

Мелиса Куллуқджу



*The secret cipher*

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## The secret cipher

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### **Аннотация**

Alice (under the guise of Anna) is taking revenge for her father, an honest policeman who was killed in 1985 for trying to uncover corruption in the ranks of the police.

She plays a dual role. The first role is a criminal who tried to annoy detectives and people by collaborating with Victor. The second is that she conducts a secretive investigation, leaves messages saying "The truth always comes out" and cooperates with detectives Maxim and Elena. Igor Stepanovich, her father's former colleague, begins to blackmail her: he knew about the impending murder, but did not intervene in order to preserve the system.

Investigator Maxim suspects Alice at first, but then understands her motives and joins her. Analyst Elena also joins the team.

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# The secret cipher

## Chapter 1

The sign on the steleIt's a cold night. The city was asleep, but I couldn't afford to relax—the game was starting today. The Aurora Jewelry store was twinkling with lights, as if teasing me. Diamonds, sapphires and emeralds sparkled in the windows — they beckoned, but I knew that the main thing was not the extraction, but the process.I was standing on the roof of a nearby building, watching through the scope of a minicamera. The wind stirred my hair under the hood, but I didn't feel the cold—the adrenaline warmed me better than any jacket. The clock on the tower struck two. The quietest time. The most vulnerable.The guards were making their rounds, as predictable as clockwork. Three minutes — and they are immobilized: one from the paralyzing gas, the second from a precise blow. Gaz is the development of a familiar chemist. It works in 3 seconds, the effect lasts 20 minutes. The punch is a practiced martial art technique that my father taught me. He always said: "Precision is more important than strength."The alarm was turned off during the day, when I pretended to be a customer. I memorized the location of the cameras, studied the schedule of security shifts, and found out the safe's code — 73-19-05. The owner's date of birth, naively hidden in social networks.The glass doors of the

elevator opened silently. I went down to the first floor, walked past the display cases with emeralds and rubies, without looking at them. The value is in grams of gold and carats of stones, not in luster. The safe is in the back. The lock clicked and the door opened. Inside there are jewelry boxes, cash, and documents. I worked quickly, accurately, and without fuss. Gloves won't let fingerprints through, soft-soled boots won't leave footprints, and the hood hides your hair. Every detail is calculated. Some of the jewelry went into the bag for sale. I carefully put some of them in a separate case for the collection. I have a tradition: every trophy is a reminder of skill. Before leaving, I stopped at the central showcase. She swung her arm and the glass cracked, showering with sparkling rain. Not for the sake of profit, but for the sake of demonstration. I can take everything. And I can destroy what I don't need. On the fragments of the surviving glass, I wrote in bright red lipstick: "What could be more expensive than gold, but has no price?" From the roof, I saw police cars approaching. The blue light of the flashing lights colored the night. They scurry around like ants at a disturbed anthill. He's one of them. Maxim Orlov. He was tall, in a dark coat, with a tense face. He examines the crime scene, asks questions, examines the evidence. The movements are fast, but not abrupt — confident, measured. "This is not nonsense," he says to his assistant. "It's a message. And it's addressed to us. I smiled in the dark. Yes, Detective. It is for you. Victor's voice came over the headphones

## Chapter 2

The sworn enemy

Maxim never resembled an ordinary policeman — there was a special depth in him, noticeable even through the veil of fatigue frozen in his eyes. There was a steady fire in his gaze, burning and burning, fueled by a passion for solving the most intricate puzzles. It was as if he was challenging those who fancied themselves above the law, and each time he entered into this battle with the passion of a hunter. His manner of work resembled the tactics of a predator: measured steps, patience, willingness to wait for the right moment to deliver an accurate blow. It wasn't the first time our paths had crossed, and that gave our unspoken game a special edge. A few years ago, I, still inexperienced and naive, made the mistake of leaving a trail that he managed to discover. Then his experience and amazing intuition turned out to be one step ahead — he outplayed me, but this loss was an invaluable lesson. I learned it in full: now every action was thought out to the smallest detail, every step was verified with surgical precision. Today, I was no longer the same — more prudent, more careful, more sophisticated. It gave me a strange pleasure to watch him from afar. I studied his methods, analyzed the tactics of his team, and even noticed such small things as the subtle irritation that appeared on his face when

he discovered my "signature"—the very mark that I deliberately left, like an artist's signature under a painting. For me, it was not just a chase, but a real intellectual game where every detail mattered and every move required careful planning. I sincerely respected his intelligence, tenacity, and determination. Perhaps it was reckless, but deep down I cherished the hope that one day he would see in me not an ordinary thief, but a creator who creates his masterpieces in a criminal but masterly way. Ambitious plans for the next night were already forming in my head. The robbery of the Aurora emeralds was only the first chapter in a series of daring schemes — a kind of warm-up for real challenges. The city contained a lot of treasures that beckoned with their inaccessibility, and I was filled with a thirst for new challenges, a desire to surpass myself. I had no doubt that Maxim Orlov would be looking for me with the same indomitable determination with which I was preparing for a new operation. And this endless cat-and-mouse game, this intense duel of minds, had just begun. I knew that he would not back down, which meant that my life would be filled with the most exciting tension that I valued so much. A slight smile touched my lips as I looked at the twinkling lights of the night city. The air was permeated with the winter chill, but heat was burning inside me—not from physical warmth, but from anticipation. Adrenaline coursed through his veins, sharpening his senses, and the thought of the upcoming challenge excited his imagination. The next move was his, and I was ready for it. I had time to prepare, to hone the plan to perfection. The

game continued, and the stakes in it were getting higher.

## Chapter 3

Anna's Mask  
The police office greeted me with the smell of coffee and paper. I came in with a folder in my hands, smiled at everyone and introduced myself:— Anna Krylova, guest analyst. I'll be helping with the investigation of a series of robberies. Orlov looked up from his papers and nodded. I am glad to cooperate. We exchanged glances. There is a cold calculation in his eyes, a slight mockery in mine. He didn't realize that I already knew more about him than he did about me: his work schedule, favorite routes, habits. For example, I knew that he always checks his e-mail at exactly 10:15 and 4:45 p.m., and prefers a turkey sandwich and salad at lunch. Maxim's colleague Elena narrowed her eyes, studying me. Her gaze slid over my suit, lingered on my hands, looking for signs of nervousness or inconsistency in the image.— How do you know so much about the methods of such crimes? "What is it?" she asked with deliberate nonchalance.— Experience,— I smiled. — I've worked with similar cases in another city. She specialized in the analysis of robbery patterns and behavioral patterns of criminals. She didn't say anything, but her gaze remained suspicious. I noticed how she nodded imperceptibly to someone in the back of the room, apparently signaling her doubts. I've been watching the department work all day. Orlov moved confidently, asked precise questions, and noted details that others had missed.

For example, he noticed a barely noticeable scratch on the lock of the safe, a small thing that the others ignored. He took a picture of her, made notes in a notebook, then compared it with photographs from other crime scenes. I've been analyzing his work methods.: the speed of information processing, the ways of structuring data, and the logic of building versions. It was useful for my task to understand how dangerous he is as an opponent. His professionalism was impressive, but not admirable: I evaluated him solely as an element of the system that needs to be taken into account in the game. At lunch, Elena started talking again. We were sitting in a small staff canteen, drinking cold coffee from plastic cups. "You know too much about the psychology of criminals," she said, stirring with a spoon. — As if she herself had once—...worked with specialized psychologists," I finished for her. — It was necessary in the last project. We have been developing algorithms for predicting the actions of organized groups. She nodded, but I could tell she didn't believe me. I could see it in her eyes.: "You're hiding something."

## Chapter 4

An unexpected trip to a restaurant

That same evening, Orlov proposed:

"You're working too hard." Let's get some rest? We'll deal with this case over dinner, discuss the versions.

I hesitated for a split second, but agreed. It was a chance to get access to unpublished investigation data.

In the restaurant, Maxim laid out printouts, crime scene photos, and notes on the table. He was explaining his theory:

"Look, all the crimes were committed within a three—kilometer radius of the main thoroughfares. But at the same time, places with a minimum density of surveillance cameras have been selected. The criminal knows the city like the back of his hand.

I listened attentively, took notes, and asked clarifying questions. He showed diagrams, marked points on the map. I recorded every detail — it could be useful for planning the next step.

When we said goodbye at the entrance, he took my hand:

— Thank you, Anna. You're... easier to work with. You see things that others miss.

I nodded, keeping a professional expression on my face.:

— I'm always happy to help. Efficiency is my priority.



## Chapter 5

An insidious plan

Returning home, I took out my notebook and began to systematize the information I received:

weaknesses in the security system of banks;

police patrol schedule in key areas;

Orlov's methods for analyzing evidence;

possible loopholes in surveillance cameras.

Victor— my accomplice, who knew the truth, was waiting there somewhere. The next game was waiting somewhere out there. I opened my laptop and started making a plan for the next robbery, taking into account the new data. The game continued, and now I had more information to win.

Moonlight fell on the windowsill, but I didn't pay attention to it. The laptop screen glowed, displaying a map of the city with marked points. I've been making the latest edits to the chart. I set the rules. And in this game, emotions were an extra factor—I eliminated them from the equation many years ago.

The darkness of the room was broken only by the cold, almost ghostly glow of the laptop screen. Its light picked out the outlines of a table, a stack of folders with documents, and the edge of a city map spread out next to it. My fingers slid over the keyboard with mechanical precision as I put the finishing touches to the plan, honing the details that would transform chaos into

a flawless system.

There was more than just a map of a megalopolis with streets and blocks in front of my eyes. I saw a complex web of possibilities: infrastructure vulnerabilities, surveillance camera blind spots, patrol schedules, and the rhythms of urban life. Each planned point of a future robbery is verified to the millimeter — not only from the point of view of logistics and security, but also taking into account Maxim Orlov's behavioral patterns. His methods of work, his foresight, the logic of analyzing evidence — all this has long been part of my strategic calculation.

I knew perfectly well that Orlov would be looking for patterns. He will analyze previous crimes, compare the evidence, and try to build a criminal profile. But my game is always one step ahead. I deliberately left small clues—barely noticeable, but convincing enough to distract his attention. These "scratches" on the locks of safes, strange marks on the walls, intentionally left shoe marks — all this should have led the investigation on the wrong track. Let him look for connections in old cases, study other people's mistakes. My "mistakes" were thought out to the smallest detail —perfect fakes designed to confuse even the most astute detective.

Victor, my accomplice, kept in constant touch. His messages came rarely, but contained only the most important information: "transport is ready," "equipment checked," "route approved." He was the invisible force that set my plan in motion. We worked as a single mechanism — without unnecessary words, without

emotional outbursts, with absolute trust built up over the years of working together. Our bond was not based on friendship, but on a common goal and the same attitude to the rules of society.: We both considered them to be nothing more than annoying restrictions that could and should be circumvented. To the outside world, I am Anna Krylova, a guest analyst. For Victor — Alisa Vorontsova, the architect of impeccable operations. And this duality was the key to success.

At dawn, I closed my laptop. I didn't feel tired, just a slight tension in my muscles and a barely noticeable dryness in my eyes. It wasn't just a job, it wasn't routine crime planning. It was a strategy game, a chess game with live pieces, where every move was calculated ten steps ahead. The king is Eagles, pawns are policemen, rooks are security systems. And I am an invisible grandmaster, managing the game from the shadows.

I was already anticipating the next stage: a new series of robberies that would plunge the investigation even deeper into a dead end. Each crime will be a logical continuation of the previous one, but only at first glance. In fact, they will become part of a complex mosaic that cannot be assembled without knowing the big picture. And only I knew this painting.

The sun barely appeared above the horizon, painting the sky in delicate peach and pink tones. The city was waking up: cars were starting up somewhere, shops were opening, ordinary people were starting their day. But for me, the world remained contrasting—black and white, like a chessboard.



## Chapter 6

A new crimeThe Central Bank towered in front of me, a massive building with armored glass, austere facade lines, and an aura of inaccessibility. I looked around the facade: the cameras on the corners were no longer transmitting a signal, the alarm system had been disabled last night, and the security system obediently obeyed my laptop with a pre-prepared script. Victor stayed outside to monitor the situation and be prepared for any eventuality. Everything was quiet inside. The guards, alerted by a fake alarm in another wing of the building, went there to check. I walked unhindered to the vault — the door opened after entering the code, which I found out through an insider at the bank. There was a sterile silence in the vault. I quickly looked through the cells, selected the right boxes of valuables and put them in a compact case. Then she took out a prepared note and put it on the manager's desk: "You thought money was power. But the power lies in information." Under it, she carefully placed a piece of paper with a new riddle: "The more you give, the richer you become." A few hours later, an investigative team was already working at the site. Orlov methodically studied every detail: footprints on the floor, prints on the door handle, the position of objects in the room. I stood a little apart, pretending to analyze the situation.—Interesting,— Maxim muttered, examining the note. — Why does he leave hints? What does it mean?—

Maybe he wants to be caught? I suggested, trying to sound neutral. Orlov shook his head and ran his finger along the lines of the note.:- no. He wants us to play by his rules. Do you feel this challenge? He's provoking us. Elena came closer, squinted, reading the text of the riddle.:— These riddles They're too personal. It's like the criminal is trying to tell us something directly."Or just one person,— I added softly, looking directly at Orlov. He looked up sharply.: "What do you mean?" "Maybe he has a specific opponent,— I continued calmly. — The one to whom these messages are addressed. Someone he's playing his game with. Orlov thought about it, tapped his chin with his fingers, then nodded. But who? I shrugged, hiding a smile. He didn't know yet that the opponent was right in front of him. And that the next mystery was already waiting for him—more complex, more personal, more dangerous. A plan for the next move was already forming in my head. The game was just beginning.

## Chapter 7

Deliberate evidence

Orlov methodically examined the bank's vault, moving from one detail to another with his usual meticulousness. He paused at the safe, carefully examining the lock, then slowly ran his hand over the surface of the manager's desk.

"Look," he called to Elena, pointing to a barely noticeable footprint on the dusty floor. "There's something here. It looks like part of the sole pattern... but it's too blurry.

Elena came closer, squinted:

— Maybe it's just dirt?

— No, — Orlov ran his finger along the contour. "It's an imprint. Someone tried to erase it, but not completely.

I stood a little apart, watching them work with the air of an interested analyst. Inside, I could barely contain a smile: it was this mark that I had intentionally left—noticeable enough to attract attention, but too obscure to give a real clue.

The crack on the wall, which I left intentionally to make it look like the result of a break-in, also did not escape Orlov's attention. He went over to her and took out a magnifying glass.

"It's a strange mark,— he muttered. — It doesn't look like a natural injury.

"Do you think this is part of the plan?" Elena asked.

"Maybe." The criminal could have left a mark... — Orlov suddenly froze, turned his head slightly, sniffed. "Do you feel it?"  
- what? Elena did not understand.

— The smell is... subtle, barely perceptible. Jasmine and bergamot?

My heart skipped a beat—he caught the scent of perfume. But it was part of my plan. I specifically chose this perfume, which is rare and memorable, but not so bright as to arouse immediate suspicion.

—Yes,— I replied calmly, coming closer. — It really looks like perfume. Perhaps someone from the bank's staff used them?

— Hardly, — Orlov straightened up, his gaze became thoughtful. — There are rarely visitors in the vault. And this smell... it's too specific.

He took a few steps, following the scent, and stopped near the safe. He bent down and peered at the corner.

He carefully picked up a small piece of cloth. — Woolen.

Elena looked at the thread in surprise, then at me.:

"I wonder who it might belong to?"

"Probably a criminal,— I shrugged. — Maybe he got caught when he was working with the safe. Or it's just an accident — someone could have passed through here earlier.

Orlov thoughtfully twirled the thread in his fingers:

— Accidents in such cases are rare. But for now, this is just one more piece of evidence among others.

"I agree,— I said. — Every detail is important, but you can't

draw conclusions based on a single thread and a smell. We need to collect more data.

He nodded, turning his attention back to the other evidence. I exhaled imperceptibly—until Orlov suspected me. He analyzed the facts, looked for connections, but did not see my figure behind them.

—Anna," Orlov said to me, "take a look at these scratches on the box. They seem strange to me. It was as if someone had tried to pick the lock in another way.

— Indeed, — I came closer, bent over the box. — Do you see the tracks are not symmetrical? This is not a standard lockpicking job.

"So the criminal used some kind of unusual tool,— Orlov said. — Or he had a special purpose — not just to open the safe, but to leave some kind of sign.

I ran my finger thoughtfully over the scratches. — What if it's part of some kind of system? For example, a code or a message?

Elena chuckled skeptically  
, "You're making it too complicated." Maybe the tool just slipped?

"There are no small things in such matters," Orlov objected. — Every detail can be crucial.

While they were arguing, I surreptitiously looked around. Everything was going according to plan: Orlov found the evidence that I had left, but did not connect them to me. The scent of perfume and the scarf thread were supposed to create

the illusion of a criminal's presence, but not give me away.

Great, I thought. "He noticed the evidence, but he didn't connect it to me. This is exactly how an ideal trap should work: to attract attention, but not to betray the creator."— Maxim, — I turned to him, — look here. There are barely noticeable scratches on this drawer. Perhaps they were left when trying to open the lock in another way? Orlov turned around, his eyes lit up with interest. "Show me." He came over and bent over the box, forgetting about the smell and the thread for a while. The game continued. My evidence worked as it should—it distracted, confused, and misdirected the investigation. Orlov was following the trail that I had left for him, not even suspecting that the hunter and prey had switched places. My phone vibrated in my pocket—a short message from Victor: "Transport is ready. Wait 20 minutes." I surreptitiously checked the screen, smiled to myself. The plan went like clockwork. A little more and I'll disappear, leaving Orlov alone with my riddles.—By the way," I said casually, "what about the note?" "The more you give, the richer you become." Maybe this is the key to understanding the criminal's motives?" Perhaps,— Orlov said thoughtfully. — But so far I don't see a connection between words and actions.— And if the criminal believes that he is stealing knowledge, not money? I suggested. — What if it's an intellectual competition for him?— An interesting thought, — Orlov looked at me for the first time with sincere interest. "Do you think he's playing with us?" "Isn't it obvious?" I smiled. — All these riddles, clues

He's clearly enjoying the process. Orlov nodded, lost in thought. Meanwhile, Elena was studying other details. I quietly moved to the window, looking out at the street. Victor was waiting there somewhere. Somewhere out there, the next part of the game was waiting. One more step, I thought, and I'll be out of reach. And Orlov will remain with unanswered questions. "You know, Anna," he said suddenly, without looking up from his work, "I've come up with something. My heart stopped for a moment, my pulse quickened, thudding in my temples. But I kept my cool, my years—honed mask of professionalism never wavered for a second. Not a single muscle on my face betrayed my inner tension." And what's that?" My voice sounded flat, almost indifferent, as if this topic didn't arouse the slightest interest in me. I tilted my head slightly, feigning polite curiosity. "The criminal is a woman,— Orlov said confidently, finally looking up from his inspection of the safe and straightening up. He looked me straight in the eye, and for a split second I was afraid he was seeing right through me. But no, there was only fascination with his own theory in his gaze, the excitement of a hunter who had found a trail. — Everything fits: the subtle scent of perfume, the thread from the scarf, the neatness in the work. A man would hardly think through every detail so carefully. And the method of entry is... too elegant for brute force. I could barely contain my sigh of relief. He guessed, but not about what was needed. His suspicion did not concern me—he was looking for some other woman, an invisible rival, whose image was already forming in

his analytical mind. In his eyes, she was a mystery, a challenge, an intellectual opponent. "A woman?" I feigned surprise, slightly raising my eyebrows and slightly widening my eyes. — Indeed, this explains a lot. But how are we going to find her? There are thousands of women in the city with similar perfumes. And many people wear scarves. Besides, if she's that smart, she's probably thought of ways to disguise herself—changed her perfume, got rid of her scarf. Orlov grinned, rubbed his chin, his gaze became distracted — he was already mentally sorting through possible options, building logical chains. "We're going to look for someone who has hacking skills," he said. — And who is interested in intellectual games. She's probably already been involved in other cases—we need to check the archives, study unsolved robberies in recent years. Perhaps we will find similar handwriting, repetitive elements. He took a few steps around the room, as if building a logical chain in his head, then abruptly stopped at the window, looking out at the street. "Imagine," he continued, "a woman with a high IQ who knows how to calculate her moves in advance. She doesn't just steal, she plays. It leaves hints and provokes us to search. It's not just a crime, it's a challenge. She enjoys our confusion, rejoices when we are on the wrong track. At that moment, Elena shouted from the ventilation grate:— There's nothing here! No signs of intrusion. Everything is clean, the grille is intact. Not even the dust is disturbed." So our way lies to the archives," Orlov summed up, turning to me. — Anna, help me collect all the evidence. We have a lot of

work ahead of us: to study old cases, find patterns, and create a psychological profile. You need to understand her motivation, logic, and way of thinking. While we were packing up the finds—a thread, a piece of glass, photographs of scratches and cracks on the wall—I smiled imperceptibly. He was on the wrong track—he was looking for a mysterious female thief, while the real criminal stood by and helped him with the investigation. The game was getting more interesting. "Let him look for his ghost thief,— I thought. "Meanwhile, I'll prepare the next move." He doesn't even know that all this evidence is part of my strategy. The smell of perfume? A specially selected fragrance that is sold in three stores in the city, but is rarely bought — I checked the sales statistics. A scarf thread? I bought this scarf yesterday morning to leave this particular clue. Even a crack on the wall is not an accident, but a carefully thought—out element located at an angle that points... not at all where he thinks." "Maxim," I said to him as we put the evidence in the box, "what if this woman was already in the police's field of vision?" Maybe she was once a witness or a suspect in another case? Or did I use someone else's documents? the subsequent move of my flawless game. The game was just beginning, and I was sure that the victory would be mine. Orlov froze, considering my words, then his eyes lit up: "An interesting train of thought," he nodded. — Yes, it is possible. It is necessary to check not only unsolved cases, but also those where the suspect has not been found. Or where the case was closed for lack of evidence. Perhaps she tested her methods

gradually — first small-scale thefts, then on a larger scale.

"And also," I added, "maybe she uses pseudonyms or changes her appearance." A woman can easily transform into a wig, makeup, and other clothes. This complicates the search, but it gives us a clue: it's worth checking out beauty salons, wig shops, and makeup studios. Perhaps someone remembered the unusual client.

"That's right,— Orlov looked at me with renewed interest. "You're good at these things." Where did you get this knowledge from?

I tensed up internally, but outwardly I remained calm.

"Just logic,— she shrugged. — I'm an analyst. My job is to see what is hidden from others. To look for patterns where others see chaos.

He nodded, apparently satisfied with the answer, and returned to packing the evidence.

Elena came up to us, wiping her hands with a napkin.

Where are we going? What are your instructions?

"To the archives,— Orlov repeated. — We need to bring up all the cases for the last five years. Special attention is paid to robberies with an unconventional approach, where the criminal left some signs or riddles. Let's make a crime map, put dots on it, and perhaps identify an activity zone. And we'll start interviewing witnesses to those cases, in case someone remembers a woman who fits our portrait.

I nodded, hiding a smile. Let them search. Let them spend

their time painting a portrait of a non-existent thief. In the meantime, I will prepare a new stage of my game — even more sophisticated, even more confusing.

"Soon," I thought, "you will understand, Maxim, that all your theories are just a reflection of my will. You're looking for a mystery woman, and you'll find... perhaps something completely different. You think you've figured out half a step, but you've actually taken a step into the abyss that I've prepared for you."

We left the vault, leaving the crime scene behind us. The sun was already setting, turning the city golden and crimson. Somewhere out there, in the shadows of the alleys, Victor was waiting.

## Chapter 8

The old case Orlov's car, a BMW, rolled gently through the evening streets, taking us towards the archive storage. Sunset had already painted the sky in crimson-gold tones, and the lanterns, turning on one after another, cast trembling circles of light on the asphalt. The cabin was stuffy, smelled of dust and old leather — a smell that usually irritates, but it, on the contrary, had a calming effect on me, as if it transported me back to my childhood, when I loved to hide in my grandfather's study among old books. I watched houses flashing by the window, people hurrying somewhere every passerby seemed to me to be a potential character in my game. Here is a woman with a bright bag — perhaps she has ulterior motives? But the man, nervously looking around, isn't he acting too suspiciously? I couldn't help but smile, imagining how I could weave these random passersby into my complicated scheme. Orlov drove the car intently, occasionally glancing in the rearview mirror. "You seem too thoughtful, Anna, — he remarked, without taking his eyes off the road. — What are you thinking about?" "Just watching, — I replied without turning around. — I wonder how many of these people keep their secrets. And how many of them are willing to commit a crime in order to achieve a goal." "You have too analytical a mindset for simple observation, — Orlov chuckled. — Are you already building psychological profiles?"

—Maybe,— I shrugged, still looking out the window. — After all, it's part of my job. At the archive, we were greeted by an elderly curator, a gray-haired man with piercing eyes and a neat beard, who looked like the main character from an old detective story. He reluctantly handed us the file folder, but his curious gaze revealed that he hadn't missed a single detail. He seemed to be mentally compiling a dossier on each visitor. "Be careful with your documents,— he said sternly, handing over the folder. — These are not just papers, they are pieces of someone's life." Of course,— Orlov nodded. — We will be extremely careful. Orlov immediately began sorting through the documents—stacks of yellowed papers, faded black-and-white photographs, interrogation protocols, crime scene diagrams. He laid them out on the table, sorted them by date, and made notes in a notebook. "Look," he showed me one of the photographs, "I've seen this method of opening the lock before. A very specific approach.—Indeed," I agreed, only glancing at the picture out of the corner of my eye. — I wonder how many more similar cases we will find. While he was poring over the reports, I surreptitiously glanced at one of the old files lying on the edge of the table. On the cover was written: "Case No. 47. Apartment theft. The suspect has disappeared." My heart started beating faster. That was it. That's the case I was looking for. I quickly flipped through several pages, my gaze clinging to familiar details. The handwriting, the description of the stolen items, even the investigator's small note about "unusual neatness"—

all this was part of my carefully planned plan."He'll find a similar handwriting," I thought, "but he won't understand that it's not a coincidence. All these cases are just steps up which I have been improving my skills. And this theft... it was my first step, my experiment, which will now serve as a false thread leading to a long-forgotten past." "I found something interesting," — Orlov suddenly said, raising his head. — "There is a very similar handwriting of the crime in the 1985 case. The same method, the same neatness" "Maybe it's an episode," — I said, trying to keep my voice neutral. — "It's worth checking the rest of the archives." We stayed in the archive for several hours. Orlov, fascinated by the process, took notes, built chains, his eyes burned with excitement. While I was helping him outwardly, inside I was already planning my next move, feeling the game gaining momentum. "It's amazing how much you can learn from old cases," — Orlov muttered, putting down another document. — "Every little thing can be a key." "Yes," I nodded, "sometimes the most important thing is hidden between the lines." The sun had long since set, and only the dim light of the table lamps illuminated our concentrated faces. Shadows danced on the walls, creating the illusion of movement. Ahead of us was a night full of mysteries and new possibilities. I knew that Orlov was close to solving the mystery, but he didn't even suspect that all these clues were just fragments of a mosaic that I had put together especially for him. The game was just beginning, and I was sure that the victory would be mine. We left the

building when the city had already completely plunged into the silence of the night, broken only by the occasional rustle of tires on asphalt and the distant hum of rare cars. The lanterns cast quivering circles of light on the sidewalk, and the shadows from the trees were intricately intertwined, like the threads of someone's tangled web. Orlov started the engine, and the Volga began to move gently again, taking us away from the dusty shelves of the archive, from the smell of old papers and the musty air saturated with decades of other people's secrets. There was a tense silence in the salon, which he seemed to perceive as a working atmosphere, and I — as a premonition of the finale of the first act of my carefully thought-out play. My fingers involuntarily touched the inside pocket of my coat, where there was a tiny, invisible photograph, extracted from a folder under the noise of flipping through the protocols. It depicted a room with a broken mirror, a detail that I specifically left in case No. 47. Now she will become another thread in the web that I was weaving around Orlov. "You know," Orlov broke the silence, adjusting the rearview mirror and taking a quick look at it, "this guardian... he knows too much. He looked at us too closely. Sometimes old archives store not only papers, but also people who don't want the truth to come out. I smiled slightly at his reflection in the mirror.: "You've become paranoid, Maxim," I said softly. — He's just an old man who loves his job. He probably sees people like us every day, and he's already used to treating everyone with suspicion. But you're right about one

thing: the past tends to come back, especially if it's properly warmed up. Orlov chuckled, tightened his grip on the steering wheel and gave me a quick glance.:— And you, Anna, are too calm for someone who has just been digging into cases of theft. Like you know something I don't." I just trust the process,— I shrugged, trying to keep my voice level. — And I understand that sometimes the key lies on the surface. You just need to be able to see it. We turned onto a narrow street, where the streetlights shone especially dimly, casting long, distorted shadows that seemed to reach out to the car, trying to slow it down. There was an atmosphere of mystery in the air, and I could feel Orlov's excitement growing — he had already begun to build a theory of the connection between the 1985 case and my "first step," completely unaware that I had given him this clue myself. Everything was going according to plan: he saw the pattern that I had drawn myself and accepted it as an objective reality. "We'll check the connections at that apartment tomorrow morning," he said, gripping the steering wheel so hard that his knuckles turned white. — Someone must have seen this woman who fled the scene of the theft. Perhaps the neighbors remembered something important — the car, the clothes, the manner of bearing.—Of course," I replied quietly, looking out the dark window, through which the lights of the city floated by, twinkling like distant stars. — Look for it, Orlov. Look for the one I'll let you find.

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