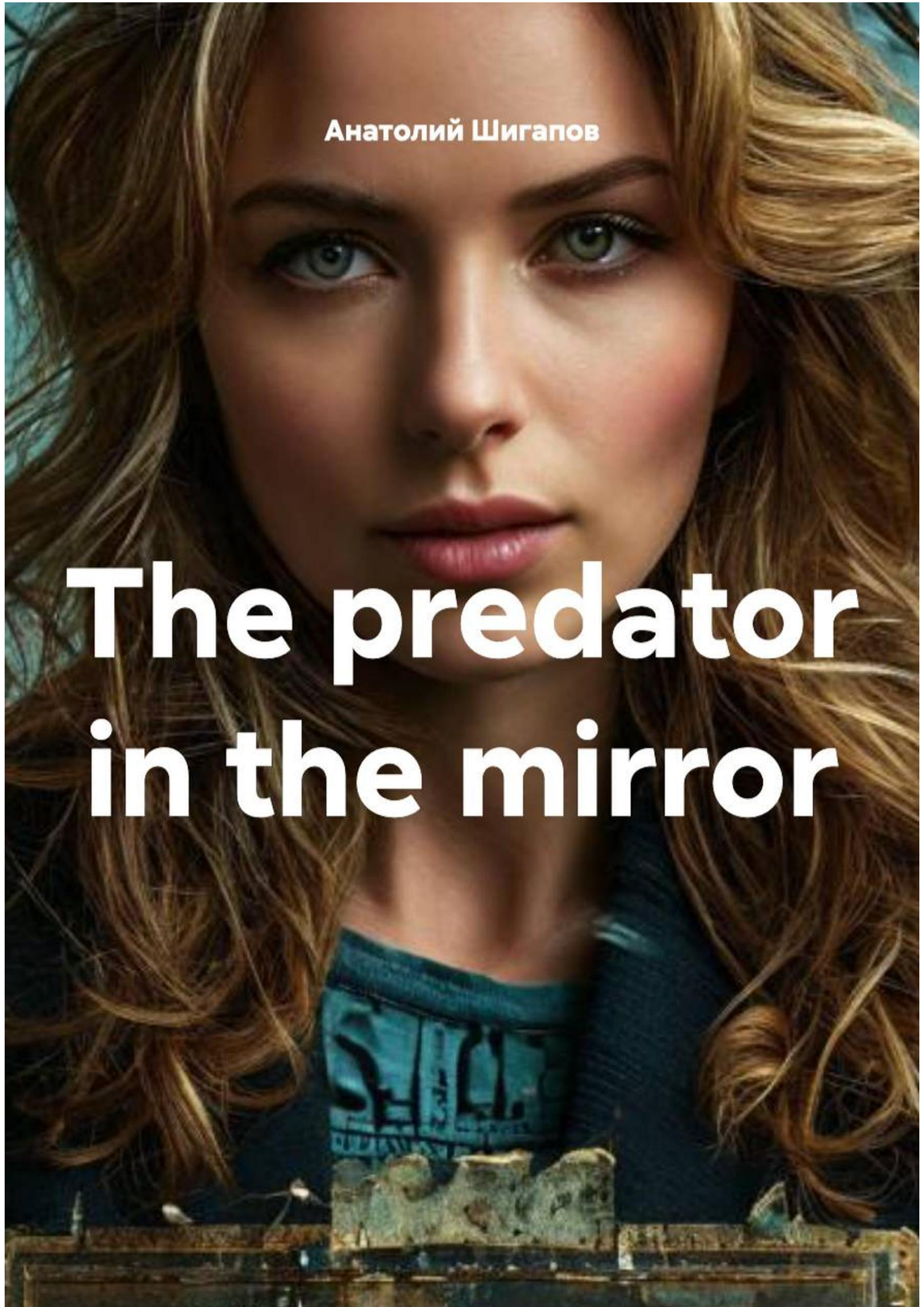




Анатолий Шигапов

The predator in the mirror

THE PREDATOR IN THE MIRROR

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The predator in the mirror

«Автор»

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Шигапов А.

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For fifteen years, she's been searching for her sister. He's been writing bestsellers, unaware that his plots were being dictated by someone else's memory. Their connection is a secret locked in the basement of a psychiatric hospital called Safe Harbor. FBI profiler Alice Wood is called to a murder scene that exactly replicates a scene from a yet-to-be-published novel by author David Morrison. The trail leads her to a locked-down institution and a patient named Lina Novak, who hasn't spoken in ten years. Is she a victim or a puppet master? And why are her letters, filled with details of future crimes, being sent to Morrison? To survive, Alice must descend into a past where the lives of abandoned children, a brutal doctor, and a man watching from the shadows are all intertwined. The truth she uncovers will shatter everything she believed in. Because sometimes, the people closest to you are the ones you thought you'd lost forever. But are they ready to forgive?

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Анатолий Шигапов

The predator in the mirror

A Psychological Thriller

Dedication

To my sister, who is five years older than me.

To the one whose palms still remember the warmth of my childhood hands. To the one who stood between me and the world, when the world was too big, too loud, too scary for a little boy just beginning to live in it.

I remember how you held my hand on the first day of school-your fingers were confident and warm, and I knew that as long as you were near, nothing bad could happen. I remember how you sat by my bed when I was afraid of the dark, telling stories of brave knights and kind dragons until sleep carried me off to safe, distant lands. I remember how you tied my shoelaces, wiped away tears from skinned knees, shared the last piece of chocolate because you knew I loved it more than anything in the world.

You taught me to read at night, when our parents thought we were long asleep. You showed me the stars and said each one was a soul watching over us, protecting us. You were my quiet refuge, my first shield, my most reliable person in this huge, incomprehensible world.

Years have passed. We grew up, our paths diverged, life threw us in different directions, testing our strength, making us fall and rise again. But in every fall, in every rise, in every word, in every line, in every breath of this book, there is you. Your care, your tenderness, your unconditional love, which shaped me long before I learned to write. You live in every one of my characters, in every woman's smile, in every moment of warmth amidst the cold.

This book is full of pain, loss, darkness, and despair. But there is light in it, too. And that light is you. You taught me that even in the deepest darkness, you can find a kindred soul. You showed me that love is stronger than fear, that family isn't always about blood, it's always a choice, and you chose me long before I learned to choose for myself.

Thank you for everything. For the nights you stayed awake, listening to my childhood fears. For the days you shared your last, thinking nothing of yourself. For the years you believed in me, even when I didn't believe in myself. For being my sister-not just by blood, but by spirit, by choice, by love.

I looked for you in every person, until I understood: you were always inside me. You are the part of my heart that remembers what home is. You are the part of my soul that never gives up.

I found you once, and I will look for you again and again, in this life and the next. Because people like you aren't lost forever. They become the stars that guide us home.

With love, endless tenderness, and gratitude that you exist in this world and in my life, Your younger brother.

Author's Note to the Reader

Dear Friend,

You are holding this book in your hands. Perhaps you bought it in a store, intrigued by the cover. Perhaps someone gave it to you, saying, "This is worth reading." Perhaps you borrowed it from a library, drawn by the title. Or maybe you just opened a file on your device, looking for something to fill an evening. I don't know how this book came to you. But since you're here, since you're reading these lines, it means a connection has already been forged between us. Thin, invisible, but real.

I want to talk to you, before you dive into this story. To talk the way old friends do before a long journey they're about to take together.

This book wasn't born from cold calculation. Not from a desire to write a bestseller, to meet reader expectations, or to fit into current literary trends. It was born from questions that haunted me for many years. From late-night reflections, from conversations with myself, from those moments when you're alone with the silence and suddenly hear within it the voices of those you loved and lost.

I asked myself: what makes us who we are?

We're used to thinking our personality is shaped by events. Birth, growing up, career choices, meetings and partings. But the longer I live, the more I understand: it's people who make us. Those who were there in childhood, holding our hand when we were afraid of the dark. Those who came to help when we fell and scraped our knees. Those who believed in us when we didn't believe in ourselves. And those who left, leaving behind an emptiness that nothing can fill.

I thought about my family. About my parents, who are no longer here. About my sister, who was always a beacon for me in the darkest times. About those whom fate scattered to different corners, but whose voices I still hear inside me. And I understood: memory is the only thing we truly have. Everything else can be taken away. Money, home, work, even freedom. But memory stays with us until our last breath. And it can also become the most terrible curse, if what you remember is unbearable.

This book is about memory. About how it shapes us and how it destroys us. About how we try to run from the past, but it always catches up. About how sometimes the only way to survive is to forget. And sometimes the only way to become yourself is to remember.

I wrote this story for those who have ever felt lost. For those who searched for their place in the world and didn't find it. For those who lost loved ones and found them again-perhaps not physically, but in their hearts. For those who know that family isn't always about blood, but always about choice.

There have been moments in my life when I acutely felt that I didn't know who I was. That my past was a fog where ghosts wandered. That people I considered family could turn out to be strangers. And strangers, the closest ones. These feelings, these fears, these hopes I poured into my characters. Alice, Lina, David, Miranda, Alex-they aren't invented by me from start to finish. They are assembled from fragments of real people I've met, from their stories, their pain, their victories. They are like a mosaic, where each shard is someone's real life.

This is a psychological thriller. There will be murders, secrets, the dark corridors of a psychiatric hospital, basements where the truth is hidden, and people ready to do anything to conceal that truth. There will be tension that takes your breath away. There will be moments when you want to close the book and never open it again, because it's scary. There will be scenes that make your heart clench.

But above all, this is a story about love. The kind of love that is stronger than fear. That makes you stay silent for ten years to protect those you hold dear. That drives you to commit crimes to save. That forgives even when forgiveness seems impossible. That doesn't die, even when the body dies. That lives in memory, in the heart, in every cell of your being.

I've often thought: why do we love reading such dark stories? Why are we drawn to suffering, pain, despair? And I came to the conclusion: because only through darkness can we see the light. Only by losing do we understand the value of what we have. Only by going through hell do we learn to appreciate heaven.

This book is about forgiveness. About how hard it is to forgive those who have hurt us. And about how necessary it is to do so in order to live on. Because hatred corrodes the soul faster than any illness. Because anger is heavier than any burden. Because only by freeing ourselves from them can we breathe freely.

And this book is also about choice. About how every minute, every hour, every day, we make choices. Who to be, who to be with, who to fight for, who to protect, who to betray. And from these small choices, our greater destiny unfolds.

I don't know what you're going through right now, dear reader. Maybe you're happy and looking for a thrill. Maybe you're sad and want to share your sorrow with someone who will understand. Maybe you just want a distraction from everyday routine. But I believe that if you've read this far, you're looking for something important. Something that will resonate in your heart.

I don't promise easy reading. This book will require courage. It will make you think, maybe cry, maybe get angry. Maybe you'll argue with the characters, judge them, not understand their actions. Maybe you'll see yourself in them. And that's normal. Because good literature is always a dialogue. A conversation between author and reader, between characters and reality.

But I promise you one thing: this book will not leave you indifferent. It will enter your life, settle in your thoughts, return to you at the most unexpected moments. You'll remember Alice when you realize you're also searching for yourself. You'll remember Lina when you face injustice. You'll remember David when you lose someone important.

And if that happens-then I didn't write it in vain.

I also wrote this book for those who have ever felt lonely. Because there's something frightening and simultaneously attractive about loneliness. It's a state where you're left alone with yourself and finally hear your true voice. My characters are often lonely-even when they are together. They carry their loneliness like a cross, but in the end they understand: true loneliness is impossible if you have the memory of those you love.

This book is also about home. About how home isn't a place. Not walls, not a roof over your head, not an address in your passport. Home is the people who wait for you. Who accept you as you are. Who warm you even from a distance. My characters search for home all their lives and find it where they least expect it.

I want to thank you in advance. For picking up this book. For reading these lines. For being willing to spend your time on a story I imagined. It's a huge responsibility and a huge honor-to know that someone out there, in another city, another country, another world, is experiencing the same emotions I felt while writing.

And if this book touches you, if it makes you think, if for even a moment you feel what my characters felt-then it was all worth it. All those sleepless nights, all the doubts, all the drafts thrown in the trash, all the moments of despair when it seemed like nothing was working out-it was all for this moment. For this meeting with you.

And now-goodbye. Or until we meet again? Because, as you already understood from the epilogue, the story of the Novak and Wood families is not over. Too many threads remain unraveled, too many questions unanswered, too many shadows waiting for their time. Perhaps we will meet again on the pages of a new book. Perhaps fate will grant us another journey into this dark, yet so vibrant world.

But that will come later. For now-forward. Into the darkness, into the mystery, into the past that won't let go. The door is open. Behind it, those who lost themselves to find each other are waiting. If you're ready-enter.

With hope that you find something important for yourself in this story,

Anatoly Shigapov

ATTENTION

Dear Reader,

Before you turn this page and dive into the world of *Predator in the Mirror*, I want to pause you for a few minutes to say a few important words. This is not just a formality or a nod to tradition-

it is a conscious necessity, born from respect for you, for the reality we live in, and for the themes addressed in this book.

On Fiction and Reality

Everything you are about to read on these pages is a work of fiction. From the first line to the last. All characters-Alice, Lina, David, Miranda, Alex, Dr. Harrison, and others-are entirely imaginary. Their personalities, actions, thoughts, feelings, and fates are products of my imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or to actual events, organizations, or locations is entirely coincidental and unintentional. I did not know, nor could I have known, any real-life counterparts, and if any coincidences occur, they are merely a trick of fate that could not have been foreseen.

The psychiatric hospital "Safe Harbor" described in the book does not exist in reality. It is a composite creation, built for the purpose of the narrative. The treatment methods mentioned in the novel-electroconvulsive therapy, the use of tranquilizers, patient isolation-are depicted within the context of a specific story and are not recommendations for practice or a reflection of real medical procedures. I have the deepest respect for the work of psychiatrists, psychologists, nurses, and all staff in psychiatric facilities who save lives every day, help people cope with severe conditions, and guide them back to a normal life. Real psychiatry bears no resemblance to the horrors sometimes portrayed in books and films, and I urge you not to project fictional images onto reality.

On the Book's Purpose and Goals

This book is a psychological thriller. Its primary goal is to entertain the reader, to draw you into a world of mysteries and secrets, to make you empathize with the characters, and to evoke strong emotions: fear, anxiety, hope, and the joy of discovery. I aimed to create a tense narrative that keeps you on edge from the first page to the last. But it's crucial to understand: everything that happens to the characters stays on the pages of the book.

I am in no way advocating for any of the actions described in the novel. I do not promote violence, vigilantism, breaking the law, overthrowing any existing order, or any form of revenge. My characters make terrible mistakes, sometimes crossing the line, but they do so within a fictional plot, driven by fictional motives. In real life, justice must only be pursued within the bounds of the law. No personal grievance, no amount of pain, no injustice gives anyone the right to take the law into their own hands. That is what courts, law enforcement, and social support systems are for. If you feel you have been a victim of injustice, please seek out professionals-do not try to solve problems the way my characters do.

On the Influence of Books on Reality

I believe literature has the power to change people. A good book can make you think, can open your eyes to something important, can help you through difficult times. But literature should not become a manual for action. Reading thrillers is a safe way to experience intense sensations without leaving your comfortable chair. It's a chance to live someone else's life, someone else's fears, someone else's victories, all while remaining safe.

If, after reading this book, you feel anger, a desire for revenge against those who have wronged you, or suspicion towards those around you-please, stop and think. These are just emotions, stirred by fiction. Do not carry them into your real life. Do not let literary images dictate your actions. You are stronger than any book, you are smarter, you are capable of separating truth from fiction.

On Mental Health

This book touches on difficult themes: the loss of loved ones, violence, mental disorders, prolonged isolation, and suicide. If you are experiencing such difficulties in your real life, if you feel like you can't cope, like your world is falling apart, like there's no way out-please, do not face these thoughts alone. Seek help. There are people and organizations ready to support you. Psychologists, therapists, crisis hotlines, support groups-you are not alone. Your life is valuable, and any hardship can be overcome when you have someone willing to help.

Different countries have their own support services. Find them, write down the numbers, save them in your phone. Sometimes, one call can save a life.

On the Characters and Their Actions

My characters are not role models. They make mistakes, they suffer, they fall, they get back up, and they make mistakes again. They do things that might make you judge them, feel frustrated with them, or even anger you. That's normal. Literature exists so we can argue with characters, disagree with them, and see their weaknesses. But remember: they are just literary characters. Their path is not your path. Their choices are not your choices. You can learn from their mistakes, but you should not repeat them.

In Conclusion

Read, empathize, be afraid, and rejoice along with the characters. Let this story sweep you away, transport you to another world, and make your heart beat faster. But when you return to reality, leave all the fears and anxieties on the pages of the book. Live your own life-the real one, full of color, opportunities, and love. Cherish the people around you. Take care of yourself.

And remember: this is only a book.

With respect for you and the reality we share,

The Author

PART ONE: MIRROR IMAGE

Chapter 1. Bloody Signature

"Every murder has a signature. Sometimes it's the handwriting, sometimes a gesture, sometimes the silence. But the scariest signature is the one you leave in your own memory." – From the diaries of Special Agent Alice Wood

Autumn in New York greeted the morning with a gray, heavy sky that hung low over the rooftops of Manhattan, as if it intended to crush the city with its humidity. A light drizzle fell, and the asphalt gleamed, reflecting the yellow lights of taxis and the red tails of brake lights. In this light, even the skyscrapers looked like sets for a noir film-fitting, but unreal, as if an invisible director could say "cut" at any moment, and it would all vanish, leaving only emptiness and the smell of ozone behind.

Alice Wood had been standing by the yellow police tape for twenty minutes. She didn't move, just stared at the body lying on the lawn of a small park between buildings on the Upper East Side-a place usually reserved for walking expensive dogs and sipping takeout lattes while discussing the latest news from Wall Street and children's successes at prestigious schools. Now there were no dogs, no lattes, no idle chatter. Just the indifferent rain, washing blood into the withered grass, and people in blue windbreakers with "NYPD" on their backs, moving slowly and deliberately like ants around a disturbed anthill.

Alice wasn't wearing a windbreaker. She stood in a black coat, soaked through, but she didn't feel the cold. In ten years with the FBI, she'd grown accustomed to such mornings-the smell of wet earth and blood, the indifferent hum of the city behind her, the faces of the dead staring silently at the sky. But she couldn't get used to this face. It clung to her, made her glance back again and again.

The woman was young-about twenty-five, no more. Long dark hair spread out on the ground, absorbing the moisture and growing darker, almost black. Her eyes were open, staring into nothing-at that gray sky indifferently raining down on her. But the worst part was her mouth. It was twisted into an unnatural, frozen grimace that vaguely resembled a smile. Not a smile of peace, not a smile of relief-a smile full of bitter irony, as if in the last moment of her life she'd seen something that made her smirk at her own death.

"Who found her?" Alice asked without turning. Her voice sounded dry, like she was striking sparks from flint.

"A janitor from the nearby office building, at six a.m.," replied a detective who'd walked up. Marty Cole had worked with her for three years, and in that time they'd learned each other well

enough to dispense with small talk. Marty was one of those cops who did everything by the book but managed not to get in the way of profilers-a rare quality Alice valued more than professional skills. "He was on his way to work, saw legs sticking out from behind the bushes. Called the cops. We were here in seven minutes."

"Seven minutes," Alice repeated thoughtfully. "That's enough time for the killer to get away. If he even left."

"You think he might have stayed?" Marty moved closer, also peering at the victim's face.

"Ones like this always stay. Not physically-mentally. They like to watch their work. Admire it." She finally tore her gaze from the face and scanned the surrounding buildings. "Any cameras?"

"Checking now. But this area's a dead zone for surveillance. Wealthy residents don't like being watched. Cameras are only on the main streets."

"Convenient." Alice took a step closer to the body, squatting down. The crime scene techs had finished their initial inspection, and the medical examiner-a woman in thick-rimmed glasses Alice had known for about five years-was waiting for permission to remove the corpse.

"What can you tell me, Dr. Reed?" Alice asked, scrutinizing the wounds on the victim's body.

Marta Reed adjusted her glasses and stepped closer. She was one of those experts who disliked unnecessary words but could see what was hidden from ordinary eyes.

"Death occurred roughly between two and three a.m.," she began, opening her tablet with preliminary notes. "I'll be more precise after the autopsy, but based on body temperature and rigor mortis-two to three hours. Cause of death: multiple stab wounds. Total..." she glanced at her notes, "twenty-seven. Inflicted with great force, but chaotically. Not professional."

"Chaotic, but twenty-seven times." Alice frowned. "That's not chaos. That's ritual. Or rage. Very personal rage."

"Agreed," Marta nodded. "But that's not the most interesting part."

"What is the most interesting part?"

"This."

Marta pointed to the victim's left hand. The wrist was unnaturally twisted, and the fingers were arranged in a strange shape-thumb and index finger extended, the others curled into a fist. Someone had clearly positioned the hand like this after death-the muscles were already beginning to stiffen, and arranging the fingers this way would have required effort.

"A gesture?" Marty suggested, stepping closer. "Some kind of sign?"

"Not just a gesture," Alice said quietly. She pulled out her phone, opened a photo sent from the office that morning just before she left for the scene. "It's a gun. A child's game, you know? When kids make a finger gun and say 'bang-bang.' But in this context..."

She stood and showed her colleagues the screen. It showed a book cover: dark, almost black, with a blurred silhouette of a woman standing on a cliff's edge, and the large red title "The Last Shot." Author-David Morrison. A name known to anyone who'd set foot in a bookstore in the last five years.

"That bestseller?" asked a young patrol officer standing nearby, clearly eavesdropping on his senior colleagues' conversation.

"That same one, which isn't even out yet," Alice corrected, not turning to him. "Release is in two weeks. But I got an alert from the publishing house this morning, even before I came here. Someone leaked them a photo of the crime scene. Or..."

"Or the killer read the book," Marty finished, understanding where she was going.

"Or wrote it."

Alice opened the attached file. It was an excerpt from Morrison's novel-a murder scene the publishers had sent to the FBI marked "urgent" and "confidential." She scanned the lines and felt something cold and sticky stir inside her, the feeling familiar to anyone who had ever encountered true evil.

"She lay on the wet grass, and the rain washed the blood from her face, erasing the last traces of who she'd been in life. He leaned over her, feeling the cold slowly seeping through the soles of his shoes, and carefully, almost tenderly, folded her fingers into a gun-the last gesture no one would understand but him. The smile on her face was his signature. His autograph. He looked at her and thought: now you're mine forever. Now you're part of my story."

"The description matches down to the smallest detail," Alice said, pocketing her phone and feeling her fingers tremble slightly-from cold or tension, she didn't know. "The pose, the rain, even that damn smile. Morrison is either clairvoyant, or..."

"Or he was there himself," Marty finished, and there was something in his voice Alice hadn't heard from him in a long time-fear.

"Or he was there," she repeated, lowering her gaze back to the body. "Or the one who was there read his book. Or wrote it with him. Or..."

She fell silent, because she suddenly realized: this murder wasn't just a murder. It was a message. To someone. Maybe to Morrison himself. Maybe to the police. Maybe to her.

Alice looked once more at the dead woman's face and caught herself thinking it reminded her of someone. Someone from the distant past, whose face had faded from memory but remained in her subconscious like a heavy stone, periodically pressing on her heart, reminding her of itself at the most inopportune moments.

"Miranda," she whispered inaudibly, just moving her lips.

"What?" Marty asked, leaning closer.

"Nothing." Alice straightened up sharply, shaking off the delusion. "Just a thought. You know how it is-a familiar face, but you can't place it."

"It happens," Marty agreed, but something flickered in his eyes-understanding? sympathy? He knew about her sister, about that old cold case that had weighed on her all these years. Knew, but never brought it up first.

Alice turned away from the body and walked toward her car, feeling her colleagues' gazes on her back. She needed to go see Morrison. Needed to understand what game this writer was playing, whose books sold millions of copies and now, it seemed, had become an instruction manual for a killer.

But inside her, the mechanism that never stopped had already started: comparing facts, searching for connections, trying to climb into the killer's head, understand his motives, his desires, his fears. Only now, something personal was mixed in-a feeling that the threads of this case led not just to dark corners of the city, but deeper, into those layers of memory she tried not to disturb, because every time she touched them, she felt herself falling apart.

The rain intensified. Alice got in the car, turned the heater on full blast to warm up a little, and dialed the number the publisher had given her. As the phone rang, she looked at her hands-slender, with long fingers that could be both gentle and harsh, depending on the circumstances. On the ring finger of her right hand was still a barely noticeable mark from her wedding band, which she'd taken off three years ago after her divorce. Sometimes she thought the mark would never disappear-like the scars on her soul that never fully heal.

The receiver was picked up after the third ring.

"David Morrison?" she asked, trying to keep her voice even and official.

"Yes," answered a low, slightly tired voice. It had that particular huskiness common to people who either haven't slept all night or smoke a lot. Or both.

"FBI Special Agent Alice Wood. We need to meet. Immediately."

A pause. So long that Alice was about to repeat herself, but then came the voice again:

"I've been expecting this call."

And something in those words-in their calm, almost resigned intonation-made her heart beat faster.

She pressed the gas pedal and pulled away from the crime scene without even looking back. In the rearview mirror, the park, the yellow tape, the figures of police officers, and the body being covered with a black bag remained behind. The woman whose name they wouldn't know for several hours, until they found her documents and notified her relatives, remained behind.

The mystery they had to solve remained behind.

But Alice didn't know then that this mystery was just the first piece of a mosaic that would form a picture capable of destroying everything she believed in.

Chapter 2. The Writer and His Shadow

"A writer thinks he creates his stories. But in reality, the stories create him. They wait in the darkness, patient as spiders, and one day they weave a web from which you can no longer escape." – David Morrison, from an interview with The New Yorker, 2018

Alice hadn't slept all night.

She sat in her office on the twenty-third floor of the federal building, surrounded by stacks of papers, photos, and reports Marty had sent to her email the evening before. Outside the window, the rain intensified and subsided by turns, and the lights of Manhattan blurred into colored blobs on the wet glass, reminding her of an impressionist painter's palette, only instead of paints there was neon, blood, and despair.

She laid out before her the letters she'd taken from Morrison. Ten sheets, ten messages from the darkness, ten steps into the abyss of someone else's mind. Alice read them again and again, trying to grasp the rhythm, the intonation, the hidden hints. The author wrote in impeccable English, but there was something unnatural in the phrasing, as if the language wasn't native, even though there were no mistakes. Or perhaps it was someone who'd read too much classical literature and unconsciously imitated the style of Victorian novels.

"Mr. Morrison, your books are the only thing keeping me in this world. When I read your lines, it seems you are sitting beside me, telling me stories no one else can tell. You know me. You've always known. And I know you. I know what you are writing now. I know about the woman in the red dress, about the rain, about the finger gun. I know, because I was there. I am always where you are."

Alice set the letter aside and rubbed her temples. Her head throbbed from lack of sleep and tension. The coffee in her mug had long gone cold, but she kept mechanically bringing it to her lips, wincing at the bitterness each time.

The second letter was even more disturbing:

"You are afraid of the dark, Mr. Morrison. I know this, because I am afraid too. But my darkness is inside me. I carry it with me, like carrying a child in the womb. It grows, stirs, demands release. Your books help me let it out. Thank you for that. Without you, I would have gone mad. Or have I already?"

"Who are you?" Alice whispered, peering at the even lines. "A crazy fan? Or someone who really knows Morrison?"

She opened her laptop and typed in the search bar: "David Morrison biography." Page after page-standard facts: born in New York, studied at Columbia University, debut novel in 2010, seven bestsellers, a bunch of awards. Not a word about parents, about childhood, about where this phenomenal talent came from. In interviews, he always avoided personal questions, citing that "a writer should remain in the shadow of his books."

But Alice knew: shadows are always cast by something. Or someone.

She picked up her phone and dialed Marty's number. It was well past midnight, but the detective, like her, wasn't sleeping-you don't sleep on cases like this.

"Anything on the clinic?" she asked without preamble.

"Yes," Marty's voice sounded excited, a rarity for him. "Quiet Haven isn't just any psych ward. It's a closed facility for particularly dangerous criminals deemed insane. They've got murderers,

maniacs, pedophiles-everyone society wants to forget. Security level is above average. But the most interesting thing-ten years ago, there was a fire there."

"A fire?" Alice perked up.

"Yeah. In 2005. One of the wings burned down. Three patients and two staff members died. One of them was Dr. Philip Novak, head of the department. That same night, his house in the suburbs burned down. His wife and two children died. Investigators linked the events, but never found the culprit. Ruled it an accident, faulty wiring or something."

Alice went cold.

"Novak?" she repeated. "Philip Novak?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Lina Novak-the patient in Quiet Haven. The one who's been silent for ten years. Novak's daughter?"

"Looks like it," Marty confirmed. "She was admitted there a few months after the fire. Transferred from another clinic with a diagnosis of 'post-traumatic stress disorder with psychotic episodes.' Hasn't spoken since."

Alice stood up from her desk and walked to the window. Rain drummed against the glass, and the city lights blurred like watercolors.

"And the son?" she asked. "Novak had a son, Simon. What happened to him?"

"The son's body was found at the fire site," Marty replied. "Identified by dental records. He was presumed dead."

"Presumed," Alice repeated. "But what if he didn't die? What if he survived and someone took him?"

"You think David Morrison is Simon Novak?"

"I don't think anything," Alice shook her head, though Marty couldn't see it. "I'm just connecting facts. A writer who remembers nothing about his past. Books in which someone else's memories come to life. Letters from the clinic where his sister is held. Too many coincidences."

"Coincidences don't happen," Marty echoed her own words.

"Exactly." Alice paused. "Marty, tomorrow morning I'm going to see Morrison again. Need to talk to him openly. You keep digging. I need to know everything about the Novak family. Who these people were, what they did, who they associated with, who might have wished them harm."

"Will do. And Alice..." Marty hesitated.

"What?"

"Be careful. If Morrison really is Simon Novak, and his sister is in the psych ward sending him letters with murder details... this could be very dangerous. For both of you."

"I know," Alice replied quietly. "But I have no choice. This case smells of something bigger than just a murder. And if my sister is involved..."

She didn't finish. Marty knew about Miranda. Everyone in the department knew, but kept silent.

"Keep me posted," he said and hung up.

Morning greeted Alice with gray skies and a headache. She'd barely slept, just dozed for an hour right in her chair, and woke to her own scream-she'd dreamed of a fire, a child's cry, and someone's hands reaching for her from the flames.

She washed her face with cold water, drank a double espresso from the vending machine in the hallway, and drove to SoHo.

David Morrison opened the door immediately, as if he'd been waiting for her on the threshold. He looked even worse than yesterday-dark circles under his eyes, stubble, wet hair from a recent shower.

"Agent Wood," he said, letting her in. "I thought you'd come earlier."

"I had things to do," Alice replied curtly, stepping into the living room. "We need to talk seriously."

"I'm listening."

They sat opposite each other-like yesterday, but the atmosphere was different now. More tense, heavier. Alice sensed David was holding something back, and it worried her.

"Mr. Morrison," she began, "I've done some digging. About the Quiet Haven clinic and the fire there ten years ago."

David flinched. His face paled.

"Why?"

"Because it might be connected to your letters. And to the murder." Alice watched him carefully. "You said you remembered nothing about your past. But your adoptive parents gave you documents. Do you know your real name is Simon Novak?"

David was silent for a few seconds, then slowly nodded.

"Yes. I know."

"You knew? And you didn't tell me?"

"What for?" bitterness crept into his voice. "I only found out yesterday, after you left. I found an old folder my adoptive parents had hidden away years ago. There were documents. Birth certificate. Photos." He stood, walked to his desk, and took out the very folder Alice had briefly seen last time. "Here."

She took the folder, opened it. Birth certificate for Simon Novak, a family photo-a man, a woman, two children. A girl about ten, thin, with big eyes, and an older boy. The boy looked very much like David.

"That's you," Alice said, pointing to the boy.

"Yes. And that's Lina." David pointed to the girl. "My sister. She's alive. All this time, she was in that damn clinic, and I didn't even know."

"You couldn't have known," Alice said softly. "You were given a new name, a new life. It's not your fault."

"But she wrote to me." David clenched his fists. "All those letters... she was trying to reach me, and I thought it was a crazy fan. I didn't even answer her. Not once."

"You didn't know."

"Knowing or not-what difference does it make?" He spun around and walked to the window, turning his back to her. "She's been there ten years. Silent. And I was writing books about killers, thinking it was my imagination. But it was her memories. Our shared memories."

Alice walked over and stood beside him.

"David, listen to me. Your sister isn't just a victim. She knows something. Something important. Otherwise, why would she write to you now, after all these years? She wants you to come. She wants you to help."

"I'm going there," David said firmly. "Today."

"I'm coming with you. But first, we need to understand exactly what she's trying to say. Do you have all the letters?"

"Yes. I kept every one."

They sat at the table, spread out the letters. Alice reread them now with new knowledge, and much became clear. The lines about the past, about pain, about memory-all of it was addressed to the brother Lina had lost and hoped to find.

"Look," Alice said, pointing to one of the letters. "Here she writes: 'I know what you're writing now. I know about the woman in the red dress.' How could she know, if you told no one?"

"I don't know." David shook his head. "Maybe she reads my thoughts? Or... or am I writing her thoughts?"

"What do you mean?"

"I told you-I remember nothing about my childhood. But when I write, images sometimes come. People. Events. I thought it was imagination, but now..." He paused, searching for words. "Now it seems like memory. My memory, returning through books."

Alice looked at him and understood this man was telling the truth. She'd seen many liars in her career, and David Morrison wasn't one of them. He was confused, frightened, devastated-but not lying.

"David," she said quietly, "we need to go to the clinic. Talk to Lina. She's the only one who can tell us what happened that night. And who's killing now."

"You think it's connected?"

"I'm sure." Alice stood. "Get ready. We leave in an hour."

Chapter 3. Imprint of the Past

"The past never truly dies. It doesn't even pass. It just waits, patiently, like a spider in a dark corner, to one day weave a web you'll stumble into when you least expect it." – From the diaries of Special Agent Alice Wood

New York greeted her with the same endless rain that seemed to have been falling for a week, washing not only the dirt from the city but also the colors, leaving only gray, black, and wet asphalt gleam. Alice drove slowly, though the roads were nearly empty-one in the morning, downtown, only the occasional taxi and fellow insomniacs like her.

Fragments of information swirled in her head like pieces of a puzzle that refused to form a coherent picture. Lina Novak, her brother Simon aka David Morrison, the fire, the clinic, the letters, the murder. And now this girl-Miranda Stone, whose body was never found, whose face in the old photograph stared at her from the computer screen with eyes she saw every morning in the mirror.

"Coincidence," Alice whispered, but her voice sounded unconvincing even to herself. "Just coincidence."

She pulled into the underground garage of her building on the Upper West Side, parked in her usual spot, and sat in the car for a long time, staring at the concrete walls and dim lights. The thoughts wouldn't let go. What if it wasn't coincidence? What if she was somehow connected to this family? But how? She remembered her childhood-or thought she did. Mother, father, a little house in New Jersey, school years, then college, the FBI Academy. Everything was in place, everything logical. Except for one thing-Miranda.

Miranda had entered her life when Alice was fifteen. Her parents adopted the girl from an orphanage-that's what they said. Small, thin, with big frightened eyes, she'd cling to Alice at night and whisper, "Don't leave me." And then she disappeared. Just left school one day and never came back. The police searched, but in vain. Her parents died a few years later-father from a heart attack, mother from cancer. And Alice was left alone with an unhealed wound and an unsolved case she carried inside her like a splinter that never works its way out.

She went up to her apartment, not turning on the lights, walked into the bedroom, and took a box from the closet. Old, cardboard, tied with string. On the lid was written: "Miranda." Alice hadn't opened it for about two years-since the last time she'd sorted through things in a fit of desperate hope to find some clue.

She sat on the floor, turned on the desk lamp, and untied the string.

Inside were photographs, drawings, school notebooks, a few toys. Alice carefully sorted through them, each item sending a pang of pain through her chest. Here's a photo: Miranda in the park on a swing, laughing, hair blowing in the wind. Another one: the two of them together, Alice with her arm around her sister's shoulders, both smiling at the camera. Alice was sixteen then, Miranda eleven. A year later, she would disappear.

Alice picked up the photo and stared at her sister's face. And suddenly she felt as if struck by lightning: Miranda's eyes-the same eyes that stared at her from the photo of Miranda Stone in the Novak case file. Same shape, same cut, same gaze-trusting and slightly frightened at once.

"It's impossible," she whispered, but her fingers were already trembling, and her heart pounded in her throat.

She rushed to her laptop, opened the files Marty had sent, and brought up the photo of Miranda Stone on the screen. Beside it, she placed the photo of her own sister. She compared them for a long time, feverishly, afraid to believe and afraid to be wrong.

They looked alike. Very much alike. But that meant nothing-children often look alike. Alice needed proof. DNA, documents, witnesses.

She looked at the clock-half past two in the morning. Marty was surely asleep, but she didn't care. She dialed his number.

"Alice?" Sleepy, alarmed voice. "What's wrong?"

"Marty, I need you to find everything you can about Margaret Stone. Where she lived, where she came from, who her relatives were. And especially about her daughter Miranda. I need photos, documents, everything."

"Why?"

"Because, it seems, she might be my sister." Alice herself didn't believe what she was saying. "Or... I don't know. Just find it."

Pause. Then Marty said quietly:

"I'll find it. You okay?"

"I'm fine." She wasn't fine. "Just do it."

She hung up and stared at the photos again. Somewhere deep in her memory, something stirred-vague, warm like a summer day. The smell of smoke. Someone's hands scooping her up. Running through the forest. Screams.

Alice squeezed her eyes shut, trying to hold onto the vision, but it slipped away, leaving only a headache and nausea.

She lay down on the floor, right next to the box, and closed her eyes. Sleep came instantly-heavy, dreamless, like falling into a black pit.

She woke to the phone ringing. It was already light outside-a gray, wet dawn. Alice sat up, rubbing her stiff neck, and answered.

"Agent Wood," Marty's voice came, "I found something. You need to see this."

"What?"

"Margaret Stone was a patient of Philip Novak's for three years, from 2002 to 2005. Diagnosis-dissociative identity disorder complicated by post-traumatic stress syndrome. She was admitted with her daughter, who was placed in the clinic's shelter. In 2005, shortly before the fire, Novak obtained guardianship of the girl. Officially-to provide her with normal conditions. Unofficially... I don't know."

Alice listened, holding her breath.

"And the mother?"

"Died in the fire. Body identified by dental records. The girl... the girl disappeared. The documents say she was presumed dead as well, but no body was found. Case closed for lack of evidence."

"Where could she have been?" Alice whispered.

"I don't know. But there's more." Marty paused. "I found a photo of Margaret Stone. Want to see?"

"Send it."

A minute later, a photo of a woman around thirty, with dark hair and tired eyes, appeared on the screen. Alice looked at it and felt everything inside her collapse.

This was her mother. Her real mother, whom she'd thought died many years ago. Only her name wasn't Margaret Stone, but Anna Wood. And she didn't die in a fire, but of cancer, when Alice was twenty.

Or did she?

Alice frantically opened old photos of her parents. Compared. The woman in the clinic photo was eerily similar to her mother, but not identical. Different hairstyle, different expression, but the features... God, it was the same face!

"Did I have a twin sister?" Alice whispered into the phone.

"What?"

"My mother... did she have a twin sister? I don't know. I don't know anything."

"Alice, are you okay? Want me to come over?"

"No. I'm fine. Thanks, Marty."

She hung up and stared blankly. Thoughts tangled, superimposed, spawned monstrous conjectures. If Margaret Stone was her mother's sister, then Miranda Stone was her cousin. But why did the photo of Miranda Stone look so much like her own sister Miranda? Because they were the same person?

Alice jumped up, paced the room frantically. It couldn't be. It simply couldn't be.

She grabbed her phone and dialed David's number. It rang a long time, then a sleepy voice answered:

"Hello?"

"David, it's Alice. Sorry to wake you. I need to ask you something about your family."

"About my family?" He was instantly awake, his voice alarmed. "What happened?"

"Your father, Philip Novak. Did he ever mention a woman named Margaret Stone? Or a girl named Miranda?"

Silence. So long Alice thought he'd hung up.

"David?"

"I... I don't know," his voice trembled. "But I had a dream last night. For the first time in years. I dreamed of a girl. She was sitting in a tree, crying. And I was standing below, saying, 'Don't be afraid, Miranda, I'm here.' I called her Miranda."

Alice's breath caught.

"What else?"

"Fire. Screams. And someone's hands pulling me through a window. I don't know whose."

"David, we need to meet. Urgently."

"I was planning to go to the clinic. This morning. I can't wait."

"Don't go alone. I'm coming with you. Wait for me; I'll be there in an hour."

Chapter 4. The Quiet Ward

"There are places where time stops. Where people exist outside society, outside memory, outside hope. Closed psychiatric hospitals are purgatory on earth. Those whom society wants to forget end up here. And here they wait-for death, for clarity, or for a miracle. But miracles don't happen. Only silence does."

– From a report by Special Agent Alice Wood

Mornings at the federal building started early. By seven, the corridors were already buzzing with voices, shuffling feet, clinking cups, and endless phone calls. Alice sat in Marty Cole's office, drinking her fourth cup of coffee, staring at the documents spread before them. Overnight, Marty had done the impossible-compiled a file on the Quiet Haven clinic a good five centimeters thick.

"I didn't sleep all night," he said, rubbing his red eyes. "But it was worth it. Listen to what I found."

He spread out a map of New York State in front of Alice and jabbed a finger at a point north of Albany.

"Here, in the woods, an hour's drive from the nearest town, is Quiet Haven. The location isn't random-wilderness, no neighbors, just forest and river. The clinic was founded in 1952 as a tuberculosis sanatorium, later repurposed into a psychiatric hospital. Since the seventies-a closed facility for particularly dangerous patients."

"Particularly dangerous?" Alice repeated, peering at the map.

"Yes. Those who committed serious crimes but were deemed insane. Murderers, maniacs, rapists. Currently about a hundred and fifty patients. Security level-like a maximum-security prison."

"And they sent a ten-year-old girl there?" Alice frowned.

"Lina Novak wasn't sent there immediately. After the fire, she was first kept in a regular psychiatric hospital, but after six months she was transferred to Quiet Haven. Official reason-'severe post-traumatic stress disorder with psychotic episodes, requiring constant supervision in strict isolation.' Unofficially..." Marty shrugged. "Who knows."

"Who transferred her?"

"The head doctor of that hospital, a certain Dr. Garrison. He later became the head doctor at Quiet Haven. And has been running it ever since."

Alice felt the familiar chill. Garrison. She'd already heard the name from David when he talked about the clinic.

"So Garrison has been in charge of Lina from the very beginning," she said thoughtfully. "Interesting. Why?"

"That's not all." Marty slid another folder toward her. "I requested data on the fires. The night the Novak house burned down, there was another fire-at the clinic itself. The wing where Dr. Philip Novak worked caught fire. Three patients and two staff members died. The fire destroyed the archives, the lab, all documents."

"Convenient," Alice raised an eyebrow.

"Very. Investigators tried to find a connection at the time, but couldn't prove anything. Ruled it a coincidence. But there's one detail: a few weeks before the fire, Novak filed a police report claiming he was being threatened. He didn't name names, but said someone wanted to get hold of his research."

"Research?" Alice perked up. "What kind?"

"He was engaged in experimental therapy-treatment through creativity. He believed that through art you could reach the most severe patients, even those unresponsive to medication. He had some developments, methods, notes. All burned."

"Or stolen," Alice added. "And then set on fire to cover the tracks."

"Exactly."

They were silent for a moment, digesting the information. Outside, another gray day was beginning, and rain drummed against the window again.

"Marty," Alice said, "I need everything you have on Garrison. Where he studied, where he worked, who he associated with, what connections he has. And especially-whether he had any conflicts with Novak before the fire."

"Already looking," Marty replied. "But it'll take time. Garrison is a well-known figure in certain circles, he has plenty of connections, including in the police and administration."

"All the more reason to be careful." Alice stood. "I'm going to Morrison's, need to tell him. You keep digging."

She was already at the door when Marty called out:

"Alice, wait. There's something else."

She turned.

"I found a photo of Lina Novak. The one taken upon admission to the clinic." He handed her a black-and-white picture. "Look."

Alice took the photo. A girl of about ten stared back at her-thin, with huge eyes frozen in fear. Long dark hair, sharp cheekbones, thin lips. And suddenly Alice felt her heart stop. This girl was eerily similar to Miranda. Not just similar-she could have been her twin sister.

"What?" Marty asked, noticing her reaction.

"Nothing," Alice forced herself to look away. "Just a thought. Thanks, Marty."

She walked out into the corridor, but the photo of Lina Novak stayed before her eyes. Miranda. Always Miranda. Why did this case cling to her so? Why did every step bring her closer to the pain she'd so carefully hidden?

Chapter 5. First Encounter

"Silence is the loudest scream. Especially when the one who knows the truth is silent. In her eyes, I saw not emptiness, but an abyss full of answers. She didn't want to speak-she wanted me to learn to hear without words."

– From the diaries of Special Agent Alice Wood

Dawn found Alice behind the wheel. She hadn't slept for over twenty-four hours, but adrenaline pumped through her blood faster than any coffee. David stayed in the city-she insisted he wait for her call and under no circumstances take any independent action. After their nocturnal escape from the clinic, they were both on edge, but Alice understood: if Garrison suspected anything, he could transfer Lina or worse. They needed to act quickly and officially.

She pulled into the clinic parking lot at half past eight in the morning. The gray building rose above the wet trees like a medieval fortress, ready to withstand any siege. Alice adjusted her badge on her belt, took a deep breath, and headed for the entrance.

This time, the reception was different. The guard studied her credentials for a long time, then called someone, and within minutes a nurse appeared who led her not to Garrison's office, but straight to the maximum-security ward.

"Dr. Garrison has authorized a visit," she said dryly. "But only fifteen minutes, and in his presence."

"Fine," Alice nodded, though inwardly she tensed. Garrison's presence ruined everything.

She entered the familiar visitation room. Same white walls, table, two chairs. Camera in the corner. In a minute, Lina was brought in.

She looked the same as last time-thin, frozen, face like stone. But when they sat her opposite Alice, something flickered in her eyes-recognition? interest? Garrison stood against the wall, arms crossed, ready to observe.

"Hello, Lina," Alice began as gently as possible. "My name is Alice Wood. I'm an FBI agent. I'm here to help you."

Lina was silent. Her eyes-huge, dark, almost black-stared straight at Alice, unblinking. There was no madness in them. There was a depth that both frightened and fascinated.

"I know you haven't spoken for ten years," Alice continued. "But I also know you wrote letters. Your brother received them. He's here, he wants to help you."

No reaction. Only that penetrating stare.

"Lina, if you know anything about the murder that happened a few days ago in New York, please, give me a sign. Any sign."

Silence. Garrison smirked behind her.

"I told you, Agent Wood, she doesn't react. It's useless."

Alice ignored him. She kept staring at Lina, trying to catch any hint of emotion. And then she noticed: the fingers of Lina's right hand twitched slightly. She tapped on the table-once, twice, three times. A rhythm. Short-short-long. Morse code?

Alice frowned. She knew Morse code-learned at the Academy. Short-short-long is the letter 'U'. Lina didn't continue further, but her gaze flickered momentarily toward Garrison, then back to Alice.

"What are you trying to say?" Alice asked aloud, hoping Lina would continue.

But she already sat motionless, like a statue.

"Time's up," Garrison announced, approaching. "The patient needs rest."

"Just one more minute," Alice requested.

"No." He nodded to the orderlies, who took Lina by the arms. As they led her away, she turned and cast Alice a look that could only be interpreted as a warning.

The door slammed shut.

Alice was left alone, frantically replaying what she'd seen in her mind. Rhythm. Definitely a signal. 'U'-what could it mean? Or was it the beginning of a word? She left the room on unsteady legs.

Garrison was waiting in the corridor.

"I hope you're satisfied, Agent Wood?" he asked with slight mockery.

"Completely," Alice replied coldly. "See you around."

She went outside, got in her car, and only then allowed herself to exhale. She pulled out her notepad, sketched the rhythm: dot-dot-dash. 'U.' What word? Maybe 'Under'? Or 'Up'? Or a name? 'Ulysses'? Too many options.

She dialed David.

"I spoke with her," she said without preamble. "She didn't utter a word, but I'm sure she was trying to tell me something in Morse code. Just one letter-'U.' What could it mean?"

David was silent for a few seconds.

"'U'-could be the start of 'under'? Or 'up'? Or..." he hesitated. "Or it could be 'you.' She was addressing you."

"Me?" Alice thought. "'You'? What was she trying to say?"

"I don't know. But I remembered: as children, we sometimes played with Morse code when our parents wouldn't let us talk at night. She might be using it to communicate secretly."

"So she's deliberately silent, but she can communicate." Alice felt excitement kindle within her. "Garrison was there, so she couldn't speak openly. But she gave me a sign. Now we have to figure out what it means."

"You're going back?"

"Definitely. But more cautiously now. We need to find a way to see her without Garrison."

They said goodbye, and Alice sat in the car for a long time, staring at the clinic windows. Somewhere there, behind bars, was a woman who knew the truth. And who had just given her a key.

Chapter 6. The Shadow Behind

"Curiosity is a trap that fate sets on the path of those who want too much to know the truth. Fear is the guard that should have warned of danger. But when curiosity is stronger than fear, a person walks into the darkness themselves, without waiting to be dragged there." – From the diaries of Special Agent Alice Wood

The drive back to New York took a little over two hours. Alice drove in silence, teeth clenched, gripping the wheel so tightly her knuckles went white. David sat beside her, but his thoughts were far away-in that room where Lina remained, where Garrison was probably now yelling at her, threatening her, maybe even hitting her.

"She's in danger," he said finally, as they entered the suburbs. "Because of us. Because we came, Garrison will take it out on her."

"David," Alice shot him a quick glance, "if Garrison lays a finger on her, I'll personally put him behind bars. But right now we need to keep a cool head. If we storm in there now without a plan, we'll only make things worse."

"What plan?" David turned to her. His eyes burned with feverish intensity. "Wait? Until he kills her? You saw his face when he caught us. That's the face of a man with something to hide. And who's willing to do anything to hide it."

"I saw." Alice nodded. "That's why we're going back tonight. Like I said. Marta will help."

"What if Marta was fired? What if they've already thrown her out?"

"They haven't. Garrison was bluffing. He can't just fire her without cause. But even if they did fire her, she has keys, access. She'll help us."

David fell silent, but Alice sensed he wasn't reassured. Two desires warred within him: to rush back immediately, and to trust her experience. For now, the second was winning, but for how long?

They stopped at his building. David got out, but before closing the door, he leaned down to the window:

"What time are we leaving?"

"Ten tonight. I'll pick you up. And please, David, don't go anywhere and don't call anyone. Wait for me."

"Okay." He slammed the door and disappeared into the entrance.

Alice looked at her watch. Five p.m. Five hours until departure. Five hours to sleep, gather her thoughts, prepare. She knew she wouldn't sleep, but at least she could shower, change, recharge her weapon.

She drove off, not noticing the shadow watching her from around the corner.

David went up to his apartment but couldn't settle. He paced from room to room, picked up books only to put them back, turned the TV on and off, sat at his computer and got up again. Thoughts of Lina wouldn't let go. He saw her eyes before him-dark, deep, full of pain and hope. She'd waited for him ten years. Ten years of silence because she knew: if she spoke, Garrison would kill her. And now that he'd finally come, she was in danger again.

"Damn it," David whispered, stopping at the window. Outside, the evening city hummed, lights flickered on, pedestrians hurried by. Ordinary life, with no room for people like him-crushed by truth, going mad from helplessness.

Suddenly, an idea struck him. What if he didn't wait? What if he went now, alone, under some pretext? He could pose as a researcher, a journalist, anything. Get into the clinic, see Lina, warn her they'd return tonight. Or even get her out, if possible.

He knew it was madness. That Alice would be furious. That he could ruin everything. But sitting and waiting while his sister was there, next to a murderer, was beyond his strength.

David showered, changed into dark clothes, slipped a voice recorder and a small flashlight into his jacket pocket. He took a fake ID he'd once made for one of his books-a journalist from a small independent publication. The clinic probably wouldn't check too thoroughly. If he was lucky, he'd just pass as a visitor.

At seven p.m., he left the house. Got in his car and drove north, toward Quiet Haven.

The road stretched endlessly. Darkness fell quickly, and the headlights picked out only wet asphalt and roadside poles from the gloom. David drove fast, barely feeling the speed. Options ran through his mind: what he'd say, how he'd act, what he'd do if Garrison appeared.

The clinic appeared around a bend unexpectedly-a huge dark building lit by sparse lamps. David parked in the same lot as before, but farther from the entrance, in the shadow of the trees. He turned off the engine and sat for a few minutes, gathering his courage.

Then he got out and headed for the main entrance.

A dim light burned in the reception area. Behind the glass sat a duty nurse-not Marta, a different one, unfamiliar. David tapped on the window; she looked up.

"Can I help you?"

"Good evening," David tried to make his voice sound confident. "I'm from the independent magazine 'Mental Health America.' I have an appointment for an interview with Dr. Garrison."

"An interview?" the nurse frowned. "Strange, no one told me. Dr. Garrison usually gives notice."

"Maybe he forgot." David smiled his most charming smile. "I can wait. It's very important for our article on modern treatment methods."

The nurse hesitated, then shrugged.

"Wait here. I'll call him."

"No, don't!" David blurted out. The nurse looked at him in surprise. "I mean... I'd prefer to surprise him. We're doing a series of profiles on doctors working in challenging conditions. I want to catch him off guard, you know? Unprepared."

The nurse eyed him suspiciously.

"Strange approach."

"That's modern journalism." David spread his hands. "Okay, let me just go to the ward and wait there. Maybe someone from the staff can show me around while the doctor's busy?"

"Not allowed."

"Please." He pulled a hundred-dollar bill from his pocket and slipped it discreetly through the window. "For your trouble."

The nurse looked at the money, then at him, then back at the money. Apparently the sum was tempting.

"All right," she said, quickly pocketing the bill. "I'll call an orderly to take you to the ward. But if the doctor gets angry, I don't know anything."

"Deal."

In a few minutes, an orderly appeared—a young guy with an indifferent face. He nodded silently and led David down long corridors. They passed several security checkpoints, went through heavy metal doors that opened only with keycards.

"Where exactly do you want to go?" the orderly asked without turning.

"I heard you have a maximum-security ward. I'd like to see it."

The orderly grunted.

"No outsiders allowed there."

"I'm not an outsider, I'm a journalist. I have permission."

"Permission from Dr. Garrison?"

"Yes," David lied. "Verbal."

The orderly stopped, looked at him doubtfully, then shrugged.

"Okay, hell with it. If anything, you didn't see me."

They approached a door marked "Ward 4. Maximum Security." The orderly swiped his card; the door opened.

"Go straight, then left," he said. "I'll wait here."

David nodded and stepped into the dimly lit ward. The corridor here was narrower, the lamps burning dimly, smelling of medicine and something sour. Strange sounds came from behind doors—muttering, crying, sometimes screams.

He walked quickly, trying not to think about being in a ward for the most dangerous criminally insane. Cameras hung on the walls, but he tried to stay close to the walls to avoid their lenses.

Suddenly, a wild howl erupted at the end of the corridor. David froze. The cry repeated, closer now. Doors slammed, footsteps pounded.

"Escape! A patient escaped!" someone yelled.

David pressed against the wall. Orderlies ran past him, some with batons, some with tasers. In the chaos, no one noticed him. He dashed forward, hoping in the confusion to reach Lina's room.

But he hadn't gone ten meters when a huge man in a torn hospital gown burst around a corner. His eyes blazed with madness, a metal chair leg clutched in his hand.

"Aaaagh!" he roared, spotting David, and charged.

David barely dodged. The escapee flew past, slammed into the wall, spun around, and lunged again. David threw up his hands to defend himself, but the blow hit his shoulder, and he was flung against the door of some room.

Then orderlies arrived. They piled onto the violent patient, wrestled him to the floor, strapped him into a straitjacket. He thrashed and screamed, but they held him tight.

David got up, rubbing his bruised shoulder. At that moment, one of the orderlies noticed him.

"And who the hell are you?" he barked.

"I'm... I'm a journalist," David tried to smile. "I was escorted..."

"Journalist?" The orderly stepped closer, peering at his face. "What the fuck are you doing here? This is a secure ward!"

"I was looking for Dr. Garrison..."

"Dr. Garrison is in another wing. You're violating protocol." The orderly grabbed his arm. "Come on, let's sort this out."

"Let go! I'm here on business!"

But the orderly was stronger. He dragged David down the corridor, away from the ward, somewhere downstairs, into the basement. David tried to break free, but a second orderly came to help, and together they subdued him.

"Let go, damn it!" David shouted. "I'm not a patient!"

"Who knows," the first one snorted. "Nighttime, in the violent ward, no pass. Just a trespasser."

They shoved him into an empty room with concrete walls and a steel door. David fell to the floor, and the door slammed shut behind him with a clang that made his ears ring.

"Hey!" he yelled, pounding on the door. "You have no right! I demand a lawyer!"

But only receding footsteps answered from the other side.

David slid down the wall to the floor. The room was cold, dark, and damp. It smelled of mold and urine. Somewhere, water dripped.

He closed his eyes. Fool. Arrogant fool. Alice had warned him, and he hadn't listened. Now he was trapped, and who knew what they'd do to him.

And somewhere above, in her room, Lina was probably waiting for him. And she'd wait in vain.

Alice called David at nine p.m. The phone didn't answer. She dialed again, then again-subscriber unavailable.

"Damn," she exhaled.

Everything inside went cold. She knew this symptom-when someone who should be sitting still suddenly disappears, it means they've done something stupid.

She dressed quickly, grabbed her weapon, and rushed out of the house. In the car, she dialed Marty.

"Marty, urgent! David Morrison is missing. He probably went to the clinic alone. I'm heading there. If I don't check in within two hours, send backup."

"Alice, what is this freelance operation?" Marty worried. "Let me come with you."

"No time to wait. Do as I said."

She hit the gas and sped onto the highway.

In the room, David sat leaning against the cold wall, trying not to panic. Thoughts raced through his mind: what would Alice say, what would Garrison do if he knew he was here, how would Lina react. But most of all, he feared the unknown.

How long would he sit here? An hour? A day? A week? They could easily declare him a patient, drug him, turn him into a vegetable. In places like this, anything was possible.

Suddenly, footsteps sounded outside the door. David jumped up, pressed his ear to the cold metal. The footsteps approached, then stopped. Someone stood right outside.

"Hey," David called softly. "Who's there?"

Silence. Then a barely audible voice:

"Simon?"

David's breath caught. It was Lina's voice.

"Lina!" he cried. "Is that you?"

"Quiet," she whispered. "Garrison is looking for you. He knows you're here. I came to warn you."

"How did you... how did you get out?"

"I have my ways. Listen carefully. They'll move you to the general ward in the morning. There you'll meet people who will help. Trust only those who know the poems."

"What poems?"

But the footsteps retreated again. Lina vanished as suddenly as she'd appeared.

David pressed his forehead to the cold door. His sister was nearby. She spoke to him. So all wasn't lost.

He sat on the floor and waited for morning.

Morning came slowly. David hadn't slept, listening to every sound. Finally, the lock clanked, the door opened. Two orderlies stood there with indifferent faces.

"Out," one said.

"Where?"

"General ward. You'll be living with others."

David stepped out. They led him through corridors, past more barred doors. At one point he saw Marta-she was carrying a tray and gave him a barely perceptible nod of encouragement.

They pushed him into a large room with four beds. Three patients were already there-an elderly man with a Bible, a young guy rocking back and forth, and another lying face to the wall.

"Meet your new roommates," the orderly smirked. "Solomon, Kevin, and Tommy. Play nice."

The door slammed shut.

David looked around. The room was slightly larger than the basement cell, but just as squalid. Dirty windows high up, smell of unwashed bodies and medicine.

The elderly man with the Bible looked up.

"New guy?" he asked quietly.

"Yes."

"My name's Solomon. I've been here five years. You?"

"I'm not a patient," David said. "I was locked up by mistake."

Solomon smiled bitterly.

"Everyone here is by mistake. Who did you come to see?"

"My sister. Her name is Lina Novak."

The old man flinched.

"Lina? You're Lina's brother?"

"Yes."

"Then hang on." Solomon crossed himself. "She's the boss around here. Everyone's afraid of her, even the doctor. If she's for you, you'll survive."

"And if not?"

"Then pray." Solomon went back to his Bible.

The young guy stopped rocking and stared at David.

"You're really her brother?" he asked.

"Really."

"Cool." The guy grinned, showing toothless gums. "She protects us. The orderlies are afraid of her. If anything, she helps."

"How does she help?"

"In different ways. Swaps someone's meds, passes notes. She can do anything. She's a saint."

David looked at the third roommate, lying face to the wall. He suddenly stirred, turned over. It was a man about thirty, with intelligent, lively eyes, not at all like a madman.

"Lina's brother?" he asked.

"Yes."

"My name's Tommy. I'm here because of Garrison. Knew too much. Lina promised to help me get out. If you're with her, I'm with you."

David nodded. Silence fell in the room. Somewhere beyond the wall, a patient screamed, but here, in this little room, it was quiet.

David lay down on the empty cot and closed his eyes. He was trapped, but not alone. He had allies. And he had a sister who knew how to escape.

He just had to wait and trust.

Alice pulled into the clinic parking lot at half past midnight. She saw David's car parked in the shadow of the trees. So he was definitely here.

She dialed Marta. The phone didn't answer. Alice cursed and decided to act alone. She knew the back entrance, knew the code, knew the camera positions. All she had to do was get inside and find David.

She slipped out of the car and moved silently toward the building.

PART TWO: CLOSED DOORS

Chapter 7. Welcome to Hell

"Hell is not a place with cauldrons and devils. Hell is a hospital room with concrete walls where you scream and no one hears you, where you prove you're not crazy and they inject you with tranquilizers and you stop understanding where reality ends and delirium begins. Hell is when your truth matters to no one."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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