

e a s y t o w n b o o k s
CHARLIE ALICE RAYA

book 1

beginning

or drafting a town experiment

chapter 1

easy town books

easy town books

book 1, beginning, or drafting a town experiment, chapter 1

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BEFORE

2 March - 3 April 2016

It all began with a letter

Berlin, 2 March 2016

Dear Mr Tom Holbon,
Sometimes I wonder what I would do with a fortune like yours.

The answer is actually simple: I would set up a team of experts for an experiment which might or might not answer all the questions foremost on my mind.

Do you think your kind of fortune would be sufficient to build an experiment? Building, being one of the clues. Exploring, another.

Well, you seem to have the sort of influence to bring together all the experts required. And from what I hear, you are a programming businessman with an altruistic streak. All of which would come in handy.

So how about we set up an experiment which might turn the world upside down? In which case, we could give it a good shake.

If you are intrigued, I would be happy to present my ideas to you in person.

Sincerely,
Alice Adler

More than two weeks later

When Tom Holbon looked up from his paperwork, he was surprised to see his PR manager enter the study.

And actually for two reasons.

It was late in the afternoon, on a Friday, and usually Richard made prior appointments. At least here on Tom's estate. Back at the offices in New York, Richard came and went.

As always, Richard looked perfect. Perfect suit, perfect haircut, perfect everything. Some called him Barbie Ken. He even stood perfectly. At ease and yet with poise. Right now, three paces into the room, waiting for Tom to speak first.

Tom always wondered about the three paces. Why not two, which would bring him level with the terrace door, or five, which would get him to the centre of the room? There was no logic in three paces.

But then, Richard was a smooth talker, not someone for pace logic. And he was ambitious. Over a decade ago, he talked himself into Tom's inner circle. Tom still wasn't sure how that had happened.

Well, Richard delivered. Usually. There had been a few complaints by female employees down the years, but nothing that couldn't be handled.

Now in his forties, Richard was still unmarried. And that meant, he was available for overtime, and apparently on a Friday afternoon too.

'Richard, what is it?' Tom asked, clearing away the documents on his desk.

'I called the woman from Germany.'

'Remind me. What was that about?'

'The woman who sent you a letter about building an experiment with your fortune.'

'Oh, right. What's the idea about?'

'She wouldn't say.'

'Really?' Tom raised his eyebrows. 'She wasn't serious, right?'
'She will only talk to you in person. "I wrote in person, and I meant in person," is what she said.'

'Oh, well. She will change her mind. Give it a few days.'

'I doubt that. "I won't change my mind," is what she said.'

'Hm.' Tom was a little puzzled. 'Do you think there is an actual idea? Or is this just a prank?'

Richard hesitated. 'She is stubborn, maybe arrogant but not crazy or a prankster, is what I'd say.'

'Hm. Anything else?'

'Nothing that can't wait until Monday.'

That was Richard too. He never made a fuss. Especially not on a Friday. Which was a nice touch.

'All right. Thanks, Richard.'

When the door closed behind Richard, Tom leaned back in his chair, massaging his fingers. They didn't hurt, not today.

The letter still seemed like a joke.

What would I do with a fortune like yours?

What a question?

And yet, he was curious. And he still smiled whenever he thought of the line: turn the world upside down to give it a good shake.

According to Richard, Alice Adler was a small-time freelancer, web design and photography. She studied business in Berlin and Bristol, and some search results indicated work for a theatre company and on a movie. But Richard wasn't sure that these entries related to the same Alice Adler.

Forty-three, born in Berlin, according to her passport details. The passport photo showed an intelligent looking person, someone with a mind of her own.

Tom didn't trust photos.

No sign of a husband, children or any social media activity.

Hm.

For a moment, Tom looked out of the French windows, down to the lake. The sun was already low.

Hm.

He opened his desk drawer, searched it and found her letter under some documents.

He read the letter again. He smiled again.

Then he crumbled the letter and threw it into his wastepaper basket.

Ten days later

Monday, 28 March 2016

A party loft in New York

Jack Harris was still fuming when he ordered a G & T at the long bar. He would have a few drinks on the house. That was the least Tom Holbon owed him.

Who the fuck does Holbon think he is? A bleeding billionaire who can buy just about everything he wants? Oh, hang on. Yeah, he is the richest man on this screwed up planet, and he just tried to buy me. ME! A bloody famous actor with a BAFTA win under his still acceptable belt, from bloody old England. And I still get screwed over! What else does it take?

And then this Alice Adler ... Jack couldn't make up his mind about her. Nor could Holbon, funny enough. Holbon sounded sort of puzzled when he pointed her out in the glamorous buzz of the party. Some two hundred guests. About two-thirds suits, the other third: actors, musicians, models.

'She doesn't seem like she's new to circles like ours,' Holbon remarked. 'But neither does she seem like she's used to our circles. There's some sort of curious amusement about her. Don't you think?'

DON'T I THINK? Jack nearly shouted.

But he didn't want to make a scene. Everyone knew him. Though luckily, no one here would talk to him as long as he avoided eye contact. It was some kind of unspoken agreement — in circles likes ours.

Finally his G & T arrived, and he gulped down half of it.

He hated parties like this: rich businessmen courting celebrities, and in some cases vice versa. It was sad, at best.

For fuck's sake, why did he keep walking into traps? Why couldn't people just leave him alone? Why couldn't they just let him be? Just be.

Jack emptied his glass and ordered another G & T. 'A triple this time,' he snapped at the waiter.

Bloody hell, he was far too sober for this.

He could still hear them chirping: 'Oh, Jack, but you have to go. The Tom Holbon wants to meet you.'

And not just his agent. No, five other people kept bugging him. Three of which, he hadn't even spoken to in years. And for what? This bullshit?

Jack frowned, suddenly distracted.

He was keeping an eye on Alice Adler. Inconspicuously, of course. More like a corner of an eye, really. And a barkeeper, further down the long bar, sneered at her. What did she order? Water?

Oh, orange juice.

Well, at least she seemed to take the sneer with humour.

Now she stepped away from the bar, orange juice in her hand, and looked around. Again. She was watching people a lot. Sometimes other guests talked to her. She smiled easily when they did. But no one stayed long.

She was dressed casually: jeans, T-shirt, long jacket, no jewellery, no noticeable make-up, her short dark hair sort of ruffled. He opted for casual too. And no tie. Never a tie. Not even for The Tom Holbon.

What the heck? What does Barbie Ken want with her?

Jack turned, leaning his back against the bar. Earlier, the Barbie Ken guy introduced him to Holbon. Now, Barbie Ken was talking to Alice Adler. And she was frowning. And now, Barbie Ken walked away. She was looking after him, kind of puzzled. What the hell?

Jack turned to the bar again, just as the barkeeper served the triple G & T. He picked it up and took a few thoughtful sips.

So far, he hadn't given Alice Adler a single thought. He was just angry. He even remembered what a famous actor told him on his first job: 'As an actor you are a prostitute. You strip for your audience, body and soul. When you are famous, you strip

for the world. And as a reward, the world will own you. Every single one of them will own you!’

A fucking prostitute!

And tonight Holbon tried to buy his services, saying: ‘Whatever it takes. I will, of course, reimburse all you expenses, and pay you well.’

Did Holbon really mean ...?

No wonder, he got angry. Walked out on Holbon. But Barbie Ken caught up with him and explained with smugness dripping from every word: ‘Mr Harris, Tom isn’t all himself. He’s experiencing a brief stretch of senility. It will pass. He just turned sixty-three. These things happen when people get to that age. I mean, he invited Alice Adler out of the blue. No one was more surprised than me. And now, we have to keep Tom from making a fool of himself. He can’t be seen to fall for a prank. Right? Besides, if there is something to her idea, then it’s better we know about it and not our competitors, right? So, we need you to get her talking.’

What a total dick!

Jack wondered how Holbon would react if he knew that his PR manager portrayed him as a dotard. Aren’t PR managers supposed to present you through some rose-coloured glasses? Do you still get screwed over even if you are the richest man on the planet?

Hm. But what about Alice Adler? What has she walked into?

Jack frowned, remembering something else Barbie Ken told him. ‘We have several people at the party who’ll gather information about her idea. But you — you with your famous charm — you might have the best chances.’

Jack nearly punched Barbie Ken.

But that was the curse of being famous. You couldn’t just punch someone. Least of all in public. If you did, there would be hell to pay.

Jack shook his head.

‘I’m curious, Mr Harris. That’s all,’ Holbon said earlier.

'We have other people at the party,' Barbie Ken's voice echoed in his mind.

Other people.

What if?

No!

But ...

Yes, yes ... I should at least warn her.

Though, she seems like the kind of a person who can look after herself.

That's bullshit.

Yeah. I know.

He had seen it many times. People thought they could get through trouble on their own. And they failed. In the past, he needed help, but people thought he didn't. And he failed.

Jack turned around.

But Alice Adler was gone.

He scanned the loft.

Was she really gone?

Apparently.

Well, if she was gone, then there was nothing he could do.

He was simply too late.

Case closed.

Jack sighed and went looking for her.

He had been in this loft before. It was popular with the rich and famous, who rented it for their parties. This party was Tom Holbon's. Hence all the suits, and the celebrities for the suits' amusement.

Apart from the main room, with the long bar, there were several smaller rooms: for gamblers, dancers, smokers, chillers and one for minimalists.

That's where he found Alice Adler.

He couldn't help a little smile, but then he stopped, hesitating.

The room was nearly empty, just a few stools and fewer guests. The walls were grey, and the bar was the only source of light.

Alice Adler was sitting at the bar, lost in thoughts, a cocktail in front of her. A young barkeeper was working his phone, standing in the opposite corner.

Should he really talk to her?

What if she gets star-struck and starts to giggle? What if she wants to trick Holbon?

Bollocks!

Just talk to her.

Are you sure about this?

No.

And then a third thought added: You know, maybe you should have some fun with this.

Hm. Maybe some fun would be good.

Slowly, Jack walked towards the bar, pulling at his shirt. Then he took a deep breath, put a whimsical smile on his face and sat down on the barstool next to her.

She looked up.

And she stared.

She just stared at him.

That never happened.

People made a fuss, gasped, begged him for a selfie or an autograph, or they giggled. No one just stared at him with angry — no, not angry — frustrated eyes.

Oh, come on. She's probably having a miserable night too.

'What is it?' she asked.

'Well, um ... I heard a few things about you ...' Dude, really? That's the best you can come up with?

She frowned. 'What did you hear?'

'Um... Your name is Alice Adler, and you are from Berlin. You were invited to this party by Tom Holbon after you sent him a letter, proposing some kind of experiment. How am I doing so far?' he added sort of jovially, trying to regain some ease or confidence or anything that didn't make him feel like a fool.

Her frown deepened. 'A bit too well. Who told you? And why are you talking to me?'

Why he was talking to her? No one had ever asked him that question. And frankly, her bluntness was a bit off-putting. Better get this over with quickly. 'Um ... You see, I got several calls from people, all telling me that Tom Holbon wants to meet, and that I had to go or come to this party.'

Her expression darkened.

'Nobody gave me any details,' he quickly added. 'Look, I'm in New York for Easter, and so I agreed. Shortly after I arrived, I was introduced to Tom Holbon, and he told me about you—' Jack stopped, suddenly realising what was coming next.

Did he have to tell her everything?

Just say it already.

Embarrassed, he continued: 'Mr Holbon said he needed to know all about you and your idea and—'

Did he really have to spell it out?

Just say it!

'And he implied you might open up to someone like me.'

Alice Adler gaped. Maybe she even blushed a little, but he wasn't sure. He was sure that he was blushing.

He forced himself to continue: 'Look, I don't want to know anything. Just, there are others who will try to trick you into talking. So I thought I should warn you. Not that you seem like someone who needs a warning. But then we all—' For fuck's sake, stop babbling! And he did, but he continued to talk. 'Look, I should have punched Holbon for his impertinence, but I just walked away, drank too much, and suddenly I realised that you don't know about the others. So—' Jack stopped.

Alice Adler was still looking at him — but with unseeing eyes.

She was so strange. No one just looked at him, especially not with unseeing eyes.

Then she sighed. It was a little sigh, like it had travelled a great distance, and a mere echo made it all the way to this loft in New York.

And she saw him again. Of course, the frown was back, but she didn't sound snappy any more. 'That explains why other

people tried to get me talking. And it explains why you are talking to me.'

This assessment seemed to conclude their conversation, and she turned to the bar again, lost in thoughts — again.

Earlier he thought talking would make him feel better. It didn't.

Or that she would thank him. She didn't.

Alice Adler puzzled him. Not in a good way.

A little annoyed, he stood up.

'You know what's funny?' she said, looking at him again.

'Funny?' he retorted.

'Yes, funny,' she replied. And for the first time, there was a smile in her eyes. Just in her eyes. But it was there, and she added: 'I think, someone like you might be good for the project.'

'What?' he burst out.

Alice Adler smiled. This time a full smile. Amused, she said: 'You think I'd ask you to be the poster boy for my project.' She raised one arm and proclaimed jestingly: 'See here: Jack Harris, the Hollywood star, and just as hot as our project.'

He didn't have a good feeling about this. Any of it.

'And you wouldn't?' he asked, undecided whether to leave or stay, stand or sit.

'No, I wouldn't,' she answered, still amused. 'Neither your looks, nor your fame, fortune or profession would play much of a role in this.'

He nearly burst out laughing. What would he be without his looks, fame, fortune or profession? Another part of him, the curious part, asked: 'OK?'

That part also made him sit down again.

With a little smile, she said: 'You are one of the few actors I can actually put a name to. But I haven't seen all your movies.'

Bloody hell, I wish I knew where this is going. 'Should I be hurt or relieved?'

'Maybe both,' she replied with a lopsided smile. 'And I know little about your life. But the little I do know suggests a person who cares about the well-being of others, and who has an active mind as well as a playful instinct.'

Now it was for Jack to frown. And since his active mind refused to send him any input, or output for that matter, he said: 'I'm sorry, but I don't follow.'

'If this project goes ahead, experts of many professions will be needed. But the project also needs people who aren't academics. Playfulness and ease are as important as expert knowledge to make this project work.'

'And you think I could help?'

'I've seen your playfulness on screen. And I'm sort of hoping it wasn't all acting.'

Jack only just kept himself from gaping.

On the face of it, it was a compliment. Sort of. Wasn't it? But — 'I'm just an actor,' he said more testily than intended. 'And I don't fancy being the clown for a bunch of academics.'

'Sorry, that's not what I mean. The playfulness I am talking about should be part of the very fabric of the project — not an entertaining sideshow. It's about loving and enjoying life, venturing, twirling through the air, provoking, crossing lines, laughing, opposing, daring ... It's the talent to play around with ideas, questions, impossibilities; always open, never narrow-minded or fixated on existing knowledge; free to explore. Mind you, I'd hope to get other artists on board too.'

Jack felt his anger rising. An anger that ran deeper and was older than his earlier anger about Holbon's request.

And he snapped. 'You are decades too late. That playful, optimistic, loving life guy, you might have seen on screen, he doesn't exist any more. If he ever existed, he's dead!'

'That's a shame. And I don't believe it.'

'What?' Jack exclaimed and nearly got up again.

'I doubt you can lose playfulness. You can bury it though. But, be that as it may, if you're not interested in a challenge, then you're not.'

Jack was struggling with his anger and broke eye contact. Man, what's happening here? What's she even saying? Playful? He used to love that guy. But— But life pushed that guy away. That guy became a prostitute, and now the world owned him. How can you remain optimistic when, no matter what you achieved, you still got screwed over? And no matter what you did, the world was still a screwed up planet?

Earlier Jack asked Holbon: 'What's her idea about?'

And Holbon replied: 'It's about turning the world upside down to give it a good shake. I have no idea what she means. But I keep thinking about it.'

He sounded a little senile then.

Give the world a good shake. That wasn't possible, was it?

But what if it was? And what if he could find that playful guy again while doing some shaking?

When Jack looked at Alice Adler again, she seemed surprised. And that surprised him. Until he remembered that he must have looked pretty angry when he broke eye contact.

He gave her something like a quarter-smile, and then curiosity took over. 'And this project is—? What is it?'

She hesitated, probably wondering whether she could trust him, and at the same time thinking: how could you tell with an actor?

Well, how could you? So Jack added: 'I know you have no reason to trust me, but Holbon won't learn anything from me. I swear.'

She still hesitated. But then a rebellious glint appeared in her eyes, and she told him about her ideas.

'That's crazy,' he said after about an hour.

She laughed. 'I'm glad we agree on that.'

There was a pause, and Jack let the buzz of ideas wash through him while she took a sip from her second cocktail,

pensively watching the barkeeper, who was drawing beer for two suits.

They had only scratched the surface, she explained earlier, and for now that was all she would tell him. But even so, her ideas struck several chords, and he felt—reckless, kind of ready for anything.

'And if the project goes ahead,' she said, resurfacing from her thoughts, 'I might need an assistant.'

'Are you offering me a job?' he asked, sounding far too hopeful. What the hell did he know about being an assistant?

But she said: 'No. I was just wondering whether you could recommend someone?'

Admittedly, he was both disappointed and relieved.

A bit doubtful, he asked: 'What kind of assistant are you looking for?'

'Someone who has organised big projects and who can lead their own team. But not someone stiff or meticulous or a bureaucrat. What I need is reliability and someone who can admit to having made mistakes.'

'Hm. I might know someone who knows someone.'

'Great.'

There was a sudden gap in their conversation. And while the earlier pause had been fine, both following their own thoughts, this gap needed filling. So Jack grabbed the first question that crossed his mind. 'What do you make of this party?'

'The party?' she returned amused. 'Well, I realised that I know fewer famous people than is generally expected of an educated person.'

Jack laughed.

She seemed encouraged by this and added: 'Some other solo-guests talked to me — always until they realised I have no valuable connection to offer.'

'You could have played the Holbon card.'

'I was tempted a few times.'

Jack chuckled. 'Barbie Ken mentioned you didn't want to send any information upfront. Did you guess they'd contact you again?'

Alice shook her head. 'No, I was convinced I had blown it. And after the call with Barbie Ken, I poured myself a glass of wine and continued to add images to the website I was working on, all the while chanting to myself: So what? It's my idea! I'll find another way.'

Jack chuckled. 'What happened then?'

'Good Friday. Another evening, another call. Again Barbie Ken Richard. He sounded unhappy when he told me about the flight ticket to New York he had booked. Against his will by the sound of it. For Monday morning. As in today. I didn't have plans for Easter, but a single weekend wasn't much time to get ready. Anyway, after my arrival, Richard warned me that Tom Holbon might only have a minute for me.'

'Prick.'

'Yep. And I said: "Are you telling me, I came all the way from Berlin to New York for a three-minute interview?" And he answered: "If you're lucky."'

'Prick,' Jack repeated, smiling. 'So what did Barbie Ken want from you earlier?'

'He told me Tom Holbon is indisposed tonight, and I'm to meet him at his estate. In two days, on Wednesday morning. And Barbie Ken added: "You must have impressed Tom, or you'd be flying back home tomorrow."'

'Prick. And wow!'

'Yah. And now I'm wondering whether I want to work with someone who is this impressionable.'

Jack chuckled and Alice added: 'And then I thought: Hurray—I mean the most sarcastic hurray you can imagine. Hurray, I'll have a meeting with The Tom Holbon. And for that I had to strut around a party for nearly two hours, being bored out of my mind. Though, it was a bit amusing at times too.'

'I didn't see you strut.'

'You didn't? Well, then I have to change my story to: thinking about strutting but deciding against it since too many people were in the way for a proper strut.'

Jack chuckled.

Alice frowned. 'You watched me?'

'Just a little. But how did you get from a one minute interview to an invitation to Holbon's estate?'

'That's a good question. And I don't know. Earlier, I told Richard it would take hours to present the ideas. And he went all super-snob. "Hours? And you expect Mr Holbon to grant hours to someone he hardly knows anything about?" And I answered: "I hope he's curious enough to take a walk with me through the ideas. And I hope he's sensible enough to mull over the ideas before taking any decisions." Maybe that got me the invitation.'

'But aren't you worried that Holbon will just use your ideas?'

'I wasn't. Not really. Not before tonight. Actually, not even before you told me why you're here.'

'I won't tell him a thing.'

'I think I know.'

Jack grimaced. 'You'll see.'

It was a little strange, but he actually wanted her to trust him. She nodded sort of yeah-we'll-see like.

'Just be careful when you meet Holbon.'

'If it helps, I can text you after—' She stopped, looking embarrassed. After a few seconds, she took a card from her jacket and pushed it towards him. 'Sorry, you can contact me if you want to know more. I'd better call it a night,' she added and got up.

Jack was surprised that asking for his number was such a big deal for her. He got out his phone and while typing the number on her card, he said: 'You know, now I am curious, and I'd like to know how the talk with Holbon goes.'

She watched him, obviously undecided how to react. But when her phone rang, she took an old smartphone from her

jeans pocket and saved his number with a half-smile. 'OK, I'll send you a text after the meeting.'

But she didn't sit down again, and when she put away her phone, it was obvious that she would be leaving.

'How will you get to the hotel?' Jack asked still a bit puzzled.

'I'll slip out of the loft and walk back. I don't fancy another run-in with Barbie Ken Richard.'

'I can call you a taxi.'

'Thanks. But the hotel is close. I'll walk.'

Jack twitched his mouth, weighing his options. But the paparazzi were bound to be waiting downstairs. 'I can't walk you to the hotel.'

Alice chuckled. 'No need to. And, of course, you can't. That would be too close to posterboying.'

Jack smiled a little. If he was to become part of this project, he needed to get used to her bluntness.

'Well,' she said, 'thanks for talking to me. Our chat cheered me up — eventually.'

'Likewise,' Jack said and decided against offering his hand.

It was just a hunch, but something told him she would prefer not to shake hands.

With a smile, she turned and left the bar.

Two days later

When Richard Barbie Ken stopped the car at the main entrance, Alice was glad that the two hours of snobbish silence were finally over.

'Just open the front door and walk across the hall,' Richard told her frostily. 'Tom's study is in the right corner, next to the living room.'

And then Richard started to drum his fingers on the wheel. Alice rolled her eyes and got out of the car.

Why do some people have to be arseholes? What's in it for them?

Still annoyed, Alice hardly registered the few steps she walked up to the double door, or how easily the door opened.

But inside, she stopped.

This entrance hall was huge, just like the estate: Tom Holbon's estate.

Four pillars marked the square shape of the hall. On the right were five doors and a recess with a staircase. On the left were two corridors with a blank wall between them. Other than that, there was nothing. Not even a coat stand. Just a huge empty space.

The living room was straight across the hall. The double doors were open, revealing some modern artwork on the far wall.

Alice felt like sitting down. Right here, next to the front door, on the white tiles.

Not to sulk.

More as some sort of protest, stressing that she despised games like this. She didn't even know what the game was. Though, it sounded like: if Alice Adler insists on coming in person, push her into the water and see whether she can swim.

Well, I hope you won't be disappointed. Because I can swim.

Tom Holbon looked at his monitor again. Three minutes. Usually people reached his study within a minute after Richard's call. No one needed three— now, four minutes.

Could she have lost her way?

No. The living room doors were kept open on occasions like this. But what if someone had closed the doors?

Tom got up from his chair, just as the knock came. Quickly, he settled back, placed his fingers on the keyboard and started to type.

'Come in,' he called, watching the door from the corner of his eye.

Alice Adler entered without hesitation, but there was a hint of annoyance about her. Maybe because he didn't look up.

Like at the party, she was dressed casually: jeans, T-shirt, a long blazer jacket; a thick folder under her arm.

She closed the door and stayed next to it.

Interesting. So she wasn't a pushing kind of person. Or she demanded his attention if she was to take another step.

Interesting too.

Tom continued to type.

The next question was whether she was a nosy person. Would she look at the books, pictures and trophies on his shelves along the walls, or would she look out of one of the French windows? And, would she choose the window behind him or the window to her right, thereby avoiding to look at him?

Interesting. She alternated between both windows. Not nervously. Just every now and again, like someone who got easily bored.

Hm.

So far she hadn't made a single mistake, neither at the party nor here.

It was time to find out more.

Tom looked up.

His sudden attention seemed to startle her, and her hands started to shake. She must have been miles away with her thoughts.

'Sorry, to have kept you waiting,' he said pleasantly, getting up.

As he walked around his desk, she seemed to force herself into motion, still as if her mind hadn't quite made it back to this room.

They met halfway and shook hands.

She had a firm handshake. That was unexpected. 'Nice to meet you, Ms Adler. I hope you like New York?'

Alice Adler cleared her throat. 'Um, thank you, yes. New York is nice. Look, I'm not good at small talk. And I'd like to get started straight away.'

Tom was surprised by her directness. On the other hand, he disliked people who took hours to get to the point. So he said with a kind smile: 'All right. Let's sit down then and hear about your experiment.'

But she didn't move.

Instead she opened her folder. 'Before I tell you about my ideas, I'd like you to sign this agreement.'

'A non-disclosure agreement?'

'No.'

Looking at her curiously, he accepted the two sheets of paper and read the five paragraphs.

He frowned, meeting her eyes again and maybe seeing her for the first time. This was not what he expected.

He remembered her shaking hands, but by now, Alice Adler was utterly calm and focused. There was nothing insecure about the person who was facing him, or the person who had written these five paragraphs.

'And you want me to sign this?'

'Yes.'

'Why would I let you run the project?'

'Because I have no agenda. I don't seek a fortune, power or fame. Nor am I a nationalist who needs to forward any country's interests. I'm not religious. I have no boss or shareholder to please or any ladder to climb. I'm not a politician who needs to win an election. I have no class or party affiliations. I don't even have a family I owe anything to. I am independent. And I'm driven by one things only: curiosity.'

Tom looked at her with a hint of incomprehension, something that rarely happened to him.

A little amused, Alice Adler added: 'You need an independent and curious mind to run an experiment like this.'

Tom turned and looked out of the window, down to the lake.

What impressed him maybe most in this moment, was the calm patience with which she waited for his next question or comment. He had to admit that he didn't expect to meet someone who wasn't here to play any games. Any games at all.

All right. He could do that too.

'Have you ever managed a team?'

'Nothing worth mentioning.'

'Why not run the project with an executive team?'

'The experiment is about trying out ideas and for that you need one person who makes the final decisions about what is to be tested. Besides, all I'm asking is to be convinced why we should choose one idea over the other, and to take one step at a time. I'd say that's not asking too much.'

Tom frowned, walked to the terrace door and read the agreement again.

The Easy Town Project — Agreement

I, Tom Holbon, born 21 March 1953 in New York, agree to the following terms and conditions should the Easy Town Project or a similar project be launched:

§1 If Alice Adler is involved in the project, then she heads the Easy Town Project.

§2 If Alice Adler heads the Easy Town Project, then she is the only person with a veto on every subject, issue and decision, regarding the Easy Town Project, its related projects and businesses, and all aspects of the experiment.

§3 Mr Tom Holbon will not use the name Easy Town for any duplicate of the idea or ideas involved.

§4 If Mr Tom Holbon decides to do this or a similar project without Alice Adler, the ownership of the intellectual property remains with Alice Adler. This refers to all ideas presented by Alice Adler.

§5 Alice Adler will be compensated for any idea used if she is not involved in the project. The extent of the compensations is at the discretion of Alice Adler.

New York, ____ March 2016

Alice Adler, Berlin

Tom Holbon, New York

Tom turned and looked at Alice Adler again. 'And you want me to sign this before you tell me anything?'

'What do you have to lose? If you don't like my ideas, nothing happens.'

'Why is the name so important? It's not a very good name.'

'Easy is a friend. His story inspired the initial ideas for the project. That's why the name is essential — to me.'

'Hm. And you wouldn't mind if I did the project without you?' Tom asked, frowning.

'To forestall your next question, I will only be involved if I run the project. I'm not going to watch anyone water down the ideas. But if you'd rather do your own experiment, that's fine by me.'

'Hm. Tell me about yourself.'

'No. This project is not about me.'

Surprised, Tom raised his eyebrows, and Alice Adler added impatiently: 'You will learn enough about me if I tell you about the project. Everything else is a waste of time. Interesting but irrelevant.'

Tom inclined his head, indicating that he expected more than an evasive: it's not relevant.

Alice Adler sighed. 'If you want to know whether I ever set foot in a prison, the answer is yes.'

A flicker of alarm crossed Tom's face.

'Works every time,' Alice Adler said, sounding annoyed. 'See, when I was in my teens and early twenties, I was part of an Evangelic Free Church. We went to prisons to spread God's word. I sang in the choir.'

'That's a nice trick,' Tom said a little sourly, wondering whether he shouldn't try another line of questions before he stumbled into another trap.

Alice Adler twitched the corner of her mouth but didn't comment.

Hm. 'Why did you contact me for your project?'

'It was a spontaneous idea,' she replied, shifting her folder from one hand to the other. 'The project needs a lot of money. I didn't want to involve universities, banks or governments since independence is essential. One morning, your name popped up in my mind. And I thought, why not contact Tom Holbon and see whether he'd be interested in the experiment?'

'Who else did you contact?'

'No one, so far. I was busy with a website for a client.'

Tom frowned.

He looked at the agreement again. 'I could maybe agree to the first four paragraphs. But we need to fix an amount for the compensation.'

Alice Adler raised an eyebrow. 'Neither you nor I can possibly know what the ideas might be worth. I'm not here to play games. Either you trust me that I won't take advantage of paragraph five, or you don't.'

'You have come this far, and you're risking everything on one detail?'

'It would be a waste of time to tell you anything if you're not prepared to trust me.'

Tom frowned.

Then he turned to the terrace door again, looking out, thinking. So she was testing him too. Trust me, or you're not worth my while.

This was not some entrepreneur, coming to beg for money or someone who would do anything to get him to cooperate. This was someone who cared enough about her idea not to make any concessions.

What did he have to lose?

Maybe a little if the media got wind of this meeting.

But even then, not much.

Tom turned. 'There's a chance that this meeting will never have happened.'

Alice Adler twitched her mouth into a half-smile. 'That's fine by me. Though, I should warn you that I'm not a good secret

keeper. But I guess you'd have no trouble denying anything that might slip my tongue by mistake.'

'By mistake?'

'That much, I can swear.'

For the first time in this conversation, Tom actually shook his head. He had nearly done so a few times before. Alice Adler kept surprising him. But something told him that he could probably trust her, or at least that he should hear her out.

'All right. I'll take my chances,' he said and walked to his desk. 'Please, take a seat,' he added, pointing to the visitor chair.

After handing her the signed copy of the agreement, he leaned back in his chair. 'So, what's Easy Town about?'

Alice Adler seemed to relax. She put the copy of the agreement back into her folder. Then she inhaled and said: 'To understand where the ideas come from, it's best to start with what happened to Easy.'

Tom nodded.

'Easy was a friend who went through several medical facilities after an aneurysm ruptured in his brain. When he woke up from the induced coma, some two or three weeks after the initial operation, he couldn't speak, walk or eat.'

Alice Adler paused and a faraway smile appeared on her face. 'He kissed my hand after I cut his fingernails. That was when I knew that he was still there, somewhere.' She inhaled. 'While he couldn't smile, he could express dismay. And usually, he was dismayed. Who wouldn't be?'

His condition got worse after an operation to close his skull. You probably know that a bit of skull is removed to operate on the brain and to relieve the pressure that is caused by swelling. In my unqualified opinion, this second operation was undertaken too early. But apparently, the clinic followed some specifications by his health insurance company. The insurer wanted to see him off to rehab as soon as possible and argued that the missing bit of skull needed to be replaced to prevent injuries during rehab. Other insurers seemed to handle this

differently, since there were patients with missing skull bits in rehab. But I might not know the full story.

In rehab, he didn't improve as fast as the insurance guidelines demanded, and eventually he was transferred to a nursing home where little would be done to improve his mobility or anything else. You could say, he lay in wait for the inevitable.

I had little income at the time. And I live in Berlin while he went through several facilities in Southern Germany.

There was only so much I could and would do for him.

When I visited, I usually stayed for four days. It always frustrated me that I could see progress during my stay, but the next time I came, I had to start from scratch again.

The measures specified by the health insurance company obviously weren't sufficient. No worse. They didn't even manage to maintain the progress Easy and I achieved together. I won't get into the details of these visits, but I'll point out the observations which influenced the project ideas; ideas I started to write down during my visits.

The brain. The brain is an incredible organ. It has enormous potentials of healing itself or of finding alternative routes to achieve something that has become impossible due to an injury. I read about a girl who lost half of her brain and made a full recovery. Apparently, recovery becomes more difficult the older you get, but a lot can be reignited if the brain receives enough stimuli, especially if these stimuli are accompanied by emotions and the sense of doing something relevant, as I observed.

For example: During a visit in the nursing home, I saw that Easy's wardrobe was in a mess. So I decided to tidy it up. While doing so, I would pick up a cap or his sunglasses and hand them to him. He would hold them until I had cleared some space on a shelf. These were just small activities: receiving, holding, handing back. But I could see that these relevant activities were a lot better for him than me just sitting by his bedside.

Relevant activities became a key point in my considerations. For example: when he was still in rehab, I sometimes watched other patients in the communal area, a circular space on the sixth floor of the clinic, with the elevator in the middle. I remember a man who could roll around in his wheelchair, using his legs to move forward. He spent hours circling around that elevator. And I thought, it would be much better for him if he had somewhere to roll to. Going outside wasn't an option since the clinic was built on a steep hill. But what if the clinic was next to a village centre, and he could roll into the bakery, even give a hand in the bakery or roll into an artist studio and hand the brushes to the artist or roll into the stables and meet the stable master? What if there was some kind of feel garden, where he could roll through a number of stimuli: feel running water, feel hay, feel fur, feel heat, smell flowers, hear birds, you name it. Anything really that gives the brain a stimulus, pleasant or not.

Thinking along those lines, I remembered how Easy liked to go to a runnel in a park. He would sit there and dangle his feet in the water. So what if the relatives of patients could tell the clinic about such preferences? What if patients could experience things they like? It would be no problem to build a platform on a jetty which could be lowered into the water, and the patient could do some dangling while sitting in a wheelchair.

This takes us to another important aspect: self-determination.

In a hospital, every patient is pretty much treated the same way. All patients have the same kind of room, and not a room they would choose to live in. All patients have to follow the same daily routine, and not the routine that fits their biorhythm. Usually patients have no access to things they like to do. Worse than that, a patient like Easy has nothing left where he could make a single decision on his own, let alone do anything on his own.

At the time I thought, for example, what if I could build a little mobile table and fix it to his bed? And then he could pull the

table towards him or push it away. A table with many buttons, because he loved electronic gadgets. A light could be fixed to the table which would allow him to decide when to turn off the lights. And maybe some sort of boxes or pockets could be added with paper and pencils. And when no one is watching, he could try for himself whether he can't will his brain to overcome the barriers. Of course, there is a danger of self-harm, since the patient isn't in full control. But I'm sure, we could find a way around that. The treatment I saw never took embarrassment into account nor our impulse to try out things when no one is watching.'

Alice Adler paused and looked out of the window, towards the lake. 'I remember looking into his eyes at the nursing home. It felt like looking into a deep tunnel, at the bottom of which, he was standing, waving his arms, shouting, jumping up and down, trying to say something. But he couldn't get it out. He couldn't get out.'

Alice Adler inhaled and looked at Tom again. 'Another observation was that all these patients were shut away. Life in any hospital is a life centred around illness. And I thought about our society's tendency to divide people into groups. The sick are in hospitals, the old in old people's homes, the children in kindergarten or school, the adults at work. Only a few paths cross. And I wonder whether that's a good thing. It didn't seem like a good thing for the patients or their relatives.

For me, the time spent with Easy had many pleasant moments, insofar as it was good to watch his progress. The worst part of the day was the evening. I would sit alone in my B and B, not knowing what to do with myself, my thoughts circling around Easy's situation. Going to a bar alone didn't help.

And that brings me to another relevant point. During the day, I sometimes got talking to the relatives of other patients. In particular, I recall a wife whose husband was paralysed after a spine surgery. Contrary to Easy, he showed no reactions at all.

She told me that she came all the way from Frankfurt, which took her maybe two hours by train, and that her holiday entitlement was down to ten days. Yes, she had tears in her eyes when she said: "I don't know what to do after that. I'm a waitress. I don't earn enough. I can't afford to come here or to lose my job."

And again, I thought the village idea could help. I only had to extend the idea to include the needs of the relatives of patients. So what if there was a village that offered all kinds of stimuli, relevant activities and self-determination for neurological patients, and dissolved at least some divides in society, and also offered jobs to relatives or friends so that they could stay close and still earn a living, still have a life?

So I started to think about businesses which can easily work with temporary staff. And that brought up the question of what a useful business diversity for the town could look like. The latter is important for the next point too.

During my visits, I learned more about the enormous costs involved in running a hospital. And since I have no interest in a luxury hospital or village, I wondered how the clinics in such a village could be run feasibly, without issuing exorbitant healthcare bills. This point opened a whole new box of questions. For example: could tourism help to finance the town's healthcare services? Or what kind of business diversity would provide the town with stable finances? But also: could costs be reduced if there wasn't such a dependence on big pharma companies, and can we rethink the way hospitals are run?

And lastly, for now, the nurses and doctors.

I couldn't stand the amount of seriously ill patients for more than four days at a time. And I often wondered how nurses and doctors managed to cope with the misery. Taking this into account, I asked: what if this village offered temporary alternative jobs for medical staff too? A temporary change in

occupation is bound to have a positive effect and would probably prevent some burnouts.'

Alice Adler straightened in her seat. 'Well, now you know what got me started. I soon realised that a village would be too small to make anything like this work. And once I started to think about a town, all other aspects of our economic and social life came into view. And more issues surfaced where alternative approaches could be useful. In fact, I haven't found a single issue that couldn't do with a rethink.'

Alice Adler paused briefly. 'So, what I'd like to propose is to build a town from scratch and run it as an experiment. In the experiment, we would treat every aspect of life as a variable, as something we can put to the test, as something we can adjust until it makes more sense than our present systems. We would question every theory we know. We would question how we do business, how patients are treated, how the town is composed in terms of people, businesses, educational and cultural offers, or its layout. And we would try to find out whether we can't do better if we use our imagination, and hang our complacency in the closet.'

'And turn the world upside down?' Tom asked while finishing a note.

'Just to give it a good shake,' she replied, and he could hear a smile in her voice.

Her next words, however, were spoken quietly. 'My friend Easy was not fine. Many of us on this planet are not fine. But maybe we could be.'

Tom swallowed and looked up from his writing.

But her eyes had a note of cheekiness in them. She had all these questions and saw the misery, but she wanted to do something about it, not dwell on it.

Tom smiled a little and looked at his notes. 'Well, I have a few questions. Why an experiment?'

'So we can test ideas in a microcosm and make adjustments whenever something doesn't quite work yet. Or when another

promising alternative comes up. Besides, the experiment allows us to operate outside existing laws, ideologies and perceptions, making us free to explore ideas without any impediments. Also,' she added with a lopsided smile. 'I don't want to drag too many people into our mistakes. And we're bound to make mistakes if we truly want to discover something. Producing new ideas on paper and then pushing them on a whole country just isn't good enough for me.'

Tom smiled a little again. 'Why do such an experiment at all?' 'Because too much doesn't work for too many people — is the obvious answer.' Again the lopsided smile. 'For me there is an additional point. To me, the discrepancies on our planet are like a riddle, a challenge. It's something that begs me to solve it. I'm not capable of accepting that we as humans can't do better, that we can't get to the roots of how to make life worthwhile living for every creature on this planet. And I'm tired of the scrupulous businessman narrative — as if jerks were a natural given we have to accept. It's not. Also scientists tend to observe what is and research how something came about. But in our experiment, we would explore what could be. It's complex. But maybe, it's just a question of solving the puzzle. And what better way to solve it than to build an experiment where we can test, eliminate, try again, rearrange, invent, dare?'

'Hm. In your words. What's the benefit of Easy Town?'

Alice Adler considered the question and then said: 'When I was a kid, I heard about children dying of hunger in Africa. I was shocked but not worried. Because I thought, this will be sorted out soon, and then everyone will have enough to eat again. I was convinced that a tragedy like that is not only solvable but that every effort would be made to solve it as soon as possible. The older I get, the more I wonder why we, for example, explore the universe, make movies or have football tournaments when we still haven't made sure that every human has enough to eat. Sometimes I want to press pause and say:

Look, there's a lot of interesting stuff to find out, and there's a lot of fun to be had, but could we, please, sort out the essentials first? Neither the fun stuff nor the intriguing mysteries of the universe are going anywhere. We can have it all — later.

Also, when I listen to politicians, I often think they don't have the time, understanding, daring or imagination to find the root of a problem. Or, to put it more drastically, you could compare most societies to a huge rotten tree. Instead of going to the roots to find out what made the tree sick, politicians tear off the odd leaf, replace it with a new one and call that change for the better.

In the town experiment, we would try to find the roots of whatever we regard as problematic. The benefit? We might learn something to our advantage. Besides, the town would be tangible. People are suspicious of change and of new ideas, notably when they believe that they'll get a bad deal. If Easy Town works, anyone could come and see for themselves what we have discovered. And then everyone can decide which of our findings they want to try out themselves.'

'Hm. Why build the town from scratch?'

'Because the way a town is built is crucial to how people interact, and whether they feel at home, whether they'll be healthy, whether tourists are attracted and so on. I'd like to create a town which is thoughtfully put together so that every bit of it adds to a vibrant, thriving, beautiful, sustainable, healthy and beneficial whole. An existing town wouldn't provide us with the freedom to pay attention to every detail. Besides, everyone living in our town will have applied to be part of the experiment. The participants will have an idea of what's coming. In an existing town, we'd have to find a compromise for those who already live there.'

'Hm. How would you go about it?' Tom asked, frowning.

Alice Adler opened her thick folder, picked out a few sheets and placed them in front of him. Then she told him how she would begin.

They spent the next nine hours talking, discussing and arguing.

Alice enjoyed most of it. Though, she had to tell herself at times to take a breath and actually listen to Tom, instead of firing off everything she had accumulated over the last years.

Beatrice, Tom's secretary, brought them tea, water and sandwiches, a few times. And Fran, Tom's wife, joined them for some hours.

It was after nine when Tom got up again and walked to the terrace door. Alice turned with the visitor chair and looked out of the window too. It was dark outside. Some lights marked the path that led down to the lake and to the estate's guest houses. The brightest light came from a small boathouse by the lake.

Tom was still looking out of the window when he said: 'Even for a basic overview of the ideas, you'd need a large team.'

'I know. And then we need to find a place where we can build the town, and a government which is curious enough to grant the experiment the freedom it needs. But we'd start with seven main teams. And our programmers would build the town simulation so that we can run preliminary tests of our ideas. And if he agrees, I'd like artists like Jack Harris on the team from the beginning.'

'Jack Harris? The actor?'

'Yeah, the one you asked to spy on me,' Alice replied amused, got up and joined Tom at the window.

'Then you did talk to him?'

'And he says hello. He wasn't happy about your request.'

'I'm a businessman. I take precautions. I hardly knew anything about you.'

Alice laughed. 'Yes, you are a businessman. And I need a businessman who is a software expert and has an expendable fortune plus an altruistic streak.'

'And you think I'll just hand over my fortune?'

'I wouldn't know where to start to calculate how much money is needed for a project like this. But let's say the project required fifty billion dollars. That would, as far as I know, leave you with seventy-five billion dollars. That's more money than you can possibly spend in your lifetime. So what do you have to lose? Besides, my aim is to make the project financially independent rather sooner than later. We could set up some businesses even now. These businesses would work for the project's benefit, and later we'd integrate them into the town.'

'But there won't be any return for me?'

'Again, what do you want that money for? You have a unique opportunity to build something extraordinary, something that will need initial capital, like a child. Would you ask your child to return your investment? Or would you ask your child to pay interest? We wouldn't build Easy Town to make money. We would build it to find out what's good for us humans.' Alice paused. Since Tom still seemed doubtful, she added: 'Come on. Let's find out whether growth is the only option for a business, whether some sort of slavery is necessary for a thriving economy, whether we need two hundred kinds of cheese in extensive packaging. Let's explore. Let's take nothing for granted or proven. Who knows what we may find out? Enough people are talking about this or that idea, but we would create a complex microcosm and put everything to a practical test, be it ideas for businesses, health, architecture, ecology, society and every other field.'

'And for that, I'm to hand over half of my fortune?'

'You'd still be one of the richest men on the planet. Aren't you past the age where you need to verify your cock's length with the balance on your bank account? I believe you're better than that. At least, I hope you are.'

There was anger in Tom's eyes when he said: 'How is any of this going to end hunger, war, illness, injustice, fanaticism, terrorism, global warming?'

'It's half past nine. And that's what you want to talk about now? All right. In short: With a single town, we can help to rethink whatever needs rethinking. We can test ideas and deliver tangible and reproducible results. War, hunger, global warming and all the rest are consequences of inadequate practices. By tackling root problems in our town experiment, we might find adequate practices which in turn might influence all of the above positively.

But who knows? Maybe we find out that there is no hope for the planet as long as humans live on it. And even that would be a result. All charities could close, governments could go home, and everyone could do whatever they want. No more worries. The world will end, no matter what we do.'

'Do you think this is a good moment to be sarcastic?'

'I'm not sarcastic. Not really. Because that might be the result. Besides, it's paramount to keep in mind that this experiment will never provide ultimate answers. We need to be careful not to come up with some ultimate truth or salvation like so many movements and religions. No good has ever come from having all the answers. To make sure that we don't start to take ourselves too seriously, we employ whatever it takes to keep a level head, an open mind. That's why I need people like Jack Harris on board. People who bring a natural playfulness, ease and even recklessness into the project. People who make us laugh, not least about ourselves. People who keep us safe from thinking too highly of ourselves. People who keep us from becoming arrogant prigs.'

'But Jack Harris isn't just any odd artist for you, is he?'

'I like his playfulness, and I'm sure there are many artists with the same quality. But as it happens, thanks to you, it's Jack Harris who crossed my path.'

‘I think you’re wrong about Jack Harris. People like him are all about themselves. And don’t you know his reputation?’

‘I’m not up to date with his reputation. What is it these days?’

‘He frequently gets himself into trouble with his affairs. He is a proud, self-indulgent, spoiled and lost celebrity.’

‘Good. He’s not a saint. We all make mistakes. We all get lost – or most of us,’ Alice added, suddenly doubtful whether Tom had ever been lost. ‘I met Jack Harris only once, but I think he can bring ease and playfulness into the project. And others can bring contradictions and crossing lines—’

‘And then you’ll fall for his charm,’ Tom retorted, walking back to his desk.

Alice rolled her eyes.

‘Alice,’ Tom said, sitting down. ‘If you want to be the leader you are proposing to be, then a man like Jack Harris will be your downfall.’

‘Luckily, I’m not stupid enough to believe that Jack Harris could ever fall for me. As for a little adventure: I’m not available.’

‘I hope you won’t be disappointed in yourself. Anyway, you mentioned earlier that you want to base the project in London. Why London?’

‘Frankly, America is a bit too far from home. Germany, on the other hand— How shall I put it? I have— Berlin is a fine city—’ Alice faltered. How to put this? No. Better keep it simple. ‘See, I have a soft spot for England and Scotland. That’s why I’d like to go to London.’

‘Hm.’

Tom flicked through his notes.

‘Hm,’ he uttered again and shook his head thoughtfully. ‘I have to sleep on this. But I’ll call you. In the meantime, you’re welcome to keep staying at my hotel.’

Some two hours later, Alice entered her hotel room in New York, tired and tense.

Her mind was still busy with the topics she discussed with Tom, and those she forgot to mention, and those she probably failed to explain sufficiently.

During the drive, she tried to distract herself by talking to Richard. But he seemed undecided whether to stick with his snobbishness, or whether the wind had really changed, and he should change with it. After a while, Alice gave up and let her mind run wild again.

Her mind was still running while she was pacing up and down in her hotel room. She stopped to grant herself a glass of wine from the minibar.

Even now, she could hear Tom's voice: sometimes calm, sometimes challenging, sometimes slightly threatening.

Taking a few slow sips, she went to the window. But all she could see was Tom's study.

Maybe she could write a list of topics that would need some clarifications? Would Tom give her another shot at making her case?

Wine finished, she considered having something stronger. But no, a hangover was not a good idea.

Still dressed, she lay down on her bed, unable to close her eyes — or her mind.

Two days later

Friday, 1 April 2016

Jack had found an assistant for Alice: Leo Jones. And Leo came highly recommended. He even offered to drive Jack to the first Easy Town meeting at Tom's estate.

Leo seemed like a friendly guy. He was tall, blond, relaxed and a good driver. They talked during the first hour of the drive — mostly about movies and the town project. But now, Jack closed his eyes to think a little.

It was all happening so fast.

First there was the party which was followed by a headachy morning, and the distinct feeling that everything at the party must have been a weird dream. Then he woke up some more and realised that all of it really happened, and that his children were waiting for him with a late breakfast. They were all in New York over Easter, his three children and him. Anyway, by the time he was fully awake, he dismissed last night as some kind of disturbance along the fringes of his personal reality. What Alice suggested sounded intriguing after a few drinks, but you simply couldn't give the world a good shake. Nor could you resurrect some positive young guy. Young was another thing from the past anyway.

The trouble was that during breakfast his children wanted to know about the party, and he couldn't really avoid mentioning the town project. And then his older son, eighteen, said: 'Dad, you've been complaining about life like an old man. And suddenly you look happier.'

And his daughter, sixteen, added: 'Go and do this experiment. You want to. And we want you to be happy.'

Could there be anything worse? His children calling him an old man when he was feeling like an old man who was far too young to be old. But actually worse, his children worrying about him. His children looking at him and seeing a depressed old

man. Yes, that was about the worst case scenario for any parent, young or old or somewhere in between.

So he decided to listen to his children, and to give the town project some thought. He went about it methodically, replaying his conversation with Alice, making notes and underlining the questions that came up in the process.

Then he called her.

But she didn't answer her phone. Nor did she call him back.

He added a text, telling her that he had some more questions.

But that didn't have any effect either.

Wednesday came, the day Alice was to meet Tom Holbon, and in the early afternoon, Jack sent her another text, asking about the meeting with Holbon.

And again, no answer.

Jack smiled about that, later in the evening. Alice kept doing or not doing things, no one else didn't do.

Thursday nearly went by, and finally she texted him back.

She would be happy to answer his questions, and there were some news. He could call her any time, and she could call him back, now that she had some credit on her phone again.

Otherwise she could only offer a nightcap at the hotel bar.

He opted for the nightcap or otherwise his children might eavesdrop and give him some great advice on whatever they overheard.

It wasn't that he believed a town project could change the world, but Alice's ideas had set something in motion in his mind. He had been complaining about the system for years, if not decades. The system. Jack chuckled. This vague idea of something that screws with everyone's lives. But Alice's idea was kind of practical, actually not that crazy. Just saying: let's build this experiment, let's test, let's make the human welfare our priority, let's produce solid facts in a town built from scratch in every respect.

What if they could discover something?

And maybe his playfulness wasn't gone. Maybe it was just hiding out, and all he had to do was take the shovel and dig it up, let it out again. And maybe his old self would wake up, and his children wouldn't worry about him any more.

Jack shifted in his seat and leaned his head against the back.

When they met in the hotel bar, she had just returned from a shopping spree with Richard Barbie Ken. Apparently she never expected to stay more than two or three days in New York. And since she wasn't returning to Berlin any time soon, she had to buy a few things.

She looked flushed and was bubbling with enthusiasm and disbelief. He smiled and admitted that this was all quite exciting and rather unbelievable.

'On the other hand,' she countered archly, 'what would the world be if the impossible never happened? We might still be apes, or little cells in the ocean.'

This is what happened: Tom and Fran Holbon agreed to support the first phase of the project by providing the initial capital and by using their contacts to bring together a team of experts. Whether Tom and Fran Holbon would stay for the next stages: planning, building and running the experiment, was open. In addition, they offered their estate as the base for the first project phase. That meant the teams could use the offices and conference rooms in the main building of the Holbon estate, and the two guest houses.

'That way we save money,' Alice explained. 'But the plan is to take the project to London for the next stage.'

And they were moving fast.

For this afternoon, Tom had invited experts from various professions. And if enough people stayed, meetings would continue over the weekend.

Jack was still undecided whether to stay beyond the first meeting. And, of course, his children rolled their eyes.

Had he really turned into a disillusioned old man? At least Davie, his youngest, eight years old, insisted that he return to New York tomorrow.

In this moment, Leo slowed down the car and said: 'This must be it. The Holbon estate.'

Jack showed his invitation to the guards, and the iron-wrought gate opened automatically. Past the gate, the private road led through a strip of conifer forest. Then the extensive grounds of the Holbon estate came into view.

In the distance, Jack saw the modern three-storey building, they were heading for. It was a large rectangle block in the middle of a nice bit of nature: green meadows on one side of the main road, scattered old trees and a winding footpath on the other. Along the footpath, a smaller modern house came into view and a little later a second. These were probably the guest houses, Alice told him about. And then they saw the lake, with a forest in the background. A private lake. Not big. But still. Bloody hell, this estate was huge.

Last night, Alice told him that Tom Holbon didn't want him on the team.

'But how? Why do you invite me to the meeting if he ...?'

'I'm heading this project. And I decide whom I work with,' she said and added cheekily: 'Well, at least as long as Tom can't give me a good reason to kick you off the team. I'll always listen to good reasons.'

Jack wondered about this remark. Was it a warning that he shouldn't screw up, or was it just her cheekiness? Maybe it was a bit of both.

Jack led the way across the entrance hall to the living room. The double doors were open, and quite a few people were already at the warm-up reception.

With the modern artworks on the walls and an oversized sofa at the centre, the living room had the feel of an art gallery. Some of the thirty plus guests were inspecting the paintings

while others stood in groups, chatting, and a few helped themselves to tea, coffee or a snack from the buffet at the back of the room.

Alice was standing close to the open terrace door, talking with Tom Holbon.

The greeting with Tom Holbon was on the frosty side, and Jack lost no time to introduce Leo. 'Alice, this is Leo Jones, a first-class assistant—'

'I think we've met,' Tom Holbon interrupted. 'You ran a software developers conference, a few years back, right?'

Leo nodded and shook hands with Tom Holbon.

'You have an excellent reputation. What brings you here?'

'A friend of Mr Harris contacted me and said that Ms Adler is looking for an assistant.'

Tom Holbon looked at Alice with a frown. 'You have been recruiting?'

'So it would seem,' Alice countered cheekily.

Jack suppressed a smile.

A little displeased, Tom Holbon said: 'Mr Jones would be a good choice as your assistant.'

'Then let's hope I like him,' Alice said and eyed Leo with curiosity.

Leo gave a polite nod and diplomatically steered the conversation into safer waters by saying: 'It's amazing how many people have come at such a short notice.'

Tom smiled proudly. 'More people are interested. Some will come tomorrow, others can't make it before Monday. Convincing them to stay for the actual project will be more difficult. But some of my own people already asked to be released from their contracts should the project go ahead.'

'And would that be possible?' Leo asked.

'Yes, of course. People have to follow their visions. That's when their contributions will be greatest. Oh, Kim Bower just arrived. You must excuse me,' Tom Holbon said, looking

towards the hall where Fran Holbon was talking to a dark-haired, athletic woman. 'Kim Bower is a landscape architect from Canada. You'll like her, Alice. Well, it's nice to meet you, Mr Jones. Mr Harris.'

'Sorry about that,' Alice said to Leo when Tom was gone. 'I forgot to tell Tom about my search for an assistant.'

'No problem,' Leo replied with another of his polite nods.

'Thanks. So, you happen to be available?'

'Yes, I am. I finished a contract last week, and I haven't decided which offer to take up next,' Leo said, and suddenly his expression became a little worried. 'Um ... I think you should know that I'm gay.'

'That's perfect,' Alice returned with her cheeky smile, and Leo seemed to stumble. Not literally, just in his mind. 'Is it?'

'Yes, of course. We'll spend a lot of time together, and I'd rather not fall in love with you. Besides, I like sex with men too, but very likely not with the same men as you. Perfect again.'

Now Leo chuckled a little, and he seemed to relax, gradually.

And Jack reminded himself that he had to get better at stomaching her bluntness. Not that he disliked it, but it needed getting used to.

Dismissing the subject of sexual preferences, Alice asked: 'Why are you interested in the project?'

'Your project is something new. Over the past years, my work has become something of a routine. Clients change, everything else seems to be the same, no matter whether I work for an exhibition, conference or movie.'

'Hm. Where are you from?'

'Bristol, UK.'

'Oh. Then what are you doing in the States?'

'I work all over the world. My previous contract brought me to New York. I hear you want to move the project to London?'

'That's the plan. Would you move to London with us?'

'Yes. It'd be nice to be home again.'

'Good. How do you determine whether to take on a job?'

'In your case, I'll need more input.'

'OK. Then here's what I can offer. Ask me all the questions you have, today, tomorrow, whenever. And if you're still interested afterwards, let's work together for three or four days as a first test.'

'Thank you. That sounds good. Just a question: Are you going back to Berlin?'

'No. Not any time soon. I don't have any open projects, and I entrusted my few clients to a colleague. What else do you want to know?'

'Did you and Tom Holbon sign any contracts?'

'Yes. This morning. Preliminary contracts. And we talked to three lawyers to get an overview of what else we might need. We will set up the Easy Town Foundation as an umbrella organisation for everything we might think up. It's been a busy morning. And I met Tom's wife Fran again, and I chose a bedroom in Guest House No. 1. I even know that the small room next to this living room will be my study. And Tom and I decided that, if enough people stay, we'll sort of begin next week with — well, with beginning.'

After a while, Jack left Alice and Leo, a little tired of being a bystander. But he was pleased that they seemed to get along well.

Next, he met Fran Holbon and complimented her on the modern art work assembled in this living room. They had a nice chat about colours and shapes, and she introduced him to some of the other guests.

Later, he had a laugh with Jason Eagles, a pretty well known architect, nearly fifty, from the Isle of Wight, a fellow Brit with roots in Kenya. Then he met Maja, an American painter from Chicago with roots in the Netherlands, small, but the kind of person who would take the lead in anything. And then he literally walked into Andy Lawrence, another Londoner, a

programmer, dark-haired, in his early thirties. But neither of them could think of anything to say, and they found excuses to move on.

Fran explained earlier that Tom Holbon had given preference to people who either came from the UK, or who wouldn't mind moving there for the next stage of the project.

That explained all the Brits.

It was sort of nice that no one asked him for an autograph or selfie. Though, it puzzled him a bit until Kim Bower, the landscape architect, pointed out: 'We academics don't chase after celebrities.' Apparently Kim Bower was famous too. In her field. Jason told him.

About an hour later, the guests started to move to the large conference room, which was located at the end of the upper corridor. Jack was one of the last guests to leave the living room, and he couldn't quite explain his reluctance to attend the presentation. Was it excitement? Or worry about how Alice's ideas would be received? Or the big question of what exactly he was doing here?

In the conference room, Richard Barbie Ken and Leo were placing more chairs along the walls. Most seats at the conference table were already taken.

According to Alice, Richard had done a U-turn from snobbish prick to the guy who thought the world of Alice, and who wanted to become her assistant.

'And I laughed,' Alice told Jack last night. 'That's when I realised he was serious. He looked so perplexed. And I said, I'm sorry, but I'm looking for someone from England. It was the only excuse I could think of.'

Jack smiled a little at the memory and chose a seat at the conference table, three chairs down from Alice. She was standing at the head of the table, looking calm and curious.

Taking another look at the other guests, Jack counted forty-two people, himself included. It was a good mix with regard to different ages, gender, origins and dress preferences. And Fran

told him earlier that many of the professions required for the project were covered. He knew a few names already. Kim and Leo had taken seats along the wall. Tom Holbon and Fran sat across the table, Tom Holbon sitting left of Alice. Jason, the architect, had chosen a chair in front of the French windows. Maja and Andy were at the other end of the table.

Jack also recognised Graham Benson, a famous economist, and a few other people whose picture he occasionally saw in the papers. Tom Holbon really had— Jack shook himself. Blast, Alice was already talking. No wonder Andy gave him a funny look.

‘—I cannot think of a single aspect of the town, its economy, its design or its people that might not be of interest to us. In fact, part of our initial work will be to identify everything that makes a town tick.

At its core the Easy Town experiment is about being curious, about trying out visions, about exploring and playing around with ideas, testing the limits of the possible, daring to try out the unconventional, questioning the inevitable, allowing for complexity.

In short, Easy Town is an attempt to interweave all aspects of human well-being into a consistent, living and breathing whole.’

Someone started to clap. And after some reluctance, everyone in the room joined in, mostly politely.

‘Well, thank you,’ Alice said with a smile. Not quite the lopsided cheeky smile, but she seemed to be OK.

She went to the whiteboard, next to the window, and uncovered it. A chart showed seven circles, six grouped around the central circle: Design.

‘As you can see, there will be seven main teams: Design, Health and Care, Economics and Business, Ecology and Agriculture, Arts and Crafts, Admin and Society, Research and Education. Each team has main tasks, but close cooperation between all teams will be crucial. Since I believe that design is essential to every aspect of our town, I placed the Design Team

at the centre of this chart. So, let's start with Design. One of the principles of Easy Town will be beauty and—'

'Why beauty?' a woman at the back of the room interrupted.

'Simple. Because our town is about healing. I don't mind experimental designs. But when I go home, I want to feel well, not challenged or repulsed.'

This earned Alice some chuckles.

'Beauty?' a man in a corner smirked. 'Is that why Jack Harris is here?'

This time everyone laughed.

Jack tried to chuckle, but he was annoyed. Even more so when Alice gave him a cheeky smile before she addressed her audience again. 'No doubt, Jack Harris is beautiful. But when you talk to him, you'll notice that there's more to him than meets the eye. And that's what Easy Town could become: a place that is a feast for our senses, and a place that has substance at the same time. Something real inside and outside.'

Jack swallowed, but he still managed a shy smile when Alice briefly glanced at him, before continuing with her introduction.

Best not to think about her statement. Best just focus on the whiteboard and listen. Maybe her next words would wash away the embarrassment, and the anger that she made him sound like some kind of perfect guy, and the disappointment that she was using him.

Maybe he shouldn't have come.

Just listen.

Alice presented the ideas for each team, outlining their tasks, talking about gardens, toilet flushes, street layouts, playfulness, neurological patients, business diversity, theatres, tourism, cooperation between the teams and a lot more.

Next she answered questions about the seven teams and about more general issues such as free trade, protectionism, smart cities or business goals.

At some point, a younger man, sitting next to Fran, said: 'Dominic Butch, Business. So you want to control all businesses with your town rules?'

'It's an experiment. So yes, we make the rules. But this is about rethinking business practises, about testing alternatives, not about control. And if something doesn't work, then we'll try something else. Think about it, if we can identify what it takes to avoid every kind of exploitation while giving the greatest possible freedom to all market players, then we'll have achieved something remarkable. I'm a free spirit. I dislike rules. I want as few rules as strictly necessary. But every rule we choose will have to count.'

'Companies won't like it,' a man behind Jack remarked. 'Their profits would fall if they don't have access to cheap materials and labour. John Bergman, Business.'

'You'll have to give me a better reason to stick with exploitation than to fill some douchebag's pockets.'

Some people chuckled.

'Only consumption keeps the economy alive,' John Bergman returned calmly. 'And people only consume if the prices are acceptable.'

Alice smiled. 'And the puppet masters whisper day and night: "Buy, buy, buy! — my rubbish." And I say, let's tell those whisperers: "Bye, bye, bye."'

This got some applause.

Alice added: 'Also, let's find out whether something like a non-exploitative economy wouldn't be just as alive as today's rubbish spitting economies. Besides, in a non-exploitative economy, more people should have an income with an actual purchasing power. More purchasing power means both, people can pay adequate prices, and more people engage on the markets.'

Jack had forgotten that Alice had studied business. He was impressed and felt more stupid than he actually was, but also glad that he wasn't all that perfect. And she had been talking

for hours by now without referring to him once. He couldn't really blame her for taking that one bait.

The guy, sitting next to Jack, had been twitching in his seat for a while, and Jack wasn't surprised that he finally snapped and burst out: 'All of this is utter nonsense. You're not facing up to reality.'

'I never thought that facing up to reality means accepting inadequate practices,' Alice replied and held the man's aggressive stare.

He shook his head scornfully and addressed Tom Holbon: 'Why are you even listening to this?'

Tom Holbon steepled his fingers and said: 'Under other circumstances, I wouldn't bother with giving you an answer, Eric. However, I'd like to share with my other guests why I'm intrigued by this project. Over the last days, I've asked myself repeatedly: is it possible that we have become too blind to the fact that our codes and algorithms can't solve every mystery let alone every misery on this planet? Easy Town can't either. But it might help us to go beyond codes and theories. It can provide us with a place where we can test alternatives to our present systems. You see, more than anything else, I've always wanted to find solutions. That's what programmers do. We find solutions, we make things run. And I'm grateful for this opportunity to think outside the code box.'

Turning to Eric, Tom Holbon added: 'Eric, since you don't get the idea and offended one of my guests, I no longer wish to take up your time.'

Eric wasn't happy. Neither was he stupid enough to make things worse for himself. After all, he had angered Tom Holbon. Eric got up and left the room without another word.

Frowning a little, Jack wondered whether Tom Holbon could be trusted after all. You don't talk like this if you just want to exploit a few ideas for profit.

And then, Kim Bower turned everyone's attention back to the discussion. 'This is what I'd like to know: what's the good of

one town? Even if we make it sustainable, and healthy to live in. How is this going to solve our global problems? Kim Bower, landscape architect.'

Alice answered. 'In my opinion, too many people believe that change is impossible, that the way our world is run follows some kind of natural law no one can break. Or worse: no one should break. However, if we manage to create a town where changed rules work, we'd get away from speculations about alternatives. We'd have proof that alternatives work. And people could visit the town and see the results of our experiment for themselves. That's what we can do with our project.'

'So you want a revolution, starting in a small inconspicuous town and then spreading the results all over the world?' Kim Bower asked.

'That sounds like a virus,' Alice countered, smiling. 'I think, I'd go for an antivirus. Because, you could say that our world has a virus. And that virus makes humans and nature sick. If we get lucky in our experiment, we might find a vaccine. If we get even luckier, our vaccine will dry out the virus.'

'So you do want a revolution?'

'No, not really. I'm driven by curiosity. And I'm not a fan of revolutions. But we might be able to contribute to a world where the well-being of humans means something. Would that be a revolution? Maybe. I'd rather see it as an inspiration.'

And then Jason chipped in, not hiding some impatience. 'This is all very interesting and no doubt important. But could you tell us something about your architectural ideas for the town? Jason Eagles, architect.'

'With pleasure,' Alice said. 'I'm not imagining a Hobbiton, but I admit that I like round shapes. In fact, I've often wondered how and why humans came up with rectangles, triangles or perfect circles since you can't find them in nature. Nature is much more varied and a lot less angular and repetitive. I mean

how is it possible that no two thumbprints are alike? It's incredible.

Forms, shapes and patterns found in nature would be one of my starting points for any designs. Another important aspect is variety. Rather than using the same sort of buildings to fill whole streets or districts, I'd like to see a mixed assembly of buildings which fit together nonetheless. While I'm open to suggestions for buildings of a more modern style, I want to avoid soulless, cold and perfectly efficient buildings.'

'Are we going for a Gaudí style then?' Jason asked.

'No, I don't think so. That might be a bit too much. I'd go for something pleasant with surprising elements, and only on occasion for something as elaborate and colourful. A lot will depend on what sort of buildings we need for how many people. And then we'll try to compose an interesting mix.'

'How many people are we talking about?' Andy, the Londoner, asked from the other end of the table. 'And what exactly do you mean by simulation? As I might be in charge of that. My name is Andy Lawrence, Programming.'

'Thanks for bringing up the simulation,' Alice said. 'In the simulation, we'll build a virtual copy of Easy Town. Whatever a particular team finds or suggests will be fed into the simulation. Let's say, the Business Team determines that the town needs a hundred shops with a total of eight hundred people running the shops. In that case, we add a hundred shops to the town simulation, plus eight hundred shop workers, their homes, in some cases their children, their recreational activities and so on. Say the Ecology Team finds out that the town needs one thousand trees to ensure an optimal oxygen level. Then we add one thousand trees. Say the Design Team comes up with an amazing university building. Then we find a place for it, and make sure that it has a nice square in front of it and so on.'

'When you say "add workers", do you mean they actually do something?' Andy asked with a keen shine in his eyes.

'Yes. They earn and spend money. They need to get to work. They want to go to the cinema or on holiday. They take their children to school. They pay a visit to a friend in a hospital and so on.'

'How many people are we talking?' Andy asked, raising his eyebrows.

'One of our tasks will be to determine whether something like an optimal size for a town exists. Especially for a town that intends to provide affordable care for its patients as well as freedom and flexibility for its citizens. So I'd like to start with ten thousand people and—'

'Ten thousand individually programmed simulation people?' Andy interrupted, his eyes wide.

'We should be fine with a thousand and then multiply those. Over time, we can refine the stories of the copies.'

'Why ten thousand?' Tom Holbon asked.

'Well, I'd like to see an interesting demographic mix, a good ratio between residents and non-residents, patients and non-patients, between couples and singles, and between couples with children and couples without, as well as a good ratio between apprentices and students. And then there is the ratio between types of accommodation: house or flat, small or large, quiet or in the buzz of things. And again, I'd like to find a good ratio, not just between the types of accommodation but also between private, public and business buildings. And on top of that: a viable business diversity. And I'd throw in some resident artists. And all my calculations suggest that we'd need at the very least ten thousand people, tourist included, to make any or all of this happen and workable.'

'Will there be tourists all year round? Fi Hall, Business.'

'Yes. Easy Town should be an all-year holiday place. Maybe we should add a big winter garden with a pool. My calculations are just a start, and we can play around with those numbers. What would it mean to have more patients and fewer holidaymakers, for example? Do we achieve a good demographic mix this way?'

What would it mean if the number of residents was fifty thousand? How many people are needed to keep the town going? What sort of professions are required and so on. Moreover, where do they live and where do they work?

To come back to design. I'd prefer a circular layout for the town. And since one of the objectives is to mix all people in town regardless of age, gender, origin, fitness or income, I thought that the patients and their facilities should be placed around and near the town centre. This way the patients in Easy Town wouldn't be shut away. They'd be at the centre of things. The second circle could be dedicated to Arts and Crafts, including a theatre, a museum, a library and so on. The third circle would be the place for businesses and smaller factories. The fourth circle could be dedicated to Education and Research, and the outer circle would be reserved for tourists. The latter would have the advantage that the tourists would be close to the attractions around the town, and wouldn't always be in the town.'

'So you'd have five hundred wheelchairs criss-crossing the town centre, smashing into cars? Seth Meyer, Business.'

'Good point. For one, I'd love a town without cars. Is that possible? Is it desirable? Can our town cope with five hundred patients in wheelchairs? What does it take to make it happen? How do we make sure that patients, grannies and kids aren't shut away but part of the everyday chaos? These are exactly the questions we'll explore.

I said earlier that Design should be at the centre of all our considerations. However, Health & Care provides us with an important starting point. Health is something we all need, and we'll create a town where people can heal. And once we've figured out what we need to heal, and what it takes to remain healthy, then we figure out how to finance our approach.'

A young man with a slightly comical face: big eyes and a big mouth, who was sitting close to the door, said: 'Noel Hunter, programmer. With all due respect, and I like most of what I'm

hearing, Ms Adler, but I wouldn't want to live in a place where I'm confronted with seriously damaged and old people, like all the time. I'll be old and sick soon enough.'

Alice held his friendly gaze. Then she smiled. 'That's a good point. I remember visiting someone on Ko Tao, in Thailand. He was staying in a small bungalow resort, run by a family. The family had a house with a large terrace, which served as the resort's restaurant. The house was also home to a very old and disabled grandmother. The door of her room opened on to the terrace. She couldn't walk and would sometimes push herself across the floor to the door. And there she would rock to and fro like a baby to let her family know that she wanted something. I'd eat my late breakfast while the daughter and the granddaughter washed or fed her on the terrace.

Did I like to see that? No, I didn't. I didn't, because it reminded me far too much of what happened to my friend Easy. Especially one day when the grandmother had a seizure on the terrace. It was terrible.

On the other hand, I didn't doubt for a second that this family had chosen a good way to care for their grandmother.

They didn't fuss about her.

She slid out of her bed? So what? She pushed herself to the door? So what? She needed a wash? So what?

And the old lady was better off for having her family around, and for having as much freedom as she could muster.

Whenever I visited Easy in rehab or later in the nursing home, staying four days was my limit. It was all I could take. Not because of him. He was sweet. And it was good to spend time with him. No, it was the number of tragic cases. It was me, who couldn't accept what had happened. It was me, because I didn't know how to spend those wretched evenings. It was me, because I didn't want to spend the rest of my life looking after him. What I'm saying is, that yes, I like drooling grannies as little as I like drooling babies. I'm actually pretty sensitive when it comes to drooling.

So what?

I don't think the solution to my sensitivity is to surround myself with childless people who never get a cold and stay youngish. I think the solution is to get used to seeing these patients, to make them part of our everyday life. And to make sure that we can go to a pub in the evening where we meet other people who go through the same miserable situation. And to make sure that we can take on a job in the town for as long as the rehab takes.

By ensuring that relatives and the hospital staff are cared for, we make sure that the patients get the best possible care.

Creating a town that allows for such a supportive environment, that's something we can attempt to do. And while we are at it, we can question and rethink whatever else might need a rethink.

One more thing: early tribes invented gods to combat their fears.

I guess, we are still mostly driven by fear and anxiety.

Only today, we don't invent gods. Today, we make order and rules. We sort everything and everyone into nice categories. We find labels, rules and explanations for every eventuality. We bring everything under control. We use disinfectants wherever we can. We become cleaner and more perfect by the day.

I think that is as useless a way to combat our fears and anxieties as was inventing gods.

Easy Town is not about clean, perfect, ordered or about looking away. I'm not sure what it will be about. I'm not sure Easy Town is possible. But I'd like to find out.'

Silence.

'It's got to be worth a try,' Jack said, only then realising that he had spoken aloud.

A few people looked at Jack and nodded.

Alice looked shaken and as if she didn't remember getting up from her chair. Her eyes met Tom Holbon's. He nodded and Alice sat down.

When Tom Holbon stood up, he looked a little shaken himself. He cleared his throat and said: 'I agree with Jack Harris. It's got to be worth a try. But I believe for tonight, we had enough food for thought. However, not enough food for our bodies. There's a buffet waiting for us in the living room. And I for one would prefer some light conversations tonight. For tomorrow, I suggest we meet at ten in the morning to resume this meeting. Please stay if you want to be part of this project. Please stay if you want more time to make up your mind. Please have a pleasant weekend elsewhere if you are not intrigued.'

Two days later

Sunday, late in the evening

Alice didn't see Leo coming.

But when he touched her arm, it was as if a stick got caught in a clockwork and everything stopped.

Alice looked at Leo, puzzled.

He returned her gaze with a worried smile.

Then he spoke to the five people who were standing around her.

Five people.

She only knew two of them by name: Andy and Daria.

While Leo talked, Alice let her eyes drift across the living room. Her mind was drifting too, but it still registering a few things. It was dark outside. Someone had turned on the lights. When? How late was it? And there were other people around, mostly sitting on the long sofa, talking in little groups, maybe ten.

Talking.

She had been talking a lot.

Alice twitched when Leo touched her arm again.

She looked at him.

The worried smile again.

Leo kept his hand on her arm and steered her out of the living room. In the entrance hall, he helped her into her coat and wrapped the shawl around her neck. Then he guided her across the empty hall, opened the front door and led her outside.

The absence of voices was strange. And yet, the cold wind had a whisper of its own, pinching her skin, chilling.

She noticed the few low lamps along the main road and along the footpath that led to the lake and to the guest houses. One brighter light shone at the boathouse.

Alice shivered.

She was glad that they were walking slowly now.

She wanted to sleep.

She almost closed her eyes.

Someone caught up with them. The low voice seemed distant. She buried her head in the shawl. She didn't want to talk any more. And then someone was gone, disappearing into the dark.

They reached the footpath.

Suddenly she knew why she didn't protest when Leo steered her away. She hadn't been aware of the question, but now that she had the answer, it was likely that the question had been there as well.

What was the answer again?

Oh, yes. Earlier she thought that everything stopped when Leo touched her arm. And in a strange way, it did. And she felt relief. Yes, relief. How strange. After all, no one had forced her to keep talking. She just hadn't stopped talking. Someone had to do the stopping for her.

Relief.

Alice smiled, pushing her head deeper into the shawl.

That's why she didn't protest.

She blinked a few times to keep her eyes open.

So Leo was back.

He was such a normal guy. Tall, slim, blond, friendly voice.

What is a normal guy? No idea. Someone normal? No.

Someone who seems familiar. That's the point, isn't it? Normal isn't universal. Normal is individual. Normal is familiar. Leo. Yes, he felt sort of familiar, like someone she could trust. And he was good. Fast on the uptake. Asking good questions. Doing the stopping for her.

They passed the beach, the jetty, the boathouse. Next they would get to Guest House No. 1. She went there a few times over the weekend. Taking a shower in her room, talking to someone in the kitchen or in the living room. One time, someone showed her the well-equipped fitness room in the basement. And then they returned to the main house. They?

Well, people. There was always someone around for the next discussion.

Guest House No. 1 was a modern block, just like the main house, only much smaller. Twelve bedrooms, most of them on the first and second floor. It wasn't a place where she would go for a holiday. It was more a practical place. Somewhere where you could take a shower, or sleep.

Leo opened the front door of the guest house and steered her towards the kitchen on the right.

Had she slept?

She didn't remember. She remembered the shower. It was pretty narrow. But it had some nice shower gel, smelling of oranges.

Alice stopped abruptly in the kitchen door, surprised.

What was Jack doing here?

'Hi,' Jack said.

Just then the water boiler started to steam, and Jack turned away.

Leo took his hand off Alice's arm and explained in a quiet voice: 'I asked Jack to make tea. You need to drink and eat before you sleep.'

Alice couldn't think of anything to say.

But maybe she could sit down at the table.

Yes, she could do that. And she could get out of her coat. It was warm in here.

Or was she blushing?

On Saturday, both Leo and Jack went back to New York, around noon. Leo to make arrangements should Alice accept him as her assistant. Jack to think about whether or not to join the project. A polite way of saying he had seen enough and wouldn't come back, she thought then.

And now Jack was back, and he placed a steaming mug in front of her, a half-smile on his face.

Alice nodded a thanks and put her hands around the warm mug.

Leo and Jack got busy with something behind her.

She was too tired to ask what they were doing and looked at the dark window. There were three lights in the distance, from the main road. Three dots.

No one spoke.

That was good.

Just some cutting noises.

But ...

Jack's presence embarrassed her. Though, she wasn't sure why. And on second thought, Leo's too.

She was glad that Leo had brought her here. And while she didn't feel like drinking, drinking was probably a good idea. But still ...

She took a sip from her tea. Well, this was definitely good. And sweet. She took another slow sip. She rarely had sugar in her tea, but on a cold night and as tired as she was, the tea couldn't be sweet enough.

Leo brought a plate with a sandwich and sat down next to her. She looked at the sandwich, undecided.

When had she last eaten?

'We came back an hour ago,' Leo told her quietly. 'Everyone said you didn't sleep either night and hardly ate.'

That was probably true. Though Alice wasn't sure. The last days were like a blur in her mind. A blur with a lot of talking.

'I'm sorry,' she said, looking at Leo. 'I'm a fool when it comes to looking after myself. But thanks for bringing me here. Thanks for the sandwich.'

'You're welcome.'

They fell silent again, and Alice took a bite from the sandwich. It was tasty: cheese, cucumber, tomato, a few leaves of basil. But being the only one eating was awkward at best. She took another bite and put the sandwich down again. After a sip from her tea, she looked at Jack. He was leaning against the fridge, seeming thoughtful.

'You are back,' she remarked.

'I am,' Jack said, speaking as quietly as Leo. 'I didn't need long to make up my mind. And my children wanted me to continue with this project anyway. They flew to London this afternoon. So Leo and I came back together.'

'Are you staying?' Alice asked.

'I am,' Jack replied, and there was a hint of dismay in his voice as if he minded her doubts. 'I have to go to London and New York a few times. But mostly, I'm free for the project.'

'Ah,' Alice uttered. Undecided what to make of this, she turned to Leo. 'And you, Leo?'

'Is that an offer?'

'I don't know.'

'I'm fine with a trial period.'

'A trial period is good.'

'Could I make a suggestion, though?' Leo asked, looking a little worried again.

'Sure.'

'It might be good if I scheduled regular mealtimes and times for workouts.'

Alice looked surprised and even more so when Jack said: 'We can work out together. It'll do me good.'

Embarrassed, Alice said: 'Look, I see the point,' she said. 'And I agree. I want to go running and swimming anyway. There's a swimming pool in the other guest house but ...'

'Regular meals and exercise are ideal to balance stress,' Leo remarked. 'And this way you'll be fit.'

'Get fit, more likely,' Alice mumbled.

But a twinkle in Jack's eyes told her to relax or smile or not to take this too seriously or to just do it. It couldn't do any harm.

'Well, all right,' she said. 'But I won't bother you, Jack. After all, I'm not fit.'

'I don't mind,' Jack said. 'And we'll take it slowly. What's the plan for tomorrow, anyway?'

'Oh, I forgot to make a plan,' Alice exclaimed.

'I can take care of that,' Leo said. 'What are your priorities?'

Alice thought for a moment, glad to forget about workouts and fitness, and happy not to ask herself how much interference she wanted to tolerate from her assistant. What was the question again? Yes, plan, tomorrow. How far did they get in the last three days? 'Well, Tom and I decided that we'll start the project without delay. Over twenty people signed up to stay, and they'll recruit more people, starting tomorrow. That means, we'll extend the teams, get everyone settled in, set up offices for each team in the main building, address further questions, do legal stuff, sort out the budgets.'

'That should get us started,' Leo said with a smile. 'I suggest an official meeting at ten and a briefing with Tom at nine thirty? I could let everyone know.'

'That sounds good. Thanks.'

Leo gave one of his polite nods.

'Excellent,' Jack said, straightening. 'Then we meet at seven for our first workout? At the front door?'

'Hm.'

A little later, Alice entered her room on the second floor. It was a small corner room with a nice view towards the lake, a medium sized bed by the small window, and a short writing desk next to the bed. Alice fell asleep the second her head touched the cushion.

NEXT

book 1, beginning
or drafting a town experiment

With experts for all main teams coming together, Alice focuses on one team every week. **And by the by**, ideas and questions for the town experiment come together.

'Are we really going to break with well-established practices?'
'That's the point of this project.'

book 1, beginning, week 2

Book 1 is the first book of the easy town book series, and it's an introduction into the Easy Town idea.

While the book series tells the story of a town, and of the characters involved in creating, building and running it, the story also includes a thought experiment. **In this thought experiment**, the town serves as the playground, a playground where any question can be asked, and where any idea can be tested

Further chapters

- Week 1 — Settling in
 - Week 2 — Health & Care
 - Week 3 — Economics & Business
 - Week 4 — Ecology & Agriculture
 - Week 5 — Arts & Crafts
 - Week 6 — Admin & Society
 - Week 7 — Research & Education
 - Week 8 — Design
-
- New York
 - The First Easy Town Conference
 - Back at Tom's

MENTIONS AND REFERENCES

book 1, beginning, or drafting a town experiment

Lancet, the international medical paper, published the case of a girl who lost half of her brain and recovered, 9 February 2002.

The Lord of the Rings, J.R.R. Tolkien, 1954/5, Alice refers to Hobbiton in the first meeting at Tom's.

Antoni Gaudí i Cornet, 1852-1926, Catalan architect, most of his work can be seen in Barcelona, referred to at the first meeting at Tom's.

Alice's stories from her past are autobiographical and as accurate as memory allows.

FURTHER PUBLICATIONS

- book 1, beginning, or drafting a town experiment
- book 2/1, travelling, and we need to talk about sex
- book 2/2, travelling, and we still need to talk about sex

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