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DANKO

This story is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to real people or events is purely coincidental.

The novel "Danko" is written in the spirit of Scandinavian noir.
But unlike the cold, gloomy landscapes of the North,
this story unfolds under the scorching sun of the Black Sea coast.

It would seem that in such a heavenly resort
there is no room for evil — but the killer lurks right there,
among the ringing of children's voices,
cypress alleys,
and the sea.

“Amid children’s laughter, pain is the quietest sound of all.”

Prologue

The buses with children arrived between June 5 and 7 — depending on the weather. The first camp session usually opened on the tenth: a solemn bonfire was lit in the main square. Before that, there was a flurry of preparation — dorms checked, the cafeteria scrubbed, the laundry and the infirmary inspected.

The core staff came two weeks earlier, to get everything ready.
The sea in early June was still cool, but by noon it was perfect for swimming.
Galina, the camp's deputy director, oversaw everything — a woman of about forty-five, short, plump, strict but fair.

The counselors arrived a couple of days before the children, to receive their bedding, clean the rooms, and decorate the “squad corners.”
There were twelve groups in Danko, twenty-five children in each.
Most came in July, though June was still popular.
Each session lasted twenty-one days, with a three-day break for the staff in between.

On June 3rd, 1998, Children's wellness camp* Danko was once again preparing to open its doors to summer.

The day was clear and sun-drenched.

A tall fence separated the camp from the highway, guarded by a checkpoint.

The night watchmen were on duty in the little cabin by the gate.

Beside it — a doghouse, with a small, loud dog on a chain.

Another doghouse stood near the service yard.

The dogs were well fed — leftovers from the cafeteria, shared with the strays that wandered nearby.

On the sides, the camp was enclosed by chain-link fence and thick rosehip bushes.

The far edge ended at a golden beach that opened onto the Black Sea.

The beach stretched about a hundred meters long and fifty wide — from the last pavilion down to the line of seaweed and shells where the foamy waves whispered quietly against the sand.

That evening, on the eve of the children's arrival, the counselors gathered at the open-air stage near the campfire square, surrounded by firs.

Anastasia, in her third summer at Danko, was about to become a senior counselor.

Tall, slender, with pearl-green eyes and freckles across her face, she sat in the front row wrapped in a light plaid blanket.

On stage sat Andrei, the camp's choreographer — strumming his guitar and singing something cheerful.

Next to Anastasia was Alyona, a short-haired blonde.

Aleksei, the swimming instructor, poured homemade wine into plastic cups.

His broad shoulders and strong arms made him the favorite among the camp's women.

He'd worked there for five years.

The youngest counselor, Yulia, had come for the first time.

Her chestnut hair was pinned up, and her cheeks were already pink from the wine.

The gentle evening before the children's arrival lingered lazily.

The group sat beneath the single lamp above the stage.

“I need to step away for a moment,” Yulia said, rising from the bench.

She swayed slightly.

“Careful!” Alyona caught her arm.

Yulia laughed.

“I'll walk you,” Andrei offered, brushing back his dark blond hair.

“Play! I'll be fine. It's just to the restroom and back — nothing will happen to me,” she said and disappeared down the asphalt path toward the beach.

The warm sea air carried the scent of wild cherry plum that grew everywhere around the

camp.

She walked past the low trees with their small, unripe yellow fruit.

She wore a white T-shirt, denim shorts, and beach sandals.

A dim light glowed above the brick restroom entrance, surrounded by a cloud of insects.

Inside, the bulb was dead — only a faint streetlight filtered through the cracked doorway into the damp, sour-smelling space.

The songs by stage continued playing.

When Andrei finished strumming, Aleksei raised his plastic cup.

“A toast, friends!” he announced.

“Wait — Yulia’s not back yet,” said Anastasia.

“She’s been gone a while,” Alyona added.

Andrei put down the guitar, climbed off the stage, and pulled a crumpled pack of cigarettes from his pocket.

“I’ll go look for her,” he said, lighting one.

“I’m coming too,” Alyona replied.

Aleksei set his cup aside.

Andrei and Alyona vanished among the fir trees.

“A beautiful evening,” Aleksei whispered, kissing Anastasia’s ear.

“Until the kids arrive, you’ve still got time to make it perfect,” she teased.

He pulled her close, their kiss dissolving into the sound of the sea.

Far away came the faint cries of Andrei and Alyona calling for Yulia — first clear, then fading.

“They’ve been gone too long,” Anastasia said uneasily.

“Perhaps Yulia decided to take a walk to the sea,” Aleksei replied.

He leaned in again — but a sudden scream cut through the night, sharp and wild. Alyona’s voice.

Anastasia threw off her blanket and jumped up.

“Aleksei! Quick — something’s happened!”

She ran down the path, Aleksei following.

On the beach they found Alyona in tears and Andrei pale as chalk.

“What happened?” Anastasia gasped.

“Yulia... she’s dead,” Andrei whispered.

“Where?”

“There.” He pointed toward the steps leading to the sea.

Anastasia ran.

The sand slowed her steps, shells crunched underfoot.

In the moonlight, near the shoreline, lay the body of the young counselor — face down, her wet hair spread across the sand.

“We need to call the police,” Aleksei muttered and hurried toward the camp buildings.

Anastasia knelt beside the body, her tears falling silently.

“Yulia... what happened to you?” she whispered. But the girl could no longer answer.

***Children’s wellness camp** — a Soviet/Post-Soviet summer institution combining recreation, routine, and group activities; not exactly the same as a “summer camp.”

Chapter 1

The crime scene had been cordoned off with tape. A forensic specialist worked under the harsh glare of floodlights. Night wind rolled in from the sea, and the surf roared behind them.

No one slept that night. Galina greeted and escorted the militsiya* officers, doing everything she could to assist the investigation. The witnesses, wrapped in blankets, gave their statements to the investigators. Yulia’s body had lain on the beach for almost two hours before all the services finally arrived.

Soon, accompanied by Galina, the witnesses saw a young, striking woman in a formal suit approaching the scene. Her wavy blond hair whipped in the wind as she walked toward the taped-off area.

In the lantern light, Anastasia noticed she was holding a small notebook.

A moment later, the young woman slipped off her shoes and stepped barefoot onto the sand. She crossed the tape stretched around the scene with practiced ease and managed to examine the body just before the orderlies placed it into a black plastic bag.

“And who’s this now?” muttered an older investigator taking witness statements.

“Someone from your people,” Galina replied.

The man stuck a cigarette between his lips and walked toward the unfamiliar young woman, folder in hand. He carefully stepped over the tape fluttering in the sea breeze.

“May I ask who you are?” he rasped, coughing from the smoke.

“Olga Kuznetsova, investigator from Kherson,” she answered, her voice firm.

“And why did they send you?” he continued nosily.

“And you are...?” Olga frowned.

“Dmitri Khromov, Captain of the Kherson Regional Militsiya*,” he introduced himself proudly.

“What do you think happened, Captain?” Olga asked, examining the victim. Wearing latex gloves, she brushed the girl’s wet hair aside and checked her neck.

“The counselors had been drinking. The girl went off to use the toilet and must’ve decided to take a swim,” he said. “I think she drowned, and someone dragged her to shore, but it was already too late.”

“The marks on her body don’t raise any questions for you?” Olga pointed to a large bruise on Yulia’s arm.

“A drowning person thrashes uncontrollably. They can easily injure themselves, or the person trying to pull them out,” he explained.

Olga rose from her crouch, removed her gloves carefully, and picked up her notebook from the sand.

“Has anything like this happened here before?” she asked.

“People drown at this beach from time to time,” Khromov admitted. “Even though the territory is fenced and private, the locals wander in during the evenings.”

“I assume the city police will be taking over the case,” Olga said.

“You implying yourself?” he smirked. “Be my guest. Take the whole thing.” He flicked his cigarette butt onto the sand and stepped out of the restricted area.

Olga picked up the butt to throw it away later with her used gloves. The orderlies were finally allowed to remove the body.

She approached the pavilion where the counselors sat. Anastasia and Alyona were crying; Andrei and Aleksei, upset and exhausted, were finishing the last of the wine.

Olga tossed the trash into the heavy iron beach bin, opened her notebook, and wrote down a few notes.

“Who was the last to see Yulia?” she asked the group.

“All of us,” Andrei said. “We were drinking here nearby. Yulia just went off to the toilet and never came back.”

“Did you hear anything from the direction of the beach?”

“No. The guitar and singing drowned everything out,” Alyona said.

“And when you arrived at the beach, was anyone else there?”

“No. It was deserted. We didn’t even see Yulia right away. We found her by accident,” Andrei insisted.

“Who has worked here the longest?” Olga asked.

“Pretty much all of us—five years or so,” Aleksei replied.

“Only Yulia was here for the first time. She came for summer practice from the pedagogical university,” Andrei added.

“Did she have any enemies?”

“No,” Anastasia said firmly.

“Yulia was very kind. Friendly,” Alyona whispered.

“In all years you’ve worked here, has anything like this happened before?” Olga asked

before leaving.

Galina responded first, almost too quickly:

“Two years ago, a counselor went swimming in the evening and fell on the steps. She was drunk and slipped.”

“I assume Captain Khromov closed it as an accident,” Olga said.

“The steps are dangerously slippery out there. For someone drunk, it’s even worse,” Galina admitted.

“I have no further questions tonight,” Olga said.

“Come, I’ll take you to the staff hotel,” Galina offered.

“I’ll stay on the beach a little longer.”

The funeral van, escorted by a militsiya UAZ*, drove out of the pioneer camp. Only a few specialists remained, finishing their examination. Olga rolled up the bottoms of her trousers, borrowed a flashlight from the forensic tech, and walked toward the steps leading into the sea.

“Children arrive tomorrow. What a nightmare,” Anastasia whispered, staring somewhere between the spotlight and the roof of the nearest dormitory.

“You need to sleep,” Aleksei murmured, wrapping an arm around her.

“I won’t sleep tonight,” Alyona muttered bitterly.

Andrei stood up silently and walked alone toward the summer stage.

* **Militsiya** — the former law-enforcement agency in post-Soviet countries, similar to the police but different in structure and atmosphere.

* **UAZ:** A Russian manufacturer of rugged, simple, and highly durable four-wheel-drive off-road vehicles and light trucks, widely used by the military and police during the Soviet era.

Morning sunlight softly flooded the hotel room. Olga, though she'd gone to bed late, woke up promptly at six.

She didn't rush to take off the white T-shirt with the pioneer camp logo she'd slept in. Besides the bed linens, the room contained the camp counselors' simple summer uniform: beach shorts and an extra white T-shirt with the word "Danko" written on it. Olga laced up her sneakers and went out for a run.

A sleepy security guard greeted her at the entrance. When she arrived the previous evening, her car was parked in the courtyard. The guard had already warned her that buses carrying children would arrive around noon, and all seven buses would need to be moved into the grounds, meaning her car would have to be moved.

Starting at an easy pace, she jogged along the path lined with neatly trimmed flowerbeds. She passed the first dormitory and headed toward the beach.

From the second dormitory — the one closest to the sea — students from the culinary college were slowly making their way out. Dressed in their white cook uniforms, they trudged toward the dining hall.

Olga reached the razor-sharp grass where grasshoppers jumped in every direction and turned toward the summer stage.

The alley of firs and thuja trees felt like walking through a pine forest. Sunlight poured onto the campfire square, where a pit in the shape of a red star* gaped in the center.

***pit in the shape of a red star** - in the Soviet era, the red star was a common symbol used in pioneer camps. Fire pits and decorative elements were often shaped like this emblem, reflecting the camp's heritage and ideological past.

Olga began climbing and descending the rows of benches, keeping her pace steady — repeating her usual routine.

On the football field, birds wandered lazily across the morning grass. The bare metal goals gleamed in the sun. After several laps around the stadium, Olga finally stopped.

The iron statue holding a radiant heart towered above the road, greeting and seeing off every passing car. The metal figure was visible even from the main highway — a landmark, the facade of the camp itself.

After her run, Olga headed to the service yard*, where the shower block stood beside the laundry building.

***the service yard** - is a utility area behind the camp used for laundry, storage, and other common areas.

She stepped inside cautiously. Over the tiled floor, faded blue shower heads protruded from the walls. She didn't want to accidentally walk in on a naked man if she mixed up the men's and women's showers.

But at this early hour the room was empty. She left her clothes in the small anteroom and stepped into the first stall. Turning the tap, she shivered as cold droplets hit her skin before the warm water finally came.

Standing under the stream, Olga remembered herself as a little girl. Nothing in this shower room had changed — and more than ten years had passed. She was twenty-three now but felt as if she had stepped back into June 1988, into her first pioneer summer.

Water splashed onto the tiles and streamed toward the drain along with soap foam. Beside her, in memory, echoed the laughter of girls from her old squad — girls just as small as she had been, mocking her.

She drifted so far into the memory that she didn't hear someone enter.

Olga opened her eyes under the water. A tall, gray-haired woman with a stern face stood in front of her.

“Sorry, I thought someone forgot to turn off the tap,” the woman apologized immediately.

Olga shut off the water and wiped her face with her fingers.

“No harm done. It’s fine — you’re not a man,” she said.

“If you step into the next room, I’ll give you a clean towel,” the woman offered politely, already walking away.

“You’re from the laundry?” Olga asked.

“Yes. I work there. My name is Nadya. Come by if you need fresh linens,” the woman replied and left the shower room.

“Thank you!” Olga called after her, but the door had already closed.

After changing, she headed to her car. As she approached the gate, the dog greeted her with a bark, and then a security guard emerged from his kennel.

"Come on, I'll show you where to park," he offered kindly.

The white Peugeot was basking in the sun on a vacant lot surrounded by wild bushes. They had to leave it there temporarily. A hundred meters away lay a wild beach, where the sea lapped the coastal boulders. Olga opened the trunk and pulled out the duffel bag she had hastily packed for the business trip.

On the way back, Olga decided to take a shortcut. As Olga made her way past an old fence, she nearly caught her blouse on a rusty nail. But she sucked in her stomach and finally squeezed through. Someone had already torn clothes here before her. A dark cloth hung from a rusty nail. The lightweight synthetic material looked more like a patch. An intruder had clearly been there. The investigator took the patch with her.

Lunch was being prepared in the cafeteria, the smell of food wafting through the surrounding area. A voice could be heard from the outdoor stage – someone was checking a microphone. Then a song by the band "Savage Garden" began to play. The camp was getting ready to welcome the children. The buses were slightly delayed due to stops along the way.

Near the staff dormitory, Olga spotted Andrei. He was hiding his eyes behind dark glasses, and he smelled distinctly of alcohol.

"How's the investigation going?" he mumbled, barely able to speak.

"You'd better not show up in front of the children looking like that," Olga said sternly.

Andrei swayed and nodded.

Olga, without hesitation, took his arm.

"Come on. I'll take you to your room. You need to sleep."

Andrei obediently followed.

As she climbed the steps, she heard him sob.

"Are you crying?" she asked quietly.

Andrei freed himself from her hand and sank down on the step, leaning against the wall.

"I was supposed to walk her home that evening," he whispered. "I can't believe she just drowned."

Olga sat down next to him.

"Were you close?"

"We studied together. She came here for an internship to be with me," the guy admitted.

Olga didn't interrupt. She simply listened, giving him a chance to speak.

"Try to get some sleep," she finally said. "And don't go out like that. Think about the children."

Olga entered her room, closed the door, threw her duffel bag on the floor, and lay down on her bed. Looking at the ceiling, she thought, "If anyone was on the beach that evening, they probably snuck there through the wild field, ruining their clothes."

She remembered the dog's bark—it might have attracted the guard's attention if he'd spotted the stranger.

She opened her notebook and pulled out a scrap of cloth.

"The dark scrap could have belonged to anyone. But what if it belonged to the criminal?"

Her thoughts were interrupted by a loud horn blaring from the highway. Olga stood up and went to the window.

Ikarus* buses were pulling into the camp's wide-open gates one after another. Staff stood along the road, greeting the new arrivals with waves and smiles.

***Ikarus** — a large Hungarian-made intercity bus widely used across the former Soviet Union in the 1980s–2000s.

Olga was momentarily transported back to her childhood. She recalled the stuffy bus

interior, the smell of sweet soda and gasoline, the rolling and sticky heat. Her first trip to camp remained etched in her memory forever—she was plagued by nausea the entire way. The girls in her group later laughed at her.

The teachers and counselors gathered by the buses. Galina directed the children with a commanding voice toward the summer stage. The Pioneers emerged from the buses, listless and sleepy, carrying carry-on luggage. Other camp staff members, instructors and counselors, arrived with them.

Olga noticed an athletic man in a tank top—physical education teacher Oleg Romanovich. His wife, senior camp counselor Elena, walked next to him.

Some of the sixteen-year-old Pioneers already looked grown up; they could easily have been mistaken for camp counselors.

"Attention! We're about to divide you all into squads! Follow me!" Galina commanded.

The noise grew louder as the children filled the yard.

When all three hundred Pioneers had gathered near the stage, some of the buses headed to the service yard. The drivers had lunch and took a short rest by the sea.

Olga stepped out of the staff hotel and nearly ran into a tall, blue-eyed man carrying bags into the lobby. He was well-built—broad shoulders, light stubble, a confident gaze.

Their eyes met for a brief second, then each continued on their way. Groups of children slowly dispersed from the summer playground. Olga noticed Anastasia leading her squad into the building.

"Eighth Squad, inside and up to the second floor!" she commanded.

Olga headed toward the guard booth by the gate. Inside, hiding from the sun, the night guard sat on a narrow cot, watching a small TV playing a football match. A dog rattled its chain and barked.

"I need to speak with you," Olga said, knocking on the half-open door.

The man stood and stepped outside.

"You were on duty last night, correct?" she asked.

"That's right," the guard confirmed.

"No strangers entered the pioneer camp grounds?"

The man tensed slightly, adjusting his mustache.

"I usually make rounds a few times a night, but when there are no children, I mainly watch the main entrance," he admitted.

"Did you hear or see anyone at all?"

"Locals sometimes walk onto the beach from the empty field side. But last night I didn't hear anything suspicious," he replied.

“How do the locals behave around here? Any aggressive types?”

“Half our staff are locals,” he smirked. “Myself included.”

Olga jotted something down in her notebook and left.

Toward evening, while the pioneers were getting acquainted and the counselors helped them settle in, Olga decided to leave the camp grounds and take a walk through the village. She changed her formal blouse and trousers for something simpler—jeans and a T-shirt.

She passed through the main gate and walked along the roadside. Cars and trucks rushed by, kicking up dust. The sky was turning pink with sunset.

Olga remembered how, as a child—back when she was a pioneer—she would often stand by the camp fence and stare at the road. She would dream of seeing a bus appear on the sun-scorched highway, the one that would take her home to her mother.

The local shop and bar were about a kilometer from DANKO. On the opposite side of the road stretched plowed fields—later in the summer, watermelons and melons ripened there.

Olga pushed open the bar door and immediately felt eyes turn toward her. Inside sat men exhausted from the heat of the day, drinking beer straight from the bottle. An old record player blasted foreign rock. A woman in an apron stood behind the counter.

Olga sat on an empty stool and ordered a light beer. One of the locals approached her—a young man, slightly drunk and unkempt.

“Bored?” he asked, leaning on the counter.

Olga noted that the hem of his stretched black T-shirt had been clumsily stitched by hand. She waited for her beer and took a sip of the cold Taller*.

***Taller** — beer brand that was commonly sold in small bars and roadside cafés across Ukraine in the 1990s–2000s.

“What’s interesting about this place?” she asked casually.

“Never seen you here before. You’re pretty,” the stranger smirked.

He looked a little over twenty, but the rough skin on his hands and weather-beaten face made him seem older.

“Just arrived today. I’m a staff at DANKO,” Olga lied calmly.

“I know that place. I go there with friends,” the man said.

“And you went yesterday too?” she asked coolly.

“No. The season hasn’t started yet. No discos,” he answered.

Olga drank without replying.

“Viktor,” the man introduced himself.

His friends called him over. He placed a hand on her waist.

“Olga Kuznetsova. Police investigator from Kherson,” she introduced herself quietly.

Viktor snatched his hand away.

“You serious?” he stammered. “What are you doing here?”

“Help me, Viktor. You know everyone around here. Maybe you can tell me who goes to DANKO’s beach at night.”

He scratched the back of his head.

“A lot of people. It’s a nice beach—clean.”

“And you haven’t heard of anyone recently meeting a young woman there and inviting her to swim at night?” Olga narrowed her eyes.

Viktor shook his head.

“No. I’d remember that.”

At that moment, the bar door opened.

Olga saw him—the same blue-eyed man she had run into earlier at the hotel. He walked in confidently, glanced at her with the same piercing look, and headed to the counter.

His appearance made Viktor retreat to his friends at once.

“Was he bothering you?” the man asked quietly as he ordered a beer. His voice was low and warm.

“And who are you, a superhero?” Olga smirked.

The bartender handed him his drink.

“Correct,” he said. “My costume is just in the wash.”

“I thought you were on vacation.”

“Alexander,” he introduced himself.

“Olga.”

“I know who you are,” he smiled. “The investigator from Kherson.”

“Do you now? Then who are you?” she asked with interest.

“My father is the director of DANKO. I help him with organizational matters,” Alexander explained.

“I heard that something similar has already happened on DANKO’s beach. They found girls’ bodies there before. What do you make of it?” Olga asked.

Alexander took a sip, wiped the foam from his lips, and replied calmly:

“There’s something wrong with that place. I don’t believe in pioneer ghost stories, but after the girl who drowned a few years ago... the beach feels cursed.”

The noise of drunken workers grew louder. Olga looked at Alexander and suggested they step outside.

It was still light out. The air carried the smell of fresh manure and blooming grasses.

“Tell me about the drowned girl,” Olga asked.

Alexander hesitated for a moment, then began:

“It happened five years ago, mid-summer. A twelve-year-old pioneer—quiet, withdrawn, a bit odd. Viktoria. Other girls bullied her constantly. She kept everything inside. That day they invited her to the beach during nap time. They went to swim, and when she started drowning, no one helped her.”

He exhaled.

“Oleg Romanovich, the PE teacher, pulled her out. But it was too late. The girl had drowned.”

“Did anyone face consequences?” Olga asked.

“The senior counselor was sent to prison. The director was removed. But the incident left a mark... a bloody mark on that summer. The next year the camp didn’t open—no one wanted to buy vouchers, parents were afraid. Newspapers even wrote about the drowned child. But such stories fade fast.”

He glanced toward the horizon as the sun dipped behind the trees.

“In ninety-five the camp reopened. And again—death.”

Olga listened without interrupting.

“The first death happened after the children arrived?” she asked.

“No,” Alexander shook his head. “All the deaths happened before the first session even started.”

Olga froze, processing his words.

Now it was clear to her: these were not accidents. Something really was happening there.

They returned, and Alexander said goodbye near the hotel entrance. From the summer area came soft music—competitions and evening games were underway. Children’s laughter mixed with the rhythm of songs. Older pioneers wandered the alleys, talking among themselves.

Near the restroom hidden by acacias, a small group smoked—cigarette embers glowing and fading like watchful eyes.

The air carried the sweet scent of summer flowers, yet beneath it lingered another smell—salty, heavy, drawn from the sea.

To Olga, it felt not refreshing, but ominous. Almost deadly.

She raised her eyes to the crimson sunset above the beach—the sun sinking below the horizon as if repeating the fate of the drowned girl.

Chapter 2

Olga woke at six, as always. She went for a morning run, this time choosing a route along the shoreline. On her way back, she ran into a crowd of sleepy pioneers of different age groups, all shuffling toward the stadium. From the loudspeakers, a cheerful announcer urged everyone to gather for morning exercises.

Olga joined the children. Many of them didn't recognize her and even threw a few harmless jokes her way.

On the green lawn of the football field, the pioneers lined up by squads. The older kids laughed and teased the younger ones, while the youngest barely lifted their arms, yawning as they stretched.

A stocky, muscular man with a whistle around his neck was already waiting. Oleg Romanovich did his morning exercises in any weather. However, for the Pioneers, exercises could be cancelled in case of inclement weather. He greeted the squads and began calling out instructions: torso twists, bends.

Olga stood off to the side, repeating the movements. The gym teacher noticed her and gave an approving smile.

His voice carried across the entire field:

“One, two, three, four!”

After squats and push-ups, the exercises ended.

Olga approached Oleg Romanovich as the pioneers began to disperse.

“Honestly, I thought nothing could drag these kids out of bed after such a long trip here. But you managed,” she said.

“Discipline above all! How can I help you?” the gym teacher replied politely.

“You've worked here a long time, haven't you?”

“Since 1990.”

“I heard yesterday about the tragedy—the girl who drowned.”

“Five years have passed, and I still remember that day. If I’d been closer, I might have saved her.”

“I’m sorry to ask, but... could you tell me more?”

Oleg Romanovich pulled sunglasses from his track pants and put them on to shield his eyes.

“More? I heard children’s voices from the beach. At first I didn’t give it much thought—until I realized it was rest hour. Quiet hour. No one was supposed to be there. When I ran to the beach, several girls were standing at the shoreline, pointing toward the water. They were terrified.

I understood instantly. I dove in to search for her. The water that day was murky, full of seaweed. I dove several times before I found her. By the time I pulled her out, it was too late.”

“The girls who were with her—could they have helped?”

“They’re children. They panicked.”

“I’ve heard there were other cases after Victoria drowned. What do you think about that?”

“I think this place is cursed. And yes, you’ll ask why I still work here. I’ll tell you: every time I look at the sea, at the place where she drowned, it’s like I’m going back to that day.

Their conversation was interrupted by a slim woman with a dark bob haircut—Elena, his wife. She gave Olga a faintly jealous look.

“Am I interrupting?” her strict voice asked.

“We’re finished,” Olga smiled. She saw Elena at the bus yesterday.

“You know,” Oleg Romanovich added, “the first counselor who drowned was in the same group as Victoria, in 1993.”

“It’s a terrible story. We all experienced that pain,” Elena said. “I can’t imagine how her mother coped with it.”

Olga had another important question, but Elena had already claimed her husband’s attention.

Returning to the hotel and taking a shower, Olga received a message at reception about an urgent call. It was from the regional morgue—something concerning Yulia. The investigator skipped breakfast and immediately drove back to the city in her Peugeot.

Her native Kherson greeted her with traffic jams on its narrow streets. She had to leave the car and walk the last couple of kilometers to the regional morgue.

Yulia’s body lay on a metal table among others covered with white sheets. The forensic examiner—a woman in her fifties—sat at a desk filling out forms.

“Svetlana Ivanovna,” Olga called, entering the room of the dead.

The medical examiner slowly stood up and took a small object from the table.

“Tell me, could something like that accidentally get into the victim’s mouth?” - Svetlana

asked.

In her gloved palm lay a small ribbed seashell, painted with white nail polish, no more than two centimeters long.

“No,” Olga said firmly.

“Someone put it there. He stuck it tightly behind his wisdom teeth,” said Svetlana

“After Yulia died,” Olga suggested.

“Should I file this as evidence?” - asked the medical examiner.

“Yes, I knew that this was not an easy matter,” Olga sighed. -What about abrasions? Svetlana Ivanovna led her to the body and carefully pulled back the sheet. Yulia's skin has already acquired a grayish tint.

“There’s an abrasion on my arm—someone grabbed it really hard,” she said, pointing to her right forearm.

“These marks on her neck indicate strangulation. But not right away. They put her in the water.”

“They drowned her,” Olga said confidently. “Thank you. It makes a big difference.”

Before leaving, she took several photographs with her Kodak of the object found in her mouth and the injuries on Yulia’s body.

Now she had no doubt: every “accident” at Danko had been a murder.

And she suspected the first victims also had evidence left on them—evidence Captain Khromov had missed.

After visiting her parents, Olga returned to Danko closer to lunchtime. On the campfire square, workers were tightly stacking wood in the star-shaped pit, preparing for the evening bonfire. This year the opening ceremony would take place several days earlier than usual.

According to the daily routine, all units were on the beach. But the smell coming from the dining room indicated that dinner time was already close.

Olga noticed an elegant tanned brunette in stylish sunglasses walking around the territory. The girl mistook Olga for a new counselor.

“Excuse me, what squad are you from? I haven’t seen you before,” the brunette asked with a warm smile.

“I didn’t see you among the arrivals either,” Olga answered just as kindly.

“Alesya,” she introduced herself. — Senior counselor of the tenth squad.

“Olga.”

“I heard a new counselor drowned here recently. I didn’t know her, but it’s so sad,” Alesya said gently.

“I didn’t know her either,” Olga admitted. “And what about the others—the drowned counselors from earlier years?”

Alesya seemed surprised.

“How do you know about the others?”

“It’s my job.”

“Oh, right. You’re from the militsiya. I forgot. Sorry—I thought you were a counselor.”

“No problem.”

“I knew both of them. They were in my unit when I first worked here in 1993, before I was transferred,” Alesya recalls.

Aleksei walked past in a captain’s cap, with a volleyball net and balls. He formally greeted Olga and winked playfully at Alesya.

Alesya immediately lost her train of thought for a moment.

Her thoughts were clearly elsewhere.

- Yes, you said... you were once a counselor in their squad? Olga reminded her.

“Anna was very beautiful. You couldn’t take your eyes off her,” continues Alesya.

“Then do you also remember Viktoria?” - Olga said.

““Yes. The other kids didn't like her. Maybe because she was different.”

“In the year Anna died, the counselors also gathered for the traditional pre-season party?”

“Yes. Every year we do—before the kids arrive there’s no time for anything like that. Anna fought with Vitaly that night and left for her room. Vitaly followed later, but she wasn’t there. We searched everywhere. Eventually we found her on the beach. She’d taken a bottle of port wine and gone swimming,” Alesya recited without pause.

“And who is Vitaly?” Olga asked.

“Our music director. He’ll arrive this evening.”

“What year did Anna die?”

“June 1995.”

“And who died after her?”

“A year later—another counselor, Katya. Her death still terrifies me.”

“What happened to her?”

“That night, while the counselors were celebrating the start of the 1996 season, Katya’s boyfriend came. They had been fighting, but he arrived to make peace—brought her flowers. Katya apologized for leaving the party and went with him to the beach. But later, after the counselors had a few drinks, everyone decided to go swimming together. We accidentally disturbed them. Katya and her boyfriend moved beyond the camp’s beach, toward the wild camping area.

We all went to bed after that. I woke to someone pounding on the door, screaming for help. It was Katya’s boyfriend—soaked, terrified, saying she was dead.

At first no one understood what had happened. Later he said he’d left her alone for just ten minutes. When he came back she was lying face down on the shore. Of course he was the main suspect eventually.”

“And what do you think? Could he have killed her?”

“He had a motive. She admitted that she had cheated on him - so they broke up. After that, Katya came here as a counselor.

That evening they were drinking, and perhaps a new scandal broke out. But that's just

my guess."

"Thank you," Olga said quietly.

After lunch the pioneers returned to their dorms for quiet hour. Counselors decorated the stage with colorful balloons and prepared the campfire square for the evening event.

Olga walked along the path, squinting against the sun. She felt as if the camp breathed memories— even the scent of pine needles was exactly as it had been in her childhood.

Behind the stage was the cinema building. On rainy days the large hall would fill with children watching old films. Olga passed the campfire pit and decided to look inside the cultural center.

The glass door creaked as she entered the dusty lobby. The air was thick with the smell of stale furniture and teenage sweat. Around the corner stood a ping-pong table with a net stretched across it.

"Someone was playing table tennis here recently," she thought.

Somewhere a door creaked, footsteps were heard - and soon a woman in glasses and a bright dress appeared.

"Can I help you?" - she asked, seeing Olga illuminated by daylight.

"I'm just walking around familiar places. Nothing has changed," Olga answered, remembering her childhood here.

"This is our club, and the cinema is in the same building," the woman explained. "I'm in charge of it. My name is Natalia."

"Olga Kuznetsova."

"Oh! Then you must be the investigator," Natalia said, adjusting her glasses.

"Yes."

"Can you help me find some missing props?" she laughed. "I still can't account for them since last year. How could I lose something like that?"

"I'm sure it'll turn up," Olga said.

"And our Neptune costume is still here, but one of the kikimora costumes is missing! Well, I suppose we'll have one less kikimora this season," Natalia joked.

Olga looked at her, puzzled.

"Oh, you don't know? Every season we have Neptune Day*—an entire event with water games and performances. The kikimoras accompany Neptune. It's very theatrical!"

***Neptune Day** — a traditional summer celebration in many Soviet and post-Soviet children's camps.

Neptune Day is a festive water-themed event held once every camp session. Counselors perform a playful theatrical show in which Neptune, the Slavic "King of the Sea," arrives

at the beach accompanied by kikimoras — swamp and forest spirits from Russian folklore.

The performers dress in elaborate handmade costumes, hold games and competitions in the water, and stage a humorous “sea court” where campers are “judged” for fun mischiefs. For many children, Neptune Day is one of the most memorable traditions of the pioneer camp.

Natalia’s nonstop chatter exhausted Olga, and she made up an excuse to leave. «Too talkative... but why is that costume missing?» she wondered.

By evening the pioneer camp came to life again. There were children walking everywhere, smelling of deodorant and mint gum. The music director, with the help of counselors, moved the equipment from the club to the summer area. The atmosphere was buzzing with anticipation.

Olga came to the summer playground when the benches were already filled. Natalya went on stage, checking the microphone, and music director Vitaly was adjusting the sound.

The competition program began—a mix of sketches and performances. Olga stood at the entrance, observing everyone. There were many guests: staff members, regional officials, the camp administration. For the first time she saw the director of Danko—a respectable man in glasses and a light suit.

Finally, evening fell completely.

A long torch appeared at the side of the stage—carried by Alexander.

He approached the stacked wood inside the star-shaped pit and poured a flammable liquid over it.

The crowd applauded.

Alexander lit the torch and placed the flame deep into the wooden structure. A crackling sound burst forth, and fire began to devour the logs and planks.

“Let our fire reach the sky!” Natalia shouted.

“Burn bright, burn high!” the crowd echoed.

The flames rose several meters, sparks swirling in the night sky. Alexander retreated to a safe distance and allowed the counselors to bring the children for photographs in front of the fire.

The photographer had a lot of work to do that evening; he had to take notes in his notebook: write down the squad and the number of copies of the photo.

After the photos came the long-awaited disco. Vitaly changed tracks and started the evening with “Be My Lover”. The children ran to the dance floor, leaving the benches behind.

Anastasia approached Alexander, and together they disappeared somewhere.

Meanwhile, Anastasia’s fiancé, swimming instructor Aleksei, agreed on plans for sporting events, together with Oleg Roanovich.

Olga remembered herself ten years earlier—sitting in the front row, waiting for a slow dance invitation that never came. Others were chosen instead—prettier girls, luckier ones. Now she felt out of place here.

Leaving the summer area, Olga walked along the gravel road past the fir trees. She walked everywhere, trying to pass the time.

Along the way, she often met camp guests walking here. Near the pioneer hostel, on a bench, Olga noticed the counselors: Alyona and Andrei.

Andrei looked better now; She and Alyona seemed to support each other in grief.

Turned onto the alley where the rosebeds grew. A small fountain stood nearby, with benches around it, and ahead was the infirmary. A separate bench stood beside it,

hidden by thick bushes—a favorite spot for couples.

Olga came closer and accidentally witnessed Anastasia's betrayal. Anastasia and Alexander stood in the shadows, holding each other. He whispered something in her ear. She ran her fingers along the back of his head.

"Everything will change soon, you'll see," Olga heard.

The door to the infirmary opened and light poured onto the steps. The nurse stood a few meters from the door. Olga tensed—they could see her watching.

Anastasia and Alexander came out of the shadows directly into Olga's path.

-Are you following me? - Alexander asked with a grin.

"I didn't know anyone was here," she answered calmly.

"We'll talk later," Anastasia muttered in a businesslike tone and left.

But Olga has already seen enough to draw a conclusion: Anastasia is cheating on her fiancé.

Olga understood those words were only for show.

They remained alone for only a moment before a distressed voice sounded from the infirmary:

"Oh God, what happened to you? Bring him inside, quickly!" the nurse ordered.

Alexander and Olga turned toward the commotion. On the steps stood a counselor holding onto an older teen whose head was bleeding blood.

"What happened?" Olga asked.

"A fight on the beach!" the counselor replied.

"Every year the same!" Alexander muttered, hurrying toward the alley. Olga followed.

A crowd had gathered on the beach—several dozen people. Some men were already breaking up the brawl. Voices shouted from the darkness:

"Back off! Stop immediately!"

Alexander rushed to stop the fight. Olga grabbed the wiry boy and pulled him back.

"Locals—leave the Danko grounds immediately!" he ordered.

"You're not the boss of us!" someone yelled from the dark.

"No one here needs trouble!" Aleksei snapped.

Olga released Viktor's arm.

"You want trouble with the militsiya? No? Then leave," she said, firm but controlled.

Viktor wiped blood from his lip and backed away.

He gave a sharp whistle:

"We're leaving!"

The group of locals headed toward the wild beach, to circle around the fence.

"What happened here?" Oleg Romanovich demanded from the older teens.

"Nothing," someone muttered.

— Another showdown with local residents? - the physical education teacher barked.

“They molested our girls!” - the tall teenager complained.

Alexander calmed Olga.

"We'll handle it. Nothing serious," he reassured her.

The disco continued despite the chaos. After several upbeat songs, the speakers played the long-awaited slow dance— «Still Loving You». Boys led the prettiest girls to the dance floor. The others sat in the first row, waiting.

Waiting for the evening to end.

Olga watched the dying fire, embers glowing in the pit, and thought:

«Everything repeats itself. The same faces, the same songs, the same mistakes... And they still believe everything is ahead of them.»

Chapter 3

A new morning greeted the camp with clear, sunny weather. After the morning exercise, Oleg Romanovich announced the teams that would be playing in the day's football match.

Olga had loved football since childhood—thanks to her father. For her, attending a match was something personal, almost intimate. On the stadium bleachers she always felt calm, as if she were stepping back into her own childhood. Her father had coached the city's youth team, and more than once she had skipped walks with friends just to stay home and watch the Champions League with him.

After breakfast, Oleg Romanovich tightened the nets on the goalposts. He preferred refereeing the evening matches—when the stands were full and every goal was met with joyful shouting. Morning games were different: the sun beat down mercilessly, and only the most loyal fans sat on the benches.

By eleven, both teams walked onto the field. Boys in mismatched T-shirts milled about, arguing, joking, stretching. Alyona arrived with her seventh squad. The PE teacher gathered everyone in the center and tossed a coin. One team had to take off their shirts so they wouldn't get confused during play.

At the whistle, the game burst into motion—shouts, pounding footsteps, and the rising hum of excitement filled the field.

Alyona sat on the top row of benches in her sunglasses. Olga arrived a little late but still in time to catch the first goal. She climbed up to Alyona.

“Yours are the ones without shirts?” Olga asked with a smile.

“Yes. Do you like football?”

“Love it. My father used to coach juniors.”

“In this camp, football is more than a game—it's part of being a pioneer,” said Alyona.

“I know. I was a pioneer here myself... back in '88. Not much has changed.”

“Really? I first came here in '93,” Alyona replied.

Olga sat beside her. A light breeze stirred the hair at her temples, mixing the scent of dust, grass, and sea air.

“I remember how we wrote vows,” Alyona said, “sealed them in a bottle, and threw it into the sea.”

“We swear!” Olga echoed softly, smiling.

They both laughed—lightly, like an echo of a childhood long gone. On the field, a boy in an AC Milan shirt dribbled past two opponents and shot at the goal. The goalkeeper didn’t even move—the ball bounced off the post and into the net. The seventh squad erupted in cheers. Oleg Romanovich blew his whistle and pointed to the center circle.

“That girl who drowned... Viktoria,” Olga said quietly. “It seems everyone here knows about her.”

Alyona hesitated, then removed her sunglasses and scanned the field.

“You know... I still feel guilty,” she said. “I could’ve taken her into my squad. The kids in her group were older, and she was so small... so fragile.”

“She was bullied, wasn’t she?” Olga asked.

“Yes. They mocked the way she swam, called her ‘Duck.’ I heard it more than once. They laughed at her old-fashioned swimsuit. Sometimes she wouldn’t even take it off during nap time—she was too embarrassed to change in front of others.”

A whistle blew—corner kick. The ball soared, and the same boy in the striped shirt jumped and headed it under the crossbar. A second goal.

- Why didn’t the senior counselor intervene? – Olga asked.

“Because nobody wanted to notice,” Alyona answered bitterly. “Frankly, I’m glad that counselor was later sent to prison.”

“Silence means you condone it,” Olga said.

“More than that—she once struck Viktoria. I saw it. But it was my first year here. No one cared what I said.”

“Struck her?”

“Yes. For running away from the disco where they were teasing her,” Alyona said.

The whistle signaled halftime. The heat was unbearable now, so the halves were shortened. The boys ran toward the cafeteria for water.

“It was an ordinary day,” Alyona continued. “The girls invited Viktoria to the beach during nap time. They only invited her to make fun of her—and she didn’t understand that. They snuck out while their counselor was gone. My group was nearby, but I was busy with my own children. If she’d been in my squad, I would never have let her out of sight.”

“What happened afterwards?” Olga asked.

“Her aunt came. She was the one who got Viktoria the camp voucher—back then, vouchers were hard to get unless you worked at certain factories. Her aunt just wanted the girl to see something better than her parents’ constant drunken fights.”

“And her parents?”

Alyona lowered her eyes.

“Better not to remember,” she whispered. “When her aunt entered the room to collect Viktoria’s things, she saw a message painted on the girl’s bedframe. White nail polish. It said: ‘a duck.’ You know... cruelty in this camp can be worse than in school.”

A sweaty boy came to rest beside them, interrupting the conversation.

“Well done! Keep it up,” Alyona praised him.

“You play great,” Olga added. She rose from the bench, gently touching Alyona’s shoulder. She didn’t stay to watch the second half—there were more pressing matters.

To learn more about the victims, Olga headed to the camp’s archive. The records of all campers and staff were kept in the administrative building next to the small hotel.

Galina couldn’t refuse the investigator’s request and agreed to provide information from the past five years of “Danko’s” work. She even personally went to search for Viktoria’s file.

The cramped office smelled like an old library—yellowed folders, dusty shelves, paper that had absorbed decades of summers.

The deputy director pulled out the folder marked “1993” and placed it on the desk.

“Let’s see,” she murmured.

Olga waited patiently.

Among the names, birth dates, and squad numbers, finding Viktoria wasn’t difficult. The alphabetized notebook made the search faster.

“Yakovleva Viktoria,” Galina pointed out.

Olga opened her notebook to write everything down.

“You’re in luck. She lived in Kherson. Write down the address.”

Olga recorded the address as Galina dictated it. She didn’t bother taking notes on the other victims—those counselors had come from different cities.

The street where Viktoria had lived was familiar. Only two blocks from Olga’s own apartment.

Midday heat pushed everyone into the water. From the beach came shouts of joy. The swimming instructor’s voice boomed over the loudspeakers as Aleksei monitored safety in the water. Olga had moved her car several times that day and now parked her Peugeot near the cinema building.

She got into the car, started the engine, and drove toward the main gates. The guard

slowly emerged from his booth and pulled the gate open.

The iron statue by the gate—arm raised toward the sun, heart of welded rays—glinted in the heat. A warm gust brushed its metal frame.

A small dog barked after the car as Olga drove away.

Her hometown greeted her again with traffic jams and the heavy, dusty melancholy of summer streets. Elderly people hid in the shade at bus stops. Teenagers strolled along the main avenue eating ice cream. Mothers watched toddlers play by the fountain and tossed breadcrumbs to pigeons.

Olga parked in the courtyard of a five-story building. Laundry hung from ropes between balconies. A striped cat basked on a windowsill. She got out and walked toward the last entrance. From one apartment drifted the smell of fried onions and clattering dishes.

Inside the stairwell, the air was cooler — but a musty odor seeped up from the basement. Olga climbed to the second floor.

Apartment No. 5. Upholstered door. She rang the bell. Nobody answered. A television murmured behind one of the neighboring walls.

After a minute she knocked firmly three times — still nothing. Then footsteps echoed from below. An older woman entered the stairwell and climbed to the second floor. She spotted Olga standing by the door.

“Excuse me, do the Yakovlevs live here?” Olga asked politely.

“They don’t live here anymore,” the neighbor said, jangling her keys.

“They moved?”

“After their daughter died, the mother sold the apartment and left,” the woman explained.

“Do you know where she moved?”
A cat meowed behind the neighbor’s door.

“I’m coming, honey!” she called tenderly to the animal while trying to insert the key. “No idea. Somewhere outside the city.”

The neighbor clearly didn’t want further conversation. She closed the door, leaving Olga with no lead.

Taking the opportunity, Olga stopped by to see Svetlana at the morgue. Together they drafted a request to the morgue in Skadovsk — the place where the bodies of Anna and Katya had been taken. They asked specifically about any foreign objects found in the victims’ mouths. Svetlana gave Olga her personal phone number so they could stay in touch.

Olga spent the rest of the day with her parents. After dinner she dozed off in her childhood room. When she woke up, dusk had already settled outside.

She changed into a clean blouse, grabbed her keys, and kissed her mother goodbye, despite her mother's worried look at the late hour. The car's headlights struck the iron statue with the radiant heart in its hand — the silent guardian of the camp's secrets. The trees by the gate smelled of cool sea air after the hot day.

Olga honked, and the guard grudgingly opened the gate. The disco had ended about an hour ago. The buildings were mostly dark now, and the only figure wandering the grounds was the night watchman — Vitaly.

Suspicious at first, he stepped closer when Olga parked and got out, softening when he recognized her.

"How's the night shift going?" she asked.

Vitaly wore a canvas poncho and held a walkie-talkie. "Inspiring for writing music," he admitted.

"Really? You write songs?" Olga smiled.

"Even have my own band," he said proudly.

"That's impressive," she said warmly. "Do you often encounter strangers at night?"

Vitaly thought for a moment.

"We keep the locals away from the camp. But they sometimes gather on the beach at night," he said.

"Does that cause trouble?"

"Sometimes they leave trash. Nothing more."

"Can you tell me what happened the night Anna drowned?"

Vitaly exhaled slowly, as if he'd been expecting this question.

"Her death never felt like an accident to me."

"Why not?"

"She stormed off to the beach so I'd follow her. I didn't. Fool that I was. She even took my cigarettes — she barely smoked, just played at it," he said.

"They say she got drunk before going into the water and slipped at the shoreline," Olga said.

"That's the strange part! I knew Anna. She would never swim in cold water. Early June? The sea is seventeen degrees at night. She froze easily," he insisted.

"How long had you known her?"

"Since we were pioneers here. 1993. I was a simple boy, and she was... beautiful."
"You were in the same squad?" Olga asked.

“I was a couple of years older,” he said with a wistful smile.

“Viktorina died during that same period?” Olga asked sharply.

Vitaly’s expression changed.

“Yes. She was in Anna’s squad.”

“You saw the bullying?”

Vitaly hesitated. The memories were heavy.

“And Anna... she teased the girl too, didn’t she?” Olga said softly.

Vitaly shut his eyes for a moment.

“That girl, Viktorina... she was different. Not like the rest of us.”

“And for that she suffered?”

The walkie-talkie hissed loudly.

“I need to make my rounds,” Vitaly said, trying to escape the conversation.

“Anna was there when Viktorina drowned?” Olga called after him.

He stopped.

“Do you think Anna lived easily after that?” he snapped. “She came back here as a counselor to redeem herself. To help kids like Viktorina!”

After the tense conversation with Vitaly, Olga couldn’t sleep. Back in her room, she sat at the desk, opened her notebook, and wrote under the soft glow of the lamp. She looked less like a detective and more like an author outlining her characters — arranging motives, fears, and shadows.

Several times she heard soft laughter in the hallway — staff returning from late walks. A knock at the door woke her in the morning. She’d gone to sleep around four and barely opened her heavy eyelids as she approached the door.

“Sorry to bother you, but they’re asking you to come to the phone!” the duty attendant called.

“I’ll be right down,” Olga said, still half-asleep.

Only then did she remember she hadn’t called Svetlana Ivanovna back. She threw on her clothes and hurried downstairs.

“Hello?” she said into the receiver on the duty desk.

Svetlana’s voice was quick and direct.

When Olga hung up, her pale expression made the attendant frown with concern.

“Should I bring you some water?” the woman asked.

“No,” Olga replied and headed for the stairs.

Svetlana’s colleagues at the Skadovsk morgue had checked their archives. Both drowned counselors were found had small ribbed shells in their mouths.

«Shells.»

Small, ribbed shells, approximately the same size.

Painted with «white nail polish with fine glitter».

Just like the one found in Yulia’s mouth.

Chapter 4

The canteen smelled of buckwheat porridge and fried cutlets. Olga had slept through breakfast but made it to lunch. The hall buzzed with noise: children clattered their spoons, joked, argued. It felt comfortingly familiar.

She picked up her tray and, unwilling to eat alone, sat next to Natalya. The woman had already finished her soup and moved on to the main course.

“May I join you?” Olga asked, feeling toward Natalya not just curiosity, but a professional interest as well.

“Please do.”

Olga broke off a piece of rye bread and put it in her mouth.

“As someone creative... I’d like to ask you something. Are there any scary stories in the camp that the children like to repeat?” she asked.

Natalia laughed lightly.

“You mean the ‘Red Scarf’ or the ‘Black Pioneer’?” she teased.

“Something connected to the sea? The sand? Or seashells?” Olga clarified and tasted her aromatic chicken soup.

“Some pioneer oaths touch on that theme,” Natalia recalled.

“Tell me one.”

“We, the Pioneers of the Sea Star Squad, swear to guard the secrets of our camp! To love the sun, the sea, and to help one another. Let this oath bind us together!” Natalya recited theatrically.

“I’ve heard something like that already,” Olga sighed, disappointed.

They ate in silence for several seconds, until Natalia suddenly brightened and raised a

finger.

“Oh! Last year I found a bottle with a note in it! It had been drifting in the sea for years, and eventually washed up right on our beach. Can you imagine?”

“What was in the note?” Olga leaned forward.

“Come by my office in an hour — I’ll show you. I need to get back to sorting the stage props,” Natalya said and cleared her dishes.

After a filling lunch, Olga felt herself growing sleepy. She bought a cup of coffee and a chocolate from the buffet. A dip in the sea would wake her up — and at this hour, the beach was empty, since all the children were in their rooms for rest hour.

She changed into her swimsuit, took her towel and sandals, and headed toward the shore. She hadn’t worn this swimsuit for a couple of years; back then she had been almost skinny. Now, with her toned body, she could easily compete with any counselor in “Danko.”

The golden sand was hot under her feet. Empty beach pavilions stood quiet, waves rolling gently nearby. The lone lifeguard hut — a weathered wooden shack — sat a few meters from the water.

Olga spread her towel near the changing booth. The sun was high, but for a girl from the South it wasn’t a concern. She stepped toward the water: the waves lapped at her knees and thighs, cool spray touching her skin.

Seashells gently pricked her soles. She walked forward and lay back into the water. Bliss — transparent shallows, soft sand, no jellyfish in early June.

She swam several meters, dove under, and returned to shore.

As she stepped out of the water, something caught her attention — a lone figure near the western side of the beach. At first she couldn’t recognize the woman from the distance, but once she approached, she remembered her.

“Nadya, why aren’t you swimming?” Olga greeted her.

It seemed Nadya didn’t recognize her right away — maybe because of the wet hair and the way Olga’s figure looked in the sun.

“People who live by the sea don’t crave the water as much as visitors do,” Nadya said calmly, staring into the horizon.

“That’s true,” Olga agreed.

The woman took a soft pack of cigarettes from the pocket of her gray work trousers and lit one.

“How long have you been working at the camp?” Olga asked, squinting against the sun.

“Since 1995,” Nadya answered.

Olga opened her mouth to ask the question that interested her most, but Nadya spoke first.

“You still haven’t come for your towel and clean bedding,” she reminded her.

“Too much work — I’ll stop by soon, I promise.”

They stood quietly for a moment. Olga reached out her hands, letting the sun warm her, while Nadya finished her cigarette.

“Come by, I’ll be there,” Nadya said and walked across the hot sand. Olga nearly forgot about her meeting with Natalya. She didn’t even change — only threw on beach shorts and a white T-shirt over her still-damp swimsuit.

In the club’s vestibule she heard the rhythmic thump of a ping-pong ball. Turning the corner, she saw Oleg Romanovich and Aleksei in the middle of an intense game. Her sudden appearance in beachwear distracted them for a moment.

She greeted the men and continued on. Natalia’s room was easy to find — Olga remembered it from their first meeting.

Music played softly behind the door. Olga knocked and stepped inside. Natalia was bent over a festive costume, mending it with a threaded needle.

“I hope I’m not interrupting?”

“Come in, come in,” Natalia beamed.

She set aside the colorful costume and stuck the needle into a spool of thread.

“Tea? Coffee?” she offered.

“You intrigued me so much,” Olga admitted, “that I actually counted the minutes.”
“It’s only been an hour,” Natalia teased.

Olga waved her hand impatiently.

“What did you find?”

Natalia adjusted her glasses and entered the small adjacent room. Olga heard the closet creak. While she waited, she examined the scattered props - and noticed a familiar synthetic fabric identical to the one she had taken from the fence. Natalia returned quickly. In one hand she held an empty green wine bottle; in the other — a sheet of paper.

“Here it is,” she said, handing over the note.

It was a page torn from a school notebook, lined with faint blue lines and a red margin. The handwriting was childish, full of mistakes:

«Ah, sea, you are my only eternal listener. Only to you can I confess my sorrow. When I’m sad, I walk here and dig seashells out of the sand. Every time I feel deeply hurt, I hide one shell under my bed. On the last day, before leaving, I will count them.»

Where the date had once been, only blurred numbers remained — the ink washed away by water.

“It’s poetic, isn’t it?” Natalia said dreamily.

“Where did you find it?” Olga asked, her voice steady.

“That bottle washed up on our beach. I just happened to see it in the water.”

“I’m taking this with me,” Olga said after a pause.
Natalia blinked in mild surprise.

“Of course, if it’s important.”

“You have no idea how important,” Olga murmured. “One more question: in the last five years, has the camp renovated the dormitories? Replaced furniture? Beds or nightstands?”

“As far as I know — no.”

Leaving the club, Olga crossed the camp grounds. At the second dorm she noticed Alexander and the night guard carrying a single bed. It wasn’t broken — in fact, it looked intact.

Alexander stopped to greet her. The guard also paused, out of breath.

“Still busy organizing?” — Olga asked.

“The sea gives the kids so much energy that they break the beds!” Alexander joked.

The guard chuckled hoarsely. At that moment Olga remembered the words from the bottle’s note — a mysterious Pioneer girl hiding a seashell for every ruined day.

“I’ll help you,” Olga offered.

“You’ll replace me?” Alexander raised a brow.

“I’ll open the door,” she said lightly.

Inside the second dorm lived Pioneers ages 12 to 15. Girls on one side, boys on the other, each wing with its own restroom. The lobby had cushioned chairs, a TV, and large windows overlooking the camp square.

A young counselor was waiting for them.

“Please take the broken bed to the third floor,” she asked.
The guard wiped his forehead.

“Anything for a lovely lady,” Alexander grinned.

Olga waited by the stairs. The men carried the new bed into the boys’ room and dragged the old one upstairs.

The unused third floor stored old camp furniture — a dusty graveyard of the past. Olga sensed something important might be hidden there, but Alexander simply left the bed in the lobby and headed back down.

She noticed the door didn’t lock.

Returning to the room, she placed the note from the bottle in her notebook and attached it to the piece of fabric. Olga still has questions: who is the author of this note? Where did the props from the club go? She was sure that both answers were somewhere nearby.

We had to wait until the evening, when all the pioneers and counselors would gather on the summer playground. In addition, competitions and fun events were expected today. The day before, Olga took a flashlight from the glove compartment of her car. When the lights came on on the stage and evening enveloped everything around, the investigator quietly left the summer area.

She approached the second building and pulled the handle - the door gave in. On each floor there was usually one of the pioneers on duty who did not like dancing and fun, preferring to watch TV in the lobby.

Olga climbed to the third floor and carefully entered the dark corridor. Laughter and screams could be heard from the crowded dance floor from the street; the music thundered throughout the area. Walking along the linoleum, she heard her steps echo loudly. Open doors evoked unusually empty rooms.

The investigator turned on the flashlight and entered where the old wardrobes and beds stood - all unnecessary rubbish was demolished here. Afraid of being noticed from the street, she tried not to linger near the windows. A beam of light slid across the bedside tables, wardrobes, and beds. Olga was looking for at least some clue.

A broken bed in the corner of the room, right next to the window, attracted her attention. She examined the back and barely made out the familiar letters - "a duck". The inscription was made with white varnish and, despite attempts to erase it, it was still recognizable.

"This is her bed," Olga muttered and bent down to look under it.

Under a layer of dust and sparse cobwebs, she noticed a bent piece of plywood, which had burst and formed a hole in the place where the thighs usually lay. Intuitively, Kuznetsova stuck her hand into the gap and felt something flat and ribbed.

She pulled out the find and shone it with a flashlight: in her palm lay a pink royal shell. The investigator carefully hid it in her trouser pocket and continued the examination, but nothing else could be found. She was about to leave when she heard a creaking sound.

Front door - someone entered the floor. Olga turned off the flashlight and froze, listening.

A dull male voice was heard, then muffled female laughter. The steps were getting closer. Kuznetsova carefully crawled under the broken bed.

Two people entered the room - a man and a woman. In the semi-darkness, Olga saw Aleksei's broad back. The girl next to him, judging by her voice and manner of speaking, was Alesya.

- When will you tell her about us? - she whispered in his ear while he kissed her neck. "Soon," he promised in an excited whisper.

Passion flared up between them. Olga heard the zipper stretching and the clothes rustling. The dust under the bed tickled her nose, she wanted to sneeze, but she held back, covering her mouth with her hand.

The silhouettes collided with the wardrobe in a rush and, laughing quietly, fell onto the bed. The bed creaked, the headboard thudded against the wall.

The woman's laughter gave way to a quiet squeak, and the air was filled with the light aroma of strawberry lubricant.

It seemed to her that time had stopped. Every whisper, every breath sounded especially clearly in the darkness. Olga felt how someone else's proximity suddenly made her presence unbearably awkward, as if she were peeping in like a dirty voyeur.

After a few minutes everything became quiet. Outside the window, the sounds of the

holiday could still be heard - laughter, applause, loud music. Aleksei and Alesya whispered a little more, then got up, straightened their clothes and left, creaking the door.

When the footsteps died down, Olga finally sneezed. After lying under the bed, she slowly climbed out and exhaled heavily. The dust had ingrained itself into the clothes; now they definitely needed washing.

Kuznetsova was now sure of one thing: Viktoria wrote that letter in the bottle. But only one royal shell was found in the cache—where did the rest go?

In the morning, when the cheerful voice of the Vitaly sounded in the speakers, and then an energetic song began to play, Olga decided to visit the shower and at the same time take the soiled clothes to the laundry.

The sun's rays gently touched her face, it was still slightly cool. In the buildings where the pioneers lived, life began to stir - children visited the washroom. After taking a warm shower, Kuznetsova left the shower room and went into the next door, where there was a laundry.

Nadya had already arrived at work, but she was not in the main room. There were washing machines whirring and the smell of laundry detergent. Everywhere, in the corners, there were bags of dirty laundry, marked with tags.

- Nadya, I've come! - Olga exclaimed, suspecting that the woman was in the next room. But she didn't respond. Olga put the dirty things on the table and walked to the slightly open door, from behind which the noise of the pumps could be heard.

The small descent down was illuminated by a dim light bulb. The investigator cautiously went down to the basement. In the twilight of the cramped boiler room, she saw Nadya, who stood with her back to her and muttered something inaudibly. Ahead, thick pipes hummed and pressure meters stuck out like dials. A swimsuit hung on a sagging rope against the wall.

- Nadya! - Olga unexpectedly turned to her.

The woman shuddered.

"Lord," she grabbed her chest with her right hand, "how you scared me!"

- Sorry, but I called you upstairs.

Nadya turned to the girl and exhaled:

"I'm trying to figure out the water supply, there's not enough for washing," Nadya explained, pointing to the pipes and taps, which Olga understood nothing about.

"I brought you things and will ask you to wash them, and I'll also take clean bedding," Kuznetsova smiled.

"Of course," the woman nodded.

Olga drew attention to the lonely swimsuit that was drying on the rope.

- You already brought your swimsuit! Will I see you at sea soon? - she noted.

Nadya waved her hand:

- You know, there is so much work that I have no time to sunbathe.

They went upstairs. Nadya took Olga's things from the table so as not to mix dark and light ones. Then the woman kindly provided her with a set of sleeping linen.

"For your responsiveness, I'll buy you a chocolate bar," the investigator winked.

Nadya was pleasantly surprised, seeing her off with a friendly glance.

At the entrance to the laundry, Natalya almost collided with Olga.

Her hands were holding suits that needed washing, so the door suddenly opened almost hit the woman.

"Sorry," the investigator said guiltily.

Natalya laughed good-naturedly, and Olga gave way to her. At that moment, the small thing slipped and fell onto the concrete threshold, making a soft click.

The door to the laundry room immediately slammed shut, tensioned by a spring.

Kuznetsova bent down and picked up the find. In the palm lay a shell covered with white varnish - smooth, souvenir, the same size as in the evidence photographs.

She wanted to call out to Natalya, but stopped.

"I have to send this find for examination," a thought flashed through my mind.

On the path to the buildings, Olga met Aleksei and Anastasia. She alone knew about their secret intrigues, while remaining above suspicion. Aleksei hid his shameless eyes behind dark glasses, and Anastasia looked straight - coldly and distantly.

Even though they were holding hands, there was no warmth in it: each was thinking about his own, each was looking for a moment to put an end to it.

Perhaps they were both planning to end their relationship at the end of June, when the first shift ended.

Vitaly's cheerful voice came from the loudspeakers above the camp, inviting everyone to breakfast.

But Kuznetsova was awaiting another trip to her hometown.

The car was slowly leaving the Danko territory when someone knocked on the rear side window. Olga looked in the mirror: Andrei stood behind, holding a travel bag in his hands. The investigator slowed down.

- You're heading to the city, aren't you? — the guy asked in an alarming voice.

His eyes were hidden under sunglasses. Shiny, unwashed hair stuck out chaotically.

- Should I give you a lift?

- If it doesn't bother you.

- Sit down.

Andrei opened the back door and, throwing his bag into the cabin, walked around the car and sat in the front. The girl smelled alcohol coming from the guy.

They were driving along the highway.

- Are you leaving? — the investigator asked cautiously.

Andrei took off his glasses and rubbed his eyelids with his fingers.

"I can't stand it here anymore," he admitted in a broken whisper.

- I understand you.

- No! - Andrei objected. - Nobody can understand me! She's gone, and some people don't care. Yes, they practically didn't know her.

"They're just living their lives." They must monitor the pioneers, they must be responsible," Olga explained.

— I need to attend the funeral. "I need to be on time," Andrei insisted.

"I'll give you a ride to the station," Olga reassured.

- Fine. "Thank you," the guy breathed.

For a while, silence reigned in the car - only the clicks of turns and the noise of the engine.

"I saw her," Andrei suddenly admitted.

- Did you see who?

- Yulia. "She came to me after death," Andrei said.

- This is your mind. "You've been under a lot of stress," Kuznetsova tried to find a rational explanation.

- This happened quite recently. Then, at night, I came to the beach. Grieving, alone. In the light of the moon, in the sea, I saw her image. The transparent image. At first I didn't believe my eyes, I felt scared. I came closer to make sure that I wasn't imagining all this. Yulia stood ten meters from me. She couldn't speak, she only showed with gestures. She showed that she loves me. I asked what happened to her that evening," Andrei interrupted.

"You drank too much alcohol and didn't sleep enough," Olga thinks to bring some sense. But Andrei ignored these explanations.

"In response to my question, Yulia put her index finger to her lips - "shh," the guy showed with a gesture. "When I asked who did this to you, she showed a circle or a

wheel with her hands, but I still didn't understand." Then she went to where the waves were raging.

Olga did not believe his story, but pity for him made her agree.

"If you really saw this dream, it means Yulia came to say goodbye," the investigator reassured.

Andrei turned to the side window.

-You need to sleep. At least a little. "I'll wake you up when we arrive," Olga promised.

But Andrei had no time for sleep. He returned the sunglasses to his wet, reddened eyes and fell silent.

Chapter 5

The meeting with the forensic expert took place in the park. Svetlana Ivanovna approached the conventional time. Olga bought a glass of soda to escape the thirst and heat. Both of them were talking on a bench in the shade, under a chestnut tree.

— When examining Yulia's body, did you find any traces of sexual violence? - asked Kuznetsova.

- If I found traces of sexual violence, you would certainly know about it! The girl had sexual intercourse 5–8 hours before her death —Svetlana strictly assured.

Olga was counting on this answer and did not at all exclude their intimacy with Andrei that day.

- I found something. This thing is very similar to the one you found in Yulia's mouth," the investigator said and showed Svetlana a bag for things and docks, in the middle of which there was a small royal shell covered with white varnish.

The medical examiner took her glasses out of her bag.

"Indeed, very similar," she agreed.

"I'll send this for examination to be sure of my suspicions," the investigator answered, remembering Natalia.

- I can make things easier for you. Let me pass this on to the forensic laboratory," Svetlana Ivanovna suggested.

"I would be grateful to you," Olga agreed.

Svetlana Ivanovna decided to move away from the topic a little, taking advantage of the meeting in an informal setting.

— How do you spend your time outside of investigation? Have you already swum in the sea?

Olga smiled embarrassedly.

- Actually, the place is very good. The sea is still cool," the investigator admitted.

"Oh, I remember my youth... How I loved all these resorts and boarding houses,"

Svetlana began to dream about something.

— Sorry for the somewhat strange question, but do you believe in the paranormal? — I suddenly Olga remembered my conversation with Andrei.

- Ghosts? — the woman said ironically.

"As a forensic expert, do you believe in life after death?" Olga explained her question.

Svetlana Ivanovna sighed heavily.

- If after death the soul could really live... But I doubt it. Our body dies - that's all.

— A person who has experienced alcoholic delirium could see the ghost of his beloved? - Kuznetsova dared to ask.

- Of course. After all, these are all hallucinations, and not the intervention of mysticism!

— Svetlana agreed.

Olga finished her soda and threw the empty plastic cup into the trash.

"I have to go," said the investigator.

"If there is news, I'll call you," Svetlana Ivanovna said.

Towards evening the investigator returned to Danko. The watchman was watching football on a small TV when he heard the horn outside the gates.

Olga drove into the territory and turned off the engine. The watchman was surprised at the chosen parking spot.

"You need to drive further," the man remarked.

"I have a couple of questions for you," Kuznetsova answered and walked up to the watchman's build.

After a hot day, a small guard dog lay lazily on the grass under the fence. He didn't want to bark or get up.

—Yes?

— Do you keep a log of all visitors to the pioneer camp?

- Certainly.

"Can I see whose car drove into Danko's territory on the evening when the crime occurred?"

The man began to fuss. He entered the watch house and took his journal with notes.

"I wrote everything down," repeated the watchman, turning over the pages.

- Here! "On the evening of the same day, the deputy director's car drove into the territory," the man said.

This was not the information the investigator expected to receive.

- "Thank you," Olga answered dryly and returned to her car.

On the way to the camp, she couldn't get Yulia's gesture that Andrei talked about out of her head.

This sign - "circle" - could mean that the killer is driving a car. If we assume that Andrei did not dream all this...

They were adjusting the sound on the summer stage. The spotlights were shining.

People gradually converged, occupying the benches. The evening of amateur performances has begun.

Girls in sparkling outfits opened the competition with a dance.

Olga sat alone, on the sidelines, on the top bench. The investigator observed the counselors and pioneers - their behavior and attitude towards each other.

Older teenagers secretly smoked in the beach toilets and hung around the camp before the disco started.

Some sat on benches hugging each other, others walked holding hands.

When the girls' performance ended, they returned to their squad amid thunderous applause.

Olga noticed that one of the dancers was wearing a handmade shell belt.

The investigator descended from the upper rows of benches. The fourteen-year-old girl shared her inspiration for the appearance with her friends.

— What a beautiful belt you have, can I take a closer look at it? - Olga turned to the dancer.

The cheerful girl did not refuse the investigator.

— We sewed this outfit last year with Natalia! Only one royal shell came off - apparently it was poorly secured," the girl said.

Now Olga understood where that royal shell came from.

— Did you varnish each shell yourself? — Kuznetsova clarified.

- Yes! We periodically help Natalia with costumes. She has the most work on Neptune's holiday," the girl pioneer recalled.

The investigator stepped aside. Her false suspicion towards Natalia disappeared by itself.

And yet, the shells found in the victim's mouth and the element of the costume were affected by one thing - their coatings were the same varnish.

The disco ended an hour ago, and all the pioneers were already in the buildings. Before going to bed, Olga decided to take a walk along the beach - and noticed that she was not the only one who liked such walks.

Oleg Romanovich was there for a reason: he was on duty that evening. A man was walking with a flashlight on the concrete slabs near the shore.

The investigator walked slowly along the sand. The physical education teacher stood looking at the sea in the glowing moons.

The swimming area marked by buoys kept its secrets.

A cape hung over his shoulders; he turned around when Olga came very close.

- Can't sleep? - Oleg Romanovich's voice rang out.

"A walk on the beach before bed helps me fall asleep," Kuznetsova admitted.

— Do you see those buoys? - the physical education teacher drew attention. "It's deep there, about chest-deep for you and me."

"The beach is shallow, the depth increases gradually," Olga answered.

"I still don't understand why that girl went further than the buoys." If she wasn't a good swimmer.

"Maybe she wanted to prove to her offenders, that she can swim?" — Kuznetsova suggested.

"And now almost all of Victoria's offenders are dead." "It's as if they paid for their ridicule," Oleg Romanovich said heavily.

- Almost everything? Besides Anna and Katya, was there another one? - Olga was surprised.

- Yes. But after 1993, she no longer came to the Danko pioneer camp.

-What did she look like? What was her name? — Kuznetsova became interested.

"You better ask my wife." Elena definitely remembers their inseparable trio," said Oleg Romanovich.

The physical education teacher continued his rounds, and Olga was left alone with the raging sea.

The investigator was able to meet with the physical teacher's wife, Elena, over breakfast. When the teacher brought her squad, Olga was already waiting for her in the dining room.

When Kuznetsova approached Elena, the young counselor sitting next to her realized it. "It's not easy to find you in the camp," the investigator began the conversation.

- Why look for me? Am I of interest to the investigation? - Elena was surprised.

"I just have a question about some of the pioneer girls of 1993," Olga reassured her.

The young counselor wanted to leave them alone to communicate, but Kuznetsova stopped her, saying that she would not interfere.

"I think I know who you're interested in," Elena said thoughtfully, after tasting the oatmeal with milk.

— In the squad with Viktoria there were three girls who were good friends: Anna, Katya... and who is the third? — the investigator clarified.

— Unfortunately, I don't remember the third one. If I remember Anna and Katya for their brilliant performance, then the third girl... - Elena fell silent, trying to remember.

The conversation was interrupted by the appearance of Galina, the deputy director. The woman immediately approached their table.

- Elena, I need you help today! - she reminded.

"It's good that you came," Elena perked up. - We have a mystery here! What was the

name of the girl who was friends with Anna and Katya in 1993? remember their trio?

“Julia,” Galina said confidently.

- Exactly! - Elena confirmed.

— Are there any photographs of her left somewhere? - Olga immediately asked.

— They should be at the club. We once pasted a photograph of these beauties girls into the Danko wall newspaper,” Galina answered.

The first thought that came to Olga:

“What if last victim -Yulia died through no fault of her own? And the killer could have confused her with that other girl - similar and with the same name...”

The club didn't open until eleven. Sports equipment was stored in some rooms, and, in addition to Natalia, physical education teacher Oleg Romanovich had access there. Kuznetsova waited a little while, sitting on the summer stage, while some employees completed their planning meeting.

Here, on the wooden benches, someone left names and dates carved with something transparent. Judging by the inscriptions, these pioneers have been here for a very long time. There was a smell of sunny fir all around. From the side of the beach, Aleksei voice was already heard through the megaphone. It became known: the air temperature was 28 degrees, the water temperature was 22 degrees.

Natalia walked along the path, past flower beds planted with flowers. Olga was watching her from the benches, and the artistic director did not notice her. She looked cheerful, slightly eccentric: she hummed some song and stopped to smell the flowers. Judging by her mood, she was in no hurry to go to work at the club. Kuznetsova had to hide so as not to attract attention.

Two girls from the junior team ran to the club, as if in a race, and stood under the door. They laughed and fooled around. Olga followed Natalia to the very threshold.

- What are you doing here? Why not on the beach? - Natalia turned to the girls.

- We've come to help you with your costumes! - one of them said joyfully.

- What clever people! - the woman praised. — Shall we create decorations for a mermaid costume together?

- Yes! - the little pioneers exclaimed joyfully.

Natalia took out the key to the club and inserted it into the lock. Olga watched from behind a thick bush, waiting for the club to open.

The investigator waited a little while Natalia took the girls away, and then went in.

Voices echoed from the end of the corridor. Kuznetsova lingered in the lobby, trying to find that very stand.

Here, among the signs and slogans, there were various certificates for participation in table tennis competitions.

“Wall newspaper,” Olga searched, repeating, “Maybe it was removed from here?”

In the right corner, right next to the window, hung a yellowed paper.

The signboard with bright photographs. At the top there is a multi-colored inscription: “Our favorite camp “Danko”! Summer is a small life!

Under each photo pasted there was an inscription.

One photograph showed a football match between squads, and below the inscription: “Football Championship. 1991.” The next photo is Neptune's celebration. In the place where there should be a photo of amateur performances, there is only an empty space, under the inscription: “An unforgettable performance. 1993.” Below is a continuation of photographs from 1995 to 1997.

If Galina was talking about the trio of girlfriends who are at this stand, then this is definitely 1993. But where did the photograph go? - Olga noted.

In place of the torn photograph, only dried glue remained.

Children's voices could be heard from the artistic director's office. The investigator knocked and then opened the door.

Natalia adjusted the frames of her glasses, looking around at the guest. The room smelled of acetone.

The girls sat on a soft couch and covered shells with multi-colored varnish.

- Come in, Olga! - Natalia invited. - How can I be of help?

The investigator entered the room and smiled at the girls.

She came closer to Natalia, who was deftly threading a needle into the light fabric of the prop.

"I'm interested in one of the photographs on the stand," Kuznetsova began the conversation.

- Which one exactly? - Natalia asked.

— Performance by pioneer girls, 1993.

"Oh, you mean that old wall newspaper," the woman smiled.

- Yes. But that photo disappeared," Olga noted.

- Hmm, strange. "I didn't even notice," Natalia was puzzled. - Who needs it so much?

— Maybe you still have a copy or a similar photograph? It's the trio of those girls that interests me," the investigator clarified.

— Unfortunately, I don't have any other photographs. I take it this is related to the investigation?

"I need to see one of the participants in that performance, Julia," Kuznetsova explained.

"I don't remember Julia," Natalia admitted.

"She was just in the missing photograph," Olga sighed.

Then she turned her attention to the girls.

— Do they always help you with needlework and decorations for costumes?

- You know, it's more fun together. In addition, some children love to be creative.

Sometimes I don't have enough time and I have to ask even the staff for help due to the upcoming holidays.

The investigator approached the table where there were vials and bottles with various chemicals. Pink and white nail polish with glitter stood open, but girls, for some elements of the costume, use bright red nail polish.

Wooden balls with holes for fishing line lay in a small saucer. Olga picked up one ball and rolled it in her fingers.

"I will cover these balls with white varnish and they will turn out to be pearls," said the girl.

"A pearl necklace for the Little Mermaid," another girl corrected her.

When the investigator returned to the hotel, the duty officer notified her of a recent call from the city.

Olga missed a call from Svetlana, but quickly called her back on her work phone.

The conversation did not last long - the forensic laboratory confirmed the identity of the coating on the found royal shell and the one found royal shell in the victim's mouth.

But even without this information, Kuznetsova was sure of it.

The puzzle was gradually coming together. Someone is killing those girls who were with Viktoria on the beach at the time of her death.

At noon the sun went to its zenith. The beach was filled with screams from children, and older groups were playing volleyball. A football competition was ongoing at the stadium.

Olga, grabbing a notebook, a swimsuit and a towel, headed towards the sea.

Soon the voice of the loudspeaker will send the all pioneers to dinner, and the beach will be empty again.

After low tide the sea is clear. Somewhere in the distance, outside the camp, locals are catching shrimp.

Olga loved to sunbathe near the water, so she spread a towel on the coastal slabs.

The girl lay down on her stomach. The sea and the cries of seagulls. She a moment and

closed her eyes. Sleeping on the beach at noon, when the sun is more aggressive, is fraught with burns, but only here and now she managed to relax for the first time - meditation procedures.

Olga didn't notice how she fell asleep for a few minutes, and could have slept longer, but she was awakened by children's laughter coming from the western part of the beach.

The investigator opened his eyes and turned to the side to look.

About fifty meters away, two pioneer girls stood in the water, the third sat on the slabs. One of the pioneer girls lay down on the water and swam. Brown plastic buoys slowly swayed against the background.

Olga got up with the towel at the same moment and ran across the hot sand towards the girls.

- What squad are you from? - she shouted.

The girls stopped laughing. And the one that was swimming snorted with her nose, standing out of the water.

- Come ashore! - Olga said.

The girl sitting on the slabs moved aside. The second girl climbed out of the water.

"You are not our teacher," snapped the girl swimming near the buoys.

- Get out onto the shore! - Kuznetsova shouted.

- You can't force me! - the pioneer girl muttered in the water and continued to swim towards the buoys.

Olga got in the water. The sea was wonderful for swimming. A fat pink jellyfish floated next to her shin.

The investigator lay down on the water and swam part of the way in a matter of seconds.

The pioneer girl looked around in fear, realizing that they were about to overtake her.

A couple more deft movements - and Olga left five meters of the sea behind her. In this place where the girls swam, the depth was much greater than in the permanent place reserved for swimming for pioneers.

Having reached the buoys, Olga no longer felt the bottom under her feet. The pioneer girl went under water three meters from the investigator.

Kuznetsova dived after her. Two white legs in turquoise depth repeated the pose of a frog.

The investigator swam up and, grabbing the girl by the torso, lifted her up.

- Let me go! - she was capricious.

- To the shore! - Olga repeated.

- Do not touch me! - said the pioneer girl.

By that time, Oleg Romanovich had already appeared on the beach. He took off his light T-shirt and was ready to go into the sea, but he saw how Olga was doing great without his help.

The girl came out of the water, shaking off the water. Skinny, but with character, she climbed onto the slabs herself.

- From which squad? - the physical education teacher asked, putting his T-shirt back on.

"From the sixth," she admitted.

- Swimming in the sea is only in a designated place, under the supervision of counselors and a swimming guide! - Oleg Romanovich reminded in a stern voice.

The two pioneer girls were silent, only that the one who had crawled out of the sea was trembling.

Olga climbed out onto the shore after her.

"Visiting the beach is prohibited during lunchtime nap..." scolded the physical education teacher Oleg. - Everyone quickly returned to the hostel!

The girls obediently left the beach.

"You're great, Olga," Oleg Romanovich said with delight.

"It's much deeper here," the investigator noted.

“Viktoria drowned in this very place,” said the man.

Olga gathered her wet hair.

“You also happened to be nearby at the right moment,” said the investigator.

— Every time the pioneers sleep, I patrol the beach. I don’t know, maybe it’s for internal peace,” admitted Oleg Romanovich.

“You’re waiting for the moment to save someone’s life.” That’s why you come here at a certain time. That accident with Viktoria hurt you. You feel guilty. But you couldn't see it coming,” Kuznetsova explained.

“You’re right,” the physical education teacher admitted.

After a lunchtime nap, the beach became crowded again. The stadium too came alive with shouts and the referee's whistle.

The time was slowly approaching evening. Olga sat in the hotel room until sunset.

The yard came to life with the hubbub of pioneer voices; children went to the dining room for dinner and sang squad songs*

***squad songs** are one of the traditions where the pioneers sing in chorus the title song chosen by the squad.

Having changed into comfortable, inconspicuous clothes, Olga decided to visit the local bar again. She left the already familiar Danko structure behind her, creaking the gate. The evening highway smelled special. On the other side of the road the fields were yellow with sunflowers. The walk to the local bar was accompanied by the sound of crickets chirping in the overgrown roadsides.

Near the entrance to the bar there were tables with chairs for guests. There was a truck parked in the parking lot not far from the bar.

Entering the bar, Olga noticed a gray-haired man having dinner at the table. There were no other customers in the bar.

Olga ordered a cold beer and boiled shrimp. She decided to sit at a table outdoors. The smell of cut grass and manure no longer struck her as a strong scent unusual.

The sign above the bar lit up, thereby attracting flying insects. Olga slowly enjoyed her beer, sitting in the courtyard near the bar.

The truck driver she saw at the bar climbed inside and, leaving behind a cloud of stench from the exhaust pipe, drove off along the highway.

It became unusually quiet, faint music was coming from the record player in the bar.

From time to time, cars drove along the highway, their headlights blinding.

Olga had already finished her beer and was about to leave when suddenly a strange woman appeared from the back of the bar. Her clothes could not help but attract attention: an old light-colored dress, topped with a thick gray jacket. The hair is chaotically disheveled and the makeup is uneven. She looked to be about fifty. She muttered something under her breath, and when she saw Olga, she was intently fixated on her gaze.

“The local madwoman,” the investigator decided.

Avoiding eye contact, Olga stood up from the table to leave this place.

The sign above the bar began flashing hysterically and making a hum.

“Your search is in vain,” came the squeaky voice of a stranger woman.

- Sorry? - Olga was surprised.

The woman took a few steps closer. On her skinny wrist hung frightening homemade bracelets.

“They took them,” she repeated. -You don’t understand?

- Who are you talking about?

“About drowned girls,” she switched to a whisper.

- You're from that camp, aren't you?

A chill ran through Olga skin.

- How do you know?

"I know who drowned those girls," the woman nodded.

- I wonder who? - Olga narrowed her eyes.

— Do you know the old legend of this place? — a woman came up and took the investigator by the shoulder.

Her sweater smelled of lavender, apparently this was how she protected her old clothes from moths.

- Who are you? — Kuznetsova became interested and carefully removed the stranger's hand.

"Jeanne," the woman introduced herself. "You came here for answers, didn't you?"

- What do you know about the drowned girl and who drowned her? — the investigator became interested.

— Once upon a time, on the site of this village there was another settlement. People lived well until the Tatar-Mongol troops came here. They killed the men and took the girls with them. But in this settlement they were well aware of the fate of the captives from the stories of others who survived these bloody raids. Local girls gathered and went to the sea. When troops came to the settlement, they rushed to look for them. But the girls did not want to become prisoners and drowned themselves in the sea. Their souls still live here. They are talking to me! — tell Jeanne.

- Why are you telling me this tale? - Olga reacted skeptically.

"The camp is in that very place, and this beach is the beach of drowned people," said Jeanne with frighteningly bulging brown eyes.

- Do you want to say that the souls of drowned women drown living girls?

- The pioneer camp is cursed! But no one believes it! - Jeanne repeated.

Along the street, approaching the bar, someone was riding a bicycle, its wheels rustling. When the cyclist came into the light, Olga saw him as a watchman from Danko. The mustachioed man recognized Olga.

- Jeanne, stop pestering people! - the man exclaimed.

The woman tensed up from his speech and walked away.

The watchman drove closer to Olga.

"Don't listen to her, she's not herself," the man reassured.

-What happened to this woman?

"You're heading to camp, aren't you?" "I just need to go on night duty, I can tell you on the way," the watchman suggested.

Kuznetsova agreed to go with him to the camp.

They walked along the road. The man was rolling a bicycle. His name was Fedor, he worked at Danko for the second year.

- What happened to Jeanne? — the investigator became interested.

"You see, the divorce from her husband had too much of an impact on her mental health," Fedor said.

— Does she also come to Danko?

"We try not to let her into the territory of the pioneer camp. There are children there, and Jeanne can scare them," said the watchman.

The celebration did not subside on the camp grounds. Loud music and flickering lights came from the summer area.

Olga returned to her room. Lazily stretched out on the bed, she didn't want to go anywhere, but she body needed a hot shower. After changing into a T-shirt and shorts, she took a clean bath towel from the nightstand.

After walking along the illuminated path near the fountain, she came out to the shower room. The tiled room was dark and damp. Drops of water were squelching on the tiles

somewhere. Against the backdrop of the shower stalls was a tightly painted white color paint window. Every year new peepholes, scratched with a coin, appeared on the glass of this window. They were painted over with white paint, but someone scratched out new ones again.

Olga turned on the light in the shower and took off her clothes.

She went into the first shower stall, where she usually washed herself.

Turned on the water. As she ran the foam along the curves of her body and lathered the shampoo into her hair, she felt someone looking at her from the side. But no one except her was in the shower room.

After shower, Olga put on clean clothes and went outside. An affectionate evening greeted her pleasantly.

Someone's shadow flashed at the end of the building. This alarmed Olga.

The investigator carefully walked around the building, but wet rubber shoes made a characteristic sound, thereby giving her away.

This probably scared the silhouette, which quickly disappeared.

Kuznetsova walked along the wall and saw an overturned zinc bucket standing on the ground under the window leading to the shower room.

Someone was spying on her while she was washing.

The girl returned back to the main entrance. In the distance the voices of pioneers were heard returning from the disco. The boys went into the street toilet together.

She walked along the alley leading to the hotel and met Anastasia, who was walking with a bath towel and a basket towards the shower.

"Anastasia, good evening," Olga called her.

The senior pioneer counselor stopped.

— I found an overturned bucket under the shower window. Some action needs to be taken! - said the investigator.

- You know, every time I go to the shower, I feel anxious. Many counselors complained that someone was spying on them while they were washing in the shower – tell Anastasia.

"There are a lot of pioneers there now," Olga warned.

- Yes, I know. So I wait until they go to bed. And then I go into the shower," explained Anastasia.

— And after lights out, you can also hear rustling sounds? - Olga was surprised.

"Some of the counselors heard them after lights out," the teacher recalled.

- Let's go. "I have an idea," said investigator.

The pioneers dispersed exactly five minutes later. Olga hid behind the outdoor toilet, in the shadows, and waited for Anastasia to go into the shower. The shower door creaked and slammed shut. A light came on in the window.

Kuznetsova slowly came out of the shadows and crawled under the very fence where the rose hips grew. The web touched her face disgustingly. Olga hid.

Soon, on the reverse side, behind the shower building, the silhouette of a stranger appeared.

The unknown figure slowly, on tiptoe, crept up to the wall itself and climbed onto an overturned bucket. At that moment, Olga quietly came out from behind the bushes. The observer's face was not visible because of the hood of the cape. He leaned against the glass of the window shower building.

In an instant, the bucket treacherously slipped from under his feet, and he collapsed onto the grass. Olga stood next to him - it was she who knocked the support out from under his feet.

- Fine? Have you seen enough? - she exclaimed.

The light falling from the window illuminated the stranger's face, and the investigator recognized him as the night watchman Fedor.

- That's not what you think about me!
- Certainly! Were you just passing by? — the investigator said ironically.
“I just ask you, don't give me away,” the man prayed as he stood up, breathing heavily.
- You?! — Kuznetsova got angry.
- Forgive me, please! “I'm a lonely, unprepossessing man,” he insisted.
The water in the shower stopped making noise.
- Get out of here! And if I catch you doing this again, blame yourself! - Olga threatened.
Fedor rose to his feet and rushed along the wall around the corner.

Olga met Anastasia at the exit from the shower.
She didn't even have time to dry his long black hair properly.
— Did you succeed? — the girl became interested.
- I scared him. He climbed over the fence and ran away.
Probably one of the locals,” the investigator lied, covering Fedor.
- He got into the habit of coming here.
- I hope he won't come again.

In the morning, while everyone was still sleeping, the investigator went for a run. The sun was reddening over the horizon. The morning freshness was invigorating. Olga began to run circles around the stadium.
Aleksei stood not far from the watch house; he noticed Olga and squeezed past the branches of fir trees towards the stadium.
- Good morning!
Olga stopped.
A night watchman's cape hung on Aleksei's shoulders, and a cup of coffee was steaming in his hand.
- Do you ever sleep? — Kuznetsova was surprised.
— Our watchman Fedor quit today. I'll have to sit in his place until eight in the morning,” Aleksei explained.
- Resigned? - Olga clarified, as if she hadn't heard the first time.
- Well, yes. He said he won't work here anymore. Something must have happened at home,” Aleksei suggested.
But only Olga knew the true reason for Fedor's dismissal.

Chapter 6

For breakfast they served semolina porridge with milk. Some children did not like this dish and left their plates half full. Among the teachers and other staff at Danko, Olga noticed Alexander, who was having breakfast alone.
The investigator brought a delivery of food to his table and asked if she could join him.
Alexander smiled and changed into an empty chair.
— Do you go for a run every morning? — Alexander became interested, noticing the sportswear on the Olga.
“I keep in shape,” she answered.
At the next table, Anastasia was having breakfast with other pioneer counselors. She tried not to show it, but her dissatisfaction was felt and read in her eyes.
Anastasia was jealous.
- Do you know about the past of this place? — Kuznetsova suddenly became interested.
Alexander broke off a piece of rye bread and put it in his mouth.
— Do you mean what was in this place before the pioneer camp? - he clarified.
“Before the formation of this village,” Olga rewinded even further.

Alexander grinned.

— The story is very fascinating. There were legends about raids in these places,” he answered briefly.

— It was on the territory of the Danko beach that the drowned women gathered? Olga asked.

- This is just a local legend. But who knows, Alexander didn't rule it out.

“A strange woman named Jeanne told me about this,” Olga said.

- You know, she always brings up this topic. Besides, schizophrenia... Well, you probably know, the man suggested.

- Yes. I know.

The conversation was interrupted with the appearance of Anastasia. She approached the table and, ignoring Olga, turned to Alexander:

— Alexander, could you please provide a volleyball for my pioneer squad? - Anastasia said in a businesslike voice.

Olga smiled and silently continued to eat breakfast.

“I'll be at the beach in ten minutes,” he replied.

“Then we'll meet there,” Anastasia said and gave Kuznetsova a hostile look.

There was silence at the table. Alexander turned noticeably pink.

“Well, I have to go,” said he.

- Don't worry. “I don't notice anything,” the investigator teased him.

Alexander realized that their secret affair with Anastasia had been revealed. Olga found it amusing to watch adults acting like schoolchildren.

There must be no place for evil in this piece of paradise. In the rays of the sun and sea, in children's smiles. Here everything happens in its own sequence: some children come here to relax and take away only pleasant impressions, while others end up with disappointment and bitterness.

But everyone lives here according to the same routine and eats the same food.

While here, Olga caught herself thinking that she still felt like that closed pioneer from back in 1988.

Perhaps to understand this place, you need to look at everything from a different perspective?

At the evening event, everyone again gathered on the summer platform. The air smelled of deodorant and mints. Girls want to please boys, and boys compete for the most beautiful girl in their pioneer detachment.

Olga did makeup for the first time during her entire stay here. Today she wanted to come to the holiday like an ordinary girl, and not like a police officer.

This children's non-alcoholic holiday, where in the pioneer years, he never found himself in the center of male attention.

Olga arrived at the summer playground later, when the competition program came to an end and the disco began.

Vitaly announced the start of the dancing into the microphone, and then raised everyone from the benches with the fiery song Bailando.

The senior squads were always located to the left of the stage, the junior ones to the right. The dance floor turned into something similar to a city market: just as densely packed.

Olga began to move to the music. Ten-year-old children danced in front of her. They all seemed funny, pretending to be adults.

Olga stayed away from the stage, and was still afraid of being the center of attention. Handsome boys pulled closer to the stage where the most beautiful girls of the camp were dancing.

It's as if nothing has changed. When the song ended, Olga took a few steps forward,

closer to the stage light. An absurd pause between songs spoiled the mood, and some children returned to the benches.

The counselors called those sitting on the benches to return to the dance floor.

The sound came back to life in the speakers. Already finding herself close to teenagers, Olga felt awkward. Their gazes slid over her carefully, evoking that childish timidity.

Olga just listened to music and danced. The movements were light, so as not to seem funny. But even that made someone laugh from behind. She turned around to look at those laughing, but then realized that they were not laughing at her at all.

Olga saw her in the multi-colored lights - in the same chaotic clothes and with uneven makeup - Jeanne.

This woman was simply doing the same thing as everyone else here. But her appearance in this place caused mixed reactions. They laughed at her, and at the same time she frightened those present here. The woman was not shy about being the center of attention. Dancing right under the stage, the lighting fell on her pale face with carelessly pomaded lips.

Alexander, who was on duty that evening, treated the uninvited guests with loyalty. The man deftly led her off the dance floor. Jeanne, drowned in his blue eyes and courageous devilish face, agreed to go with him to the ends of the earth, but he accompanied her only to the gate.

And when Alexander returned, a very sad and beautiful song was flowing from the speakers, to which everyone present was dancing a slow dance. Olga lingered in place, giving Alexander the opportunity to invite her, but he remained aside to observe order. Instead, a culinary school student approached Olga; he still smelled of food and tobacco. The round face said something to Olga through a sad song, but she showed him with a gesture that she did not want to dance and left.

The evening continued, but she wanted to return to the hotel room. Just like when, out of hopelessness, she, disappointed, returned to the room of the pioneer corps.

From the street came the hubbub of children's voices returning from the disco. They shuffled their shoes on the asphalt, laughed, shouted each other's names. Olga was almost asleep. The window in her room remained open, letting in the cool evening air through the mosquito net.

She got up and went to the window. Couples walked in the light of the lanterns. The happy pioneer saw off his chosen one, receiving a kiss as a reward.

A few minutes later the yard was empty. The window in the building opposite was lit—the pioneers were getting ready for bed, brushing their teeth, and hiding their clothes in the nightstands.

Olga returned to bed.

Silence reigned again. The moon hung high above the sea. The eyelids are heavier, the breathing has become even.

Olga was already falling asleep when a sharp scream pierced the night. She looked at the ceiling for a few seconds - was it a dream or was it real?

The repeat screamed - female, hysterical.

Olga jumped out of bed, pulled on her shorts and ran out into the corridor.

In the hall, at the reception, no was on duty.

The hotel door was locked from the inside. Clicking the lock, she ran out into the street in bewilderment.

Shouts could be heard from afar: "Protect the children! Don't let them go to the sea!"

The voice came from the direction of the medical station. Olga broke into a run. A flashlight beam flickered somewhere ahead—the night duty officer was already rushing there.

The voice came from the state of medical station yard. Olga broke into a run. A flashlight

beam flickered somewhere ahead—the night guard was already rushing there. As Olga approached, the screams died down. Someone was breathing heavily under the cherry plum branches.

"Don't be afraid," Olga said quietly. "Come out, let's talk."

The figure stood motionless. A hoarse breath came from the darkness. The light from the lantern drew closer. Alexander appeared a few steps away from Olga.

"What's going on here?" he breathed, pointing the beam at the figure under the tree.

The woman stepped into the light. Pale face, tangled hair. "Jeanne..." Olga whispered.

"She's here again!" Alexander snapped irritably.

"Quiet," Olga raised her hand. "She needs to say something. Right, Jeanne?"

The woman stood with her head bowed. "They're talking to me again," she whispered.

"Someone's going to die very soon!"

"You're lucky the dogs are tied up, otherwise they would have attacked you!" Alexander protested. Jeanne grabbed Olga's hand and whispered, "The camp needs to be closed! Otherwise, more deaths are inevitable!" "Calm down. You need to rest," the investigator repeated.

"I can leave her in the watch house until dawn," Alexander suggested. "That would be the right thing to do," Olga agreed. "Just promise you won't make any noise. Otherwise, I'll have to throw you out into the night!" Alexander threatened.

As she left, Jeanne pulled her hand away from Olga's wrist. "Please! Help get this camp shut down!" she cried anxiously. Alexander urged his guest on.

The night gradually dissolved into gray dawn. Rain drummed on the eaves. Olga couldn't sleep. Her thoughts still revolved around Jeanne, her words, and this strange, almost insane fear, which, oddly enough, hid something genuine.

Due to inclement weather, all events at the pioneer camp were cancelled. Today, there was no beach visit, no football game at the stadium, and no morning exercises at the stadium. Everyone was preparing for a trip to the movie theater, which was located on the Danko grounds.

The Pioneers woke up later than usual. They weren't awakened by Vitaly's voice over the loudspeaker, which usually invited everyone to morning exercises.

The lights had been on in the dining room since early morning. Despite the drizzle, the pioneers headed out to breakfast.

After a sleepless night, her body resisted leaving the bed. Olga needed a cup of coffee. A small line of counselors and staff formed in the cafeteria, waiting to buy a casserole. The children banged their spoons together, contenting themselves with oatmeal and a boiled egg.

Galina noticed Kuznetsova, who had just bought coffee in the cafeteria and was already eyeing a free table.

A senior manager waved at her with a friendly smile, as if they'd verbally agreed to meet here.

Olga offered to join her for breakfast.

"I heard you had to calm down Jeanne last night," Galina began the conversation.

"Nothing terrible happened," the investigator replied calmly. "Besides, I couldn't sleep anyway." "We don't usually have incidents like this," Galina explained. "It was all because of the sudden dismissal of Fyodor, the night watchman. It created a gap in security."

"Jeanne really lucky the watch dogs were leashed," Olga chimed in.

Galina nodded, then suddenly remarked with a hint of awkwardness, "I suppose you did manage to find the photo you were looking for. But confiscating it like that... well, that's not very nice."

"You mean that photo from the wall newspaper? It disappeared before I even got to see

it," Olga replied calmly.

Galina felt uneasy at her hasty assumption. "Sorry... I didn't mean to."

"Someone stole the photo," Olga explained.

"You know," Galina perked up, "you'll be able to meet Julia in person soon!"

"She's coming here?" the investigator asked in surprise.

"Yes. For Neptune's Day. Our regular photographer is sick, and Julia, it turns out, is a photographer."

She'll be glad to be back here after so many years.

"Good news," Olga said thoughtfully, sipping her coffee.

Galina finished her breakfast and rose from her chair. "I have to go," she said and left.

The rain didn't stop until lunchtime. But for the rest of the day, all scheduled events were still canceled due to the bad weather. The wind raged, and the waves whipped up on the beach.

The movie theater was packed today. The Young Pioneers watched one film after another. Some preferred to play table tennis in the cinema lobby.

Photographer Julia arrived after lunch. She had arrived a day early, as train tickets were only available for a specific date. A slender, medium-height girl with brown hair, wearing jeans and a light, light-colored blouse, she carried a small duffel bag and an umbrella. Aleksei, who was on duty there, met her at the gate.

He kindly offered to help with her bag, but she didn't complain about the weight. Aleksei insisted and carried her luggage to the hotel. Along the way, Julia surveyed the Danko grounds with a certain nostalgia and warmth. She had been assigned Andrei's room. Julia didn't yet know about the incident that had happened in Danko, the one involving her namesake.

Without closing the door behind her, she set her bag down on the rug and immediately opened the window to let in the fresh air. The bed was bare, without linens. Julia opened her bag and began rummaging through her things. Footsteps sounded in the hallway. There was a soft knock on the open door. Julia turned and saw a young woman with blond hair standing in the doorway.

«Julia?» she asked. "Yes. Have we met?" "My name is Olga Kuznetsova. I'm here investigating an accident," the investigator began the conversation. "May I come in?"

Julia tensed a little at the words "accident." "Come in," she invited.

"An accident? What happened?"

"You probably haven't read the city newspapers," Olga suggested.

"No, I haven't. I'm from out of town."

"The death of a girl. Drowned at sea," the investigator explained.

"And how can I help you?" Julia asked, puzzled, trying to make the connection.

"This wasn't the only death in Danko. There were others before this. You must remember them—the girls from your squad: Anna and Katya," said Olga.

Julia placed her camera on the carpet and froze at the news. «What? Katya too?» she

said, her expression changing.

"Yes."

The news shocked her. The radiant smile she'd brought here vanished.

"Sorry for greeting you with such news."

"I need to be alone," Julia said in a subdued voice.

"Yes, of course. We'll talk later," Olga replied and left the room.

After washing off her light makeup, Julia couldn't hide her tear-stained eyes. After sitting in the room for some time, she finally left the hotel and headed towards the laundry room.

She pulled open the creaking springs of the door and entered the laundry room. Washing machines hummed throughout the room. The shelves where ironed linens usually lay were empty. Apparently, no one was prepared for her early visit.

"Is anyone here?"

Strange sounds were coming from behind the basement door. Julia approached and was about to knock, but stopped and pressed her ear to the drafty door. She distinctly heard a woman's sobbing voice and the words, "I'm such a fool... It's me, I should have come to you!"

Julia continued listening, but soon the voice faded.

She plucked up her courage and knocked. For a while, no one came out of the basement. Julia was about to leave, considering coming back later. But just as she was about to exit, the door behind her opened, and a female voice followed her.

"I'm listening.

Julia turned around and saw a sullen woman in a shop apron holding some rags in her hands.

"I'd like a set of bed linen and a towel."

The woman stepped aside, hanging the swimsuit over the back of a chair, and then began sorting through the clean, ironed sheets.

"Please," the laundress placed the set on the table.

Julia's gaze focused on the chair, as if there was a ghost sitting there, or something else that could shock her so.

"Are you the new camp counselor?" the woman asked.

"I'm a photographer," Julia explained.

"Your face looks so familiar. Didn't you work here last year?" Nadya asked.

"No. I'm here as a replacement. But i was a pioneer here in 1993," Julia replied, trying to sound friendly.

Nadya's eyes stared at her as if she'd just said something offensive. Her lips trembled.

"I must have you confused with someone else," Nadya managed to say, and immediately pulled a crumpled pack of cigarettes from her work pants pocket.

Julia left the laundry room, walked down the alley to the fountain, and felt a slight dizziness. She sat down on a damp bench and began massaging her temples with her fingers. She sat there for a few minutes until she felt better.

Julia heard footsteps in the distance, and when she looked up, she saw him, Vitaly, walking toward her.

"Glad to see you! They told me you'd be coming here for the celebration; I couldn't believe I'd see you again!» the he rejoiced.

«You work here as a camp counselor?" Julia asked.

"Musical director. A DJ, as they say!" Vitaly boasted.

"Are you feeling unwell?" the he remarked.

"It'll pass soon. Probably from the journey, from exhaustion," Julia waved her hand.

"Can I take you to the first aid station?" Vitaly offered.

"No need. I'm feeling better already," Julia declined.

"It's all because of the stress. I still can't believe Katya's gone," she admitted.

"Have you spoken to the investigator yet?"

"You could say that."

"She's dredging up the past. She questioned me about that dead girl, Viktoria," Vitaly admitted.

"I saw something. I went to get some bed linens from the laundry, and that woman from the laundry hung a bathing suit on a chair. It was exactly the same one the duck was wearing", Julia recounted.

Then Julia felt embarrassed in front of Vitaly and quickly corrected herself.

"I meant the one Viktoria was wearing."

"You're confused. Or maybe you saw a similar swimsuit," the guy shrugged.

Julia rose from the bench.

"Well, see you tonight then!"

"Are you coming to the disco?" Vitaly asked.

"I definitely wouldn't miss an event like that."

In the dining room, during dinner, Julia tried to avoid Olga. The girl pretended to be about to leave when Kuznetsova picked up the tray. But the investigator gestured for Julia to stay.

She returned to the table with a disgruntled expression and continued to drink her compote.

"We still haven't talked," Olga said, sitting down at the table.

Her plate held a vitamin-rich salad and a slice of rye bread.

"Are you trying to stay in shape after six o'clock?" Julia remarked.

"That's not the point right now," the investigator smiled. "Can you reconstruct the events of the day Viktoria drowned?"

Julia looked away, as if looking out for someone.

"I'd rather not remember that."

"I understand. But nevertheless, it's important for the investigation," Olga insisted.

"That stupid idea to go to the beach came to me and the girls by chance. We invited Viktoria to come with us because she didn't have any friends."

"Did Viktoria agree to go with you, or did you force her?" Kuznetsova interrupted.

"She was glad to come with us!" Anna promised to put makeup on her for the evening disco, and Katya wanted to help her find a boy to dance with.

— What happened on the beach?

"We were afraid to get into the water first, in case some counselor would catch us."

But this didn't bother Viktoria. She climbed into the water and began to flounder there," Julia recalled.

- Were you laughing at her at that moment?

"She swam funny." The girls were amused by it, and so was I.

- What happened then? Did you also go into the water after her?

- No. We saw how she began to drown and did not know how to help her. The girls screamed and called for help.

In the place where Viktoria was drowning, there was a sharp cliff, and the depth began.

The children's hubbub in the dining room grew. The forks scratched the plates. Olga had to speak louder.

- None of you knew how to swim?

Julia looked away.

“We knew how to swim,” she admitted reluctantly.

- Why didn't you save Viktoria?

Julia got nervous.

- Don't know. We were all confused! It happened so spontaneously!

The children's voices and laughter grew even louder.

— How long did it take for Oleg Romanovich to appear?

— Viktoria had already gone under water by that time. I don't remember! - Julia repeated.

Her face paled visibly at the memory and she vomited on the floor.

The children continued to make noise at the tables, none of them really understood what had happened.

The counselors approached Julia, and one of them brought her a glass of water.

- Drink some water.

Julia, pale as a sheet, took the glass with a weak, trembling hand.

“She needs to be taken to the first aid station,” Anastasia noted.

-Can you go? - Olga asked.

Julia nodded her head.

Children placed in the camp infirmary isolation room (the isolator)* ward looked out from the windows of the first-aid post. They watched the summer, sitting on the windowsills. They were brought food from the canteen and given pills. A nurse took their temperature twice a day.

***camp infirmary isolation room (the isolator)** - in Soviet camps, the ‘isolator’ was a small isolation room inside the infirmary where children with fever or suspected infections were kept temporarily away from others.

When the pioneers recovered, they were allowed out for an afternoon walk - to sit for about thirty minutes on a bench near the first aid station.

There was a strong smell of bleach in the room, and the recently washed floor still sparkled. The doctor is at his workplace - a nurse at a table in a cramped office. Olga brought Julia into the office, sat her down on the medical cot and walked out the door, leaving it ajar.

In the dim corridor, Kuznetsova recognized a familiar door with the inscription “the

isolator". In 1988, she spent about a week here until she recovered from a cold. These were the saddest days: the whole camp was bathed in the sun, and she watched everyone from behind her dungeon window.

Suddenly, the words she heard from the office brought Olga back from her memories.

The woman said clearly:

— What is your gestational age?

The evening brought everyone together again on the summer stage. After the rain, the benches still held moisture, but this did not stop those who were not dancing from sitting on them. It seemed like an ordinary evening at a pioneer camp: the brightest teenagers were dancing near the stage. Julia practically did not leave Vitaly.

Olga walked along the edge of the dance floor, watching the children. A sudden scuffle caught her attention. A plump pioneer in a blue baseball cap pushed away a rather large boy. He stepped back and then swung. Next to the plump pioneer stood a child of about eight years old.

- Stop it! - Olga shouted over loud music.

This distracted the boy, who was about to strike. The investigator approached the boys.

- What's happening? Have you decided to start a fight?

A plump boy in a baseball cap stood silently, studying his opponent with a calm gaze.

He, on the contrary, looked wound up and belligerent.

- We'll talk to you later, Elephant! - he said and walked away to the side.

- Why did you quarrel with him? - Olga asked.

"He pushed my brother," answered the pioneer in the baseball cap, pointing to the eight-year-old child.

-Are you from the same squad? — Kuznetsova clarified.

- Yes.

The counselor approached them.

- Anton, what happened again? — she asked tiredly.

- Your pioneers almost got into a fight. Are you watching your children? - Olga said in a stern voice.

- We have a friendly team. "This is an isolated case," the pioneer counselor assured.

- Talk to that bully so that he doesn't offend the younger ones. He pushed an eight year old! - the investigator insisted.

- I'll have a conversation with him. I promise.

The bully put on his sunglasses and decided to dance again with another bunch of pioneers.

As Olga left, she looked at the pioneer in the blue cap, who was calming his younger brother.

“Elephant,” she remembered the word thrown by the bully.

Apparently, this is how he was teased in the squad - for his large size and slightly large ears.

The bullying continues, the investigator thought.

Chapter 7

Unlike yesterday's bad weather, the morning of a new day began with sunrise and clear skies. It's as if yesterday's rain never happened.

Olga went for a run and saw sleepy groups walking to exercise. The routine is back.

After breakfast, the beach was prepared for the holiday - Neptune's Day knocked on the doors of Danko.

Natalia was rushing around with the props from the very morning, and at the planning meeting she agreed on the details of the event.

Olga stopped at the summer stage, where the artistic director was speaking, and listened.

- Our Neptune is coming out! Next to him are kikimoras - five kikimoras! One costume is not ready, so there will be fewer of them this year! - Natalia said ironically. - And then - competitions!

Julia was also at the planning meeting. As a photographer, she also received instructions regarding her work.

Anastasia played the role of a mermaid, Aleksei played the role of Neptune's .

They started decorating the beach after lunch, during the pioneers' nap. The asphalt path to the sea was decorated with seaweed and nets. At each pavilion they hung a sign with the squad number in the shape of a fish.

A rehearsal for the scene of the appearance of “Neptune, the Mermaid and the Five

Kikimoras” took place in the cinema.

According to the plan, the sea king and his retinue were supposed to appear from the direction of the theater, walk through the shallow water and go out to the children.

Therefore, all the show participants waited there, having already changed their clothes. Musical equipment was placed in the swimming instructor's hut.

The pioneers were taken to the stadium, where a match between two top teams was taking place—the Danko football championship. The children guessed why they were taken there: something special was being prepared on the beach.

After dinner, everyone was invited to the long-awaited celebration. The educators led the groups to where music was already playing. The beach at sunset was breathtakingly beautiful. Alexander, as always, was in charge of the fire, lighting the torches that lined both sides of the stairs.

The atmosphere was indescribable.

Julia's photo camera flashed periodically, capturing unforgettable images.

When all the teams had assembled, the beach filled with joy and hubbub. Olga arrived a little later and heard Natalia's voice over the speakers: "Neptune Day is declared open!"

"Let's all call out to the Sea King!», Natalia said.

«Neptune! Neptune!" the crowd shouted in unison.

Aleksei was already getting ready to go out—dressed as Neptune: bare-chested, wig, long beard, decorative crown, and a wooden trident painted gold. Anastasia is a mermaid, wearing a green swimsuit and a sequined skirt. The kikimoras all looked identical: capes made of dark rags, faces covered in black makeup, and caps with protruding ribbons on their heads. All five kikimoras gathered at the theater exit. Aleksei grabbed the trident, Anastasia took his arm.

"Let's go!" Galina commanded.

In the darkness of the theater, another figure in a kikimora costume appeared. She followed the others out and merged with the crowd of other similar kikimoras.

From the western side of the beach, across the turquoise surface, figures were walking toward the shore. One of them held a trident. As they approached, the children cried out and applauded.

Olga smiled. She stood behind, watching the procession. She recognized Anastasia, then Aleksei. Six kikimoras—almost identical, only of varying heights.

"Six?" Olga noticed the discrepancy.

Neptune climbed the stairs and approached the microphone: "Were you expecting me? So, I've come to your party! Have you prepared a gift for me?"

The host took the microphone and addressed the children: "Shall we show Neptune how we can dance?"

"Yes!" the crowd shouted.

To the music, girls in bathing suits stepped out onto the sand and began to dance.

Camera flashes. Joy. Music.

The sun had already set behind the horizon. Lanterns lit up the alleys. The beach was illuminated by lit torches and the glare of cameras.

After various contests and performances, Neptune approached the microphone and spoke in a mock-threatening voice: "I liked the gift!" "Who misbehaved? Who didn't listen to the counselors?"

The children laughed and pointed at each other.

"Naughty children will be taken away by my loyal servants—the kikimoras!" threatened the sea king.

A moment later, festive chaos erupted on the beach. Games of tag!

Kikimoras ran out from all directions and chased the children. They ran away, falling onto the sand, laughing. The counselors and instructors monitored all of this to ensure no one got hurt at games. They all treated the pioneers carefully and even gave in.

The investigator watched the kikimoras' behavior, each one of them.

"Five," Olga noted, "there are five of them."

Now, watching the celebration, she felt something was missing. Neptune and the mermaid stood next to the host. Alexander was chatting with Vitaly in the swimming instructor's cabin. Oleg Romanovich was next to Galina and his wife, Elena.

For a moment, Olga noticed a missing detail, the one missing from the celebration—the flash of a camera lens. She began searching the crowd for Julia. Everyone around her was enjoying themselves. Kuznetsova approached Alexander and Vitaly.

"Where's Julia? Have you seen where she went?"

"Taking photos somewhere around here," Vitaly shrugged.

Olga asked the same question to others, but no one knew or noticed where the photographer had disappeared to. The investigator counted all the actors in kikimora costumes again—there were five of them.

"Where's the sixth?" she wondered out loud.

Olga left the party, quickening her pace along the illuminated path lined with arborvitae trees. The summer stage was deserted: everyone had gathered on the beach. The football field was shrouded in twilight. Only the cars passing behind the fence cast their headlights.

Julia walked quickly, embraced by a figure dressed as a kikimora. One hand held the girl by the neck, the other pressed the tip of a knife to her soft skin.

"Let me go, please!" the photographer begged.

"Shut up! Or I'll rip your throat out right here!" the kikimora whispered menacingly.

They walked along an alley with a fountain and benches and approached the laundry. A figure in a suit quickly led Julia toward the building.

"Come in!" the kikimora commanded. Julia pulled the creaky spring-loaded door. They entered.

Olga ran around the Danko premises but couldn't find Julia. Two interns from the cafeteria were standing near the hotel, chatting animatedly. The investigator stopped not far from them. She sensed something terrible was about to happen, but she couldn't yet figure out where exactly it would happen.

Everyone present at the moment of Viktoria's death was met with vengeance. The killer got to almost everyone.

As soon as Julia entered Danko's territory, she placed herself in danger. The killer had been in the camp the whole time, Kuznetsova realized.

The intern laughed, looking at her friend's stained cook jacket. She was indignant: "Is this so funny to you? I don't have a spare one, I'll have to wash this one!" "What are you worried about? Take it to the laundry! There's this..." The intern paused to remember, and made a wheel symbol with her hands.

"A washing machine?" the second woman guessed.

As if they were playing a children's game where you have to guess a word.

"That's it!" the first woman confirmed, and they both laughed.

The wheel symbol... In Andrei's visions, they pointed out the killer.

"It wasn't the driver!" Olga, having guessed, rushed toward the laundry room.

The front door creaked. It was dark and quiet inside. Only the sounds coming from the basement pierced the investigator with horror. The clang of slaps was accompanied by a woman's screams and pleas for mercy.

Kuznetsova tugged at the basement door, but it didn't budge.

"Open the door! Immediately!"

In the dim basement, beneath the hiss of the pumps, Nadya leaned over Julia, who sat in the corner. A knife gleamed in her right hand. Her face was covered in black makeup, and a feral gaze peered at the girl from beneath her tousled gray hair. "No one can help you now! I will exact my revenge!"

"You and they drove my daughter to death!" Nadya pointed a bony finger at the opposite corner of the room, accusingly.

"You've gone crazy," Julia cried quietly, realizing she didn't have long to live. "It was an accident!"

In another corner, a sort of altar of grief had been set up: a photograph of a seven-year-old child leaned against the wall. A colorful, faded swimsuit hung from a slender rope. Around the photograph lay neatly arranged flat shells, yellowed letters, and half-burned thin candles.

"Do you want to know how I sent your girlfriends to the next world?" Nadya repeated in a satisfied yet ominous voice.

The door upstairs shook from Olga's blows, but she wasn't strong enough to break it down.

Julia received another slap. Then Nadya slashed the girl across the bare shoulder peeking out from under her T-shirt. She screamed and grabbed the cut with her hand, from which blood was flowing.

"As soon as I found out your friends come here every summer to babysit other people's children, I got a job at that damn laundry. Day after day, I studied the counselors' schedule. I had to restrain myself the entire summer so I could plan everything carefully!"

Anna came to the beach to mourn a fight with her boyfriend—that's where I ambushed her.

Nadya picked up one of the shells from the cold concrete floor:

"Do you know what this is?" she said, pointing it at Julia face.

"My daughter's pain! She told me everything in her letters..."

Nadya softened for a few seconds.

A tear rolled down her paint-blackened face. Then she pulled herself together again and stuffed the shell into Julia's mouth.

"Viktoria ran away from you to that beach, wandered there like a lost child, and in the evenings she wrote letters: 'Take me home, Mommy!'"

Julia tried to spit out the royal shell without being noticed, but Nadya brought the tip of the knife right to her cheek. "Don't you dare!" she shrieked. "Or I'll poke your eye out!"

The girl nodded obediently. The marks of the slaps were red on her tear-stained face.

The hand holding the bleeding wound trembled.

"She asked me to take her home! And I... When she died, I climbed into the noose, but it couldn't bear the weight of my grief...Revenge is a powerful drug. Those obsessed with revenge are capable of unimaginable things!" Nadya whispered.

"When I drowned the innocent pioneer counselor, I thought I was killing you! You were the third one!" she hissed with anger. "You should have been in her place! I left them all on the shore to show that this wasn't an accidental death, but retribution!"

Olga ran out into the yard and saw Alexander in the distance, unsuspectingly carrying away the now-unnecessary flammable materials from the beach. "Alex!" the investigator called. "Come here quickly!"

The man didn't notice her right away, but when she started waving her arms, he responded.

Olga returned to the locked basement door and began shouting, "Nadya, it's over! Let the girl go and open the door!"

But her words had no effect.

"Do you want to know how your other friend died?"

The girl shook her head in denial, but that didn't stop Nadya.

"I never thought I'd be so lucky that evening, because her boyfriend was always hanging around her. Their romantic evening on the shore, intercourse under the moonlight... I watched it all from the bushes. And when he went for a swim, that's when I got my chance to get even!"

How unlucky that boy was when he returned to shore, because he could no longer explain the marks of a violent death to the police.

- The woman's gaze became desperate and mad, - Before I cut your throat, answer me: what did my daughter do to deserve your abuse?

Julia was shaking and trembling. A strong hand grabbed her by the hair, and the tip of a knife crawled down her cheek, toward her throat. The pumps hissed, and water gurgled in the thick pipes.

Olga knew something terrible was about to happen. She tried to buy herself some more time, leaning against the door and screaming, "Don't kill her! She's pregnant!"

Alexander ran into the laundry room. The investigator moved away from the boiler room door.

"Hurry! We need to break down the door!"

His manly strength was enough to knock out the lock from the back. The door swung open.

Olga descended the steps into the basement. Alex ran after her. Julia sat in the corner, shaking with tears. One hand clutched her bloodied shoulder, the other covering her mouth. Nadya was kneeling, the shreds of her coat hanging from her shoulders. Now the investigator understood where that scrap of fabric on the fence had come from. Nadya stole this suit from the club for dark deeds.

A blood-stained knife lay on the floor.

Alexander pulled the loose rope, and the old-fashioned bathing suit fell to the floor, covering the altar. Olga threw the knife away, and Alex tied Nadya's hands with the rope. "Okay, quiet, quiet," the investigator repeated, lifting Julia.

The girl opened her mouth, and a small shell fell out. It hit the floor. A layer of frozen, shimmering white nail polish was visible beneath the bloody drool on the ribbed shell.

The beach disco continued. The lights of the ambulance and police didn't interrupt the children's party. But Galina and the other personal workers were already there, at the laundry room.

Julia had to be taken to the hospital—her wound required a doctor's examination. Nadya was led out of the boiler room, walking sullenly under police escort. The killer slowed down as she passed the investigator. She paused, despite the sharp pressure from the policeman.

“My daughter’s letters and her swimsuit... please bring me those things. They’re all I have left of her,” Nadya pledges pitifully.

Olga gave her a look that promised she would honor the request.

“Wait!” the investigator called out to the policemen escorting Nadya away.

“I came to your old address, but they told me you no longer live there... Did you come here to live just to kill?”

Nadya looked at her with a dark, heavy stare.

“I had to change a lot in my life for the sake of revenge.”

“Did you and your daughter have different last names?” the investigator finally asked.

“After my child died, I went back to my maiden name.”

Deputy Director Galina could not remain silent.

«Murderer! You will burn in hell!»

The washerwoman snapped:

« Come on, keep rewarding your employees for «great» work!! And while they are busy

with fornication, weak children will suffer from cruelty! I'll save a place in Hell for you, Galina!»

« Enough! Take her away!» Kuznetsova shouted.

The police rushed to take Nadya away.

Alexander sighed heavily.

"Thank you for your help," the investigator said.

"Are you leaving today?" he asked.

"No. I need to stay here another day. Check a few things and prepare a report."

"What's the fate of the Danko?" Alexander asked cautiously.

"I can't tell you anything yet," Olga replied and returned to the laundry building.

Olga descended the steps into the boiler room and walked along the length of the room. The smell of blood in the air was reminiscent of a slaughterhouse. She picked up a swimsuit from the floor. Viktoria's photograph lay next to the letters. In the photo, Viktoria was sitting on a tricycle, smiling. The investigator picked up the yellowed letters and took them with her, along with other belongings.

Olga spent the next day finishing up her work, writing a report, and then began reading Viktoria's letters.

July 13, 1993.

Hello, Mom! They feed us well and take us to the beach every day. I don't like this swimsuit—everyone makes fun of it. Will you come visit me? Some of the kids have parents visiting.

July 18, 1993.

Hello, Mom! Yesterday I was allowed to call home, but I still haven't been able to reach you. I don't like it here anymore, and I want you to come get me.

People are always making fun of me, and no one wants to be my friend.

July 20, 1993.

Hello, Mom! I don't know if my letters are reaching you, but I'm still waiting for you. This afternoon I ran to the beach—I cried for a long time, but the sea calms me.

I'm looking for beautiful shells in the sand so I can give them to you one day. I'll collect as many shells as I've spent days longing to go home. I also wrote a letter to the sea and sent it in a bottle. My shift will be over soon, but I want to leave early. Take me away.

Olga left the hotel room only in the evening—her car was waiting for her at the gate.

Music boomed from the summer stage. She was even a little sad to leave this place, but there was no need to stay any longer.

She walked slowly toward the exit, inhaling the sweet, pine-scented scent of summer one last time.

To her right was a stadium. In the distance, on that side, children's voices could be heard—shouts of delight and excitement.

Soon, Olga saw Oleg Romanovich running, followed by Galina and Elena hurrying behind him.

The investigator lingered briefly.

A few minutes later, the Pioneers emerged from the stadium. Oleg Romanovich led one boy, and Galina, scolding another, accompanied him.

Elena walked next to a crying eight-year-old boy.

In the glow of the streetlights, Olga recognized the battered pioneer they used to tease here as “Elephant.”

A bruise beneath his right eye distorted his face. The bully, grinning with satisfaction, followed behind him. His eyes sparkled with excitement—as if saying, “I can hit anyone here.”

A crowd of onlookers trailed after them, whispering about how the hooligan had pounced on the fat boy and punched him in the face.

Galina glanced guiltily at Olga.

"We'll sort this out. Don't worry. He won't get away with it," the deputy director assured.

Kuznetsova watched them as far as the corner of the dining room, and when they disappeared around the corner, she got into her car and left the place.

EPILOGUE

The Peugeot drove along the highway. Trees and bushes turned yellow along the roadside. Endless fields lay bare after the harvest. She parked next to a tall iron figure holding a radiant heart.

A thick, rusty chain hung on the main gate. The swaying fir trees beyond the fence greeted her with the familiar scent of gone summer. Olga was dressed in an autumn coat, a light scarf covering her neck.

Using the locals' route, she entered the campgrounds. The dog kennels were now empty, and no one barked at her. In the outbuildings—the showers, the laundry—were tightly closed. She walked through the empty grounds, past the medical point and the buildings.

Everything here froze, becoming unrecognizably alien. Olga walked out to the rusty beach pavilions. The swimming instructor's shack lay desolate. The sea greeted her with a cold kiss, sending a gust of wind into her face. Besides the wandering seagulls, someone else was strolling in the distance. "Perhaps a watchman," Olga thought.

It was a cloudy October day. Having emerged onto the coastal slabs, she walked slowly along the shore. Olga wasn't afraid of meeting the watchman, or that he would scold her and send her away. As it turned out, he wasn't a watchman at all.

As she got closer, she recognized Jeanne. The woman was staring off into the cloud-covered horizon.

"Thank you for your assistance. The camp won't be reopening. They said they're still investigating, but I think it's permanent," Jeanne said calmly, not taking her eyes off the sea.

Her face was no longer marred by traces of the frightening makeup. On the contrary, she was now completely free of any makeup.

"I didn't expect to see anyone else here," Olga admitted.

"They've calmed down," Jeanne said quietly. "I can't hear their voices now."

Both figures stood on the coastal slabs, looking out at the raging waves.

The End

