



JESSICA EK

The Graduates` Killer

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Translated by Maria Burnett

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THE GRADUATES' KILLER

Prologue

November 22, 2011

It's 06:58 a.m. Only two minutes before the clock radio goes off, but Matteo is already awake.

In less than an hour, Nico will arrive, but he doesn't want to see him, even though he asked him to stop by. He must explain the contract to him; if he left it up to Francesca's parents, he would pull the wool over their eyes with his words. Instead, if he is clear and persistent, Nico will give up the assignment before he even starts, which will benefit everyone.

The clock strikes 07:00, and *Time* by Pink Floyd invades the room. Matteo tries to silence the alarm clock, but he drops it, as it continues to torture him. So, he turns to see where the clock fell, and, at that moment, a bright, white light surrounds him. He closes his eyes, but the intensity does not diminish; on the contrary. It is like staring into a 500-watt spotlight.

And then, a black silhouette comes between him and the light source, creating a cone-shaped shadow: Matteo feels like he is observing a solar eclipse without his protective glasses. He cannot focus on the image, but recognizes a syringe clutched in the hand reaching toward him. The silhouette extends and goes through him. Something has changed: he is now hovering two meters above the ground, and the room has turned frigid; the light comes back to blind him.

Stop; what are you going to do?

He wants to shout, but he can't.

The dark silhouette thrusts the needle into the arm of a girl who has taken his place in the bed. She does not resist and seems to fall asleep. The door to the room closes with a thud, and everything goes dark. Matteo regains his eighty pounds and falls onto the girl.

He knows that feeling well and comes to the conclusion no one was crushed under his weight.

In a fit of rage, he hits the alarm clock, silencing it. He rummages in the drawer, takes two pills for his headache, and swallows them without water.

I will find you, Francesca. I will find you.

1.

For a girl accustomed to the signs along Zurich streets, it wasn't easy to get around by car in the Piedmont countryside. It was difficult for Jessica to find that house lost in the green.

Without leaving the car, she checks the inscription on the plate above the mailbox.

MATTEO BALESTRA

Investigative, fortune-telling consulting

There you are, at last. I have found you.

Her feelings are a mixture of pride and satisfaction because her search is quickly coming to fruition. She also feels fear because everything in her life has now changed. Within a week, she lost her comfort zone and left behind what she had done and built. She abandoned the people who helped her grow and become what she is today; she denied what she believed to be correct and now knows to be wrong.

She has taken a new path and does not yet know if Matteo will want to go along and support her on this journey.

She drives the short distance to the house and turns off the engine of the Twingo. She sits for a few minutes, her hands clenched on the steering wheel, tempted to go back the way she came.

When she finally gets out of the car, the cool air moves her brown hair, left loose over her shoulders, and prompts her to button her denim jacket. She wears leather boots, blue jeans, and a white cotton blouse with black embroidery.

It would have been better to wear something heavier that day, perhaps a sweater or windbreaker, but when she chose what to wear, she was more concerned with the mirror than the weather.

The driveway that leaves the dirt road and leads to the property is covered with red gravel and bisects a well-manicured lawn surrounded by a wooden fence. Beyond that fence, the underbrush is devoid of brush, just grass and dry leaves.

Between the trees' nearly bare branches, the sun's light, still low in the sky, filters through quickly. There are no gates or even signs that is private property; instead, above the veranda of the stone and wood house, hangs a five-foot ornamental crossbow with the inscription "Welcome."

The gentle breeze brings to her a scent of forest and wilderness, something rare in the city; to savor it, Jessica takes two deep breaths and then releases them slowly. She slowly turns and looks around to admire the landscape that autumn has retouched with shades of red and orange, dark green, purple, and gold. The dew, struck by the sun's rays, makes the leaves glisten as they sway in the breeze and creates in that corner of the woods a glimmering kaleidoscope of secret life: she is overwhelmed by many emotions; she feels as if she never visited such a beautiful place, and probably she never did.

This well-being, however, fades quickly; something makes her uncomfortable, as she senses someone is watching her. A commotion from the woods behind her surprises her with fearful anticipation. She turns sharply. A squirrel is climbing a tree: it has brown, almost reddish fur, and a long, thick tail. It quickly climbs up to the middle of the trunk and stops there; for a few moments, it seems to look right at her, then it quickly climbs back up to the higher branches. The animal disappears from her sight, and she feels good again. All the worry and fears that occupied her thoughts before she got out of the car now seem to have vanished.

Jessica looks at the entrance: she wants to walk briskly and knock on the door, but now that she is standing there, it is not as easy as she had imagined. She casts furtive glances through the curtain-covered windows to see if anyone is home. To the right of the house is a wooden shed with an

open door that reveals a glimpse of several work tools; a black 4x4 Qashqai is parked next to the shed.

A snort, almost a whine, seems to come from the shed.

"Is anyone here?"

There is no answer.

Again, the same sound, this time sharper and louder. Jessica glances at her car: she has not gone far, three or four meters at most. At that moment, a large dog, perhaps a St. Bernard, given its size, comes through the doorway at a slow, bored pace. It stops halfway to stretch its muscles and lies on the grass as if exhausted from that short walk.

"Hello, big dog."

Jessica smiles: she has always loved animals, especially dogs. This one doesn't seem to have bad intentions, but she keeps an eye on the Renault's door, ready to jump into the car if the big furry guy turns out to be aggressive.

Almost as called upon, the dog barks twice in a higher-pitched timbre; Jessica steps back but can't help noticing that the St. Bernard is affectionately wagging its tail.

"Do you want to cuddle?"

The dog barks again and drops to her side, showing the long white fur under its belly. Cautiously, Jessica approaches him, bending her knees and stroking its head and then its belly. The Saint Bernard raises his paws to the sky.

You were all that was missing to make this place perfect. A day that started like this cannot end badly. She thinks.

She gives the dog one last pat, gets up, and, with new-found energy, goes to the door. There is no doorbell; she knocks, waits a few seconds without an answer, then knocks more firmly.

"It's open; come on in!"

Surprised by the strange welcome, Jessica opens the door; it is solid wood and very heavy; she needs to use more force than she expected. She takes

two steps in silence, but inside, she sees no one; it takes a few moments for her vision to adjust to the semi-darkness. She stops to observe the house, a single large room with wooden walls, furnished in a chic country style, charming and well cared for despite its small size.

To the right is the small kitchen with a dining table, a walnut pantry, a stove, and a ceramic sink under the window with the curtains firmly closed; to the left is the living room with a ruby red sofa, a small table filled with books, a TV hanging on the wall, and the stone fireplace in the corner; some embers are still burning, and the good smell of wood fills the room.

Next to the still-open front door is a desk with a leather armchair; in the center of the wall is another window with the curtains drawn. It looks like the people who live there care about keeping everything tidy. In the far wall, just opposite the entrance, a door ajar lets some light filter through; it probably overlooks the bedroom and bathroom.

"The door! Close the door. We are losing heat, and don't let Obelix in!" The same voice that invited her in comes from there, and now it sounds slightly annoying.

Jessica clearly senses a thought, as if it were her own: *He has arrived and is already annoying me.*

She must typically concentrate to pull it off, but this time it was involuntary. As she closes the door, she wants to say something, aware that she is the victim of a misunderstanding, but the room goes dark, and she remains with her gaze fixed on that voice, undecided about what to do next.

"By the way, how come you are already here?" The man opens the door, and the light fills the room. "We agreed to meet in..."

He steps toward her and freezes.

He is wearing only beach slippers and a towel tied around his waist; his face is almost completely covered with shaving foam, and the skin is only clear where the razor blades have done their work. Both stand motionless, staring at each other.

"Excuse me," she stammers.

"And who are you?"

"My name is Jessica Ek, and I need to speak with Mr. Balestra."

"That is exactly what you are doing."

The man checks his towel, steps forward, and extends his hand to say hello, but quickly retracts it because it is smeared with foam.

Jessica cannot take her eyes off that trained physique: broad shoulders, biceps, strong pecs, and abs. His skin is tanned enough to know that the August sun merely helped; his hair is kept short, so he always looks tidy.

Her host looks thirty years old at most, but she knows he is thirty-four, two years younger than her. He is a person who cares about his physique; there is nothing wrong with a little healthy vanity. "Excuse me, I was waiting for someone. In any case, I will settle down and be right back."

He hurries back a little to the other side of the door and leaves it ajar.

"Please open the curtains and have a seat, Miss Ek, right?"

"That's right, Ek, but you can call me Jessica."

"And you can call me Matteo."

Now that that room is lit, Jessica feels more at ease, though as she unbuttoned her jacket and sat down at the dining table, she felt silly for not keeping her gaze on her host's face, allowing her eyes to peruse his beauty.

"I don't think I've ever heard that last name," he asks.

"It's Swedish."

"That is the reason for your accent."

In saying these words, he reappears at the door glancing at her; she senses he is checking her out, but does not mind; she is a stranger, and he left her alone in his living room.

"Actually, I'm a native German speaker."

"However, it's hardly noticeable."

You can hear the water running and the razor being cleaned with regular taps on the sink.

"You really must excuse me," Matteo resumes, "I had no idea I would find you in the living room. I thought someone else came in, someone I'm

waiting for."

"Maybe I didn't choose the right time to come in."

"Never mind, we have half an hour. Besides, Nico is always late."

If he shows up. Jessica understands his thoughts with no problem.

Since time is short, she wants to waste as little of it as possible and tries to speed up the preliminaries.

"Can we call each other by our first names? That way I find it easier to talk about certain things."

It is possible she made a mistake; although she can't clearly understand his thoughts, she senses a certain surprise coming from the other room. They introduced themselves. To her relief, the answer is still positive.

"Whatever you like, but what do you want to talk to me about?"

Jessica stares at the glimpse of the room beyond the door: she wants to continue her talk, but the words do not come out.

"If you don't know where to start, I suggest you start at the beginning."

Matteo peaks out of the room and smiles. Jessica, meeting his eyes, lowers her gaze.

"Maybe not, Matteo; maybe it's better to start at the end and tell you right away why I came; by the time you come back in here, I may not have the courage anymore."

"You are making me worry," he replies to her in an almost joking tone, and in a loud voice, to be heard over the roar of the water that has returned to flow.

"I'm your sister."

That sentence sounds like a deflagration in the silent room.

Matteo comes out from behind the door with the razor in his hand: the right side of his face shaved and the other still covered by the lather.

"I beg your pardon?"

Jessica looks him straight in the eye. "You heard right. We are brothers."

"Brothers? That's not possible! Besides, you just told me you're Swedish."

"I was adopted, too."

Now she has hit him even harder. She sees it in the astonished expression of the half-shaven youngster.

"You too? Adopted? But ... what do you mean, I don't ..."

"Go back, please, and I'll tell you all about it."

"What kind of joke is this? Who did you--"

"Please, I will tell you everything. Go back in there, it's easier" Jessica sees an incredulous, perhaps angry face. "Please."

Matteo stares at the girl for a few seconds, then shakes his head and returns to the bathroom.

After a moment more of silence, she begins her story, this time from the beginning. She speaks concisely, following the talk she had prepared. The water in the sink begins to flow again.

"I grew up at Pem in Zurich, a school for boys more talented than the norm, you know what I mean – “special” like our talents, in short."

There is a small pause waiting for a reaction; nothing, the only noise is the razor tapping on the sink.

"I always knew Dr. Magnus Ek was my foster father, and I think he always tried to do his job well. However, I had no idea who my birth parents were until a few weeks ago when I found out that my mother.... -our mother-is a woman who worked at Pem until I was almost eighteen.

Finding her was difficult, but I managed to and went to see her. She told me many things about the institution where I grew up and where I worked until last week. Something that at first, I had a challenging time believing, but that gave an answer to many questions that I always asked myself and to which no one has ever wanted to provide an honest answer.

"I've never heard of this Pem; what exactly does it mean?" Matteo's question has a hint of skepticism, and Jessica imagines he thinks she is trying to rip him off or sell him something.

"It's an acronym, the full name is PEMH School & ISR: it means Pre-Elementary-Middle-High School & Institute for Superior Research. More

simply, Pem."

"Gosh, you must be super gifted just to remember the name." Although she cannot see him, she senses that Matteo is not taking her seriously. "And is this Pem located in Zurich?"

"In Küsnacht, to be exact, a beautiful town on Lake Zurich; the European headquarters is there, while the general management is in California. There are no smarter guys, but they are gifted with abilities that are considered incredibly special. It is estimated that one in a hundred thousand people unintentionally develop abilities beyond the norm. Still, only one percent become aware of them, and of these, only a tiny fraction will put techniques into practice to better perfect their "super strength." That is why Pem exists, to find these special kids to invite them to develop their abilities."

"Invite them?"

"Yes, that's right, there is no such thing as enrolling independently; it is the professors and researchers at the institute who seek out and contact the parents of possible candidates to attend classes at the center. More than kids, it is increasingly about children, even very young children; as you know, with this kind of ability, the earlier it is practiced, the greater the results that can be achieved. For this reason, the institute is equipped with all school grades."

Jessica waits for a nod, but it does not come; she picks up where she left off.

"Of course, of everything our mother told me, the thing that really shocked me was learning about your existence. Yours and..... of your twin. A real shock, Matteo."

The water stops flowing.

"Twin?" Matteo's tone is irritated now. He leans over to get a good look at her, "What are you talking about?"

"Let me finish, please."

What a fool I am. She had planned a gentler way to reveal to him he also had a twin, but when emotions are so strong, it's hard to follow the plans. "Our mother was forced to give us all up for adoption. Fortunately, she got

to know me by working at Pem, but she could not keep track of you two. She is a fortune teller who specializes in reading the pendulum to do research and have some..."

A thought from Matteo, stronger than the others, interrupts her story.

I know what a fortune teller does and what a pendulum is for.

Jessica also senses a strong distrust of her.

"Sorry, of course you know," she says. Then she looks up from the tablecloth and sees him; Matteo is standing beyond the door, and he has a stunned expression. He is wearing a gray suit with a light blue shirt and a dark burgundy tie; dressed like this, he doesn't look like the same guy he did a few minutes earlier, yet he has lost none of his charm.

"Thanks to her help, she could track you down and find out what you do for a living. Unfortunately, however, she hasn't found anything about Ronaldo, and she doesn't even know if the name she had chosen for him has been changed."

Jessica smiles and lifts her hands slightly from the table, suggesting she is finished.

"Excuse me, Matteo. I realize this all seems upsetting; it was the same for me. I also apologize for my inability to be gentle but ... as you can see, the subject is not the easiest to deal with, and the two of us are practically strangers. Honestly, I wouldn't be surprised if you kicked me out."

He falls silent, shaking his head slowly, almost struggling to decide.

"Gee, Jessica," he says finally, "your story is incredible, and I'm sorry you're going through this practically alone."

"Alone until now, but now that we've found each other, we might succeed where our mother didn't, and find out where our brother is."

"Easy, easy. Our mother, our brother -- listen: I don't think you're talking to the right person." Matteo uses a gentle tone as if he were talking to a child or someone very disturbed. "I am not adopted, and I know I have no sisters or brothers."

Jessica sits back and frowns. He would say that: he is upset. She had not expected to see him running up to her and hugging her, shouting, "my little

sister!"

Matteo sits down in front of her. His gaze is accommodating now. "I'm sorry, but I think the one you call 'our mother' has been telling you a lot of fibs or, at the very least, misreading her pendulum and mistakenly thinking of me as one of her twins."

"Matteo, I know it is hard to accept, but I assure you she cannot have been mistaken. As I told you, she is good at what she does. The best."

"Look, I have no idea of your skills are, but I know for a fact..."

She reaches across the table and takes his hands.

"I feel it, I'm sure of it. I knew it right away from how easy it was to connect with your thoughts."

At that same instant, with an unexpected, almost violent force, Jessica is invaded by anguish and fear. Matteo is staring at an indefinite point and is motionless, seemingly in a trance-like state.

"Matteo? Are you listening to me?"

He recovers, refocuses the room, and slips his hands from hers.

"Look, Jessica, you have to leave now. I'm waiting for someone, and I really don't have time for this."

"But what happened?"

"I don't have time now. Please." Matteo gets up and goes to the door. "Go back to where you came from; forget about me and all this weird stuff you're carrying around. It doesn't make sense."

Jessica feels a twinge of pain run through her mind. Her heart beats hard in her chest as she follows Matteo's request and stands up. "Then I'll come back when you have a little more time, and we can-" she does not want to give up.

"No," he does, peremptorily, "I'm saying this for your own good. You have to get out of this house and never come back."

Jessica remains silent, staring at him.

"Okay, I'll leave, but only if you tell me what happened. I read about your abilities; I know you see the future."

"What else do you know? Let's hear it."

"That you're pretty famous around here; you've helped the police solve a couple of important cases of missing kids. You have a column in a weekly magazine and are a frequent guest on TV and radio talk shows. It's no accident, do you understand?"

Matteo ponders for a moment. "All right, but then you have to leave, understand?" He returns to the table, but without sitting down. His tone leaves no room for reply. Jessica nods.

"Well, as you know, I can see events that have not yet happened. When you took my hands, I clearly saw someone dying; the image was powerful and is definitely related to your presence here. So, although it is likely that I was wrong, it is best not to take any chances. Now, please..." Matteo heads back to the door.

"Who did you see die?"

"I don't know; I don't know her."

"Then it was a woman. And how did she die?"

It was you, damn it!

"That's enough; please leave!"

Matteo's thought was so strong that it blurred with his words. Jessica felt the feeling of horror that the young man felt. Now she is frightened.

"All right, I'm going. I will call you in the next few days; we both need to consider things."

"Okay, okay. But now, please leave me alone."

"I'll leave you my note; call me as soon as you feel ready."

Jessica leaves him a note with the correct number in pen, goes to the door, puts her hand on the handle, and turns back to Matteo.

"Have you ever had a vision of our meeting?"

"No."

She wants to add something, like "it was a pleasure" or "see you soon," but can find nothing suitable.

"Bye, Matteo."

He hints at a response to her greeting with a gesture of his head but says nothing.

On her way onto the porch, Jessica runs into a man in his 40s with an unkempt beard, overgrown and messy hair, and a generally unkempt appearance. He exudes a stench of smoke mixed with whiskey or some other hard liquor, but he doesn't seem drunk; probably, it's his old Lt. Columbo coat carrying memories of the previous night. He is much taller than her, and though he stands a step below, he may look her straight in the eye, but he is examining her from head to toe.

What a cute little mouse. "Good morning, miss, are you lost?"

"Good morning. What makes you think so?"

"Just the fact that I've never seen such a pretty girl around here before."

"Maybe you've never been here at the right time."

Good job, Matteo. The man's thoughts are clear.

He greets her again and enters without knocking. Jessica smiles back at him: being called "pretty" amused her at least as much as considered a mouse. Intrigued, she stops to eavesdrop but can only perceive a few thoughts: the newcomer is glad to be there, but things change after the first verbal exchange she cannot hear, and the feelings of the two are different; now both seem annoyed to be in the same room together.

When nothing more comes to her, she walks down the porch steps. Next to her car is an old green Mazda that, judging by the state of the bodywork, does not seem to do so well; there is also Obelix lying in the sun waiting for her to receive a scratch on the belly, and Jessica still smiles. As she approaches the dog, she looks inside the green car and, on the back seats, sees a cardboard box full of books; there must be at least twenty.

Intrigued, she tries to read a few titles; she does so with the book at the top, showing the cover. *Und dann gabs keines mehr.*

"Look, we have the same taste as far as detective stories," she says softly, then crouches down to pet Obelix, who whines with contentment. And as

she leans over the animal, she still feels that creeping sensation from when she first arrived: someone is watching her from the woods.

She stands up, observes the landscape following an instinct she is familiar with, and closes her eyes. An icy blanket envelops her; she sees a girl intent on protecting herself from the cold with a gray blanket, feels an intense shiver of fear and loneliness, and then nothing more.

Nico lays his jacket on the leather chair and observes Matteo sitting at the table, massaging his temples; he is surprised not to see him in perfect form as always.

"And what are you doing here?" asks Matteo, who only seems to notice him at that moment.

"Look, you're the one who made me come, since setting foot in my office seems to give you hives."

"Only you can call a closet in an abandoned warehouse an office."

"At least I have an office."

"So do I; you're in it."

"Okay, okay, never mind. Rather, tell me, who is the little mouse that just left?"

From the window, he watches Jessica cuddle with Obelix.

"Nothing that will ever have anything to do with you."

Nico continues to look at the girl; she jerks up and looks around, takes a few steps toward the fence, and stops to observe the woods as if she were looking for something. He turns back, gets into his car, and leaves the property. He turns toward Matteo.

"What happened to you? Are you sick? You look scary."

"And you used cognac instead of aftershave?"

Matteo moves his hand in front of his nose as if for a change of air, and the other sniffs indifferently the collar of the heavy lumberjack shirt dropped

over his jeans.

"Nico, we need to talk about the Motta case."

"What is it? Do you want to talk to me about Francesca Motta? But didn't you tell me to stay away from it, that I would put the police on false leads, scare the kidnapper, and possibly endanger the girl's life?"

"And I still think that you are a problem, and we have seen that before with the Elia case. If there is even a chance to save this girl, I don't want you to miss it.

This is a low blow; it reawakens the resentment that has accompanied the two since Elijah's parents hired Nico to find the boy. Work that had brought him into a head-on confrontation with Matteo, officially appointed by the police as a consultant.

"So, if that's how you feel, I guess we have nothing to say to each other. I'll say goodbye."

"Wait, I'm not the one who wants you around. Will you listen to me?"

Nico observes him. "Go ahead."

"Edo and Silvia want to try everything to get their daughter back; they are willing to throw away some of their money so that you can attempt to find her too."

"Ah, now the situation is clearer. You're afraid I'll steal your thunder, aren't you?"

"Don't let it go to your head. If you take the case, I will handle all the information: the information that will go to the police, the information that will be passed to Francesca's parents, and the information that will be thrown away. And only the police will be able to pass the news to the press."

"Ridiculous. And how will you stop me from talking to the police or Francesca's parents? Forget it. I am not your subordinate" Nico's black eyes shine with wounded pride. He runs a hand through his hair, also dark, and adds, "Why is it always so damn hard to deal with you, huh?"

"These are the conditions. They're all in this agreement between you and the Mottas." Matteo shows him a sheet of paper from his elegant leather

folder and lays it on the table, inviting him to read it, which Nico does not do.

"If you don't like it, drop the case. If, on the other hand, you accept the conditions and sign, you will have to comply with the letter with what's written, or you won't get a penny; besides, you could get a charge for obstruction of justice if what you say turns out to be not true. You decide. I'm certainly not begging you."

Nico picks up his coat again without wearing it. "I will think about it. Have a nice day." He opens the door.

"Hey, you have to decide now. Otherwise, this contract will no longer be valid."

"Then use it for something useful; I see the fire is going out."

Matteo crumples up the sheet of paper and throws it into the fireplace.

Nico goes out, but he looks back inside before closing the door. "You know how things turned out; it's really sleazy of you to bring up Elia's story."

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