

A close-up portrait of a young man with light blonde, wavy hair and bright blue eyes. He has numerous freckles on his cheeks and a light stubble on his chin. He is wearing a dark, textured knit scarf. The background is dark and out of focus.

# 12+ The Mark

Ksenia Braun

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**The Mark**

«Издательские решения»

**Braun K.**

The Mark / K. Braun — «Издательские решения»,

This book is part of the «Stories for Motivation» series-short, evening reads crafted to deliver profound impact in just a few pages. Every story in this series is designed to stick with you and make you reflect on the deeper aspects of life. Ron lives in a society governed by rigid standards. In his world, there are individuals born with mysterious marks on their faces-people whom society refuses to fully accept. Ron had always viewed himself as a family outcast, until the day he met Marla...

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Ron didn't feel like looking in the mirror that morning. He washed up without catching his reflection and headed straight to work. The weather was beautiful. The rainy season was finally over, and despite the puddles, the crisp air felt alive with a rare energy — the kind that makes you want to create, or just feel glad to be alive. To breathe it in deeply and simply savor the moment.

Ron glanced up, scanning the sky, but there was no sign of a rainbow. *Strange, there's always a rainbow after the rain*, he thought as he reached the office door.

Ron was just an ordinary office worker — a manager, to be exact. The job wasn't too demanding and paid well enough, so he felt he was exactly where he belonged.

«Morning, everyone!» Ron said as he walked in. His greeting was met with nothing but scornful glances, cold silence, and the usual cold shoulder. At best, a few people gave him a curt nod.

Ron was used to this kind of treatment, so it didn't faze him. He was well-mannered enough not to stoop to their level, which is why he always made an effort to say hello.

«Ron, in my office. Now.» The boss sounded like he was having a rough day.

«Right away.» Ron walked in and looked at the director. The man was visibly on edge, nervously shuffling papers on his desk, unable to find his train of thought.

«Ron, I need you to relocate to another branch for a month. We have an audit coming up, and I can't have you in the main office right now. Don't take this personally, but...» The director was cut short as the secretary walked in with a tray.

Green tea with two sugar cubes — exactly how the boss liked it.

«But we have a contract!» Ron interrupted. «According to the agreement, you can't just reassign me to other branches. But that's in a completely different city,» Ron objected. «We only have this one office in town. Where am I supposed to live? And besides, I have a dog. She needs to be walked, and no one else is going to do that for me.»

«Ron, I get it, I really do,» the director said. «You're a great employee, and I can't just demote you to a warehouse worker. But you have to understand... your face. The shareholders can't see you.»

«How much does a warehouse worker make?» Ron's voice turned ice-cold.

«Half as much, Ron. Half,» the director replied. He genuinely cared about Ron and wanted to help, which showed in his tone.

«I'll take it.» Ron left his boss no room for argument. He turned and quietly walked out of the office.

His colleagues threw him more strange looks, but Ron just sat at his desk and started taking calls. Clients never met Ron in person; he had been assigned strictly to cold calling. So while his coworkers sold the company's products face-to-face, Ron spent the rest of his shift on the phone. His fluency in foreign languages was a huge asset — he handled all the international clients, which was exactly why his salary was higher than everyone else's. The whole office envied him. On top of that, he was the boss's favorite.

Yet, because of his appearance, no one wanted to get close to him. They feared him and kept their distance, but at the same time, they were inexplicably drawn to him, unable to look away. Every girl in the office liked him, but they were terrified of being judged by others. Or maybe they were

afraid of Ron himself... Or perhaps they just realized that being with him meant always being in the spotlight, and not everyone could handle that kind of attention.

When Ron got home, he walked his dog, crashed on the couch, and turned on the news.

«Another case of deviation has been reported in the neighboring city,» the anchor announced. «This marks the fourth individual in the last sixteen years. A spot, ten centimeters in diameter, was found on his left cheek. What is this? A mark or is it just a birthmark? Our research center is on the case...»

«Ten centimeters?» Ron muttered to himself, switching the channel to a movie. «Mine is fifteen! Big deal.»

Ron's parents didn't have any marks on their faces, and neither did anyone else in his family. However, their neighbor used to say that one of his own ancestors had been born special too. Back then, society wasn't so obsessively curious; no one made a fuss about people with marks, and nobody dragged them to research centers. Ron knew that being born this way meant he would always attract attention. The common folk whispered that red patches were never just birthmarks — they called them the Devil's mark, claiming the person was his messenger. Ron knew how kind and decent he actually was, but his colleagues preferred to believe those stupid myths about the Devil. They even blamed his devilish tricks for their own fascination with him — which was no surprise, considering how handsome, charming, and versatile he was.

He still had two more workdays ahead, but Ron was already desperate for the weekend just to catch up on sleep. He was completely exhausted by all the attention. Lately, his coworkers hadn't even bothered to hide it; they stared openly, whispering and snickering behind his back. Ron had no idea what they were saying, but his low self-esteem made him take it to heart, assuming they were mocking his face.

In Ron's society, people with these marks were few and far between, and scientists were desperate to study them. Out of all known cases, Ron's patch was currently the largest. Suddenly, it clicked why his boss had been so worried and wanted to keep him out of sight. No wonder! A mark that big would instantly cause a media frenzy and flash across every news channel. Ron would be immediately summoned to research centers for testing. On one hand, they covered all expenses — travel, lodging, meals, with hotel-like accommodations premium-class conditions, but Ron had no desire to upend his familiar routine. Besides, many people still looked at those with marks as if they were lepers, fueling endless gossip, so staying in the shadows felt like his best option.

And then there was Marla. She never looked at him the way the others did; she always greeted him with genuine warmth and a smile. Ron was convinced she just needed time to sort through her feelings and realize they were meant for each other. Fortunately, she would be back from sick leave soon, and Ron would get to see his beloved again.

The next two days were carbon copies of the ones before. On his way to work, Ron continued to enjoy the crisp air left behind by the relentless rainy season, still wondering where the rainbow had gone. In the evenings, he walked his dog and watched TV. The only change came on Friday: right before he clocked out for the weekend, the director brought over the paperwork for his temporary transfer to the warehouse handler position. Marla was due back on Monday, but Ron would be stuck working outside the main office. They would barely see each other, if at all. Ron only fully realized this toward the end of his shift, and his walk home was heavy with disappointment.

Marla was a psychic; some even considered her a witch. And honestly, she probably was. Ron couldn't tell if her warmth came from sensing his love, or if he was merely an object of her esoteric curiosity. Marla loved studying unique individuals, which was why Ron often chalked her attention up to professional interest. Yet, she was an excellent tarot reader — she had to know how he felt. Or did she? What if she had never even looked at him that way and had no clue he'd been in love with her since the very first day they met?

Ron rarely left the house because of his mark, and Marla simply detested the outdoors. They lived fairly close to each other, but they only ever crossed paths at work, even though Ron spent every night before falling asleep dreaming of sharing a lifetime with her.

On Monday morning, the boss called to remind him that his schedule remained the same, but he was to report to the new location. The dress code was different, and he had to use the back entrance.

Once again, Ron scanned the sky on his way to work but found no rainbow. At least it wasn't raining, which was a plus. The world no longer felt so gray and bleak; it was as if the city had finally come alive after a long hibernation.

«The truck will be here any minute,» the assistant manager said. «The boxes are clean and not too heavy. Put the office supplies and paperwork on the left shelf, and the actual merchandise on the right. Your partner will be here in half an hour to help you out.»

«A partner?» Ron thought he had misheard.

«Yeah. Didn't they tell you? You're paired up with a girl.»

«What exactly is she going to help with?» Ron still couldn't believe his ears.

«She knows the box labels, so she'll tell you where everything goes. Your job is the heavy lifting; hers is the sorting. Her shift starts half an hour after yours. Since you're the one responsible for opening the gates and letting the truck onto the property, there's no point in her being at the warehouse for those first thirty minutes.» With that, the assistant manager walked away.

Ron didn't really see the point of his new position, since his duties could easily have been handled by a secretary. But that was for management to figure out, so he didn't dwell on it.

A horn honked, and Ron opened the gates.

The company sold health and wellness foods, and the managers advised clients on nutrition and healthy eating habits. Ron's job required him to know everything about diets and nutrition, even though he had actually gone to school to become a firefighter. The company was famous, primarily for the top-notch quality of its products, so so the truck would deliver fresh meals every single day, which couriers then distributed to clients. The office supplies and paper were used up just as quickly because the managers had to map out personalized nutrition plans for every single customer — and the company had a non-stop flood of them. The director had recently decided to open an on-site gym, which meant upcoming fire safety inspections and health code audits. On top of that, the shareholders had decided to visit the office in person to do a photo-op with the director and give an interview. «*It will build trust with our clients,*» the director had argued, meaning the shareholders' arrival was inevitable. If they decided to stay until the gym's grand opening, Ron would be stuck unloading boxes for at least a month.

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