strange, mysterious friend Chris was doing. All he saw were charts and Cross’s concentrated gaze.

By the end of the week, Cross had completed the first phase of the evaluation. Next came the second, more demanding phase: the same strategy, but with tighter limits and greater consistency required. For most people, it became torture. Cross treated it as a chess game with the market.

By the middle of the month, he had passed the entire evaluation. The first funds arrived in the firm's live account. They weren't his yet, but capital allocated for him to manage. From that moment, the game moved onto a real playing field, where every trade could bring him closer to that million-dollar mark... or push it farther away.

"Do you think he even has a plan?" Roy quietly asked his father.

"Of course," Mazur replied. "If he didn't have a plan, he wouldn't have settled here. He would have left."

Another night. The house was quiet. Its old walls creaked in the wind, and the light of occasional headlights swept past the windows. In Cross's room, there was only the soft hum of the computer tower and the faint glow of three monitors. He sat motionless, staring at the screen, his hand still on the mouse and his back tense, completely absorbed in his work.

A currency pair was open in front of him. USD/JPY. A five-minute chart. The market twitched like a wounded snake, and for three hours he had been watching it like a predator watching its prey. He needed a particular signal, with its own tone and rhythm... the very one he had once woven into his team's algorithms, different from all the standard signals described in textbooks.

His finger paused over the button. A click. The trade was on.

The risk was exactly half a percent of the account balance: \$500.

He wasn't breathing. Wasn't thinking. Only watching. The trade moved into profit. Then into loss. Then up again. Higher still. He took the profit.

+\$650.

For someone else, a small amount. For him, the first stone in the foundation.

He stood, stretched, took a sip of cold coffee... and sat down again.

The second platform. Another pair: the pound against the Swiss franc. This time, he gave the market a little more room to move.

Risk: one percent of the account balance, \$1,000.

There was a small drawdown in the first few minutes. Then a candle moved in the right direction, and the next confirmed the momentum. He closed the position at the peak of the move.

+\$2,340.

Total for the day: \$2,990 net. Almost three percent of the account. A perfect start.

Cross leaned back in his chair. Only the lights of the charts flickered in the dark study. He rubbed his eyes with his fingers and let his shoulders relax a little. The work, cool and mathematical, demanded all his concentration and kept him under intense strain. Excitement counted for nothing here, and luck could offer no help.

"Chris..." Roy began, almost on a sigh.

They were sitting in a corner of a spacious living room. The evening was unfolding around them, with guests laughing and glasses clinking. An old friend of Kacper Mazur's had invited them to his birthday party. It was a society gathering, with all of Greyfield's "upper crust" in one room, including Sheriff Chain Hamilton and his wife, Helen. Chris Back, as everyone here now knew him, was to be "brought into the circle." He didn't object, although he had no need of it.

"Yes?" Cross turned, looking directly at Roy, his gaze calm but tinged with weariness and caution.

"I've never seen anyone become such a part of a community in just a couple of days. People trust you. They talk about you, discuss you. What's the secret?" his friend asked.

Cross pressed his lips together and lowered his eyes. Then he sighed, looked back at Roy, and answered:

"Knowing you can handle it."

"I don't think that's enough. There's something else. What is it?"

Cross looked at him for a long time before asking:

“Tell me, how would you feel if you knew you had a million dollars in your account, but couldn’t withdraw it until you’d put another million in?”

Roy smiled. Then he shook his head, looked at him, and said almost inaudibly:

“So that’s what this is all about...?”

“Not in my case. But that’s the mindset.”

The conversation stayed with Roy for a long time, perhaps forever. He stopped wondering who his friend really was and getting tangled up in doubts. Instead, he stopped drifting around without purpose and threw himself into the work as seriously as Cross did.

Cross switched to a new car, a Nissan Xterra bought from Hart on an installment plan at no extra cost. Roy took his own car back and, as agreed, assumed responsibility for part of the business. While Cross immersed himself in charts, sometimes until morning, Roy visited outlets, looked for new partners, and worked with his father to negotiate with suppliers of seafood and other goods for their future store. He also searched for suitable premises in the areas he and Cross had already discussed, while developing the repair-shop idea alongside it.

Every evening, over dinner or just afterward, they reviewed their progress. Each day brought better results.

By the end of February, the system had put out its first shoot.

A fresh sign gleamed on the front of the new two-story store: *Mazur & Sons*.

Roy Mazur was listed as the legal owner. The paperwork was still being finalized, but all the necessary licenses had been obtained. Cross remained behind the scenes, the unseen power overseeing every process. Meanwhile, Kacper Mazur, encouraged and full of hope, became a co-owner and partner. He contributed half the initial capital from his savings, the money he had been putting aside for a new house for his son. Roy added his share, partly from money he had saved and partly from borrowing. By then, Cross had managed to cover the remaining thirty percent. The total investment came to \$120,700. Projections for the Salt Lake City market suggested that turnover by the end of the year should be at least twice that amount.

By mid-March, Kacper had secured an investment loan from the bank’s head office after all, apparently even sooner than he had expected. With that added support, the business began growing rapidly.

The pop of a champagne cork mingled with applause as friends and partners celebrated the launch of their first venture inside the *Mazur & Sons* food store in Salt Lake City. The staff was still modest, just five people, but their ambitions were anything but.

Meanwhile, Cross kept his own count of the time left to make a million, crossing weeks off his mental calendar. Six gone already.

The phone on his desk vibrated, and Lance’s name appeared on the screen.

“Hey, buddy.” His friend’s voice held a mixture of warmth and a less obvious attempt to take stock. “How are you doing? I hear you’ve become part-owner of... a grocery store?”

“Hi. Yes, we’re working on it.” Cross sat at his computer without taking his eyes off the monitor.

Lance knew about his retail business but had no idea he was currently working with a prop firm, which was reassuring. Cross knew that the less Lance knew, the easier it would be for everyone.

“A store, you say...” Lance drawled, as though savoring the word. “And how’s it going?”

“Same as it does for everyone at first. Expenses are higher than income. But we’re working at it. We’ll see...”

A pause lingered on the line. Lance seemed to be listening for something beneath his words.

“Well, well...” he said, a sharp hint of irony slipping into his tone. “I’m here if you need me.”

“Yes, I know,” Cross replied briefly. “I don’t have time to relax yet.”

“I believe you,” Lance said. “But you know, you and I always have time for a good talk...”

“I’ll call when I need to,” Cross cut in. “Thanks for calling.”

He hung up without looking away from the chart. Price lines still flickered on the screen, while the invisible trace of Lance's pause seemed to linger in the air.

Chapter 10

Spring came cautiously to Greyfield. The March sun was already breaking through the grey clouds, but the wind still carried cold air down from the mountains. Meltwater sloshed in the streets, and grey islands of snow lay along the edges of the sidewalks.

Cross and Roy walked into Maggie's café, shaking wet sand off their boots. It was warm inside, and the smell of pastries and coffee stirred their appetites. A radio played softly above the counter, while two farmers at one of the tables argued over the price of barley.

"Take a seat, handsome boys." Maggie emerged from behind the counter with a notepad in her hand, though her eyes were fixed on Cross. "What'll you have?"

"Black coffee and fried eggs for me," he said.

"And a burger for me, as usual," Roy added.

"Will the burger have a friend?" she asked with a sly squint at Cross. "Maybe some cherry pie to go with your eggs?"

"No, thank you," he replied evenly but politely.

When she left, Roy picked up the bottle of water on the table and took a sip, gathering his thoughts. They had been discussing the store on the way over, and the conversation naturally continued at their table.

"The meat from Bob's coming in fine, no problems..." He paused, adjusted his sleeve, and grinned. "Though last time his worker nearly sent us half a carcass marked for dog food. Got the warehouses mixed up."

Cross managed something resembling a smile but did not interrupt.

"Seafood... that's where we're having trouble. The supplier's two days late, and you know how it is: nobody in a big city's going to wait two weeks for oysters. Had to make do with frozen stock. The dairy from River Springs arrived on time, no problems there. I've already paid for the last shipment."

Just then, Maggie plonked a plate of pie down in front of them and nodded toward Roy.

"That's for him, so he won't grumble."

"Thanks." Roy lifted a piece with his fork and went back to business. "Hired two more guys to unload deliveries. I can't keep up on my own anymore. But I'm still being careful about adding new products. There isn't much money to expand."

"Are we growing?" Cross asked.

"Little by little." Roy shrugged. "More customers, but the expenses are biting too."

"We'll do an audit at the end of the month," Cross said calmly. "A full one. I want to see how every item is moving."

"Next you'll tell us to wear ties." Roy grinned, but took out his battered planner and made a note.

Maggie returned with a tray and, as she set down their plates, "accidentally" moved the cherry pie closer to Cross.

"Just because it's spring," she whispered with a wink.

Roy gave her a puzzled look, then exclaimed indignantly, "Only for him? Where's mine?!"

Cross burst out laughing.

At that moment, the door creaked open, letting in a stream of cold air. Tom Hart came in wearing a leather jacket, a faint smile on his face. He spotted them and walked over to their table.

"Gentlemen, good to see you," he said.

The men rose slightly and shook his hand.

"Mind if I join you?"

"Of course." Cross nodded.

Hart pulled out a chair, sat down, and put his cap on the seat beside him.

"Heard about your store," he said, looking at Roy. "Well done. Business picking up?"

“We’re working,” Roy replied. “Doing what we can.”

“It shows.” Hart smiled. “And you, Chris, have forgotten your old friends entirely. No customers coming my way from you anymore. Shame.”

Cross tilted his head slightly.

“I haven’t forgotten. I’m a little busy right now.”

“Well... if you come back, I’m willing to raise your cut,” Hart said. “Your guys helped me make good money back then, and I haven’t forgotten it.”

Cross turned to Roy.

“Do you and Hart see much of each other?”

“Now and then,” Roy replied. “Sometimes I help him, sometimes he helps me. These days I’m mostly busy with the store, though some of my helpers still drop by his place.”

Cross nodded and said thoughtfully, “Then perhaps we should consider a partnership? On a percentage basis. And expanding into a chain...”

Hart raised an eyebrow.

“If you’re involved, I’m in.”

“Roy can handle it,” Cross replied calmly. “My part is to guide things and help the business grow. We’ll discuss the details later.”

Hart smiled, clearly intrigued.

“All right. I’ll be waiting.”

Meanwhile, Cross was gaining momentum on two fronts at once: retail and the investment business.

His days followed a busy rhythm. He began each morning with market prices over a cup of strong coffee, and spent his afternoons at places of business in Greyfield and the surrounding area: the bank, farms, the offices of small suppliers, branches of larger companies, and sometimes Hart’s garage. People invariably gathered around him, and respect was showing in their eyes more and more often. Conversations grew brief and businesslike, with no unnecessary words or emotion. His arrival visibly changed the atmosphere. Everyone could almost feel it physically. A single look from Cross was enough to make the person facing him feel as though they were taking an exam, instinctively straightening up before speaking. Cross saw it and knew things were going as they should.

He oversaw the store in Salt Lake City mostly from a distance, through reports and occasional visits, leaving Roy to manage it. People in town already knew that “Mr. Back” was involved, though no one quite understood what he actually did.

Some had seen him talking with Kacper Mazur behind a closed door at the bank. Others had seen him standing at the edge of the farmers’ market, amid the smell of fresh hay and chilled meat, watching produce being loaded for delivery. Sometimes they simply spotted him driving his Xterra down Main Street, and whispered behind his back:

“Is that him?”

“They say it is...”

But no one really knew what sort of man he was.

By April, the reports no longer looked like tentative first efforts, but the confident work of an experienced player. He kept his distance from the curious, yet listened closely to anyone who brought him an idea with potential. There was a scent of change in the Greyfield air, and Cross knew very well that he had had a hand in it.

He turned off his laptop, stretched in his chair, flicked his lighter, and went outside. The April evening air was cool, but no longer stung; it merely brushed softly against his skin. Cross lifted his head toward the pale blue sky, where the first stars were faintly appearing, and stood for a while, breathing out a thin stream of smoke.

His phone rang. It was Roy.

“How are things at the store?” Cross asked, taking his time as he tapped off the ash.

“Busy. Three more companies came by today, offering us goods to sell on consignment.”

“What kind of goods?”

“Canned food, cookies, some frozen stuff.”

“Don’t chase volume,” Cross replied calmly. “Take a box of each to try. We’ll see how they sell.”

“Got it.”

As they talked, he walked onto Main Street and made his way to the little grocery store where he had once drunk coffee and eaten a second croissant “on the house” at Mr. Jobson’s. It was warm inside, with a pleasant smell of fresh pastries crowded onto a shelf beside the register.

“Good evening, Mr. Back.” The owner nodded.

“Evening.” Cross picked up a couple of cans of Coke and a packet of crackers, then lingered at the counter, his eyes drifting absently over the shelves.

Automatically working things out: canned meat would sell well in that part of the store, dry goods over there, and imported products could fill this niche...

He paid, offered a brief word of thanks, and headed for the exit. As he pushed the door open, a young woman stepped into the doorway. Their movements mirrored each other: he was going out, she was coming in. His hand instinctively held the door open, but his gaze had already caught hers and stopped.

For a second, the beat of his heart grew louder than the world around him. They barely brushed against each other, yet an impulse ran over his skin, a tiny spark like static electricity.

She lifted her head, and their eyes met. Green eyes, so clear and deep, with an unusual cool shade, as though they reflected a forest covered in frost. Her gaze was direct and intent. Cross looked her over from the bottom up, lingering on her eyes, and for a moment there was no one else in the world but the two of them.

“Excuse me,” she said softly, and the sound of her voice reached unexpectedly deep into his awareness.

Cross nodded, but still did not move. She turned away and went inside. He remained outside, still catching the scent of her perfume: warm, with a hint of jasmine woven into the cold evening air, somehow familiar and close to his heart. It drifted from her as she moved, from her thick, slightly wavy hair with its copper sheen. Behind him, the light of a streetlamp caught it, casting a soft, mysterious shimmer.

He stood without moving until the door closed with a quiet jingle of the bell. A few seconds passed, and, scarcely aware of what he was doing, Cross pulled the handle again. He went back inside.

The stranger stood at the counter, talking to Mr. Jobson. Her voice was calm and even, slightly low, gently drawing out the vowels. Cross stopped behind her and simply listened, his eyes fixed on the back of her head.

Jobson noticed him first, brightened, and smiled.

“Miss Davison, allow me to introduce Mr. Back.”

She turned around, and Cross held out his hand. She placed her warm, soft hand delicately in his. But he held on to it, not letting go at once. She looked at their joined hands, then into his eyes, and was the first to pull away.

“I haven’t seen you in Greyfield before,” he said slowly, tilting his head a little.

“Nor have I seen you,” she replied, with a slight, almost imperceptible pause. As though she had remembered something but decided not to mention it.

“Perhaps a cup of coffee?” the shopkeeper offered, neatly seizing the moment.

Cross kept his eyes on her, then made a small gesture inviting her to the table by the window. She raised her eyebrows slightly, glanced at Jobson, who was already pouring the coffee, and walked to the table with a quiet smile.

Cross pulled out her chair.

"You don't often meet a gentleman in our little town," Miss Davison remarked as she sat down.

"It's not gallantry. It's simply how a man should behave in the company of a lady he respects," he answered quietly, with a note of confidence.

Two cups of coffee and a slice of pie each were set before them.

"Thank you," she said, but he was already studying her intently.

"Chris," he introduced himself.

"Milena," she replied, saying her name softly.

"Such a beautiful name... just like you. Why have I never seen you before?" he asked in a velvet voice.

"Thank you." She smiled and lowered her eyes for a second. "Have you been here long?"

"Three months," Cross replied briefly, taking a sip of coffee.

"I'm only home on weekends. I work and live in Salt Lake City. I come to Greyfield to stay at my father's house. He died last year."

"Please accept my condolences," he said seriously.

"Thank you." She looked away, and for a second a silence settled between them.

"What do you do?" Cross asked, leaning on the table.

"I'm an assistant at an architecture firm. It's a long story, but essentially, I'm always busy with projects."

"That must be interesting work. I came from New York to visit a friend. We started a new business, opened a store. Looks as though I'll stay here for a little while." He let the pause linger before adding, "And today I found another reason."

He allowed himself a look that said more than words could. Milena caught it and grew shy for a moment, lowering her lashes as though trying to hide a slight flutter of excitement.

"It's unusual, leaving New York and moving here," she remarked.

"I'm rather unusual myself," Cross replied quietly, without looking away. He did not seem fully aware of his own behaviour. "I'd like to invite you to dinner at a restaurant in Salt Lake City. Whenever it suits you."

She was silent for a moment, then smiled slightly and shrugged.

"All right."

He leaned back in his chair, his gaze never leaving her.

They sat there for almost an hour, talking and joking, after which Cross walked her home. Outside the entrance, they spent another twenty minutes talking about everything and nothing, until she admitted she was cold.

Back home, he settled into his armchair and sat in the dark for a long time. Every word, every look, her voice, the warm, fragrant scent of her body... it all kept turning over in his mind as he tried to understand what had just happened to him.

Chapter 11

Cross sat at his workstation in the dim office, like a captain on the bridge of a ship. An entire wall of monitors glowed in front of him: live market charts moved across the central screens, while news feeds, analytical reports, and pop-up notifications of closed trades flashed on either side. A chat with his broker blinked on a monitor in the corner, above a panel showing his current positions. The faint hum of fans and the soft whir of cooling systems filled the silence, drawing him completely into the market.

Everything was going to plan. The charts behaved predictably, trades closed at a profit, and his capital grew. Yet instead of his usual predatory focus, he increasingly caught himself staring into space, his thoughts drifting... to Milena. Her eyes, her gentle smile, the quiet voice that still echoed in his memory. Damn it, this was dangerous.

Roy's call pulled him out of that meditative state, as though someone had tapped on the glass of the bridge.

"Listen, Chris, I've got news..." Roy sounded excited, the words tumbling out almost in a single breath. "Remember I told you about Steward Darsen? The guy I helped with his car a while back. Well, he turned up and said he had a surprise for me. And damn, did he deliver!"

"What kind of surprise?" Cross was already sitting up in his chair.

"A garage, Chris. A huge garage in Salt Lake City! Rent-free for a whole three months while we get on our feet. Steward heard I was looking for a place and took me straight over. We've just had a look. Listen, the place is fantastic! Great location, no other garages nearby, hardly any competition."

Roy spoke quickly, almost choking on his excitement, as though he feared someone would snatch his idea if he fell silent for even a second.

"The garage itself is on one side, and there's a spacious room with glass walls on the other. We thought we could make it an office, or even an auto parts store."

"Are the ceilings high?" Cross asked, mentally fitting equipment into the space.

"Really high. It's a two-storey building. The ground floor's wide, divided into two sections, each about... well, probably twenty metres long and at least ten wide."

"And how many cars will fit in the workshop?"

"Four easily, with room left over for the lifts."

Cross fell silent for a second, letting the picture take shape in his mind: the smell of fresh paint, the gleam of glass partitions, the hum of machinery at work. It was like a set already built for his plans.

"All right, Roy," he said at last. "We'll talk when I have news."

He said a brief goodbye and laid the phone on the desk. He took a couple of steps across the room, and his eyes drifted to the other phone, where her name was blinking in the messenger app. Just one message: *How are you?* But he stopped himself in time, as though catching himself by the collar, and put the phone back on the desk.

"Business, Cross. Business first," he muttered, though he smiled anyway.

A couple of minutes later, he stepped into the bathroom, turned on the cold water, and held his face beneath the stream. The icy drops burned his skin, carrying away the thick haze of his thoughts. He needed to clear his head. The rush of water drowned out everything: the noise of the market and Milena's voice in his mind.

An hour later, Cross was sitting in Kacper Mazur's office at the bank. The tall windows caught the spring sunlight and cast it across the polished desk. A leather folder lay on it, and Mazur leafed through the documents inside, occasionally looking at Cross over his glasses.

"Yes, we can arrange that," he said thoughtfully, leaning back in his chair after Cross had shared his ideas.

"I haven't spoken to Hart yet, but I'm sure he'll agree to my terms," Cross replied, brushing an invisible speck of dust from his pressed trousers. As usual, he had settled comfortably on the sofa beside the desk. "All I need is for you to act personally as my representative, Mr. Mazur."

"And confidentially, of course?"

"Of course. You understand why I need to keep this quiet. If my name comes out, there'll be chaos." He gave a bitter smile. "When I return to New York, which won't be before January next year, I think you can show your hand if you wish. But not now."

Kacper nodded, though an almost warm, personal smile flickered in his eyes.

"Honestly? I'd rather never have to say goodbye to you."

"You won't have to," Cross replied quietly but firmly. "I'll simply be somewhere else. Our friendship and partnership will continue. I promise you that."

Mazur rose, came around the desk, and held out his hand. Cross stood too, and their firm handshake sealed the agreement better than any document.

With the elder Mazur's support secured, Cross was on his way to Hart's within minutes, having called ahead to arrange an urgent meeting. The car was quiet except for the steady rumble of the engine. This was the moment to work out exactly how to present Hart with an offer he could not refuse, but his fingers found the phone almost of their own accord. Milena's name lit up the screen, an invitation to abandon his fighting spirit. He pressed call.

"Hi." Her voice was soft, with a note of surprise.

"Hi. I wanted to hear your voice." He caught himself smiling.

"Thank you. That's lovely to hear. How are you?"

"Great. Better every day. How are things with you?"

"Everything's good here too."

"Did you get any sleep after yesterday's WhatsApp marathon?" he asked with a smile, remembering their conversation that had lasted until five in the morning.

"If you can call it sleep." She laughed. "I've been running on coffee all day."

"Sorry." He turned into the narrow lane leading to the gates of Hart's garage.

"What for? You didn't make me stay up."

"Really?" He deliberately drew out the word.

"Really."

He stopped at the gates, set the parking brake, and leaned back in his seat.

"All right, I promise to let you get some sleep tonight... so I can keep you awake again tomorrow." He paused, and they both laughed softly.

A pleasant ache stirred in his chest. Damn it, he wanted to see her right now.

"Talk to you tomorrow, Chris," she said.

"Tomorrow, sweetheart. And remember, we're seeing each other on Saturday."

"We've already agreed on that!" she teased.

"Yes, but it's only Thursday... two more days. All right, I'll wait."

He ended the call and took a deep breath, putting his business face back on before he stepped out of the car.

Inside the garage, Hart was already waiting, wiping his hands on a rag.

"I thought you weren't coming in." He held out his hand, genuine warmth in his smile. "Good to see you, buddy."

Cross shook his hand firmly.

"Good to see you too. Let's sit down. We have things to discuss."

Chapter 12

Hart led him past the workshop toward the office. The peeling sofa and oil stains on the walls were gone, replaced by a bright new interior: smooth grey panels, a neatly finished ceiling, a new desk, and two deep leather armchairs. A cup of hot coffee and a stack of recent car magazines stood on the windowsill. The faint smell of polish mingled with the aroma of roasted coffee beans, giving the room a more serious air than before.

“Tea, coffee, water?” Hart offered, gesturing for him to sit.

“Thank you, nothing for me,” Cross replied calmly, settling into the chair opposite. He crossed one leg over the other, leaned back a little, and looked around the room before turning his eyes to Hart.

A low table stood between them, with a notepad and pen on it. Hart sat down too and leaned forward, waiting to hear what this was about. Cross was in no hurry. He often let pauses stretch, bringing the weight of silence to bear. Sometimes it worked far better than any argument.

“I have a proposal,” he finally said quietly. “A place worth looking at, where we could plan a business together in Salt Lake City. A garage with space for a showroom.”

Hart’s eyes lit up, but he restrained himself, merely sitting a little straighter.

“And Roy and I thought,” Cross continued, “that before bringing in someone from outside, it made sense to approach people who have already proved they keep their word. People we know.”

Hart straightened his shoulders.

“Thanks for not counting me out.”

Cross gave a brief nod.

“We have offers from partners we know. We’re taking our time... and for now, all our resources are going into the store. Though that’s temporary. I’m sure we’ll be able to handle everything ourselves later.”

“So you need an investor?”

“You could say that. But less an investor than a partner on particular terms.”

“What terms?”

“Equipment, plus the ability to provide additional funding if needed. We put a monetary value on everything, including materials, and calculate the ownership shares accordingly. Later, and this is important, those shares will change depending on further contributions from all partners, both current and future. We start as the founders: Roy Mazur is the founder of the company, I’m the lead partner and the person actually running it, and the third place is open. It could be yours.”

Hart narrowed his eyes.

“How many partners will there be altogether?”

“That depends on how well we do. If we grow into a corporation with shareholders, which I’m more than confident we will, there could be many. But for now, there are three of us: the elder Mazur acting as my representative, since I have other business to attend to; his son Roy; and either you or someone else. And yes, I came to you first, as promised.”

“And you won’t regret it,” Hart said with a grin.

Cross tilted his head slightly.

“Do you know why I’m here?”

“Why?”

“Because my business and my success in this town began with you. You didn’t turn me away.”

Hart looked slightly embarrassed, but his smile showed that the words had struck home.

“Thanks for remembering.”

“And thank you. But there’s another reason.”

“What’s that?”

“Shall we be honest?”

“Of course!”

“You’re not young anymore, Tom. One day, you’ll want to live off dividends and relax by the ocean with a beer in your hand. Am I right?”

Hart lowered his head a little and pressed his lips together. At first he sighed, then laughed and slapped his knee.

“I like you! Knew from the first minute you weren’t just some ordinary guy passing through. Sharp, clever... Where are you from, anyway?”

“A long way away. And thank you for the compliment. But back to business. I’ll walk you through the details, and you can think it over. I’d like an answer by morning. If you’re in, we’ll go and see the premises, then take care of the paperwork and get started.”

Hart held out his hand.

“I’m in.”

“Wait, I haven’t explained all the finer points yet...”

“I trust you, Chris. You’ve already proved yourself. What you pulled off in three days would have taken me three months! So my instinct for the right people works pretty damn well!”

Cross smiled faintly and nodded in agreement.

“Can’t argue with that...” he added, rising and holding out his hand to Hart. “Tomorrow, Tom, I won’t just show you a building. I’ll show you your future.”

After dinner, the table in the Mazurs’ house once again became an improvised headquarters. Sheets of sketches, pencils, and mugs of cooling tea lay scattered amid a lively discussion of the new business they were planning. Kacper, Roy, and Cross drew lines on the layout, argued about the entrance, worked out spaces for the lifts, and discussed likely expenses, along with how many workers they would need and in which trades.

“I can’t manage two businesses at once,” Roy admitted, excited about the new project. “The store needs someone there all the time, and if the car dealership gets going, we’ll have to find a manager for that too.”

“Yes, you’re right.” Cross looked at Kacper. “Mr. Mazur, think about who you know and trust. We still have time, but we need to start looking.”

Mazur considered this, gave something like a hum, and nodded.

“I can’t say I have anyone in mind just yet, but I’ll give it some thought...”

“Excellent,” Cross replied. After a moment’s thought, he added, “Hart and I will go over there tomorrow morning and look into the details too. He may have some suggestions of his own.”

“Let’s not wait,” Roy decided, reaching for his phone. “I’ll call Steward. We can take a look ourselves. Well, you can. I’ve already seen it, and I really liked it.”

The call was brief, and within minutes they were on their way.

They arrived at the building’s darkened porch almost at the same time. Cross and the Mazurs pulled up a little to one side, while Steward was already waiting nearby. The owner was due any minute. They stood in a semicircle by the entrance, exchanging remarks about business, when a silver SUV glided under the canopy.

Cross recognised him instantly. Honnar Devereaux, an old acquaintance. Although he was not among Cross’s close friends, he knew him well enough to blow his entire cover the moment he stepped out.

The decision came automatically.

“I’ll speak to him myself,” he said briefly over his shoulder, and went to meet him.

Kacper immediately realised something was wrong. He stepped in at once, drawing Roy’s and Steward’s attention to himself.

“Tell me, Steward, what exactly did my son do that made you willing to get involved in this venture?”

Steward glanced toward Cross walking away and Devereaux's car, gave a chuckle, and put an arm around Roy's shoulders.

"I was flat broke back then, on the verge of a divorce... remember?" he said to Roy. "My wife caught me in the car with my mistress."

"And smashed up the car too!" Roy added with a nod, and they both burst out laughing.

While they laughed, Kacper slowly and unobtrusively drew them aside, leaving Cross and the newly arrived owner behind them.

Meanwhile, Devereaux approached with a broad smile and exclaimed in astonishment:

"Mr. Begovich?!"

Chapter 13

“Mr. Back. Chris Back,” Cross corrected him, shaking his hand firmly. Then he added more quietly, “Don’t use my name. I’ll explain later.”

Devereaux frowned and asked with concern, “Do you need rescuing?”

Cross gave him an ironic look and nodded. Honnar laughed softly.

“I don’t know what you’re up to, but I’m game for anything except a hunger strike.”

“Actually, it would’ve been better if you’d sent someone who doesn’t know me,” Cross said resignedly, more to himself than to him. But the answer came at once.

“I don’t have anyone like that.”

Devereaux gave another short laugh.

“Bro, have you taken up extreme sports or something?”

“Something like that. Let’s leave the details for later, buddy,” Cross asked.

“All right, all right. But fair warning: I’ll expect a full account of what you’re doing here and since when you’ve been Chris Back.”

“Deal,” Cross replied just as quietly.

“Well then, Mr. Back,” Honnar said in a louder, formal voice, “pleased to meet you.”

“Likewise, Mr. Devereaux. We’re looking at the building for an auto repair shop and showroom,” Cross said, lighting a cigarette. The lighter clicked, and smoke drifted toward the parking lot.

Honnar looked over the building.

“Not a bad idea. The guys have already given me the outline... but there’s some red tape with the paperwork here. This county doesn’t always look favourably on auto repairs and sales.”

“Is that a serious problem?” Cross asked.

“Serious, but it depends on how you approach it. And, more importantly, what you bring to the table,” he added meaningfully, glancing at Cross. Cross nodded, tapping the ash off his cigarette. Devereaux continued, “But if you’re handling it yourself, I’m sure it’ll work out. Your idea’s got me interested, actually. If the business plan looks promising, I could come in as a partner. Then I’ll handle the bureaucracy, and we’ll split the expenses among us.”

“We’ll discuss it once we have the details,” Cross said with a nod.

Devereaux gave a brief grin.

“I’ll be waiting. And no hunger strikes.”

They stepped toward the door together, and the group went inside the building, where the air smelled of dust, fresh paint, and the very opportunities they had come for.

The next day, Roy went to meet Hart on his own. Hart liked the premises so much that he lit up like a bulb in a short circuit. His excitement showed in the heat rising to his cheeks and the sweat on his temples.

“Chris said the final word was mine,” he breathed. “So we’re getting started?! I’m ready!”

“Slow down,” Roy said, stopping him. “There’s a snag with the licence. Chris is working on it right now. And the owner, Mr. Devereaux, has hinted that he wants a stake.”

The news pricked Hart like a needle. What if there was no room for him after all? He frowned.

“Why do we need anyone else? We can manage ourselves. I gave my word.”

“You see,” Roy replied calmly, “more investment means more profit. And we don’t have the connections Devereaux has.”

“You can buy connections.” Hart rubbed his fingers together as though counting banknotes.

“Not necessarily. Chris has a sharp nose for this sort of thing,” Roy said firmly.

Hart let out a heavy sigh and gave in, realising that the wall he was up against was stronger than his arguments.

That evening, after a couple of hours' sleep, Cross returned to his charts and immersed himself in work. Lines, numbers, candlesticks on the screen: he pushed everything else aside. But half an hour later, his phone rang.

"Buddy, I've sorted it out. We're opening," Devereaux said.

"What?" Cross kept his eyes on the chart.

"We'll get the licences. When are we meeting?"

"Honnar, I'm up to my neck in work right now, brother. I'll call you back."

"Understood. Call me when you're free," came the voice on the phone.

Cross put the phone on the desk, his gaze still fixed on the screen. The candlestick was moving in the right direction. *Now... stop...* Something clicked in his head like a gun's bolt, and the whole world narrowed once again to the trend line.

It was only toward nightfall that Cross set off. He and Honnar had agreed to meet on neutral ground, far from town and prying eyes. At Cross's insistence, they had chosen somewhere well away from their usual routes.

The highway stretched west toward the Nevada border, cutting the empty plain in two. The mountains were behind him now, and ahead lay nothing but dark grassland and the wind roaming endlessly over it. Cross drove his SUV almost blindly until two white beams of headlights appeared in the distance.

Devereaux was utterly bewildered, but knowing Cross Begovich, he saw no reason to distrust him. He had agreed without question to drive all that way for a conversation. Above all, curiosity was eating at him: what was actually going on?!

Close to midnight, the two men finally parked their cars by the roadside. Cross stepped out and breathed in the freezing air so deeply that his lungs rang, then climbed into Devereaux's car. He sank heavily against the seat back and closed his eyes. Honnar turned his whole body toward him, almost holding his breath, as though he were about to hear the most intriguing story of his life.

His theatrical air amused Cross so much that he burst out laughing in his friend's face. Thoroughly confused, Honnar laughed too, his eyebrows rising in surprise.

"Buddy, tell me what's going on with you," Devereaux finally said. "I might have thought someone was blackmailing you, or the FBI was on your tail, but the way you're acting... it makes no damn sense!"

Cross looked at him and dissolved into laughter again, throwing his head back. Honnar watched him for half a minute, then waved a hand and simply got out of the car.

Cross laughed alone for another couple of minutes before gradually calming down and, with a theatrical flourish, striking the centre of the steering wheel with his palm. The sharp blast of the horn nearly made Devereaux jump as he leaned against the hood. Cross laughed again and nodded for him to come back.

"Get out and come over here yourself! The only camera that could catch you out here is one in space," Honnar called, then turned away.

"Damn you," Cross grumbled as he climbed out.

As usual, he lit a cigarette and breathed out smoke, which the wind immediately caught and carried into the darkness of the grasslands.

"Remember Lance?" Cross asked.

Devereaux looked at his friend, thought for a moment, then asked, "The one with the earring?"

"Yes, that one."

"And?"

"He and I made a million-dollar deal."

"Whoa. What kind?" Honnar asked, putting his hands in his pockets and straightening a little.

“That I, Cross Begovich, will make that million dollars in a year, starting with no money and no connections.”

Devereaux blinked, silently absorbing the information. Cross breathed out smoke and smiled broadly again as he watched his reaction.

“Have you guys really got nothing better to do?” Honnar finally asked, still stunned by what he had heard.

Cross turned away, tapped off the ash, and spoke more calmly.

“Actually, it was a good idea, and I seized on it straight away. A good way to sharpen my skills and test my endurance. That’s why no one around here knows my real name. Just a couple of people, and they’ve given me their word. But there’s one problem between you and me, Honnar, old man.”

Cross turned back, looked him in the eyes, and took a drag on his cigarette.

“I know too much, and now you have to kill me?” Devereaux joked, making Cross laugh again.

“Did the meeting place give it away?”

“Yes. I brought pepper spray, just in case. It’s in my pocket.”

Cross almost doubled over with laughter. Once he had recovered a little, he gave his friend a playful punch on the shoulder.

“You’re more likely to kill me with your jokes,” he said through his laughter. Then he sighed again, glanced at Devereaux, and continued, “If it weren’t for that damn agreement... We had it made legally binding, by the way.”

“You’re kidding!”

“No. I’m perfectly serious, never mind the laughing. It’s exactly as I’m telling you, Honnar.”

“That’s insane!” Honnar pressed a palm to his forehead and half turned away.

“It’s all right, brother. Everything’s under control.”

“How much time do you have?”

“Until January.”

“And how much have you made?”

“I’m only warming up. But you know how it is: you always skim off the cream at the end...”

Devereaux said nothing.

“Everything’s going to plan...”

“Can I help somehow? Give you a couple of hundred, at least? Though I could lend you the whole million. Just say the word.”

Cross clapped him on the shoulder.

Devereaux had never been on Cross’s personal list of close friends. Different cities, different lines of work, and different social circles had kept them apart. But he was a man who was hard not to respect. He was no small businessman, but the owner of a major real estate company in Utah, with branches in other states. Yet he never flaunted his position, could speak to anyone as an equal, and made no distinctions of class or status. Today, he had come to the meeting himself, without an entourage or any fuss. These minutes beneath the open sky had finally swept away all formality between them.

Cross felt that rare, genuine affection for Honnar Devereaux: here was someone he could work with, joke with, and trust.

“Thank you, truly,” he said, “but that would defeat the point of the deal. It isn’t really about Lance. He was just the reason it happened. If I wanted, I could give him the million and never miss it. But he challenged me in front of everyone...” Cross lowered his head and paused briefly. “And now... you see, I want to prove to myself that I can do it.”

When he finished, he looked up at Devereaux, who simply watched him in silence, his jaw clenched.

Cross gave a wry smile, took a deep breath, and looked into the distance. It seemed they were both thinking the same thing.

“Your friend’s a real bastard...” Honnar finally said through his teeth.

Cross shrugged, stepped closer, and leaned back against the hood of Devereaux’s tall SUV.

“We have a lot of memories together. Yes, he can be petty, and sometimes stupidly arrogant, but there were times when he was willing to put his life on the line for me. And I don’t forget the good things.”

“I understand. Then let’s get this business going and make it work. At least I can help you that way,” Devereaux said.

“The thing is, there’s a clause in the agreement: no previous connections or contacts, no dealings with or help from old friends and acquaintances. And I don’t want to break it.”

Honnar turned to face him, looking puzzled.

“So what now? I’ve already sorted out the licence!”

“That doesn’t put an end to the business, but you and I can’t be partners until next January. We’ll have to wait,” Cross replied, still relaxed and calm.

Honnar bit his lip and thought. A silence stretched between them. Then he said, “I know how to get around that clause and make this work for both of us without putting it off.”

“Mm?”

“Someone else joins as a partner in my place, but with my money and the resources I can provide.”

Cross straightened and held out his hand. Devereaux slapped his palm against it.

“Now you’re talking. And remember, I suggested that right from the start!” Cross said with a grin.

They went back to joking, and by then none of the old distance remained between them.

Chapter 14

Just before seven on Saturday evening, Cross parked outside the entrance to Milena's building. In the dimness of the back seat lay a bouquet of fresh scarlet roses, heavy with fragrance. He leaned back against the car, slipped his hands into his pockets, and waited, counting every second. He wore a fitted dark blue jacket that outlined his broad shoulders and strong chest. His new wardrobe was gradually filling with clothes he felt at home in. Well-made and comfortable, with no loud branding, yet unmistakably expensive. Cross had always chosen such things himself, carefully, to suit his style without being ornate. Simple and understated, but every stitch said that the man wearing them was accustomed to the best and knew how to wear it.

The evening was quiet. Soft lamplight spilled across the wet asphalt, and the air carried a faint scent of rain and spring. The wind stirred his collar, but Cross did not notice the cold. All his attention was fixed on the doors.

Then they opened. Milena stepped out in a light-coloured coat, her loose hair catching the light. She walked calmly, with an ease and quiet confidence in her movements. Cross straightened, a smile came to his face of its own accord, and the whole world fell silent, leaving only the two of them in that moment.

"Hi," she said, smiling too as she came closer.

He bent slightly and brushed his lips against her cheek.

"Hi. You look lovely," he said softly, his gaze lingering on her eyes.

"Thank you. You look very attractive too," Milena replied.

"If I've managed to attract a beauty like you, I must be damn attractive!"

"I suppose we're both lucky." Milena laughed.

"Definitely." He opened the door for her and, gently holding her hand, helped her into the front seat. Then he took out the bouquet and placed it in her arms.

"Make it even prettier with your smile..."

"Oh God... they're beautiful..." She buried her face in the roses, closed her eyes, and breathed in their intoxicating scent. There was genuine delight in her voice. "I haven't had flowers in a hundred years, let alone flowers like these... Thank you!"

Cross still stood beside her, watching her with quiet pleasure.

"Your hundred years of happiness are only beginning," he said, closing the door and walking around the car to get behind the wheel.

Once settled in his seat, he smiled again. His palm touched her hand, and he gently lifted it to his lips.

"Thank you for coming. I'm very happy."

Milena watched him with green eyes full of curiosity and things left unsaid.

"You know, Chris..."

"What?" He started the engine and eased the car onto the road.

"I have this feeling that we've met... as though I knew you before."

"Really?" He glanced at her briefly, hiding a small stab of tension beneath his calm. "People often tell me that. Perhaps it's a kinship of souls. In our case, it certainly is, because I felt it too. From the first minute." His fingers threaded through hers, and he gave her hand a gentle squeeze.

Milena glanced at their joined hands but did not withdraw hers. He continued to hold it confidently, looking ahead.

At last, he parked by the restaurant entrance. The warm glow of the streetlamps softly filled the car. He got out first, walked around, opened her door, and offered his hand. His fingers closed around hers with a strength in which she felt a certain care.

“Careful, my lady,” he said quietly, noticing the slippery paving beneath their feet and her beige heels, which matched her coat.

Milena carefully set the bouquet aside and stepped out, adjusting her hair a little. He caught the softness and grace of the movement. His gaze was direct and warm, with a hint of curiosity as he studied her. He was in no hurry to release her hand, and they went inside together.

Soft lighting and muted voices greeted them in the restaurant, where the scents of wine and fine food lingered in the air. The host recognised Cross, who had arranged the reservation beforehand, and quietly led them toward their table. They left their coats with the cloakroom attendant and headed farther into the dining room, but Cross stopped for a moment, looking her figure over from the bottom up with open admiration. Milena smiled broadly. Her dress, a rich lilac shade and falling just below her knees, flattered her silhouette, fitting closely over her curves and showing off her long, slender legs. His gaze reached her eyes, and he said softly:

“What I see is even better than I imagined.”

Their table by the window, overlooking the lights of the city at night, was perfectly laid. Cross pulled out her chair, waited until she was settled, and only then sat down himself. A chilled bottle of white wine already stood on the table. A minute later, the waiter graciously poured it into their glasses.

“You know, I thought this evening would be good. Now I’m sure it’ll be special,” Cross said.

All his attention was on her. He did not study the menu, glance at his phone, or search the room for anyone. All the space, all the time, and the entire mood belonged to her alone. To Milena.

“Do you prefer red or white?” he asked, looking into her eyes.

“White. Light, but... with some character.” She smiled a little.

“Then I guessed right. It’s just like you,” he replied, almost in a whisper. “You look gentle, but there’s a whole storm inside.”

Milena lowered her eyes, though a smile played on her lips.

“And you? What do you taste like?”

“Dangerous question, Milena.” Cross leaned forward a little, holding her gaze. “Honestly, you’d be better off trying than listening.”

She laughed and shook her head.

“And you call this a safe dinner?”

“Safety’s boring.” He moved his glass slightly, as though clearing the space between them. “Tell me what you’re afraid of instead.”

“Afraid of?...” She thought for a moment. “Probably spending my life on the wrong person.”

“Then we have that in common,” he answered at once. “I’m afraid of making the wrong choice too. But tonight...” His gaze moved over her face, slowly committing every detail to memory. “I have a feeling... that I’m on the right path.”

“You’re very convincing,” she remarked.

“I simply don’t waste words. Especially on a woman who’s touched something in me.”

They fell silent for a second, but there was a particular fullness to that silence.

“What shall we drink to?” she asked, changing the subject.

“To both of us having a chance tonight. And to it becoming a beginning, rather than just an episode.”

They clinked glasses, and he took his first sip without looking away.

Cross eased into a casual conversation, asking questions in a way that turned her answers into stories rather than bare facts. He listened so closely that she felt like the center of his universe. His compliments sounded like observations from someone who saw more in her than she had ever thought to notice herself.

“Tell me about yourself.” Her voice was gentle, but her eyes watched him closely.

Cross leaned back a little, considering his options. For a second, he said nothing, deciding which side of himself to reveal.

"I came over from the Balkans in the early two thousands," he said at last. "Studied, trained in banking... then life swept me along. I'm a partner in several businesses, some small, some not so small. Life's hectic. You can't fit it all into a few words. It's a tough world, mostly a man's world. But..." He paused. "I get the feeling life has toughened you up, too."

Milena tilted her head with interest.

"What makes you think that?"

"Because there's nothing naïve about you. Which means you've had your share of joys and blows." He touched the stem of his wineglass, turning it slowly. "Once, in a meeting room, I watched a young woman, just as calm as you are now, turn an entire negotiation around with a single sentence. There were eight men sitting there, and every one of them was stunned. She stood up, took her folder of documents, and said, 'When you're ready to talk seriously, you'll know where to find me.' The door closed, and the room went so quiet you could hear the clock on the wall ticking away the seconds. Three days later, they signed the contract on her terms."

He smiled, watching Milena's reaction.

"Ever since then, I've known that silence can sometimes carry more strength than any words."

She smiled, too, but a question flickered in her eyes: *What is he leaving out?* That suited him perfectly.

Milena looked away for a moment, as though searching her memory for something she was willing to share.

"When I was a teenager," she began quietly, "we went through... let's call it a difficult time at home. People we'd helped turned their backs on us. That was when I realized other people's promises are worth nothing unless they're backed up by actions. Since then, I've tried to rely on myself and a couple of people I trust completely."

She gave a faint, wry smile, though sadness showed through it.

"And yes, sometimes it makes me too cautious. But I'd rather err on the side of distrust than lose everything again for someone else's gain."

Cross listened closely, without interrupting. Then he tilted his head a little and spoke.

"That isn't caution, Milena. It's experience. And, honestly, it suits you."

She flushed ever so slightly. Catching that moment, he let the pause linger, holding her gaze until the world beyond their table ceased to exist. He laid his hand over hers and lowered his voice, each word still clear.

"You know, I don't like making promises unless I'm sure I can keep them. Actually, I avoid putting myself in that position at all. But when I say something, it's already a plan, not just words. I know very well what it means to be left alone, and I know what it feels like to have someone beside you who stays to the end. And yes... I don't like losing people who matter to me."

He fell silent again, gauging how deeply those words would sink in.

"So if you let me take even one step closer, I won't disappoint you," he said after a little while.

Milena lowered her eyes to her glass, but a barely perceptible smile appeared on her face. He understood that she was torn between caution and the desire to believe him. To ease the seriousness of the moment, he raised his eyebrows slightly and added with a hint of humor:

"And don't worry, I'm not dangerous... except perhaps to your conviction that perfect men don't exist."

Milena laughed softly, and that laugh sounded like a small surrender.

At the end of dinner, when the waiter discreetly brought the bill, Cross didn't even look at it. He simply slipped his card inside and continued their conversation, as though the moment didn't warrant so much as a pause.

"If you'd like to go for a walk, there's a place I want to show you. It's a little like the two of us: it seems simple, but it has a secret," he said, rising and offering her his hand.

And by then, she already knew: he had got what he wanted.

Half an hour's drive brought them to a turnoff from the main highway running along the foot of the mountains. Cross turned, and the car began a gentle climb up the winding road. With every minute, the city below grew smaller, and the air fresher and cleaner.

At the overlook, the dark, still surface of the lake greeted them, golden trails of reflected waterfront lights trembling on the water. To their right, the mountains stood in clear silhouette through a faint evening mist, while below, the city lay like a scattering of sparks on black velvet. Cross switched off the engine and lingered for a few seconds, simply looking ahead and committing the moment to memory.

He got out, walked around the car, and opened her door. The damp scent of spring mingled with the smell of pine from the scattered trees clinging to the slopes.

"Look," he said quietly, leading her to the edge of the overlook, where sturdy metal railings ran around the perimeter. Below the slope, a little stream murmured, catching glimmers of lamplight. "I like coming here when I need to breathe. Every man should have a place where he can leave behind everything he doesn't need." He spoke as he looked into the distance, then turned to her, his voice growing softer and warmer. "I brought you here tonight. That means you're what matters most to me, what I always want to feel close by."

He said it quietly, then fell silent, keeping his eyes on hers. That was why his words went straight to their mark. There was no wish to impress in his gaze, only honesty and an inner certainty.

Without thinking, Milena stepped closer, until her shoulder barely brushed his chest. Cross swept a stray lock of hair away from her face and let his fingers linger. Their breath mingled in the cold air, and the world around them seemed to disappear.

"Milena..." His voice grew quieter still. "I like you more than I'd planned."

She lifted her face a little, searching for words, about to say something, but just then he asked: "May I...?"

He didn't wait for an answer, leaving only the briefest pause for her to choose. When she stayed where she was, he leaned down and kissed her, slowly and gently, but with growing passion. And that moment was only the beginning of something that could no longer be stopped.

Chapter 15

By July, Cross's ventures had moved beyond their first tentative steps and become a stable system. Everything he put his hand to came to life and began turning a profit. The stores were expanding, and the car dealership was running at full capacity.

The morning chill still lingered in the small warehouse behind the store. A damp cold rose from the crates of ice as Cross arrived and walked between the rows at his usual pace. He never hurried, but he never wasted a second either. Everyone knew him: someone nodded from behind bunches of greens; someone else raised a hand in greeting beside a barrel of honey.

"How's the shrimp looking today?" he asked Beatrice, looking into her eyes rather than at the price tag.

"Keeping us on our toes," she said. "One refrigerated truck broke down near Lewiston, but I've already arranged another. We'll have it here by this evening. Same price we agreed on."

"Keep the volume up. We'll fill out the selection with chilled shrimp. Leave the margin alone; we'll make it up in turnover," Cross replied, stepping back to let a worker pass with a cart full of strawberries. "Roy will come by with the paperwork around three."

He picked up a box of strawberries to take home, though home that morning wasn't his own address. He liked the way they smelled: of June and someone in particular.

Mazur & Sons was buzzing at that hour. A line had already formed at the fish counter. Roy was checking stock levels. Two girls from Greyfield helping out moved with almost measured precision: one smile, two quick steps.

"Look." Roy turned his tablet toward him. "Yesterday's cream sales beat the forecast. It's moving better than we expected. Fruit's up eighteen percent. Fish slowed down around noon, but we made it up by evening."

"Then give the fish a stronger display first thing in the morning. Move the ice 'island' closer to the entrance. Let the cold greet the heat," Cross said briskly. "And find another person to help with the morning deliveries. You're worn out by the afternoon."

"Will do. By the way..." Roy lowered his voice and grinned. "People are talking about you. In a good way."

"Let them talk," Cross replied with a slight smile. "As long as they have something worthwhile to say."

He left the sales floor and went to the staff entrance, where a crumpled delivery map hung on the wall. Studying it, he worked through the routes, then took out a marker and drew three quick lines, changing the delivery order. Logistics was chess on wheels: sending the right truck out first saved three phone calls that would never need to be made.

His phone vibrated. A message from Milena appeared: *"Woke up and remembered the way you laughed last night. I miss you."*

He caught himself smiling and sent a brief reply: *"I miss you too. Good morning. Eight tonight? I'll pick you up."* Then he put his phone aside.

The store's little administrative office occupied a former storeroom that had been hastily converted. It served as a temporary headquarters. The manager and accountant worked side by side at two desks, and urgent meetings were held there too. A separate building for the corporation's future head office was still only a plan, so for now they had to put up with the spartan conditions. A bookcase reaching the ceiling, a heavy safe, a couple of shelves on the walls: everything was already buried under folders, delivery notes, formal records, estimates, and piles of other paperwork.

Bett, the accountant, was practically drowning in it and often didn't leave for home until after midnight. The newly hired managers, Clyde in purchasing and Beatrice in logistics, each shouldered their own share of the chaos. Roy Mazur was learning to cope with his growing responsibilities.

Besides the store, he now had the dealership too. The elder Mazur still hadn't found a capable assistant and, despite his age, took an active part in managing things himself. Whenever he couldn't, Cross picked up the threads. Brian Mercer, Honnar's man, had taken on a substantial share of the work at the dealership; without him, it would simply have ground to a halt. Hart had changed too. He had put a manager in charge of his garage and now traveled back and forth between Greyfield and the city. He had so much energy that he seemed to have shed ten years.

The changes in them were impossible to miss. Kacper Mazur looked noticeably younger too: his step had acquired a spring, his smile had grown broader, and instead of giving his secretary a curt nod, he now showered her with compliments. Roy had become a different man altogether. More and more often, he wore suits with neatly pressed shirts, a stylish, tidy haircut, and a watch on his wrist, in place of his grubby overalls and old boots. Even Tom Hart, forever the mechanic in oil-stained shirts, had bought himself a couple of jackets and ties.

Cross watched it all with a barely perceptible smile. To him, they were like stones in a sauna stove. He poured on water and watched the heated bodies give off steam. People were changing, and that meant the business was more than work: it was a school, a forge of character. In that transformation, he saw the surest promise for the future. Even if one day he was no longer there, the corporation would stand.

Partnership offers were pouring in. Suppliers from neighboring counties offered access to their distribution networks, banks were already considering lines of credit, and several farms wanted to sign long-term contracts with them. They had to sit down, work through the figures, and discuss what came next.

They were beginning to understand something simple: the little shop was no longer just a store. It had become an organization ready to grow into a real corporation.

Folders lay spread across the table: sales reports, supplier contracts, warehouse lease documents, and an agreement with a logistics company. The store shelves were overflowing with goods, the second floor was packed to capacity, and profits were growing steadily.

"We've secured supplies from three major farms and signed an agreement with a transport company out of Bozeman," one of the managers reported. "Deliveries are running smoothly."

"Good." Cross nodded, turning the pages. "We need to think about expanding. People in town are already talking about our store, and demand is growing faster than we can bring stock in. That's encouraging..."

"Are you suggesting we open more stores?" Kacper asked, leaning forward a little.

"Exactly," Cross replied firmly. "I'm thinking of two new locations. One in the southern part of town, closer to the highway, where the truckers and tourist buses come through. The other in a town nearer the border. We need to reach different groups of customers. I've already found a few premises for the new stores. I've come to terms with the landlords, but I haven't given a final answer. I wanted us to discuss everything together first. It's not a question of grabbing more space. It's a question of which places we can actually handle, and where we can grow without overloading the team."

He looked around at everyone, his gaze lingering on Roy and Bett.

"So right now, we need to assess our resources: staff, logistics, sales volume. If we can't handle it, no lease is going to save us. But if everything adds up, we can move on to the contracts."

A pause settled over the room as everyone took in what he had said. Roy gave a restrained smile.

"We're becoming a chain."

Cross tapped his fingers on the table and gave a cold smile.

"We already are a chain. The only question is how soon everyone else finds out."

Clyde leaned back in his chair, rubbed his temples, and gave a dry chuckle.

"Chris, do you realize those two new stores will turn the rest of my hair gray? Your marker lines already live in my head. I wake up and see arrows on a map."

Beatrice couldn't quite suppress a smile.

“Then draw thinner lines. But seriously, if we open the southern store by the highway, I need an early ‘cold-chain window,’ with unloading between five and seven in the morning. Otherwise, we run short of ice during the day and end up paying for it in write-offs.”

Cross took out his planner and clicked his pen.

“Writing that down: early cold-chain window, five to seven, for the southern store. What about the second location, nearer the border?”

“That’s more about customer flow than refrigeration,” Roy put in. “People come through buying small wholesale quantities. They want everything in one go: canned goods, dairy, dry mixes. The displays need to make an immediate impact.”

“Which means,” Beatrice continued, “we need a small cross-docking setup at the warehouse: assemble pallets for both stores in the evening, load them at night, so by opening time the stores are ‘breathing’ stock instead of empty air.”

Kacper turned to Bett.

“What do you think, Bett?”

The accountant pushed her glasses up her nose and pointed her pencil at a statement.

“I’ll give you the boring answer: cash-flow gaps. We pay suppliers on net fourteen, net ten for some items. Sales bring in cash every day, but payroll, refrigeration, and fuel costs are rising. If we take on two stores at once, we need either to negotiate discounts for paying upfront or to get bank financing.”

Kacper nodded slightly.

“I’ll talk to the bank. Arrange an unsecured working-capital line based on our turnover. I’ll need the figures by this evening.”

Clyde raised a finger.

“And another thing: staffing. We needed someone to handle morning deliveries at the main store the day before yesterday, and each new store will need a manager. We’ll have to train them here. Roy?”

“I’ll recruit three people to have in reserve,” he replied briefly. “Let them shadow me and Beatrice for a week. We’ll soon see who can handle it. And, Chris, I’m still going to ask for a camera at the back entrance. ‘Hidden shrinkage’ isn’t just about fish.”

Cross made a note in his planner.

“Camera at the back entrance by the end of the week. As for the fish display, we keep the ice island by the entrance, like today. It works.”

“And you call that ‘not giving orders’?” Bett said with a wry smile, though there was relief in her voice.

“I’m recording the decisions,” Cross replied gently. “The team makes them. If there’s something we can’t handle, say so straightaway. We’ll sort it out faster.”

For a second, everyone fell silent. Sounds drifted in: a van door slammed beyond the wall, and someone laughed on the sales floor.

“As for the product range at the southern store,” Beatrice said, returning to business, “I want to push harder on prepared salads and cold sandwiches. Something truckers and road crews can grab and go. That will give us turnover without putting more strain on the kitchen.”

“Agreed,” Kacper said with a nod. “Just keep the prices reasonable. Let them buy two instead of one.”

Clyde tapped his knuckles on the table.

“To support that, we’ll rent one more refrigerated truck for three months. If the stores take off, we’ll get one on a lease.”

“Go ahead,” Cross said. “But with an option to return it. And check the insurance. We’ve already had our ‘Lewiston.’ We’re not taking that chance twice.”

Bett turned over a sheet.

“And one last thing: reporting. I physically can’t handle two more stores on my own. I need an assistant for the day-to-day paperwork, and once a week I need a summary for the whole chain in one file, instead of three different realities.”

“Hire an assistant,” Kacper replied at once. “And give yourself a bonus. We see how hard you’re working.”

Bett looked embarrassed and merely nodded.

Roy looked at Cross.

“Do you want to open both stores at the same time?”

“No.” Cross put down his pen. “One after the other. The southern store first, with three weeks to prepare. Then the border store, two weeks after the first one opens. We need one variable at a time. We’re building a schedule, not playing roulette.”

Clyde let out a relieved breath.

“Then I might manage to keep my hair from going gray.”

“Don’t get your hopes up,” Beatrice said. “I’ll turn it gray myself.”

Everyone laughed, and the tension eased.

Cross closed his planner and smoothed a palm over the cover.

“Let’s sum it up. Southern store: cold-chain window from five to seven, grab-and-go food, a camera at the back entrance, and an extra refrigerated truck with an option to return it. Border store: opening two weeks after the southern one; pallets assembled at night. Staffing: three prospective managers in reserve, and someone to handle morning deliveries, urgently. Money: Mr. Mazur handles the bank credit line; Bett puts together a cash-flow gap forecast and hires an assistant. Monitoring: a weekly summary for the chain every Friday, all in one file.”

“And KPIs,” the elder Mazur added. “For everyone. Short and clear.”

“Yes,” Cross confirmed. “No phantom metrics. Turnover, write-offs, gross profit, inventory turnover rate, NPS at the checkout. Numbers are the language we use to understand each other.”

The noise of the sales floor rose again beyond the door, and someone called Roy’s name. He stood up.

“I’ll go check the ice island.”

“And the smile,” Beatrice reminded him. “We’re a chain now.”

Roy gave them a thumbs-up as he left. Clyde followed him. Bett gathered her papers into a neat stack and, already at the door, let out a breath.

“Thank you for the assistant. And for Fridays: one summary will save my life. And, by the way... for the bonus!”

Three of them remained. Kacper looked up at Cross.

“Two stores means we’re no longer responsible just to one another. We’re responsible to the town. Ready?”

Cross gave a barely perceptible smile.

“I’m ready. So is the town.”

He stood and picked up his jacket from the chair. Cool air carrying the smell of fresh fish drifted in through the gap in the door. Suddenly, a summer breeze from the open window mingled with it, damp, warm, and full of movement.

“Let’s get to work,” Mazur said.

Cross offered no objection. He simply nodded, clicked his pen, and took another look at the map with his marker lines.

Chapter 16

Back in the car, heading toward Greyfield, he thought over what he had heard. One thought caught on another, forming a picture of the future. “A chain of stores” sounded good, but it required a strong supply base and substantial investment. Expanding the dealership, reaching agreements with dealers... more puzzles to solve. But he was already in up to his neck, with neither the intention nor the desire to get out. The excitement had taken hold of him too, just as it might in a casino.

They left the store’s profits untouched, apart from a small percentage to cover living expenses. Everything else went back into the business. They had begun paying interest on the loan Kacper Mazur had secured at the bank’s head office, but those payments did little to change the picture and had no effect on performance. Sales were booming. The same was happening at the dealership. Hart counted every cent that was “his” and, with complete trust, put it into the new venture, drawing funds from his old business to invest in the current project.

Cross was doing the same. Despite mixed results along the way, his trading had already earned him hundreds of thousands of dollars. The prop trading firm had signed a new partnership agreement with him, or with Kacper Mazur on paper, for a five-percent share of total earnings, and Cross was now all but sailing on his own. Of the money he was trading on the market that day, a little more than half was his own, earned capital, a fact the firm had formally acknowledged. But Cross kept the agreement in place, preserving a fallback channel so he could always bring in more capital if unforeseen circumstances arose.

Yes, business was going better than ever. It would have been better still if he hadn’t been pulling hundreds of thousands from the account and pouring them into businesses outside the market. Had every last cent stayed on the exchange, he might have settled his wager with Lance as soon as tomorrow. But the ventures he had drawn half of Greyfield into were worth it.

Cross pondered that. It was strange that Lance hadn’t raised the alarm, and that the oversight committee they had assembled hadn’t bothered him once. Surely they knew about everything. Well, almost everything, except his arrangement with Honnar. Even so, Cross could honestly tell himself, at least, that Devereaux had played no decisive part in his success. Yes, he had done some running around to get the paperwork sorted, and his people sent customers to the dealership, but someone else Cross had reached an agreement with could have done that too. Couldn’t he have found someone? Of course he could. Devereaux had simply been quicker.

Cross drove attentively, thinking. It was all very strange... and at the same time, predictable. John Lawrence, who managed Cross’s company, Begovich Trading, in New York, almost always sent reports showing positive results. Cross took out a cigarette, flicked his lighter, and drew deeply on it, sinking into his thoughts. Surely everything couldn’t keep going this smoothly, without a single serious hitch...? A little more, and he would reach the million. But while things were looking up, he had to keep climbing.

An image of Bob Colton’s farm rose in his memory. Hart, Bob, Roy... these were the people who had believed in him six months earlier, when he arrived with a backpack and a hundred dollars in his pocket. Now it was his turn to believe in them.

He turned sharply off the highway onto the country road leading to the farm. The dogs began barking while he was still at the gate. Cross took out his phone.

“Hey, buddy. Are you home?” His voice sounded confident.

“Yes, just got back. Good to hear from you, Chris. Things seem to be going well. I’ve been meaning to thank you, but I still haven’t managed to come by,” Bob replied.

“I’m at your gate. Open up.”

Soon they were sitting in the kitchen at a large wooden table. Cross praised him for getting the work running smoothly and for keeping his word. Then, looking him straight in the eye, he said seriously:

“It’s time to move up. Your farm needs to grow. I need more produce, and I want you to be my main partner, someone I can rely on.”

Bob went still, then clasped Cross’s hand in both of his. Something new flickered in his eyes: a mixture of gratitude and faith.

Cross sat in the farmer’s spacious but slightly worn kitchen. A pitcher of milk and fresh bread stood on the table in simple country fashion. Somewhere farther inside the house, he could hear Bob’s wife and daughter talking. Bob, a heavyset man with a weather-beaten face, spoke with some uncertainty.

“I’d be glad to increase the herd, but where would I put them...? There isn’t enough land. We haven’t got the pasture for it, and feed gets more expensive every day. That’s what it all comes down to.”

Cross leaned back in his chair and spent a few seconds thinking in silence. Just then, his gaze happened to catch on the partly open window. A dull, rhythmic thudding came through it, like a drum. Cross stood and went to the window. In the backyard, beneath a shelter, a boy of about seventeen was pounding an old punching bag. His punches were sharp but haphazard. His hands were fast, but his technique was rough, his blows flying wide.

Cross watched him for a while. Following his gaze, Bob fell silent and waited. But the shadow of his uncle rose in Cross’s memory: training on the damp concrete floor of a Bosnian basement, the smell of leather from old gloves. His own awkward movements as a teenager, and the trainer’s stern shout. Cutting the memory short, he returned to the table.

“Listen, Bob.” His voice was firm. “I’ll think about how to arrange it all. But start with the basics: find a suitable place for a bigger farm. Work out an estimate for pasture, feed, and expanding the herd. And calculate exactly what you have available yourself. The figures need to be absolutely clear. I need an accurate picture, and then we’ll start taking steps.”

Bob came alive at once. His eyes lit up, and he almost rushed over to Cross, caught his hand in his own heavy hands, and shook it hard.

“God, son... I thought everyone had written me off. You have no idea what this means...” His eyes shone with immense gratitude and hope.

Cross clapped him on the shoulder.

“I’m not doing this just for you, Bob. It’s for all of us. And for the town. Greyfield needs to grow.”

Then he went out into the backyard. Without asking his host’s permission, he pushed open the kitchen door and found himself facing Bob’s son, a lean, wiry boy with a stubborn face. Seeing Cross, the boy stopped and lowered his hands in embarrassment.

“What’s your name?” Cross asked.

“Nate,” he replied, wiping the sweat from his forehead.

Without a word, Cross took off his shirt, tossed it onto the railing, and held out his hand.

“Gloves.”

The boy blinked in surprise, as did his father, watching from the window. Then he fetched another battered pair and tossed them to Cross. Pulling them on quickly, Cross turned toward the bag.

“Watch closely. A punch isn’t just about strength. It’s rhythm, breathing, and control.” Taking his stance, Cross struck once, then again, faster and sharper now. His technique had been honed until it was second nature. His voice catching with exertion, he added, “Footwork, body movement, defense. All of it together.”

The dull blows merged into a rhythm in the vibrating air. The boy watched, spellbound, his mouth slightly open.

“Try doing that,” Cross said, stepping aside to let him take his place.

That evening, he stood at Milena’s door with the basket of strawberries he had picked up at the store that morning. She opened it, and her hair, loosely gathered at the back of her head, caught the light from inside. Cross stepped in, took off his shoes, kissed her tenderly, and went into the living room. Two plates and a chilled bottle of white wine stood on the table.

“You always turn up like a bad habit and good news,” she said with a smile.

“I have a gift for colorful descriptions,” he replied, setting the basket on the table. “And seasonal fruit.”

They ate and talked: about a cashier who had come up a couple of dollars short, the manager who had made a scene, and Milena defending the girl at work (“You should have seen his face!”); about the downstairs neighbor (“She spies on my drying rack”); about how he had rearranged the delivery routes that day with three lines of a marker. She shared her own stories and listened closely to his, but what she wanted to hear was news about him, rather than the business.

“You know,” she said quietly, “you do everything as though you’re half a step ahead. And everyone trusts you so much, Chris.”

“This is only the beginning. And yes, a pretty good beginning...” he said, with a distinct note of pride.

Almost inaudibly, she said:

“Move in with me.”

Cross met her gaze.

“Give me a little time. We’ll have it all...”

Milena nodded. Neither a yes nor a no. She understood. Perhaps in her own way, but he didn’t launch into explanations or promises. He was happy with her, here and now. And yes, he had serious plans for their future, something she didn’t yet suspect, but he wasn’t rushing things.

Later, when lights were going out across the town, he stepped onto her porch. The night smelled of strawberries and her scent. His phone chimed with an incoming message, a brief report from Roy: *“Ice island by the entrance. A line this morning like at the movies.”*

He replied: *“Same again tomorrow. Get the fish on display early too.”*

He put down his phone and went back inside, where warm arms were already waiting for him. He allowed himself to turn his attention away from the charts and all the bustle of business, giving himself entirely to feeling and passion.

Chapter 17

Two more stores opened before the end of summer. The business was growing, and so was the team: salespeople, cashiers, warehouse workers. All of Greyfield was being drawn into its orbit. Cross increasingly handed management over to Roy, teaching him every aspect of delegation. Roy caught on quickly and was gradually becoming a leader in his own right.

Through his contacts, with Devereaux behind them, Brian was securing premises for a second dealership. Cross, meanwhile, had thrown himself into trading, spending every available moment in front of the screens, catching the market's impulses and building his capital. He had set himself a goal: settle his agreement with Lance by the end of September, reclaim his name, and take Milena to New York.

Meanwhile, Colton had found a plot for the new farm: level ground beside a river, with good pasture. He wasn't rushing, but he walked around it as though he could already see his herds there. Kacper Mazur stepped in at once, calling on every contact he had to secure a loan for the land and the first batches of livestock, which Bob had already arranged to buy. Chain Hamilton helped with the paperwork, using his influence to speed up registration and clear the bureaucratic hurdles.

Cross had no time to get involved in the details, nor did he need to. The authority he had built in such a comparatively short time was already enough. Once he gave the go-ahead, everything ran smoothly. In fact, people were doing things he hadn't even had time to put into words. A little longer, just a little longer, and his hands would be free!

But that was precisely when the troubling calls from New York began coming more often. John Lawrence, his manager and right-hand man at Begovich Trading, was contacting him more frequently than usual. The business had begun to falter, and Cross's involvement was becoming essential. He gave instructions remotely, but the company needed him there in person. Eventually, he called an urgent meeting with the oversight committee and, of course, Lance. In New York.

"There's a problem, and I want to discuss it in person. Not over the phone," he told Toby.

"Of course, Cross. Need a hand? Shall I buy a ticket?"

"No, Toby. It's not a personal problem. It's the business. I'll let you know when I'm arriving. We'll meet at my office."

Toby's first response had been that of a close friend, without bureaucracy or references to signed documents. But after speaking to the others, he called back. By then, Cross had already booked a ticket on the next available flight. Toby's voice was firm.

"Lance is completely against you returning to the company's affairs, at least without someone accompanying you. He doesn't trust you."

Cross gripped the phone, barely containing his fury. Without answering, he lowered his hand. He sat in silence and began rapidly weighing his options. Send Lance a million dollars and cut him out of his life forever? Or what?!

Twenty minutes later, after washing his face with cool water, he called Lance.

"Hello, Cross." His friend's voice was heavy. "You got yourself into this mess. Making the agreement legally binding was your idea, not mine. And a million dollars is a million dollars," Lance began at once, without waiting for Cross to speak.

"What do you want? I never promised I'd let my business collapse for the sake of our arrangement," Cross countered calmly, though he was clearly struggling to control himself.

"And what would you do in my place? How would you handle it?"

"First of all, I wouldn't show off at a party by making my friend look like some useless bastard sheltering under his parents' wing!" Cross gestured with his index finger as though Lance stood before him. Then he squeezed his eyes shut and fell silent until Lance spoke again.

"I told the truth, whether you like it or not. But that was the only time in our friendship I didn't keep my mouth shut, which is what you've always been used to, my friend! Whatever stunt you pulled, whatever you did, it was always treated as the right decision. But it wasn't always right, far from it! And none of us dared say it to your face. But behind your back..."

"Shut the fuck up, Lance," Cross said through clenched teeth. "This isn't about the money. I could make a million a million times over, and giving it to you would be no problem. All you'd have to do is ask. But you're trying to drag me through the mud, and you shouldn't..." He paused to contain his rising anger. "I could fly over right now and terminate every agreement I have with you."

"Your choice. But I didn't draw it up, and I'm not the one who should break it. Want to fly over and get back to your business? Go ahead. But that will mean you've signed off on your own result. I'm just warning you. And by the way, this conversation is being recorded, so you can't deny what you said later."

Cross almost choked in disbelief. The man who had once been his closest friend, who had been through hell and high water with him, was speaking to him like a stranger. Memories flashed through his mind: all the times he had bailed Lance out, given him money, even fought for the son of a bitch, all but pulled him out of prison and out of a noose. Lance always managed to land himself in some fresh pile of shit, and Cross was there. He had always been there for him! And now... he couldn't believe his ears...

He hung up and immediately called John. Glancing at his watch, he reckoned his assistant might still be at the office. It was just after six.

"Mr. Begovich?!" John sounded composed, though slightly tense.

"Contact our lawyers. I'll be at the office tomorrow at eight. Everyone needs to be there."

"Will do," John replied briefly, and Cross ended the call.

Toby was next.

"I expect all of you at my office at nine. This is important."

"So you've decided to terminate the agreement after all, Cross?" Toby asked gently, almost soothingly.

"Yes. But Lance is in for a surprise. I was planning to strike in September, but since he's asking for it, I'll do it tomorrow."

"Cross..."

"Toby, I'll see you at nine. And... keep what I said about the surprise between us. Agreed?"

"You know I'm always on your side."

Cross wasted no time. He called Kacper, Roy, and Brian into action. Half an hour later, they had all gathered in the living room at the Mazurs' house.

"I need to withdraw my assets. Today, right now," Cross said, standing before them. His voice was cold, with no further explanation. "For just two days, three at most. I'll come back with an even larger contribution. Don't ask why. I'm flying to New York urgently. I need a million dollars."

"How...?" Roy couldn't finish, looking at Cross as though seeing him for the first time.

"I have six hundred thousand in my account. I need another four hundred. But not as a loan. There must be documentary proof that these assets belong to me." He delivered the last sentence without taking his eyes off Kacper.

Kacper lowered his gaze and began to think. A tense silence settled over the room.

Brian cleared his throat and, as though easing the tension, spoke calmly.

"I think we can arrange that, Mr... Back." He emphasized the surname.

"There could be an inspection tomorrow, and they could pull every document," Cross continued firmly. "The assets I hold must be completely above board."

Kacper took out his phone. Everyone turned to him. A minute later, he was speaking to the accountant.

"I need an urgent report on the partners' equity. No, right now." A pause. "Then give me the one from last week, whatever you have. Read out the figures and send the report straightaway."

Roy rushed to a shelf, grabbed a sheet of paper and a pen, and handed them to his father. Sitting down at a small table, Kacper began writing the figures and names Bett dictated.

"Chris Back: three hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars."

Cross read it aloud, and for a moment his face relaxed. He closed his eyes and let out a breath of relief.

"Another twenty-five thousand?!" Roy looked up in bewilderment.

"That's nothing," Cross said calmly. When Kacper had put down the phone, he added:

"Thank you."

"Mr. Back," Brian said, "we'll find those twenty-five thousand too. More, even."

"How?" Roy asked on behalf of Cross, who had now settled into an armchair, finally allowing himself to breathe.

"We'll sell ten of Hart's cars," Brian replied with a grin, walking over to the window as he dialed someone's number.

Cross smiled easily and poured everyone a glass of Baikal whisky.

Kacper came over and put an arm around him with fatherly affection. Cross stood and gave a barely perceptible nod.

"Thank you," he repeated, quietly and with feeling.

Roy was the only person in the room who understood nothing, but he was happy.

By nine-thirty that evening, a slim folder of documents lay before Cross.

The first page was a statement from Salt Lake Trust & Bank for a subaccount in Kacper Mazur's name. It showed every transaction since the account had been opened and a closing balance of US\$1,000,015. There was also a notarized general power of attorney granting Cross Begovich full authority to manage the funds in the account.

Finally, there was a declaration, also notarized, in which Kacper Mazur certified that the funds held in the specified subaccount belonged to Cross Begovich. Mazur's name was used solely as the nominal account holder.

The documents were impeccable. Stamps, signatures: every page inspired confidence that the game was being played by the rules.

At precisely midnight, a plane carried him to New York.

Chapter 18

Cross entered the conference room in a perfectly fitted dark blue suit, as though he had stepped off the cover of a business magazine. A white shirt and the subtle prominence of an expensive watch completed the image of a man whose style was an extension of his power. His steps were confident, without any affected heaviness. Everything about him said he owned the space. When he stopped beside the long table, those present turned their eyes toward him almost in unison. Anticipation and tension mingled in the air. Some were drawn to his charisma; others feared they wouldn't be able to hold his direct gaze. He hadn't said a word, but it was already clear that Mr. Cross Begovich had arrived at the head of the table.

"Good morning," he began. "Thank you for gathering so promptly at my request."

"Good morning."

"Hello."

The replies came almost in chorus. Cross gave a slight nod and waited for the murmur to subside before continuing.

"An audit initiated by Mr. Thorne may begin at our company today. It will focus mainly on transfers from the company account."

He looked at his chief financial officer, Linda Hawkins.

"Of course. We'll provide the documents as requested."

"Excellent," Cross replied. "Have any funds been transferred to questionable accounts over the past year and a half?"

Hawkins didn't quite understand the question and hesitated, unsure how to answer. Noticing this, Cross clarified:

"I mean, among the account holders and companies we've made one-off payments to, is there anything that might raise questions?"

"No. Everyone we deal with is a legal entity with a verified address and business activity. No dubious names."

"That's what matters most," Cross said on an exhale, leaning back slightly. Then he turned to John Lawrence, who sat on his right as usual. "After the meeting, we'll discuss our own matter separately."

"Yes, everything's ready." His assistant nodded briefly, gesturing toward the folder on the table before him.

"Good." Cross then addressed the senior department managers. "You can return to your work. We'll resume the discussion later. Review all the documents and be prepared. Thank you."

Chairs scraped back, and nine people left the room one by one. Jonathan Pierce and Michael Rosenberg, his lawyers, remained at the table. They knew every detail of his agreement with Lance Thorne. Cross slid the folder he had brought from Utah toward them. Rosenberg opened it at once and quickly scanned the pages, while Pierce followed the lines over his shoulder. When they reached the final balance on the bank statement, both looked up at Cross and froze for a moment. He sat comfortably in his chair, calmly watching them as he waited for their opinions.

"Mr. Begovich, are you terminating the partnership agreement ahead of schedule?" Rosenberg finally asked.

Cross nodded without speaking. Then he leaned a little toward the table.

"Will these documents be sufficient proof?"

"Yes, quite sufficient, provided the other side doesn't question how the sum was accumulated."

Cross gave a brief sigh.

"Of course they will. I'm more than certain they'll demand a full investigation, with the prosecutor's office involved."

“They have no grounds to involve the prosecutor’s office,” Rosenberg said.

But Pierce disagreed.

“If the other party is dissatisfied with the final documentation, the agreement entitles them to request an audit of transactions on the corporate account, the personal account, and Mr. Mazur’s subaccount, over which the power of attorney grants authority.”

Rosenberg looked at his colleague.

“If there’s resistance, yes, they’ll investigate where the money came from and where it went during the period specified in the agreement. But Mr. Begovich is prepared to provide all the documents.”

“Yes, but in any case, at least the overall inflows and withdrawals will be subject to examination.”

“No problem. Even if Mr. Thorne brings in a detective, he won’t dig anything up,” Cross replied quietly. “I did everything above board.”

“We’re more than certain of that,” Pierce replied. Rosenberg nodded in agreement and lowered his eyes.

Cross checked the time. He still had twenty minutes to spare. Excusing himself, he left the lawyers and went to his assistant’s office.

“John, when is our meeting with...?”

“Five this afternoon, Mr. Begovich.”

Cross slipped his hands into his pockets, stood by the panoramic window, and nodded slowly.

“So Godsbury has decided to switch companies...?”

“They say he’s planning to start his own.”

At that, Cross turned sharply to look at John.

“I’ve spoken to a few people, and that’s what I was told,” his assistant said, coming closer.

“But he can’t manage it on his own. He hasn’t got the experience!” Cross said with a faint smile of surprise. “Do you remember how I brought him into this business, and what he was doing before?”

“Yes. Restaurants. His business was beginning to fail.”

“And what had he made after just a year?”

“Over a million. I even remember the speeches he made in your honor at his birthday celebration.”

Cross gave a dry chuckle and turned back to the window.

“I’ll owe you for the rest of my life... You kept me from going under...”

“He practically cried, too... Though perhaps he actually did,” John added quietly.

There was a knock at the door. The secretary looked in.

“The gentlemen have arrived. They’re waiting for you in the conference room.”

Cross adjusted his tie and, lifting his chin slightly, stepped toward the door.

Everyone was there when he returned. Cross went around the group, greeting each man with a firm handshake. When he reached Lance, he gave him a friendly smile too.

“I’m glad to see you in good health, Mr. Thorne,” Cross said, looking him in the eye.

“Likewise, Mr. Begovich,” Lance replied, meeting his gaze with a serious look.

Cross then greeted Lance’s lawyer, Mr. Samuel Clayton, and went to his place opposite Lance. Before sitting down, however, he addressed the room.

“Well, gentlemen... thank you for gathering at my request...” He let the pause linger a little. “Owing to urgent business circumstances at my company, I’m obliged to suspend my partnership agreement with Mr. Thorne.” Cross gestured toward Lance as though introducing him for the first time, then continued, “Without any intention of breaching a single provision of the agreement.”

Lance leaned back in his chair, sparks of victory dancing in his eyes.

“It’s important to establish, Mr. Begovich, that you’ve reached this decision yourself, without any pressure, much less interference, from anyone else,” Lance said.

“Of course,” Cross replied. “And I doubt anyone would have managed that anyway,” he added with irony, drawing a little laughter and even a joke from the other men, his close friends and members of the oversight committee.

But neither a smile nor pleasure appeared on Lance’s face. He continued staring at the man who had once been his close friend and was now a formidable opponent.

Cross settled comfortably into his chair. Looking first at Lance’s lawyer and then at his own, he asked them to proceed with terminating the agreement between himself and Mr. Thorne in accordance with the established procedure.

Rosenberg and Clayton rose, each opening his copy of the agreement. Cross’s lawyer began reading aloud.

As he moved through the clauses, he paused and looked at the committee members and Mr. Thorne himself, receiving silent confirmation that everyone remembered the terms and that all would be taken into account.

“In the event of failure to fulfill or breach of any of the foregoing provisions of this agreement, Mr. Cross Begovich undertakes to transfer the sum of one million United States dollars to the account of Mr. Lance Thorne,” Rosenberg read clearly, then paused. Cross watched Lance. One of Lance’s eyebrows rose, and a flash of triumph passed through his eyes that he could not conceal.

“If Mr. Cross Begovich breaches none of the provisions of this agreement before the specified deadline of January 1, 2017, and provides satisfactory documentary evidence that, between January 1 and December 31, 2016, he has increased the funds in his bank account by no less than one million United States dollars, Mr. Lance Thorne shall be obliged to transfer one million United States dollars to Mr. Cross Begovich’s account. The obligation to transfer the aforementioned sum shall be fulfilled within one month, thirty calendar days, following the expiration of the agreed term or the early termination of this agreement by either party.”

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