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Anton Smirnov

The Mystery of Lina Green

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Аннотация

Creative torments torment James Havebrook, a young but already promising writer. Inspiration, like an elusive ghost, left him. In search of salvation from writer's stagnation, he leaves for a secluded provincial town lurking in the shadow of New York. There, among the dusty pages of the past, he finds a mysterious diary. Its author, with frightening frankness, tells about the murder of a girl named Lina Green.

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The Mystery of Lina Green

To my mother, wife and daughters

Prologue

Year 2002

«Hurry, he's running in a westerly direction.

«He's running too fast!» Where did he go?

Two police officers chased a man who was deftly escaping from the chase.

«Damn, where is he?»

The mysterious stranger, however, managed to run into the library and hid there. He heard the police passing by, but the librarian, who was standing nearby, did not give him away. To which the stranger nodded to him as a sign of gratitude.

«I need to hide one thing. As soon as there is an opportunity, I will return for it. Will you help me?

The librarian led the man into one of the halls without any questions and said:

«There is a private collection in this hall, there are no visitors here. You can hide it here.

The man took out a package, carefully unfolded it and took out a book.

«For safety, I don't need to know where you'll put your item. With that, he left the room.

The disappearance of Marcus Peters

1976 year

«Get in the car, Marcus.

«Catherine, I'm so glad to see you!»

«Shall we ride?»

«Of course, I don't mind!»

«What the hell?!» Someone blinks their headlights.

«Marcus, I'm afraid!»

«It's okay, Catherine, turn up the gas!»

«Oh my God, they're going to push us out of the way... God,

Marcus...

Nowadays. The year is 2024

My name is James Havebrook, and that's my story. At certain moments, my life was very unsuccessful. Now I am a famous writer with a huge check in my pocket for a tidy sum. Every publishing house in the country wanted to get a contract with me, but until recently I was a big loser with a lot of problems and instability in life.

It all started in the summer of 2023 in New York. I worked as a journalist in the literary magazine «New Life». The magazine was based on reviews of new books, films, and on top of that, it published stories by promising beginning authors. This magazine also contained my stories, but I hardly came close to writing a masterpiece. In addition, my inspiration left me, and my articles were published less and less often, and my conflicts with the editor only intensified. Finally, we agreed that I needed a full-fledged vacation, by the end of which I would have to provide the editor-in-chief with something masterpiece. It seems to me that he saw talent in me and understood that this was only a temporary crisis that needed to be survived and inspired.

«James, I know you're capable, and you can write a good story. However, at the moment you are at a dead end...

«Are you firing me?» Robert, you can't do that to me! I was one of the best. Yes, I had a creative crisis, but don't give up on me!

«Listen, Havebrook, don't interrupt me. I'm not firing you, I'm just giving you time to understand yourself, gain strength, inspiration, and rest. And as soon as you bring me a story that I will read in one breath, we will continue to work further...

— That is, this is a sabbatical?

«Let's assume so!»

«Thank you, Robert... Can I go?

«Yes, go and think it over.» If anything, you know my phone number.

Robert Wilson was the editor-in-chief of New Life magazine and a very understanding man. He once taught a journalism course at my university, and I was his student. He always saw potential in me and therefore, after completing my training, he gladly hired me to work for him. And at first we worked fruitfully, I was even invited to work in other magazines, but I was devoted to my mentor. He was a handsome man who wrote dozens of stories and novels. One of his first was awarded various awards, and this indicated that he was very successful in his field. Now he is over sixty, he has his own family, but he did not have his own children, so many students were like children to him. Robert Wilson, despite his age, was still popular with both women and young students. Perhaps it was all about his charisma and strong mental abilities, because it seemed that this man knew about everything in the world.

Finding myself free from work in the middle of the day, I didn't want to go home, so I decided to take a walk. Wandering

aimlessly through the streets, I saw a bar and decided to stop by for a couple of glasses of whiskey — it was my favorite alcoholic beverage. The clock showed 21:00, and alcohol had already hit my head, so I decided to go home to sleep and think about what to do next in the morning. As I walked in the direction of the house, I thought of Lisa.

«How is she?» What does our relationship lead to? And is there love between us?

As it turned out, I asked myself these questions for a reason. As soon as I crossed the threshold of the house, I saw her reproachful gaze, filled with anger.

«Where are you hanging out?»

«I was in the bar, I was fired today,» I lied.

«It's not surprising, you're a loser!» And that's what you're all about!

«Thank you for your encouragement, that's what I need right now,» I grinned.

«We should break up. I wanted to tell you even earlier, but today we have reached the limit in our relationship. I'm leaving, and there's no need to try to stop me...

«All right,» I replied indifferently.

Tears flooded her eyes, but she took her things and proudly stepped over the threshold of my house, and I never saw her again. Probably, it is for the best. Lisa was an ordinary doll, falling only on money and prestige, which was at a certain point in my life, so to speak, at the beginning of my career.

I need to unwind, take a break from the frantic rhythm of the big city, be alone with my thoughts, breathe fresh air, take a break from people and transport. I have to go to a small town, a provincial one, where all of the above factors are combined. And, by the way, I know such a town: as a child, I often visited there, but over time I outgrew this town, but still the desire to return to it after a while was palpable.

Lingfield is a provincial town near New York City, with a population of about 5000 people. Quiet and peaceful, it seemed that nothing ever happened here. The city itself is surrounded by a forest consisting mainly of Weymouth pine. The people here were kind and suspicious of outsiders — a kind of community in which everyone was connected and familiar with each other in one way or another. James Havebrook could hardly be called an outsider, because he spent a lot of time here as a child. His father is from Lingfield, so young James often came here for holidays to visit his grandparents.

I packed my bags in a hurry, got into my Range Rover and hit the road. The road was supposed to take no more than three hours. Cities, high-rises and bridges flew by, but at the moment I was not particularly interested in the beauty of big cities: I wanted to be in a cozy house on the shore of the lake, which once belonged to my relatives, and now it has long been empty. It's hard to imagine such comfort in New York, where there are people and cars around, and everyone is constantly busy and in a hurry. And besides, New York is a city of tourists, so you can

relax in this city only in bars and with a lot of alcohol, so that when you return home, you would sleep like a dead man, not hearing anything and not thinking about anything.

Here in Lingfield, on the shore of the lake, is my grandmother's house. My father grew up in this house, and it was a pleasure to be there again, to soak up the scents of the fresh pine forest, to walk along the beach and feed the birds, to escape from the reality of the big city and just merge with nature, where in the morning the birds sing, you can hear the dogs howling, and there is no fuss.

I got there quite unnoticed and parked my car near a small diner, which I decided to look into after the road. When I was a schoolboy, my grandfather and I often came here, ate pancakes for breakfast, and at lunchtime I adored their burgers with chips. At that time, they seemed to me the most delicious of all that there is in this world. My grandparents died more than five years ago, and I never found the strength to come here: without them, I felt completely uncomfortable here, I loved them very much.

On the threshold of the diner, I was met by a nice waitress, she looked no more than twenty. She had blond hair and graceful curves that were accentuated by her uniform. She smiled and offered to sit down at a table near the window, and I gladly agreed.

«What shall I treat you with?»

«Coffee and a couple of sandwiches first,» I ordered.

«We have excellent lasagna,» the waitress suggested. «My

name is Marcy.

«Thank you, Marcy,» I smiled back. «Carry your lasagna.»

«Are you passing through our house or visiting us?»

«Hurry up to visit, I decided to change the scenery and live in your wonderful town.

«Great, I think we'll be friends, because most of the town comes to our diner. How can I contact you?

— James Havebrook. My grandparents lived here, and I used to be here. Perhaps you and I have seen each other once, and I would not mind if you suddenly want to join me and give me a tour of Lingfield.

Marcy was embarrassed and ran off to fulfill my order.

A couple of minutes later, she brought me coffee and sandwiches: but we had to wait for lasagna.

«It's okay,» I shrugged.

«What do you do, Mr. Havebrook?»

«I'm a writer!» I think I'm a writer. Now I am looking for inspiration for my novel.

«It's so exciting, promise to write about this amazing town!»

«I don't mind at all,» I smiled.

«Marcy, the lasagna is ready for the guest!» The owner of the diner shouted from the kitchen.

She ran off to get my order.

I began to eat with pleasure. The food seemed ordinary, homemade, you won't find such a thing in the metropolis. After eating the sandwiches and finishing my lasagna, I got up from

the table, left my tip, and went outside, satisfied with my satiety. I decided to go to the house by the lake and settle in.

The house was completely tidy and peaceful, only a layer of dust from long-absent residents. Since the death of my grandparents, only my dad has been here. Obviously, he had put things in order here, but more than five years had passed, and no one had appeared here. I examined the first floor. The kitchen — so many pleasant memories flashed in my head! It seemed that I could even smell the smells coming from the stove: it was my grandmother making pancakes with maple syrup for me, and my grandfather was sitting at the table and reading the morning newspaper. Everything here is as I remember. In the living room there is the same sofa standing in front of the fireplace, on it there is a photo of me as a child, my parents. I decided it was a nice opportunity to light a fireplace and succumb to memories with a glass of whiskey and a good cigar. A photo album came to hand. I flipped through a few pages: here is a photo of my young grandparents, you can see that they are in love, there is so much joy in their eyes, so much love. I felt uneasy at the conclusion that I would never see them again. Brushing off the delusion, I nevertheless pulled myself together and began to sort things out.

After getting used to my dwelling a little, I went for a walk around the modest town. I have always been attracted to this kind of cozy cities. Cute little shops, narrow streets, friendly locals, everything is clean, it is impossible to find even a cigarette butt on the ground. As I wandered the streets, I noticed a few interesting

places to look into, including the police station. Who knows, maybe I'll find inspiration in this place.

I swerved once again, and it was as if a building suddenly grew up in front of me. This building was quite old, as indicated by its narrow and high windows, as well as the architectural style in which it was made, but still it had been restored not so long ago in an attempt to preserve the spirit of that time. I came closer and saw the inscription «**PRIVATE LIBRARY**». As a child, I was not particularly interested in such places, although I may have been here once. Pulling the handle, the door swung open in an instant, and I found myself in a large hall, where I was met by the old librarian.

«Good evening,» he greeted me politely.

«Good... Can I look around here? You see, I am a writer, however, recently in a deep crisis, and I am looking for something suitable and motivating for myself.

«Are you a writer from New York?»

«How do you know?» I just arrived.

«The whole city here already knows about it. In small towns, it's hard to hide anything.

«Yes, I suppose you are right.

«Please, watch whatever you want.» And if you want to borrow a book, I will make a form in your name, and you will be able to get any book without hindrance. However, our library is private, so all books are paid...

«Okay, I understand you, thank you.

«Maybe you're interested in something?» Can I help you navigate?

«I don't even know, while I'm just looking closely.

«We used to have a hall with private collections. We kept the books and records of various people who were afraid of losing them. In the past, this hall was closed from prying eyes, but now a lot of time has passed since people stopped paying the rent for our halls, and the books became our property, they were obliged to do so by contract. Therefore, you can look there. The hall is located in the left wing of the library. Come on, I'll see you off...

«You've intrigued me. I have just arrived, and you are already pleasing me with something unusual.

In New York, you can't get into private collections so easily, even if someone doesn't pay rent, because it's privacy... And even there, without prying eyes, there is someone to look at these collections.

The hall was quite spacious. The librarian, by the way, his name is Mike, was an elderly man, but still very vigorous for his age. After escorting me to the place, he obediently left, and I was left alone. Looking at the books from floor to ceiling, I ran my eyes over the shelves. In general, nothing unusual: classics and gift editions, for the most part nothing that could interest me at the moment. But still, without haste, I examined the regiments: Hugo, Hemingway, Blake, Dostoevsky... A thick volume without a title on the spine. I wondered what it was. Tolstoy with «War and Peace»?! Taking the book from the shelf,

I distinctly heard something fall. Then a certain bundle attracted my attention. As it turned out, it was a book wrapped in a towel or something. I carefully unwrapped the towel and saw a book without any titles. When I opened the first page, I realized that this was not a book at all! This is someone's diary. Glancing through the text, it immediately caught my eye that the diary was not so simple. Several times on one page I came across the word «murder». I smiled, no, not at the murder, but at the fact that I think I had found my homework. However, the diary was hidden, and it was unlikely that Librarian Mike would want to give me a book that was not in the register. So I hid the book, and I took the same volume that was untitled on the spine. As it turned out, it was really Tolstoy with his «War and Peace».

Mike started a form and wrote down a book. I paid a deposit for it, and in a month I had to pay 30 dollars and return the book no later than in a month. Otherwise, another \$30 will be added to it. However, I didn't care, I was ready to return it right away, in my pocket there was a much more intriguing read. But I did not show it, saying only goodbye:

«Thank you, see you!»

«All the best!»

I was very hungry because of my excitement, and I decided to go to the diner where I stayed for the first time.

«Have you decided to have dinner?» «I was greeted nicely by the same waitress as in the morning, I think her name is Marcy.

«Yes, I'd like to have something to eat!» «Looking around, I

didn't even notice how hungry I was.

«Great, now you will be our regular customer, I hope,» she smiled.

«If it's possible,» I couldn't hide my smile either.

«What shall I bring you?»

«Let's go to your taste, I trust you...»

«Excellent!» While I pour you coffee to brighten up the wait...

She left to fulfill my order, and I, sipping coffee, stared out the window with a thoughtful look. Maybe this diary is a joke? Although it is obvious that it was hidden there, so it matters. I was bursting with curiosity, and nevertheless I decided to look in and read a few entries.

3 June 2002

I didn't think something like that could happen in Lingfield. She was a friend, not sexually, more platonic, she was dear to me, and now she's gone. I don't know how to cope with it and how to survive this pain — it shackled my body and soul. Every day I replay that terrible incident in my head and can't find the answer. It's been a couple of weeks since her death, and I'm still writing day after day to find a clue, but nothing comes of it. This is a dead end! I promise you, Lina, I'll get to the bottom of the truth, no matter what it takes.

«Your order!»

I didn't even notice how she approached. I was so engrossed in reading that I couldn't see anything around me.

«Thank you,» I muttered.

«Enjoy your meal!» If you need anything, just tell me, I'll come up in a moment.

«Yes,» I replied detachedly.

What was it? Who wrote this? Questions popped up in my head here and there, and I only knew that I had to read the journal to understand. I immediately felt a certain insecurity, my appetite completely disappeared. Leaving the payment for dinner and tips, I quickly left and almost ran to my dwelling.

As soon as I ran into the house, I flopped on the couch with a swing. Taking the diary in my hands, I carefully opened the first page and slowly plunged into reading...

The Diary of H.H

3 June 2002

I didn't think something like that could happen in Lingfield. She was a friend, not sexually, more platonic, she was dear to me, and now she's gone. I don't know how to cope with it and how to survive this pain — it shackled my body and soul. Every day I replay that terrible incident in my head and can't find the answer. It's been a couple of weeks since her death, and I'm still writing day after day to find a clue, but nothing comes of it. This is a dead end! I promise you, Lina, I'll get to the bottom of the truth, no matter what it takes.

7 June 2002

Yesterday the police came to see me, and I got the impression that they suspected me of killing her. So far, it has been just a conversation, but there is a clear conviction that this was not the last.

10 June 2002

My search for the truth is exacerbated by the fact that I know almost nothing about the details of the murder. All I know is that her body was found on the beach, she was shot, and there are no other external traces, and supposedly no evidence at all — but if it was an accident, then the police would hardly be interested in this case, so everything is not so simple here. You need to understand how to find information...

12 June 2002

I met a nice person who I believe can help me in some way. His name is Edward, and we found a common language. Besides, he knew Lina. This is the first clue in a long time, one might say, the only one. I met him at a local bar. He himself came up to me and started talking about Lina. It seemed suspicious to me. But still, in view of the fact that I had absolutely no ideas how to get off the ground, I decided to take a risk. We talked about her for several hours, and he told us about himself. He had known Lina since university and even sometimes helped her with projects. And Lina, like me, was a journalist. So, Edward followed the same path and came to Lingfield for a while, having

learned about the tragedy of an old friend. What do I have at the moment? Lina was clearly killed — it was not an accident. I think it has something to do with her work, as we worked closely with her. I knew some of the topics she was working on, but I needed to find Lina's notes and figure out who she might have crossed.

20 June 2002

God, I had to commit a crime to get Lina's notes, but it paid off. I think I've found some connection to what happened to her. The police (and maybe not only) searched Lina's house a long time ago, but few people knew about her hiding place. Now, I knowed where he was. In her house, in the study, there is a small niche in the floor. She even joked that if something happened to me, you knew where to look for clues. Now it no longer seems like a joke. Lina wrote about the disappearance that happened in the spring of 1976. In addition, there were newspaper clippings of the time.

The missing man was Marcus Peters. At the time of his disappearance, he was only 17 years old, a very young guy. The disappearance was under strange circumstances, because the body was not found, there was no evidence in his house, and the guy did not leave the city. So he's still in town, but then, where is he?! After a while, his body was found at the exit from Lingfield.

NEWSPAPER CLIPPING:

The police are looking for the missing Marcus Peters, who disappeared on April 16, 1976. At the moment, no details have

been reported, but the suspicious fact is that the young man does not get in touch, and, as far as the police know, he did not leave the city. Details in the evening issue.

Issue of April 16, 1976

Journal. Branson. K.

NEWSPAPER CLIPPING:

Parents and friends of Marcus Peters ask for help from all concerned citizens who have any information, to immediately inform the police. We remind you that on April 16, 1976, Marcus Peters disappeared from his own room and his whereabouts are still unknown.

Issue of April 18, 1976

Jour. Branson. K.

NEWSPAPER CLIPPING:

Parents and friends of Marcus Peters ask for help from all concerned citizens who have any information, to immediately inform the police. We remind you that on April 16, 1976, Marcus Peters disappeared from his own room, and his whereabouts are still unknown.

Issue of April 18, 1976

Journal. Branson. K.

NEWSPAPER CLIPPING:

This morning, the body of the missing Marcus Peters was

found at the exit of Lingfield, on Highway 95 leading to New York. The boy's parents do not understand how their son could be alone on this highway. Mourning has been declared in the city.

Issue of April 19, 1976.

Journal. Branson. K.

21 June 2002

I visited Lina's house. He doesn't seem to be under surveillance, but among the documents I found were newspaper clippings and one sheet of information to figure out:

Lina Green's leaf:

— Marcus Peters

— Catherine Green

Chevrolet Camaro Red N26NIB

M.B., R.U., N.B., S.D.

L.G.

Obviously, this information was important, but what it means is not entirely clear to me. Only Lina could know. Perhaps I did not search the house well, perhaps I will have to visit there again.

22 June 2002

I was walking and casually turned to Lina's house to assess the situation. From a distance, I saw many cars: one policeman and two black jeeps. Most likely, they were people from the FBI, on one of them I saw a branded jacket with the inscription «FBI».

But what is the FBI doing here? I hurried away.

23 June 2002

I think again of Lina and who could have done this to her. I roll her paper in my hands, but I can't figure out what's what. Basically, everything is clear there: Marcus Peters is the man who was killed in '76, Catherine Green is Lina's mother, and everything else... A red Chevrolet Camaro and strange initials?

24 June 2002

Again I was at Lina's house. It was empty, the door was sealed. I walked around the house and, seeing an open window, went inside. I couldn't find anything else in the house. However, when I got out, I noticed that I was being followed. At that moment, my heart sank to my heels, and I decided that I had to run. I was being pursued. I was able to hide in the library. This is where I write these last lines, because if I were caught, I would be the prime suspect in this case. I will hide the diary here and leave the library after a while.

After reading the diary, on the last page I found the inscription: «H.H.» Were they initials or Roman numerals? Although, judging by the dot between the symbols, I concluded that they were still initials. And they belong to the author of this diary. But who is he? I was in a stupor, these lines struck me. I stared frantically at the fireplace in which the wood was burning. The diary was small, but the meaning and facts hidden in its pages impressed me very much. As an experienced journalist, it is difficult to surprise me with anything, but this diary simply

trampled on me morally. It was difficult to think of anything else, all my thoughts were occupied only by this diary. Then I realized what I should write about, and it would not be just a story, it would be a bestseller, a novel that would excite the entire population of America in the same way that this diary had just excited me. But I have a lot of work to do, I am only at the beginning of the journey.

Still, I opened my laptop and began to write down all the information that I had gleaned from the diary, at the same time typing the diary in full, so that I could always have an electronic version of it. A shiver ran down my spine again. He was so honest, so direct.

Finally, I was exhausted, as if I had been squeezed. I closed my laptop, rubbed my eyes and looked at my watch: it was four in the morning. I did not notice at all how it flew by. A storm of emotions and inspiration was still raging in my soul, a kind of internal struggle of the physical body, which was exhausted, on the other hand, my emotionality, which wanted to do something, run somewhere, look for information. So far, two clues from the diary could be distinguished: the murder of Lina and the murder of Marcus Peters. And it was about this information that you could find out in the sheriff's office of the town of Lingfield.

As far as I knew, the police station used to be run by Sheriff Martin Blackwood, but he has recently taken a well-deserved retirement. My father knew him, I think they were friends. Now Martin's place has been taken by his son, Patrick. I remember

him from childhood, although he was older than me. But he was not offended, because everyone knew that his dad was a sheriff. We haven't seen Patrick in over a decade, and I hope he still remembers me and can help me get the information I'm interested in.

Time passed slowly, the clock showed only half past five. I made coffee and languidly walked up and down the room. It was already beginning to dawn outside, and I decided to go out onto the terrace. «Who are you, Lina Green?» flashed through my mind. At this point, I passed out in my chair with a cup of unfinished coffee in my hand. I passed out and didn't even dream, just a black veil in front of my eyes.

A mug of coffee that fell to the floor brought me back to consciousness. The sun was in full swing and gleaming on the lake. I smiled; a pleasant warm breeze blew over me. I need more coffee, or I won't last until noon. At that moment, my phone rang — the call was from Robert Wilson, my editor and publisher.

«James, how are you?»

«It's okay, Robert, thank you!» I'm fine, I'm settling in.

«Were you asleep?» You have such a voice... Or are you sick?

«No, I'm fine, don't worry. Yesterday I fell asleep late, indulging in memories.

— Have you found inspiration yet? Is there any story in mind?

«Not really,» I replied evasively.

«I believe in you, James. Our publishing house needs a bomb to stay afloat among these «sharks». You see, there haven't

been any really powerful works lately, no articles without high-profile investigations. People need action, dynamics, murders, debauchery. People love the spicy and the forbidden. In general, you understand this yourself! All hope is in you, my friend. I am waiting for news. I know you can do it!

«Thank you, Robert, for your trust, but I won't promise anything for now. I'll let you know if there are any shifts. Believe me, you will be the first to know about it.

«Okay, James, here's on the line. Bye!

«On the line!»

I put my phone on the table and went to wash my face. There were a lot of things planned for today, first of all I need to get to the police station.

So, my investigation officially begins. Well, into battle, James Havebrook! Into the game!

An old friend

By 11 a.m., I was already near the police station.

— Good afternoon! I asked the cop on duty. «Where can I find Sheriff Patrick Blackwood?»

«Good afternoon, the sheriff is at home. Are you prescribed?»

«No, but I'm an old friend of his, I wanted to see him.»

«I'll let you know.» What's your name?

«Tell me, it's James Havebrook.»

«One minute...

The attendant, whose name was Max, called the internal phone to Sheriff Blackwood's office and reported my arrival. A moment later, Patrick came out of the office and spread his hands to the sides with a smile.

«James, a hundred years, a hundred winters!» He hugged me in a friendly way. «Come on, come in.» I'll make coffee.

«Oh, thank you, Patrick!»

We settled down in an office that had not changed at all since my childhood. It's exactly the same as I remember.

«Tell me, friend, how are you?» I heard you've become a writer?

«Yes!» I'm writing! I work in a publishing house, part-time I write articles for the New Life magazine.

«Hello, James!» Congratulations! You've always been like that, you wanted to know everything and everything, and you had

the word. You see how it happens, a vocation is from childhood. If you remember, I've always wanted to be a cop, so it's fate, it's us. So you came for work or to take a break from the hustle and bustle of the city?

«Probably both,» I replied evasively.

«I'm listening to you carefully, James Havebrook,» he jokingly encouraged me.

«I'll get straight to the point, there's no need to beat around the bush,» I replied seriously.

«I'm sorry, James, I didn't mean to offend you, go on...»

Surely you have heard of the murder of Marcus Peters back in 1976?

— Yes, I am familiar with this case, but mainly from my father's words, although I also studied the folder with the case. I know that he was severely beaten, the case was not solved, and not a single piece of evidence was found at the crime scene.

— Are the case materials still preserved?

«Of course, we do not close murder cases, although the case is no longer in our competence.

«And in whom?»

«The case was taken by the feds almost immediately.

«Can I take a look at the case?»

— I think so! Perhaps you can look at it from the other side, with fresh eyes.

«Thank you, Patrick!»

«But there's more. The murder of Lina Green, she was found

on the beach in 2002.

«James, you can doubt it, but these two murders were the only ones in the history of the town of Lingfield. It's a tragedy for all of us, I hope you're not going to spread panic in our close community?

«No, Patrick, what are you talking about, I want to know more about what happened, maybe I can help catch the criminal.»

«Good!» I'll give you Lina and Marcus's files.

«If you don't mind, I'd like to study them at home.

«I'll make copies for you.»

«That will be wonderful!» I owe you!

«Come on, Havebrook, come to dinner with my parents tonight, I'm sure they'll be glad to see you.»

«Thank you, Patrick, I'm very pleased. See you tonight!

«See you tonight, Havebrook.»

I got home in a matter of minutes, my mind was seized by excitement, I wanted to immerse myself in this matter, feel it and find the culprits.

Flying into the living room, without bothering to undress, I sat down on the sofa and laid out the case materials on the coffee table. Both cases were handled by Sheriff Martin Blackwood, Patrick's father.

No evidence was found at the scene of Marcus Peters' murder. An autopsy revealed that he had died from a blow to the head with a blunt, heavy object, most likely with a stick or truncheon. In addition, he was severely beaten: literally the whole body was

covered with bruises and abrasions, there were a huge number of hematomas on his face and a broken nose. The police believed that Marcus was not alone there, however, except for his body, nothing was found at the crime scene.

As for the case of Lina Green, everything is even more vague. She was found on an abandoned beach: her head was lying on a rock, there was a lot of blood around, but there was no evidence, as well as witnesses. An autopsy of the body showed that Lina was shot with a shotgun in the head. There was no other damage. There were no signs of rape or beatings. No motive, no evidence, no suspects. Complete zero. The police only found things scattered on the beach belonging to Lina.

«It's not getting any easier from hour to hour, the police have nothing at all about these two crimes,» I cursed aloud.

To try to see the whole picture, I hung photos of Lina Green and Marcus Peters on the wall. And while I didn't have a single idea — what happened?! Two crimes: in 1976 and in 2002 — 26 years difference. Everything was foggy. If it was still possible to understand the motive with the murder of Lina, because she was a journalist and could get into places where she shouldn't have gotten in, and Marcus Peters? A young boy, who could he interfere with? What is the motive for his murder? I'm completely confused.

The clock showed six in the evening, and I only realized that I had not eaten anything that day. A little detached from the

confusion in my head, I remembered the invitation to dinner with Patrick and his parents. I decided that I would combine two things at once: I would have dinner and maybe I could get some information from Patrick's father, Martin Blackwood. Maybe he remembers some details or has his own opinion about these murders.

Dinner at the Blackwoods'

At the Blackwood house, I was warmly welcomed. In particular, Martin Blackwood himself.

«James, my boy, how you have grown! he stressed. «When Patrick told me that you had come to our town, I was very happy. How is your father?

«It's all right, Martin,» I assured him. «He's living in New York and enjoying his retirement.

«I'm very glad to hear that he's fine. Let's go to the table, let's have dinner, we will always have time to chat,» he said in a native, even fatherly way.

Pleasant aromas were wafting around the house, and I drooled. Mrs. Blackwood sat me down at the table. I remember her from childhood: she was always a modest and very sophisticated woman, always polite and not particularly talkative.

«The dinner was splendid, Mrs. Blackwood. Lately, I haven't been able to eat delicious homemade food often.

«Thank you, James, I'm very pleased,» she replied with a warm smile.

These people were close to me from early childhood, they are very kind and friendly, I was always welcome in this house, I even felt some kind of security from the outside world here.

After dinner, Martin filled two glasses of whiskey, and we went out on the terrace to smoke a cigar that the eldest of the

Blackwoods adored so much.

«Patrick, are you with us?» I asked him.

«You go, I'll come later.»

We sat down on two armchairs near the coffee table overlooking Mrs. Blackwood's beautiful garden.

«Well, how do you like it here?» He turned to me kindly.

«To be honest, I'm here on business,» I did not hide.

«Yes, Patrick told me that you were interested in old, unsolved cases and took copies of them.

«I'm in the inspiration stage, that's why I came to Lingfield to distract myself and maybe find an interesting storyline for my book,» I replied honestly again.

«I see, James. Do you have any questions for me?

«Yes!» As far as I know, you investigated both murder cases: 1976 and 2002.

«That's right, James. But it was difficult to call it an investigation: there was no evidence, no witnesses either. In addition, in 1976, a few days later, the case was taken away from us...

«Who?»

— FBI. And I didn't get involved in this case anymore, although I really wanted to get to the bottom of the truth. But I was still young and did not want to lose my job in the police, so, reluctantly, I stopped the investigation.

— And in 2002?

«The situation repeated itself there: the FBI took over the

case, and I couldn't do anything about it. To be honest, we had no experience in investigating murders. In our town, this is extremely rare, to be more precise, in the entire history of our town there were only two of them: the murder of Lina Green and Marcus Peters.

«Is it strange that the FBI took both cases?!»

— Not at all. As I said, we had no experience in such cases, and the murders were terribly strange.

«But why not the state police, but the FBI?» As I understand the whole policy, if the local police are unable to deal with this kind of case, they bring in experienced investigators from the state police. The FBI, on the other hand, deals with cases committed in several states.

«Obviously, James, there was a reason for the FBI to take these cases. Another glass? Martin suggested.

«Yes, I won't.

Then we drank in silence, and it seemed that everyone was thinking about their own things. I blew out a puff of smoke and said thoughtfully to Martin:

«We'll deal with it...

In response, he patted me on the shoulder and said:

«I believe in you, James...

At about ten in the evening I got to the house by the lake, it was already dark. I, a little devastated, sat down on the terrace, at the moment I had not a single thought. And I decided that the morning of the evening was wiser, and went to bed.

I haven't slept like this for a long time: soundly and peacefully. When I opened my eyes, the first thing I saw was my makeshift plaque on the wall with the facts about the murders of two young men. I stood up and attached two FBI memos above the photo of Marcus Peters and the other above the photo of Lina Green.

I picked up the diary of the mysterious H.H. In one of the newspaper clippings I saw the name of the journalist — Branson K. — Why didn't I notice it at once? I blamed myself.

I need to find out information about him! I was firmly convinced. Maybe he was still alive and could tell information or something like that. Immediately I called Sheriff Patrick Blackwood. He, in turn, redirected me to his father, Martin.

«He must know it!» Patrick told me.

After making another call, I got through to Martin.

«Martin!» It's me, Havebrook.

«Hi, James. Glad to hear from you!

«Mutually!» But I'm on point.

«I'm listening very carefully and I'll try to help!» What's the matter?

«Do you happen to know a journalist named Branson K.?»

«Carl Branson?» I know! He once worked in a local newspaper, now he is retired, lives near a forest, leads a bachelor lifestyle, and rarely appears in the city. In short, a hermit. Will you write down the address?

«yes, I'm writing it down...

— 21 Forest Street.

«Thank you, Martin, you helped me a lot!»

«Not at all, James. You call if anything. Don't be shy.

«I'll be in touch!» Bye!

«Bye, James.

Wow! We can say that the day started very well. For breakfast, I decided to go to the diner, where I was happily greeted by Marcy!

«Good morning, writer! She turned to me affably.

«Good morning, Marcy!» I'll have an omelet and coffee!

«I'll be there soon,» she replied coquettishly and ran away to fulfill my order.

I thought Marcy liked me. And she was a very attractive girl, perhaps under other circumstances I would have tried my luck with her, but at this time I was least interested in love games, although... There is a time for everything.

When I had finished my breakfast, I got up in a hurry, left a tip, and almost ran out into the street, got into my Range Rover, and went to see Carl Branson. My way to his secluded dwelling took no more than 15 minutes.

Journalist Carl Branson

I arrived unannounced, because I didn't know Carl's number, but still persistently rang the doorbell. A moment later, the door swung open, and I saw a tall, sturdy old man on the threshold.

«Who are you?» The journalist asked inquisitively.

«I'm sure you don't know me. My name is James Havebrook — I am a journalist and writer from New York — I did not hide it.

«James?» James Havebrook? Are you Hank Havebrook's son?

«Yes!» I was surprised. «Do you know him?»

«Do I know?» The former journalist was surprised. — Of course! We were friends at one time! Come into the house, why are we standing on the threshold.

The house of the journalist Branson was clean and smelled of mint. I became curious, and then, as if reading my thoughts, Karl said:

«I'm just brewing mint tea. Pour you a cup? He offered cordially.

«I won't refuse!»

Karl went to the kitchen to make tea, and I involuntarily looked around in his apartment.

All the furniture in the house, and the interior itself, have retained the spirit of the seventies of the twentieth century. Still,

the house was very cozy. In the living room, where we sat on the sofa, there was a fireplace lined with stone. On the massive mantelpiece there are black and white photographs, apparently from Karl's youth. There were more recent photos, but no later than the beginning of the millennium. In one of the photos, I saw my father surrounded by Karl and some other unknown man. I was interested.

Looking around Carl's house, I came to the conclusion that he was a single man. It was felt that there had been no woman's hand in this house for a long time. Carl Branson seemed to have lived as a bachelor all his life, but I could be wrong.

As I waited for the owner of the house, I replayed in my head the questions I wanted to ask Karl. At last he returned with a tray on which two cups and a transparent teapot with sprigs of mint and lemon were majestically adorned. Carl complemented this with some candy and cookies.

«Help yourself,» he offered me with a kind and light smile.

«It looks very attractive, I'd love to...»

«I saw my father next to you in the photo, and who is the third?» Without beating around the bush, I immediately asked.

«Oh, do you mean that?» He took the picture from the mantelpiece.

— As I said earlier, for some time we were friends with your father, and next to him is Edward Daniels, he, too, like us, was a journalist. A great journalist, experienced, with great connections.

«Where is he from?» I asked.

«From New York!» Once upon a time, fate brought the three of us together,» Karl sighed.

«How did you meet my father?» I began from afar.

«In fact, we have known your father for a very long time, we have crossed paths a lot in our professions, and in general we have known each other since childhood, but we have never communicated closely. Then your father went to New York and became an excellent journalist. But then fate brought us together again: a very good girl disappeared.

«Lina Green?» I blurted out.

Karl looked at me in surprise.

«Do you know anything about this?»

— I would not say that it is a lot. I only know that she was killed. To be more precise, they shot her and left her body on the beach in Lingfield — this was the second crime in the history of the town, so the murder of the young girl caused a wide public outcry. People were afraid to go out in the evening, locked the doors, although they had not done this before. The tight-knit community suddenly became suspicious of anything new in their town.

«Yes, you're right, James, it's hit the established society of our town very hard. However, over time, this subsided, everything somehow fell into place, because since then peace and silence have returned to Lingfield. Did you say you were a writer?

— Yes, exactly.

«Do you want to write a book on this topic?»

«Perhaps,» I replied evasively, «you see, Karl, I wondered why there were two murders so brutal in such a town. And in both cases, they were young people. Marcus Peters was only 17 years old, Lina Green was 25 years old. In both cases, there were no witnesses or evidence. It seems to me that all this is suspicious. There's something hidden here, but I can't yet find what!

«And you, James, want to interview me?»

«Well, if you can call our conversation that, then yes!

«I shall be glad to help you, my dear. This mystery has haunted me for many years. What are you interested in?

«That's it!» Everything you remember and know about Lina Green or maybe Marcus Peters?

«I'm afraid it's going to be a long story, my friend.

«I'm not in a hurry, so it's okay. I'm ready to listen to you for ages.

«Well... Then let's begin.

Carl Branson looked out of the window thoughtfully and began his story slowly.

Lina Green was a very beautiful, blonde girl. In addition, she was very intelligent, young and energetic. She had the same journalistic core. She would have achieved a lot in this field, besides, she had very good protégés and teachers.

In the early 2000s, she was very interested in the case of Marcus Peters. Surely you already know what happened: the guy was found on the side of the road with numerous injuries

incompatible with life. She was very interested to know what happened on that fateful April day in 1976. The police at that time had absolutely no information, and in the future this case was a pure «capercaillie». However, this case did not let her go, she was immersed in it with her head, collecting information day and night. We, as experienced journalists, made fun of her, but she was unshakable. In all seriousness, she fished out information bit by bit.

At some point, shortly before her death, she suddenly came to see me. As I remember now, it was a terrible night — pouring rain. It poured with such force that it seemed that raindrops could split the tiles on the house. It's pitch black all around, and she's standing on my doorstep, Lina Green. She was standing without an umbrella, all wet, the mascara was smeared over her eyes and flowing down with the raindrops. When she saw me, she asked without greeting:

«Carl, can I trust you?»

«What's wrong, Lina?» I replied to her frightened.

«Answer me, Karl!»

«Yes, Lina, of course you can trust me!» But what happened, Lina?

«Then don't ask questions!» Just listen! Tomorrow I have an extremely important meeting, I don't know what will happen after it, maybe I won't come back, but I want you to take it...»

«If something happens to me,» she continued, «just use this key, all my notes are there, you'll understand everything, and

we'll catch that bastard!»

At that time, I was in shock, I did not understand what was happening. She was all wet, standing in the rain, and I, a fool, never bothered to invite her into the house. I took the envelope, and she just left, got into the car, and I never saw her alive again. I still blame myself very much. After all, I could have stopped her! He could have helped her! But still, I didn't. Your father, when he found out that I had seen her shortly before the murder, was very angry with me that I could not help her, and I cannot forgive myself. After that, he didn't talk to me anymore, well, we had a few more meetings when we were looking for Lina's killer, but we didn't communicate as before. And I do not condemn him.

«I'm sorry, Karl, you said that Lina gave you the key in an envelope, what was it from?» Did you find her notes?

«I don't know what the key is. She didn't explain anything, apparently for security reasons, but I tried everywhere I could.

«And where?»

«Yes, everywhere... at the post office, at the station, in the storage rooms and even checked her mailbox, but the key did not fit anywhere. It remained a mystery to me, although I clearly understood and still understand that if we find Lina's notes, we will find the killer.

«Do you still have the key?»

«Yes!» Of course!

«Can you give it to me?» Maybe I can figure out what this key is from.

«Wait a minute, James.

Karl went off in search of the key, and my head was already thinking about what the key was from and what could be there. And I came to the conclusion that, most likely, Lina Green found the killer of Marcus Peters and went to expose him. That's why she stopped by Carl Branson and left him the key to keep, but she didn't tell him what it was from. She probably thought that Carl would guess what he was from and would be able to go to the police with Lina's evidence. However, Karl could not figure out what this key was from, and the criminal remained at large.

Then Karl returned and interrupted my reasoning. He returned with a small carved box in his hands and handed it to me. I slowly opened it: it contained only a small key, the purpose of which I had to find out.

«Thank you, Karl!» I will try to find out the truth about the murder of Lina Green.

«I hope you can do it, James. This secret has been haunting me for 20 years. Find the criminal, let this scoundrel answer for what he has done. And James, that's thank you!

With that, I said goodbye to Karl. He hugged me and said at the end:

«Take care, James!» This can be very dangerous.

In turn, I once again promised to look into this case.

«Say hello to your father!»

«Certainly, Karl!»

I got in the car and went to the house by the lake. All the

way I was occupied with thoughts about this little spring. What is it from? And what can be there? A diary? Documents? Notes? What?

As soon as I crossed the threshold of the house, I put the key on the table and began to examine it attentively. It doesn't look like this key is from a house or mailbox, as if it's from a vault or a cell. However, where? Definitely not at the station, Karl was there. There is no airport here. And I concluded that the key had to unlock something specifically here in Lingfield, because Carl had lived here all his life, and if the records had been in New York or elsewhere, Lina would not have left the key to Carl. So, you need to look for it here!

More and more facts appeared on my wall. Or, as the police call it, a detective board that helps to visually assess the available evidence and build new chains in the investigation.

I was dizzy with thoughts, I filled a glass of whiskey and drained it in one gulp. It didn't get any easier, but I calmed down a little, and the thoughts that had been wandering around in my head so erratically seemed to be on the shelf.

Lina knew the killer and went to him on purpose. She needed his confession, apparently she paid for it. In turn, Carl Branson could not understand Lena Green's intention, and her death was in vain. At that moment, I realized that there was another person who knew about this case. It's my father, Hank Havebrook! Of course! I have to learn what my father knows. And why didn't my father tell me about it before? Probably, this topic is very

painful for him. Looking at the clock, I decided to put this idea aside until morning, since the clock showed half past one in the morning. After draining another glass in one gulp, I just fell on the sofa and fell asleep.

I didn't sleep long. Someone desperately pressed the bell button. Stumbling with my feet, without bothering to ask: «Who?», I threw the door open. Marcy was standing in the doorway!

«Marcy?» What are you doing here?

«I'm sorry. I was driving past your house after finishing my shift at the diner, saw a light in the windows, and decided to stop by to leave you dinner. You probably work a lot on a book, and you don't always have time to eat. And I have the opinion that you work at night.

«Oh, Marcy, you really shouldn't have been so worried about me. Actually, I was already asleep, I just forgot to turn off the light. Today was a very busy day.

Marcy was embarrassed.

«I'm sorry again, Mr. Havebrook. I'll go. Bon appetit and good night.

«Hey, Marcy!» Thank you! I nodded in gratitude.

She embarrassedly got into the car and drove away.

Nevertheless, it was past two o'clock in the morning, and since I woke up, I firmly decided to have a snack and think about the available information. The food seemed very tasty, although I did not heat it. I decided not to call my father about the Lina Green

case. I thought it would be better if I came to my parents' home in New York. I took a shower, hastily packed my things and went to my parents.

I drove very slowly, as it was still 5 in the morning, my father wakes up early, about 6—7 o'clock, and I expected that my journey would take no more than three hours. I turned off Mountain Road and got out onto the highway. The road was clean, it seemed that everyone around was asleep. I drove past majestic spruce and pine trees, and at that moment I felt one with nature. It was raining lightly, it was cloudy, but for some reason it made me feel good and calm.

Around 8 I was already near my parents' house. I didn't notice how I got there, it seemed to me that this moment.

Conversation with Father

«Hello, Dad!»

I saw my father in the driveway, outside the house. Evidently he had gone out for the morning paper. It was his daily ritual: every morning he made coffee, went out to get a newspaper, and then settled into his chair and enjoyed the new day. Sometimes people don't need much to be happy. My father never chased fame or money, he just lived his life and enjoyed the little things. I thought it was boring, because my plan was to become a famous writer and, accordingly, make money on it. Although, do I really want it?

«Oh, son! What fates? How is your vacation? You haven't called in days! My father bombarded me with questions.

«It's all right!» There was a lot of work...

«Work?» I thought you were on vacation?

— Yes, but this is a sabbatical.

«Have you started writing?»

— I think so. I have a story. In fact, this is the reason why I came to New York so early. I have a conversation for you!

«Well, why are we standing in the street?» Come in,» my father cordially invited, hugging me. We entered the house.

«Make coffee?»

«Yes, I won't refuse. I didn't sleep much today.

«Go to your room for now, rest, and I'll cook breakfast and

make us coffee.» Your mom is still asleep, so don't make any noise.

«All right, Dad.

Everything in my room remained as it was when I graduated from school: an old computer, furniture befitting any teenager — a wall table, a folding sofa. On the wall there were still posters of various rock musicians. I sat down at my desk and laid out my things. I took out a laptop, the diary of a stranger with the initials H.H., and a file folder that contained all the materials I had managed to collect. It was at this moment that my father looked into the room.

«You look thoughtful. Hold your coffee, breakfast will be later, because your mother woke up and chased me out of the kitchen,» my father said with a smile and kindness.

He loved his mother very much and was always courteous to her.

«Well, what do you have, James?»

«Listen, Dad, it's a very long story, but I think you can help me!»

«I'll do my best to help, son!»

— It all started when I went to Lingfield. In the local private library, I was walking around the bookshelves and accidentally found a package. It contained a diary! It described the murder of a certain Lina Green and the disappearance of Marcus Peters...

I looked at my father, his face was as white as a sheet.

«Dad?!» Are you okay? You're all pale!

«And where is this diary?» Father asked barely audibly.

«He's here!» That's it. What's the matter?

— Are there any initials H.H. at the end of the diary?

«How do you know?» I was amazed.

«Because this is my diary, son.

«What?» Hank Havebrook?

Then I realized what had happened. This is my father's diary, written during the years of Lina Green's disappearance.

«Dad!» Why didn't you tell me about it?

«Son, understand, it hurt me to remember those events, and it still hurts me. After all, the killer was never found.

«You must tell me everything you know about this case.

«Good!» Just promise me that you'll get to the bottom of the truth!

«I'll try, I'll do everything in my power!»

«You must do more than you can to get to the truth.» But it can be dangerous, so be careful, son! Year 2002.

I was a little over forty years old at the time of the events that took place in Lingfield in the summer of 2002. I was quite a successful journalist. I never became a famous writer, and I did not aspire to do so. But in the field of journalism he had excellent achievements.

I met Lina Green in 2000 at the behest of my work. At that time, she was still a beginner in this business, but she was already writing quite good articles. She came to our newsroom to learn from the best journalists in New York. It so happened that I

became its curator.

She was very purposeful. She was constantly writing something down in her diary and always remained mysterious. I was wondering what she was writing down all the time, and one day I asked her directly about it.

«You know, Mr. Havebrook, this is my investigation of a long-ago crime. The police were unable to solve this case, and it seems to me that I am close to it.

«What is this business?» I asked with interest.

«The murder did not take place in New York, but in Lingfield. If you don't mind, you could help me! However, you should know that this is my investigation,» she replied a little sharply.

I agreed to help. And then she told me about the strange murder of a certain Marcus Peters. The guy was 17 years old — very young. Then, in 1976, this case quickly went into the category of «grouses»: there was no evidence, no witnesses, and all kinds of DNA tests had not yet been done, there were no technologies. For the local police, this was the first murder in their careers, they did not know how to behave correctly at the scenes of a crime of this kind. Both the state police and the FBI were there, but the case stalled before it began. Lina only said that she knew more than the police, but for some reason she was in no hurry to tell me the details. She said something about the fact that she had a witness who was at the scene of the crime. I was carried away by this case, it seemed that this story could blow up all the news feeds, but Lina was in no hurry to make this

case public ahead of time. She thought it was too early. When she is sure of all the details of this case, then she will release a full-scale article with a detailed investigation so that the perpetrators are punished. But she was silent. Time passed, I did not climb to her with questions, because this was her investigation. I figured that when she was ready, she would tell me everything.

It all happened in the summer of 2002. Lina came to Carl Branson and left him the key that we could not find out about and could not understand what it was from. After meeting Carl Lina, no one saw her alive again, except for the killer, of course.

The police suspected me and Carl, but rather only because there were no other suspects, and we spent a lot of time with Lina, especially me. I don't know whether to go with her at last or call me immediately in the end. But he didn't. Now I understand that I shouldn't have been so angry with Karl, because he had nothing to do with it. He's just a journalist for a local newspaper in Lingfield, and the whole situation scared him a lot, he was in a stupor, and that's not surprising. When I found out that Lina was dead, I was devastated by it. Then I began to keep a diary. There was no purpose to this diary, I kept it just to complain on paper, because I was afraid to talk to anyone else about it. In each of them, I saw an enemy or a greedy journalist who dreamed of promoting himself at the expense of the death of the unfortunate Lina.

Father fell silent. It seemed that he almost burst into tears, but still he managed to pull himself together.

«Dad, I have this key now. I went to see Carl Branson, he said hello to you, and he is very sorry that he could not help Lina on that fateful night. He considered himself guilty of her death. I myself want to understand what this key is from, because perhaps there is information that will give us a denouement of both crimes that happened in Lingfield. After all, it is obvious that these two murders are somehow connected with each other.

Father nodded and was silent for a long time. It seemed to me that he still had a lot of information, but now he is unable to continue the conversation. He only said:

«Son, deal with this matter, I beg you.» But don't release your book until you're sure of all the details. Otherwise, it will not be a book, but dog shit. Write only facts.

«I won't let you down, dad!»

«Boys, go wash your hands and have breakfast!» Mom's voice was heard from below.

«Let's go, mom.

«Mom didn't make a sound. There is no need to make her nervous and worried.

«Of course, Dad, no questions asked!»

«Then go and put on a smile!»

My mother was happy to see me, and we had a very warm, family-like breakfast.

«How's your book, son?» Mom asked.

«She's in the process, mom, I don't want to reveal all the details yet.

«I'm happy for you,» my mother said with warmth in her voice.

At that moment, my father looked at me proudly. I nodded to him imperceptibly.

When breakfast was finished, my father went outside with me to see me off.

«Deal with this matter, son.

«But I don't even know what to do next...

«Find her mother!»

«Lina?»

«Yes!» Maybe she's still alive.

«Thank you, Dad, you helped me a lot. I hope the new branch will lead somewhere.

«Come on, have a good trip!» Don't drive quickly!

«Yes, sir,» I said like a soldier.

«Call me!»

I didn't even remember how I got to Lingfield, I was so in my thoughts, so much the story sank into my soul. Literally another moment — and here I am already driving up to the house by the lake. This place has become even more native to me than it used to be. Thoughts even appeared in my head: should I move here for good?

In Search of Mrs. Green

I decided to go to the police sheriff, Patrick Blackwood. There is a possibility that he will be able to find out something about Lina Green's mother through the police channels.

«Greetings, Patrick!» I have a request, I hope you can help me.

«Hey, James!» Can you come to the station? We will discuss everything here.

— Yes, I'll be there in just 10 minutes.

«Okay, I'll warn the duty officer.

«See you!»

I hung up the phone and immediately drove to the police station. I felt that I had found something, I just needed to move forward, I needed to reveal this secret so that justice would prevail.

The attendant let me in without any problems, and I ended up in Sheriff Patrick Blackwood's office.

«Sit down, Havebrook. What happened?

«You know I'm writing a book about Lina Green, so I want to know if she has any living relatives?»

«As far as I have heard, Lina had only her mother and grandfather, they were very close. Lived in Lingfield, but at some point moved to Cortland, I haven't heard from her since. I can contact the police department in Cortland and find out something

about Mrs. Green.

«Patrick, I would be very grateful if you could find out her address.

«Good. Stay in touch, as soon as I find out something, I'll call you.

«I owe you, Patrick!»

«Come on,» he replied embarrassedly.

«I'll be in touch!»

It was as if wings grew behind my back, it seemed to me that I could do anything. For so many years, the police have not been able to dig up anything about these two murders, and I collected many times more information in a few days. I wanted to praise myself, but I realized that I was only at the beginning of the path and I was not close to the solution, but only knew some details that the police did not know. And yet it inspired me.

The weather turned completely bad, I decided to light the fireplace and have a glass or two of whiskey. I just sat and looked at the sparks in front of the fireplace, and it completely wore me out. I barely slept last night, and it took its toll. I slept soundly until morning. In the morning, I was woken up by a phone call. It was Patrick Blackwood.

«Patrick?»

«Yes, James!» I learned something about Mrs. Green.

«Come on, don't languish!»

«As I said, she lives in Cortland, at 7 Hudson Street. I can go there with you if I need the support of a cop.

«Are you serious?» I'll be glad if you keep me company.

«Excellent!» What time do we leave?

«In an hour!» I'll pick you up at the station. It is better to go in my car, because the investigation is unofficial.

«You're right!» I'm waiting.

I decided not to hesitate and immediately began to get ready. I had breakfast on the go: coffee and a sandwich. And now I am already sitting, waiting for Patrick near the station.

«Patrick!» I waved to him, and he joined me.

«Well?» Let's go?

«Yes, we're going!»

All the way to Cortland, we drove in complete silence, each thinking about something different, only occasionally exchanging a couple of phrases, but nothing to the point. Probably, we were both thinking about how to build a dialogue with Mrs. Green.

It was only at 7 Hudson Street that we decided to discuss our tactics. We decided that we would not take a roundabout route and simply explain the essence of our visit: that we wanted to uncover the truth about the murder of Lina Green and that we were her friends. And the second goal is to try to find out something about the key. Maybe all this time his mother knew what he was from?

Mrs. Green's Story

The small house on Hudson Street was rather unkempt: the overgrown grass and peeling paint on the façade spoke of this. We were greeted by a rickety mailbox, and there was no bell on the door.

I knocked persistently on the door, and it immediately opened. It turned out to be open. Patrick Blackwood, the brave sheriff, took the initiative at the same moment: he pushed me aside, grabbed my holster with his hand, and called loudly:

«Mrs. Green, are you at home?» I'm from the police!

There was silence in response, and we went into the living room. An elderly woman was sitting on the sofa, she was clearly drunk.

«Who the hell brought there?» She cursed.

«Ma'am, I'm from the police, my name is Patrick Blackwood, and this is my friend James Havebrook, he's a writer from New York.

«Havebrook?» She looked at me in surprise. «Are you Hank's son?» I knew Hank, not very well, but I often heard this name from my daughter. Oh, dear Lina, what have they done to you?! I've always believed that Havebrook was responsible for her death!

«Why did you think so?»

«She spent too much time with this man. And this Federal

came to me and asked about him.

«Ma'am, with all due respect, I don't think it was him.

«What's the difference now?» No one will return my daughter to me!

«That's the point, Mrs. Green — »

«I'm Miss Green!» I was not married!

«I'm sorry. But that's why we want to find your daughter's killer, so that justice can be done and the person responsible for her death gets the punishment he deserves, albeit after a long time.

«And what do you want from me?» Look at me... My daughter is all I had in this rotten life, and now she's gone. The most expensive things were taken away from me.

«Is that why you drink?»

«And what can I do?» How to relieve this pain inside?

«Miss Green, did Lina tell you anything before she disappeared?»

«What do you mean?»

«We've learned that your daughter was investigating the murder of Marcus Peters.

«Marcus?» Her eyes filled with tears.

«Yes, Marcus Peters!»

«Oh, I loved Marcus!» On the day of his death, I was with him! We wanted to run away and get married, our parents were against our union, but he was still 17 years old, and I was already 18. We decided to escape. At night, he secretly got out of the

house, at this time I was waiting for him. He got into my car, and we drove in the direction of Salt Lake City, but we were not destined to escape...

«What's wrong?»

Patrick and I were amazed by the woman's story. She continued, however:

«A car was driving behind us. The bastards in that car were aggressive and tried to push us out of the way. I got scared and stopped the car. It was a big mistake. Drunk guys, I think they were wearing masks or something, but they started beating Marcus and I was raped right in front of him. At that moment, Catherine Green burst into tears and covered her face with her hands...

— What happened next?

Catherine exhaled and, wiping away her tears, continued her heart-wrenching story.

«Maybe they didn't want to kill anyone, they just wanted to mock us, but when they beat Marcus, they apparently overdid it. They panicked when they realized that he was dead. Then the tall one, I think he was the main one for them, or so it seemed to me, ordered to finish me off as an unnecessary witness. But I miraculously survived. I don't remember much about how I was able to crawl about 500 meters. One of the passing drivers saw me and called an ambulance.

«Didn't you find Marcus?» What if he was still alive too?

«As I said, I crawled a good distance from Marcus and then

lost consciousness. I was in a coma for about a week. When I came to, I had amnesia, so I was of no use. And a month later, I found out that I was pregnant.

«Are you pregnant?» From Marcus?

«Yes, that's all he could leave behind.

Miss Green's story was terrifying. We were shocked that no one interviewed her and no one did a proper investigation.

«Why, when you regained your memory, didn't you go to the police?»

«And I did!»

«But that's not in the protocols!»

«A man came to my house and introduced himself as an FBI. I told him everything, just as I'm telling you now. He was polite and finally said that if I needed anything, he would contact me. But time passed, and nothing changed: no one came to me, the local police told me that the FBI was in charge of the case and they had no authority. That's all.

When Lina was born, I began to forget this story, as much as I could. I lived for her, we were very happy. Later we left Lingfield for Cortland.

«Did you tell this story to Lina?»

«Yes!» But she herself stated that she wanted to find Marcus's killer. Then I could not stand it and told her everything, everything I knew. On the one hand, I wanted to tell her so that the girl knew about her father, at least a little.

«Thank you for your courage and frankness, Miss Green. I

still have one last question: do you happen to know what this key can be from? I placed the key in front of Catherine, and she looked at it carefully. Then she shook her head.

«I can't even imagine what it's from!

«Thank you for your time, Miss Green. Do you mind if we take your phone number, in case we need some information...

«I don't have one, and I don't have a phone,» Catherine cut off sharply. «If you need anything, come like this.

«Is Lina's room still here?»

«Yes, it's there, behind the kitchen.

Lina's room was dark. The curtains were closed, and there was dust all around. Obviously, nothing has changed here since Lina graduated from school. After examining the room, including for the presence of secret hatches and safes, they did not find anything that could fit this key. At this point, we decided to curtail our operation: we received very valuable information from Catherine Green, and it was worth thinking about everything in a calm atmosphere.

«Thank you, Miss Green, we've got to go!»

«Get out,» she said goodbye rudely.

Apparently, the alcohol hit her head even harder, and it was as if there was another woman in front of us.

«Get out, get out!» she shouted after her.

As we closed the front door, we could clearly hear something fly into the door and shatter to pieces. We heard screams and swearing.

«Obviously, she's already 'that',» Patrick twisted his finger at his temple.

«Perhaps, but now we have information!»

«This information is worthless. Have you seen her? In addition, when I made inquiries about her, I learned that she was in a psychiatric hospital from 2003 to 2004. She is an unreliable witness. A drunkard and a psychic, besides, she did not see the attackers.

«Maybe you're right, Patrick, but I think the two things are connected. The cases of Marcus Peters and Lina Green.

«Are you sure?»

«Not yet!» But you need to dig further. See for yourself: Lina was looking for the killer of Marcus Peters and suddenly dies, leaving mysterious messages to her friends, including Carl Branson. Who knows, but we have no way back!

«All right, let's go...»

The way back was no different. We drove in the same silence. All the way I thought about this unfortunate key. What is it from? Will it help solve this case or both cases? I thought the same way about Lina's mother, Katherine Green. How hard it must be for her! It is not surprising that she got drunk and went to a psychiatric hospital, because she got there almost immediately after Lina's death. Most likely, her nerves gave out, she could not survive the death of her only loved one. She did not marry and did not give birth again. Her whole life is the murdered Marcus, her fiancé, and what is left of him, or rather Lina! At some point, my

thoughts were completely confused, and I couldn't think clearly. I just looked ahead and drove the car back to Lingfield.

Envelope

The weather in Lingfield turned completely bad: clouds covered the entire sky, heavy rain fell on the quiet town, a piercing wind bent the trees, and it seemed that these endless clouds hung over the whole world.

My soul was both excited and disgusting. This story... I was soaked through it. A shiver ran through my body at Miss Green's story.

«Goodbye, Havebrook. I'll see you later. Patrick brought me back to reality, and I just waved back to him, and I drove to the house by the lake.

My board with facts grew, more and more new information appeared on it. I was haunted by the work of the employees of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Why, having witness testimony, no one was looking for the car and those bastards who committed such an atrocity?

I was distracted from my thoughts by the rustling outside the door. I cautiously approached and listened, but everything stopped. But still, at my own peril and risk, I abruptly opened the door. Marcy was standing in the doorway.

«Hi, Marcy. What are you doing here?

«Hello, Mr. Havebrook. I brought you dinner, I didn't want to disturb you and decided to leave the bag here.

«Thank you, Marcy!» Will you come in?

«No, no, no!» I don't want to disturb you and disturb you. I'm sorry, but I've also been given a letter for you. I don't know the man, he just came up and asked if I could give the letter to James Havebrook. He stressed that this is very important! I agreed, and he got into his car and just drove away.

«Thank you, Marcy, that's very kind of you.

«See you, Mr. Havebrook.» I hope I didn't do anything wrong?

«It's okay, Marcy, thank you again.

She waved to me and left. I stood on the threshold and held a strange envelope that was completely white, without any inscriptions. My heart was pounding wildly in my chest, curiosity was eating away, and I opened the envelope.

Letter

Mr. Havebrook, I know you're looking for the truth about Lina Green. I think I have information for you. We need to meet. I'm waiting for you tomorrow in New York, at 170 Crosby Street, the fifth table by the window. Come alone at three o'clock in the afternoon.

E.D.

«E.D.?» Edward Daniels?

I think Carl Branson said that he was a great journalist in New York. His palms sweated with excitement. So! I need a drink! I reasoned aloud.

I couldn't wait for the morning, time passed very slowly, and

I sat down to read a book. I wrote as I had never written before: the words poured out of me as if in an endless procession. I came to my senses in the morning. I rubbed my eyes, closed my laptop, then fell exhausted on the sofa and slept. However, I did not sleep long, some anxiety woke me up. I stood up detachedly and looked at my watch: it showed 6 in the morning. Then I decided that it was time to move to New York. The journey usually takes three hours, you need to be there early to take a good look at everything and look at your parents.

Mysterious E. D.

I arrived in New York early, just after 9 in the morning. There was plenty of time before the meeting, and I decided to look around the area. At 170 Crosby Street there was a small diner. I went inside and decided to find table number 5. There were 12 of them in total. And which one is the fifth? Taking a closer look and going around all the tables, I noticed that they were all signed. The fifth table was near a window overlooking Crosby Street. A convenient place to inspect whoever arrives, enters, and exits. Not noticing anything else noteworthy, I decided to drive to my parents.

«Hello, Dad!»

At that time, my father was mowing the lawn near the house and did not immediately see me, because, I noticed, he shuddered.

«Hey, James!» Father answered, turning off the lawnmower. «Has something happened?»

«No, no, dad!» I hastened to calm him down.

«Tell me, do you know Edward Daniels?»

— Yes, we know each other. I can't say that we are best friends, but we worked together for a while. When Lina Green was killed, he found me in a bar himself, but you know, there was an entry about it in the diary.

«There was... But there was no surname there...

«Oh, exactly! And why did you start talking about him?

«I think he contacted me. He handed me the letter through Marcy. She is a waitress at a local diner in Lingfield. Sometimes he brings food to my home.

My father listened attentively, and I handed him the letter. He opened it leisurely and, as it seemed to me, read it for a long time. Perhaps he was just thinking...

«Do you think he has any information about Lin?» I could not stand it anymore and broke the silence.

Father was silent for a while, and then said:

«Are you sure it's Edward Daniels?»

«Here are the initials E.D.

«Well, that doesn't mean anything!» You didn't see who handed over the letter, did you? And in general, this whole idea can be dangerous.

I listened silently, and my father continued:

«A meeting at three o'clock.» So let's do this: I'll drive my car and park outside the diner on Crosby Street and watch you. Your table is right next to the window, and I'll have a good view of everything that's going on inside. And if I notice anything suspicious, I will immediately call the police and come to your aid.

«Good plan, father,» I said with a smile. «True, this mysterious E.D. asked me to come alone. What if he notices you and thinks it's suspicious and won't tell me anything.

«I don't care what he wanted!» You're my son, and I want to

know you're safe. And this is not up for discussion. Let's go sit down, I'll make tea.»

We settled down at a table in the backyard, and then I asked: «Can you tell me any more details about the events of 2002?» The diary says that you were suspected of murdering her.

«At that time, everyone who communicated with Lina was suspected, or maybe they were rather looking for just a scapegoat in order to quickly close the case and not sow panic. As you know, Lingfield is a small town where everyone knows each other more or less.

«Why did you hide the diary?»

«Well, as you could tell from the diary, I broke into Lina Green's house and stole her notes. Well, I thought I'd find her notes. I knew about her hiding place in the floor, but there were only newspaper clippings about the disappearance and murder of Marcus Peters. I compared that Lina was engaged in this case, but still there were no records themselves — no tapes, no diaries, nothing! And I'm sure they were — apparently she hid everything in a safer place. And the key that Carl Branson gave you will give you access to these records!

«So, when I climbed into the house, the police officers on duty noticed me. I had to run away, otherwise it would have looked extremely suspicious if I had been detained. I managed to hide in the library, it was there that I wrote the last pages of the diary and hid it. At the time, the local librarian, Mike, helped me, and I appreciated his help. I was afraid that if I left the library in

the evening, I would arouse suspicion, I would be detained, and a diary and newspaper clippings about an old murder would be found with me.

«In short, I decided not to take any chances.

«What else did Lina tell you?»

«I don't know much, except that she was just looking for the killer of Marcus Peters and her father!»

«Father?» Isn't her father, the deceased Marcus Peters?

«What makes you think so, son?»

Then I told my father in detail about my visit to Catherine Green. Her father was extremely surprised, he did not even know that Catherine was with Marcus on that fateful night.

«Wait, son... You said that Catherine was with Marcus that night and she was raped, right?!

«Yes, that's right, Dad!»

We looked at each other in silence, and the realization of what had happened dawned on us!

«What if the rapist Catherine Green is Lina's real father?» It was him she was looking for to bring to light, and, fearing to be discovered, the criminal took her life. And if so, it means that Lena Green has found her father.

«That is, it turns out that the father killed his own daughter,» I summed up.

«Yes, but it's not clear if he knew it was his daughter. Lina could not reveal the whole truth at once, only hinting that she knew that he participated in the events of 76. It turns out that in

the entire history of Lingfield, there were only two murders, and they were committed by the same person, but with a difference of 26 years.

«Don't forget that he raped Lina's mother, Katherine Green.

«I think Lina's notes would help us a lot!»

«Dad, maybe Edward Daniels knows something that can help us!»

«Son, find what the damn key is to and write a story about these events. The truth! So that the culprit or perpetrators of these crimes go to jail.

«I'll do my best, Dad. But one thing I can say for sure: the person we are looking for is not so simple. It seems to me that he occupies a good position in society. Maybe he's a politician or a cop, or maybe even higher. It will be difficult, the evidence must be ironclad.

We both felt uncomfortable.

By three o'clock my father and I arrived at Crosby Street, as we had agreed, in two cars. I went inside and took a seat at table No 5 near the window. The table was empty. The waitress brought me coffee. I sat in agonizing expectation, and looking out of the window, I thought again of poor Lina Green. The poor thing just wanted the truth, she wanted the criminal to be punished. I don't know what happened that night, maybe she planned to kill her mother's abuser and her hated father, but she was reckless enough to go to the killer alone. She could tell her friends and experienced colleagues about everything, perhaps in

the team they would have solved this issue without such a high price, and this death would not have happened, and the criminal would have been in prison. Although it is suspected that Lina had no evidence against him, she only knew for sure that it was him. Therefore, she went to him alone to make sure of her conclusions. Her instinct did not fail her, and for this she paid with her life. In addition, she was afraid to put others in danger.

— Good afternoon!

I did not notice at all how a tall black man appeared in front of the table.

«You must be James Havebrook?»

I nodded.

«My name is Edward Daniels, but I think you guessed it!»
Your father Hank is out there on the street, isn't it?

«Yes,» I drawled.

«I think Hank can be trusted, let him come in and join us.

I waved my hand out the window, calling my father. He immediately got out of the car and headed to the café. A moment later, the three of us were already sitting at the table. Edward ordered coffee for everyone and asked them not to disturb them.

The Story of Edward Daniels

Year 2002

Shortly before her disappearance, Lina Green called me. We met her here, at this very table.

«What was she asking?» I couldn't stand it.

«Patience, James, I'll tell you everything.

I remember how it is now: the weather was terrible, it was raining heavily, the black sky stretched beyond the horizon, impenetrable darkness. I still came.

She was very excited.

«Edward, I need your help.

«What's wrong, Lina?» Are you okay?

«Do you know the editor-in-chief of New Life, Robert Wilson?»

«Do you want to work with him?» I heard a lot of positive things about him. Among other things, he is a very successful journalist and writer. His work is appreciated by critics. If you want to work with him, I can write a good recommendation for you.

«Thank you, Edward, but not now. I left some for Carl Branson. I hope it won't be important, but I can't tell you everything right now. I need some information about one machine.

«What car?»

«A red Chevrolet Camaro...

«I'll try, Lina. I have friends who can help.

«It's better if they weren't from the police!»

«Why?» Lina, explain what's going on, I'm worried about you.

«Edward, you'll find out, but I can't tell you anything right now.

I listened to her very attentively, trying not to miss anything. I didn't know anything, but I was seized by interest and fear at the same time. Lina was very mysterious that evening. I did not pay attention to my own anxiety for her, because Lina was a young, beautiful girl. Who knows, maybe she has love, secrets and all that. There were thoughts that she had fallen in love with Robert Wilson and wanted me to bring them together. You know this old, charming man. Although at that time he was younger and more energetic.

«And you found out about the car?»

«Yes, James, I found out about the car. I called her the same evening.

Year 2002

«Lina, hello again!» You asked me to know about the car. So, I managed to do it, and, as you asked, I did not involve the police. So, for all the time, the car belonged to only three people. Now it belongs to Zachary Miller, and previously it was owned

by Garry Brown — he is a district attorney in New York. But the first owner of this car is his father, Nicholas Brown, the sheriff of the city of Cortland. Lina, explain to me...

But she had already hung up.

This story haunted me, I could not contact Lina for several days, but then I learned about her death from the news: she was found on a deserted beach in Lingfield. Then I contacted Carl Branson and went to see him.

«Carl, your mother, what do you know about Lina Green?»
She told me about a certain key that she left for you.

«Edward, I don't know what to do. She was here... Lord, I'm so sorry...

«What do you regret, Karl?»

«That I didn't stop her!» I could... Lord, I could... God.

«Well, calm down, Karl, let's go into the house.»

I was shaking, terrified, and panicked, but I tried to keep my composure. When Carl calmed down a bit, he told me about a journalist in New York who was looking for a clue to the murder of Lina Green.

I asked:

«Who is he?»

«His name is Hank Havebrook. He's a nice guy, originally from Lingfield, he was friends with Lina, he helped her with something...

«Lina didn't tell me anything about him.

«Maybe she didn't have time or didn't consider it necessary.

«Where can I find this Hank Havebrook?»

«He often goes to the local diner and bar.

Afterwards Karl cried, wept loudly. I felt sorry for him, and I patted him on the shoulder in a friendly way and poured him a drink. He drained the glass in one gulp and just collapsed into the chair next to him, obviously he was emotionally exhausted. He needed rest.

I arrived at the bar, and I was lucky: after a while, near the bar, I noticed a man who clearly did not fit in here. You can take it for a journalist's instinct. I was thinking about how to approach him, where to start, and I decided not to play tricks.

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