

Apartment Wars

Vera Brook

Poland, 1979

Warm sun filtered through the leaves and dappled the sidewalk as Helena walked back from the farmers' market. In May, the linden trees bloomed all over the city, the same cheerful green fringed with white as the year before, as if nothing had changed.

Helena tried not to dwell on the dissonance. Julian wouldn't have wanted her to.

It was still morning, barely nine o'clock, too early for her daughter to call, but she walked briskly, anxious to get home. A wooden crate of tart cherries, shiny and red, bounced on her arm. They were her favorite fruit, neither sweet nor sour but wonderfully complex, a problem for her taste buds to solve. The handle of the crate was a phantom of her husband's arm inside her elbow, easing her nerves and offering reassurance, as he had always done when alive.

Julian had died two months ago. He was a Physics professor at the Polytechnic, where she had also studied but never earned a degree. They had been happily married for thirty years.

Helena's pension as Julian's widow was secure, outside the grasp of politics and petty rivalries at the Polytechnic.

But her apartment was another matter.

Located on the coveted second floor of a four-story building—too high for passersby to

peek into her kitchen, but not so high that the stairs were a bother—the apartment boasted the enviable total of three comfortably sized rooms, each with a large window that admitted plenty of sunlight. The living room even had a balcony large enough to set up a beach chair in which to enjoy a cup of tea and a science journal.

As if that wasn't marvelous enough, the neighborhood was neither too old nor too young, built with all modern amenities, but before the housing crisis made trees, flower beds, swings, and benches a wasteful indulgence. All the necessities were but a short walk away, and if your errand stretched further into the city, an electric tram would whisk you there and back.

Yes, Helena mused as she walked, no matter what spatial attributes you considered, the apartment was a treasure, rare and valuable.

And as with any treasure, the challenge was to hold on to it.

Especially if a lot of people knew about it, bitterly envied it, and would readily trade their kin to get it.

The linden trees fell away, their shade snipped off by bright sunlight like by a pair of scissors. Helena passed a crowded bulletin board, which made her frown, and followed the curve of the sidewalk, past tall bushes of blooming honeysuckle, toward her building.

And there it was! Her staircase—smack in

the middle, fourth from either end. Her kitchen window on the second floor, with its lace curtains.

“Good morning, Pani Heleno! Done with your shopping already?”

A bench stood along the sidewalk, a forsythia bush framing it like a golden throne. Olga presided in the center, flanked by Klara and Antonia on either side. Knitting needles flickered in Antonia’s fingers. Olga was the one who’d asked the question, her sugary tone as always hiding a nettle.

Irritation flickered through Helena. She’d been hoping to avoid the Crows today. She lifted her crate of tart cherries mid-step. The trick was to keep walking. “Morning. Just the farmers’ market.”

But Olga stuck out her leg, blocking Helena’s escape. “Ha! You’re lucky. I can’t walk that far anymore. Varicose veins!” Olga hiked up her skirt and twisted her leg to demonstrate.

Helena stopped, the crate on her arm swinging forward.

Klara, also a widow, piped up next. “I make my son-in-law do all the groceries. It’s the least he can do, considering.”

“Uh-huh,” Antonia murmured without looking up from her knitting.

Klara’s apartment was on the top fourth floor. Cotton diapers, onesies, and bibs flapped endlessly on the balcony to dry, and occasionally flew away with the wind. Klara had given up the larger bedroom to her daughter and son-in-law after the baby, moving into the smaller and windowless study herself. A fact she brought up in every conversation.

Olga patted Klara’s hand with practiced sympathy. “You’re an angel, dear. Everybody knows that. Isn’t she?”

The last part was directed at Helena. “Yes. Naturally,” Helena said.

Klara gripped Olga’s hand and sniffled, tears at the ready. “So are you, dear! So are you!”

Olga and her husband, both retired, shared their two-room apartment with their middle-aged bachelor son, an engineer. Which meant converting the living room into their bedroom each night, complete with moving the dining table and chairs out of the way and unfolding the sofa into a bed. And then repeating the process in reverse the next morning. Olga not so secretly blamed their son’s failure to start a family on the space constraints. Adding to her

bitterness, the apartment was on the first floor, so no balcony.

“Uh-huh,” Antonia murmured.

Helena’s gaze snagged on the knitting in Antonia’s hands, the silver needles racing around what looked like a slender tube attached to a cuboid shape in a vivid pink. What was it? A long sock?

Olga spoke again. “We do what we have to do. A sacrifice for our families. But no—it’s *not* natural.”

Another nettle. Helena looked up to find Olga staring at her.

“It’s not?” Klara asked. “But we love our—”

“No!” Olga said, her stare still fixed on Helena. “It’s completely *unnatural*. Love or no love, the birds need to leave the nest. But they have nowhere to go, that’s the problem.”

Helena stiffened, her mouth suddenly dry. It was about her apartment. Without Julian, she was the only occupant.

One person to three spacious rooms was a dangerous ratio.

Thankfully, Daria and her husband would move in with her soon.

Like on cue, a door slammed, startling Helena.

Someone was racing down her staircase, the feet pounding the steps. Then the front door slammed open, and two small, wiry boys exploded onto the sidewalk, the older one ahead.

Messy hair, scraped knees, shoes untied. Marta’s boys.

Helena stepped out of the way, but the older boy swerved as well, his face half turned. The top of his head barely reached her elbow, but plenty of angry force propelled him forward.

The collision almost knocked her down.

Her hand gripped the boy’s shoulder. Normally, she wouldn’t get involved. They weren’t her kids. But today she was on edge, her fuse shorter than usual. “Watch it! You could hurt someone!” she snapped.

Far from showing fear or remorse, the boy knocked her hand away, glaring. “Shut up, you ugly cow! Don’t tell me what to do! I’m the man of the house!” And he raced off.

A collective gasp of shock came from the bench.

Helena spun after the boy, speechless. But the insult wasn’t over yet.

The smaller boy caught up to her, huffing from the effort of keeping up with his brother. He lowered his head, as if planning to ram into her, but lost his nerve and swatted at the crate of cherries instead.

The crate flew from Helena's hand and hit the sidewalk, the cherries rolling in all directions.

"Yeah! Ugly cow!" And the boy raced after his brother, his heels kicking and arms pumping.

Helena watched the young offenders in a numb shock, the cherries like frozen drops of blood around her feet.

"Tommy! Danny!"

A young woman in a shapeless, unflattering dress and worn house slippers rushed out of the staircase, her cheeks red from shame.

Marta, the boys' mother.

She anxiously scanned the scene but her disorderly charges were long gone. "I'm so terribly sorry, Pani Heleno. They are sweet boys. They didn't mean it. Here, let me help you." Marta dropped to her knees, snatched the crate, and started picking up the cherries.

"Sweet boys! That's a laugh." Olga scowled from the bench. "But what do you expect? They take after their father. He's nothing but sweetness, judging from what we just heard."

If Marta's face was red before now it darkened to a crimson. But another emotion, harder to identify, glowed in her eyes.

She set the half-filled crate down and got to her feet. "I apologize again. But I have to find my boys. Make sure they are okay."

And she shuffled away after her sons.

Helena glanced at the half-filled crate and the still spilled cherries. A sparrow was already picking at one, and more birds were eyeing the fruit from the bushes. The sidewalk was going to be a mess.

Helena had an impulse to bend down and finish filling the crate. But she stopped herself. It was Marta's mess—not hers. So it should be Marta's job to clean it up. And if she was smart, she'd make her boys do it.

"I have to go," Helena said. "A phone call."

"Daria, I presume?" Olga asked. "Isn't she coming back to live with you? She and her husband?"

"Yes, they are! This summer."

But even as she said it, unease cut through Helena. She had boasted about the plan to the

Crows, shook and brandished it in front of them to scare them away and discourage them from scheming. But now she wished she hadn't.

Like the birds they reminded her of, the Crows missed nothing. Always watching and crowing about what they saw, and swooping down to steal from you the moment you turned your back.

They were also bad luck.

Before Olga could ask another question, Helena turned and hurried home.

On the second floor landing, the door opposite Helena's apartment gaped open. Marta must have forgotten to close it.

Helena hesitated. Did Marta have a key on her, or would she be locked out? Still, it didn't feel right to leave the door open. The cramped apartment was an eyesore, with winter jackets crowding a coat rack in the tight foyer, and a mess of beat-up toys strewn over an old sofa bed, a buckling coffee table, and a faded rug inside the one visible room.

Helena reached for the doorknob, when a man stepped next to her, soft-footed like a thief. Blue eyes under dirty blond hair locked on her face. "No worries. I've got it."

Helena recoiled as if burned.

"Oskar. Don't you have a key?"

If Marta had any sense, she'd taken it away from him the last time he'd vanished for days. The apartment belonged to her and, thank goodness, they weren't married.

"Of course, I do," Oskar said. But he made no motion to take it out. "And may I say? Pani Helena looks lovely as ever." He smiled at her.

His broad shoulders and boyish charm must have worked on some women, otherwise where would this arrogance come from? But Helena wasn't fooled. Oskar was the kind of man who would shove her down the stairs, still smiling.

She turned away without a word and unlocked her own door.

Erwin, her orange tabby, appeared in the crack and hissed at Oskar. She nudged him aside with her foot.

Marta had better clean up all her messes before Daria arrived.

Helena barely had time to pour herself a glass of ice tea before the phone rang. She took a quick sip of the tea, then hurried to get the phone.

It was Daria. "Mom? I have great news!"

Helena's heart leapt. She carried the phone to Julian's office, clutching the receiver to her ear. She pictured her daughter and son-in-law at the airport, passports in hand and a cart full of suitcases between them, checking in for their flight home. Coming back from a three-year work contract in Sweden—at last.

"Yes?"

"Mom, I'm pregnant!"

Sturdy oak bookshelves lined two walls of Julian's office floor to ceiling, each shelf crammed with books and papers. More stacks of papers sat on the large desk.

Helena sank into the reading chair in the corner. The image of an airport terminal lingered for a moment, now empty, before it faded altogether. *Daria was pregnant?* It wasn't the news she'd expected.

"Honey, that's . . . wonderful. I'm so happy for you. Tell me everything."

Erwin jumped onto the desk. He sat down, folding his front legs underneath him as if to fit into an invisible box. His orange eyes settled on Helena, and he ceased all motion, a statue frozen in time.

Helena chatted with her daughter for an hour, hungry for every detail, and regretting, not for the first time, that they lived so far apart—over a thousand kilometers and a whole Baltic Sea between them. But Daria was fine. She was six weeks pregnant, the first doctor visit went well, she and her husband were thrilled about the baby.

All bittersweet music to Helena's ears.

Daria picked up on it. "How about you, Mom? How are you holding up? Are you going to be okay?"

Helena waved her hand in the air, as if to swat away a fruit fly. "Me? I'm perfectly fine. Keeping busy, going for walks. You don't have to worry about me."

"That's good, Mom. I'm glad. Because . . ." Her daughter hesitated.

Helena got to her feet, suddenly restless. "Because you won't be able to come here in May. I know, honey! You shouldn't travel in your first trimester. I perfectly understand."

There was a sigh of relief on the other end. "I'm sorry, Mom. Maybe in August?"

Helena paced back and forth between the closet door and the bookshelves. Erwin's orange eyes followed her. "Of course. Just take

care of yourself. We have plenty of time to plan. Everything will be fine."

But after they said their goodbyes and Helena hung up the phone, the weight of the news sank in.

August meant three months from now. A dangerously long time.

The housing authority was bound to get a complaint about Helena's apartment before then.

Like any bureaucratic machine, the housing authority moved slowly, especially in the summer when most of the city officials eloped from their stifling offices to a seaside or lakeside vacation. But there was no guarantee. If someone pulled the right strings or greased the bureaucratic wheels just so, the order to pack and relocate to another apartment could come down like a hammer, swift and final. And worst of all—there was no way to find out.

Several stacks of Julian's papers sat on the desk, waiting to be sorted.

"Off with you," Helena said to Erwin, and the cat jumped off the desk and sauntered out of the room.

She sat down at the desk and pulled one stack of papers closer.

It was a mess—printed articles with notes in the margins, loose pages of notes, equations and diagrams in Julian's slanted longhand, newspaper clippings. All mixed together without any order. A textbook example of high entropy.

If she had the space, Helena would hold on to every scrap, because each scrap brought back a different memory of her Julian. But she needed to clear the office so it could become a bedroom for Daria and her husband. And now—also for the baby.

She had another reason, too. A request from Piotr, one of Julian's colleagues in the Physics Department.

He'd phoned her last week and offered to take Julian's papers off her hands. He was particularly interested in any unfinished projects. Julian had often worked at home in the last few years. Had he been working on anything new? Piotr wanted to make sure all Julian's work got published.

Helena was grateful. Unlike the others in the department, Piotr had always been agreeable toward Julian. But she still wanted to first go

through Julian's papers herself. It was her chance to say goodbye.

After all, her husband was a brilliant scientist. Helena knew it better than anyone. She'd been helping Julian with his research on and off for three decades: a willing listener and sounding board for his ideas; a trusted assistant when a particular reference had to be hunted down in the library; a first reader and editor of all his manuscripts. Somehow, even when still a doctoral student herself, Julian's research had become more important to her than her own.

She'd passed her qualifying exams with high marks, and her dissertation research topic had been approved, so the performance had never been an issue. Neither had her passion for science or her ambition diminished. They were still there—but redirected.

One day, she'd simply realized what mattered the most to her. It was Julian's scientific career—not her own.

After that, there'd been no point in staying in the department. She'd told Julian she was leaving the Polytechnic—although not the reason why.

Even so, Julian had been adamant against it. He'd urged her to keep going, to carry out her project and finish her degree. They'd already been engaged for a year, waiting for an apartment before they got married. But she'd made her decision to drop out, and she stuck to it. Julian had no choice but to accept it. Although, for the rest of his life, he treated her like a true colleague.

Helena never cared if she got the credit—as long as Julian's accomplishments were recognized. She took pride and joy in the work they did together, and that was enough reward for her. Besides, Julian needed her.

But now everything had changed.

Who was she without Julian? A nobody. A retired homemaker. A professor's widow with only a most tenuous link to the Polytechnic or the academic circles—not enough to confer any status or protection, should she need it.

And she *would* need it, she was certain. How else was she going to hold onto the apartment for the entire summer?

She turned in the chair to glance behind her. Erwin had found a bright patch of sunlight on the rug and folded himself into it.

"You'll help me, won't you?"

Erwin opened his mouth and meowed,

pointy teeth flashing—then leapt straight up in the air, back arched and tail puffed up, at the sound of the doorbell.

Helena jumped up herself, a foreboding hitting her like an electric shock. Who on Earth was it?

She hurried to the door.

In the hallway, Marta bent over her sons, attempting to smooth their unruly hair. Now she straightened and gently pushed her boys forward.

"Good evening, Pani Heleno. My boys have something they need to say. Is that all right?" She anxiously scanned Helena's face.

From the half open door behind her, a low hum of television and a smell of roasted chicken drifted toward Helena. She glanced at Oskar's long form sprawled on the sofa bed, his feet propped on the coffee table, the shoes still on. Nice leather loafers, expensive. She wondered how Oskar could pay for shoes like that. As far as she knew, he didn't hold a job.

Helena sighed and nodded. "Yes. I'm listening."

Marta nodded back, visibly relieved. Then she rested one hand on Tommy's right shoulder, the other on Danny's left. "Go on, Tommy. You first."

But Tommy, the older boy, only clenched his mouth shut, his gaze stubbornly down.

"Come on, Tommy. You're a smart boy. You remember what we talked about. Tell Pani Helena what you told me. Go on."

Slowly, the boy's jaw relaxed, his mother's voice melting his resistance. Finally, he looked up at Helena. "I'm sorry for my behavior," he began. "I was . . . um . . . rude to you, and I . . . um . . . gave a bad example to Danny. So I hope you're not mad at me because it makes Mom sad," he concluded with feeling.

A smile lit up Marta's face, and she quickly bent down and kissed her older son's hair. Then she pressed the younger's shoulder. "How about you, Danny? You wanted to tell Pani Helena something too. Do you remember?"

But before Danny could gather his courage and speak, a louder, adult voice cut in.

"Marta! Where's my dinner? *Get your sweet ass back here!*"

Marta froze, her face and throat beet red.

Helena saw Tommy mouth *sweet ass*, and

an uneasy mix of sympathy and exasperation washed over her. She had no doubt Oskar did it on purpose—a cruel three-in-one trick that humiliated Marta, undid her lesson for the boys, and made Helena cringe, a payback for the incident with the key.

Helena addressed the boys sternly. “I accept your apology, Tommy. And yours too, Danny. Now be good, and listen to your—”

But the TV drowned her words, the volume suddenly deafening.

“. . . And the penalty kick is in! Goaaa! GOAAAL!”

Before Marta could react, her sons spun around and raced inside the apartment.

Marta automatically started after them, as if an invisible rope pulled her, but forced herself to turn back. “Thank you, Pani Heleno. I was hoping to run to the market today but . . .” She shook her head, not quite meeting Helena’s eyes. “If I can’t get the cherries, I’ll pay you back. I’m terribly sorry.”

And Marta hurried inside the apartment, carefully closing the door behind her.

Helena stared at her neighbor’s door, utterly baffled.

What natural law could possibly explain Marta’s loyalty to a man like Oskar? What set of equations could ever capture it? Even the most challenging questions in quantum physics seemed perfectly tractable by comparison.

It would be a relief to immerse herself in Julian’s papers again.

The cellar was dark and had the musty, earthy smell of a hole in the ground, which technically it was.

Helena flipped the light switch and slowly descended the uneven steps, her hand brushing the chilly cement wall for support. At the base of the stairs, the corridor became a maze, with rows of rickety wooden doors extending in three directions like a grim, dingy gallery of mirrors, until they melted into the darkness.

A spider web hung in one corner of the ceiling like an impossibly fine lace. It looked like a flat surface but wasn’t. Silk threads extended backward in three dimensions, the original pattern repeated in multiple intersecting planes between the main web and the walls. A housefly was trapped near the bottom edge, but no sign of the spider.

Helena started down the main corridor,

squinting at the unit numbers stenciled over the doors. The unit numbers corresponded to apartment numbers, but they were not in order. She hadn’t been down here in years. On a hunch, she turned right.

She reached for the next light switch and froze.

A large limp form lay motionless in the far corner of the nearest unit, visible through the cracks in the door. *A body?* But it was only a sack of potatoes, thank goodness.

Most storage units were barely wider than the door, and packed floor to ceiling with spare furniture, tools, fishing gear, and other random possessions that didn’t fit inside the crowded apartments. Faint morning light trickled through small windows near the ceiling, just above the ground on the outside and blocked with metal bars.

Helena found her unit, unlocked the door, and stepped in.

Daria’s desk and dresser stood along one wall, wrapped in cloth, next to carefully stacked plastic boxes full of her favorite children’s books. *Pippi Longstocking*, *The Moomins*, *Alice’s Adventures In Wonderland*. Joy pricked Helena’s heart. Now her grandchild could enjoy them.

Built-in shelves, made by Julian’s hand, took up the other wall, floor to ceiling. On the middle shelf, dozens of jars with Helena’s pickled beets, onions, and peppers stood next to the last few fruit preserves.

The thought of her late husband snapped Helena back into focus. She came down here for a reason.

Stiffly, she bent down to inspect the two bottom shelves, where assorted boxes hid in the shadows.

They were mostly reused appliance boxes, filled with Julian’s handmade gadgets and demonstrations for his quantum mechanics classes. He used to tinker all the time, and not just for science, either. Julian would roll up his sleeves and fix anything around the house. There wasn’t a vain bone in the man’s body.

But which box was it?

Helena pictured the box she remembered sitting on the floor in Julian’s office from time to time.

“There you are!”

The box was shaped like a cube. Made of sturdy construction paper, with the lid tightly

on and secured with tape, it had no label. But she knew it at once.

The box was heavier than she expected and awkward to carry. She had to put it down to lock up the unit. And then put it down again at the bottom of the stairs, climb up, open the door to the main staircase, and walk down the stairs again to fetch it. But the time she locked the cellar door and hefted the box off the cement floor again, her back ached and her arms trembled.

“Let me help you with that,” a man’s voice said.

Oskar? The nerve of that man! Helena spun around, ready to tell him off.

But it wasn’t Oskar. The man wore a blue uniform and carried a bulging messenger bag strapped across his chest. The mailman.

Helena gratefully surrendered the box. “Thank you.”

“Of course.” The man was tall and lanky, his nose too long for his face, but his gray eyes glowed with intelligence, and his smile was kind.

Helena led the way up the stairs. She unlocked her door, hesitated for a second, then pointed at the narrow bench under her coat rack. “Right here is fine.”

The mailman stepped through the door, gently set the box down where instructed, and promptly stepped back out. Not as much as a glance into Helena’s kitchen. Kind and *not* nosy. She liked the man even more.

Why couldn’t Marta find a man like that?

As if Helena’s thought triggered a not-so-random shift in their branch of the multiverse, her neighbor’s door cracked open, and the back of Marta’s head appeared, her hair in a hasty ponytail.

“Tommy, you’re older, so I trust you to watch Danny for me.” Marta grabbed her purse from the hook, nearly dropping a large garment bag she was holding. “I’m just going two blocks. You can watch the cartoons until I’m back. I love you and I’m proud of you both, okay?” A note of anxiety cut through the affection in Marta’s voice.

Two high voices answered her.

Helena frowned. Marta was a seamstress, the hum of her sewing machine often drifting in through Helena’s open windows late into the night. Spring and summer were her busiest seasons, with orders piling up, anything from

linens and work shirts to cocktail dresses and wedding gowns. Marta delivered her orders herself rather than asking her customers to pick them up.

Where the heck was Oskar? The least he could do was watch his sons.

But “the man of the house” had the disappearing act down to a science, never around when Marta actually needed him, but back again as soon as she got paid, so he could sweet talk her out of her hard earned money.

Marta closed the door behind her and faced the mailman. She blushed. “Witek.”

“Hello, Marta.” The mailman’s cheeks flushed too, although his eyes were bright. “It’s good to see you.”

Helena shamelessly kept her door ajar to watch the interaction. *They know each other, and he likes her*, she thought.

“I’m sorry but I’m in a hurry,” Marta said.

Witek pointed at the garment bag. “If you give me the address, I’d be more than happy to drop it off for you. My route covers anything two blocks from here.”

Marta blinked. “Is that . . . allowed?”

“Well . . . not exactly. But some trouble is worth it,” Witek said solemnly.

Marta’s blush darkened. “Thank you, but that’s not necessary.”

“I’m sorry. That came out wrong.” Witek twisted the strap of his messenger bag. “What I meant is . . . it’s no trouble at all. Marta, wait—”

But Marta slipped past him and rushed down the stairs.

Helena quietly closed her door, not to add to the man’s embarrassment. A moment ago, he reminded her of Julian—decades ago, when they had first started dating. She couldn’t explain why. There was no obvious physical resemblance. The similarity was more intangible, hovering just outside the reach of her senses.

It still made her heart ache.

The bulky device, when Helena extracted it from the box and set it down on Julian’s chair, looked like a home movie projector crossed with a radio. Two rows of knobs and switches underneath a small screen on one side, a large lens with an odd rectangular filter on the other.

The contraption looked patched together, a weekend inventor’s project rather than serious lab equipment, but just to make sure, Helena

searched for the silver sticker that would mark it as the property of the Polytechnic. There was none. So Julian hadn't borrowed it from work to never return it. He had made the device himself.

But when? And *where*? Down in the cellar? Right here in his home office?

Wherever it was, he had managed to keep it a secret from Helena, since she'd never seen the thing before. The box, yes. But she'd assumed it was full of old papers. It had never crossed her mind to check.

Now she wished she had, so she could have asked her husband some questions.

Starting with: *What was the device for?*

All Helena had to go on was a hand-drawn diagram and a data table, both buried in a notebook full of messy equations. The data table made her pulse quicken, but with the variables unlabeled, the numbers meant nothing to her. Calibration tests? Experimental data? But what was the experiment? What was manipulated, and what was measured?

Julian had always been a theoretician at heart, enamored of proofs and theorems, but purely theoretical work had been discouraged at the Polytechnic in favor of more tangibly beneficial discoveries. So, over the years, Julian's research focused on laser technologies and geographical sensors, among other practical topics. His true passion, though, had always been quantum topology—or applying the quantum principles to low-dimensional manifolds in order to understand the nature of space.

Helena thought back to her husband's last formal presentation at his department, and a bitter taste filled her mouth. Julian had tried to warm his theory-averse colleagues to quantum topology by outlining a handful of fundamental questions he found fascinating. But his audience responded with a snobbish, narrow-minded scorn. Disheartened, Julian never tried again. What was the point? His colleagues didn't care.

Now, standing in her late husband's room, Helena inspected the bulky device. Was it merely a clever laser projector to demonstrate, say, how combining two spheres into a torus changes the total curvature of the object? Or had Julian actually intended to test a specific conjecture in quantum topology? But how on Earth would he do that?

There was only one way to find out.

A long cord dangled from the device. Helena plugged it into an outlet by the door. The cord stretched all across the carpet, but this wouldn't take long. Just a quick peek at what the projector showed.

She pointed the lens at the only wall not covered by the bookshelves or the window—at the sliding pocket door to the closet, painted cream to match the wallpaper—and switched the device on.

The small screen flickered on, but it was the laser light emitted by the lens that drew her eye. A single red line that became a pulsing rectangle when it hit the wall, shifting and expanding until it fit within the closet door with a few inches to spare on each side.

Several things happened at once.

A cheerful beep issued from the device.

A silent blast rent the air, the pressure hitting Helena from all directions as if an invisible fist squeezed her.

And an orange object bolted past her legs and straight for the pulsing lights.

"Erwin, no!" Helena cried.

But the cat had already vanished inside the dark closet.

Except . . . that wasn't possible.

The sliding door was still shut. Locked, in fact. Helena saw the handle and the lock clearly, next to the dark rectangle framed by dotted lights, now so dim they were barely visible. The closet was always locked, and the key rested safely in the top drawer of Julian's desk.

But if Erwin wasn't in the closet, then where was he?

Helena saw him run through the dark door. She didn't imagine it.

She took a step toward the ominous rectangle that had replaced the closet door and peered inside it. She could see nothing. The darkness was like a thick curtain. It appeared solid and flat from where she stood.

"Erwin, get back here," she ordered sternly, although dread tingled her spine.

What if her cat was already dead, wherever he was?

Helena took another step forward and stopped. This is as far as she could go without some part of her body crossing the path of the faint laser lights.

Fear was never helpful, though. Calm logic was better.

If the cat went through that thing, then by definition it was a door and had to lead somewhere. A place. A physical location. All right. What else did Helena know about doors? Most ordinary doors allowed you to pass back and forth, in and out, but maybe this door only allowed movement in one direction? Not good. A door could be locked too. Some even locked automatically if you let them close behind you.

Oh no. *Poor Erwin.*

“Meow.”

Helena gaped as first the orange head, then the body, and lastly the bushy tail slipped out of the darkness.

Orange eyes flashed up at her with reproach. “MEEOW.”

Then, with the formal complaint lodged in this fashion, the cat trotted past her and out of the room, indignant but unhurt.

Helena felt light-headed, relief colliding with a belated shock.

She gripped the edge of Julian’s desk to steady herself, resisting the temptation to sit down or, better yet, lie down and close her eyes. This was no time to lose her head. Something very odd had just happened, and she needed her wits about her to figure it out.

The cat was alive. That, alone, was extraordinary.

He’d gone through the “door” and back in one piece. The door that had no right to be there! In fact, he’d spent several moments *on the other side*, and the experience barely left a mark on him.

But *where* had he gone, exactly?

Helena’s head spun as she tried to parse it out. She thought of Ockham’s razor. What was the simplest explanation?

Space. It had to be a space of some sort.

Large enough for Erwin to turn around, since as nimble and flexible as he was, stealing outside through the narrowest opening in the window or the balcony door, he still needed room in three dimensions to fit through and execute the U-turn maneuver.

But what kind of space was it? What did it look like? Did it have the familiar coordinates—up and down, left and right, near and far? How big was it? What would it feel like to walk through it? And what if the space wasn’t empty at all?

Helena started to pace. The questions made her restless. She couldn’t recall the last time

she’d been as intensely curious. It felt like a burning iron pressed to her skin.

What now? Research at the Polytechnic was never a speedy process. It would take years before any experiments were conducted and any of the questions answered. First, research proposals had to be written and reviewed, letters of support secured, budgets approved, publication credits negotiated, politically correct interpretation of results agreed on, and lucrative contracts for future applications divvied up. The sheer amount of paperwork . . .

Even if she was a researcher and could attempt the task, Helena was too old for this.

Erwin was fine.

She braced herself and marched through the doorway.

Hours later, Helena sat on a bench outside, lost in thought, still trying to sort out her impressions. She had been impulsive but not entirely reckless, and had kept her inspection of the other side of the door brief. Her pounding heart hadn’t helped either.

Still, the precious few observations she’d made before losing her nerve and rushing out again were both astounding and perplexing.

The door brought forth by Julian’s device indeed led somewhere—although the place eluded description.

Part of it was the diffuse grayish light that made the dry air shimmer like mist. Helena strained her eyes to follow the faint red lines of the lasers as they sliced through the grayness. But the red lines bent and curved in unexpected ways, obscuring the shape and distorting the distance. The effect was disorienting—a “wall” swinging closer, then retreating, stretching and bulging like a soap bubble, then pivoting and shrinking to a line.

The tactile information was no less unsettling. The floor under Helena’s slipped feet, while reassuringly solid, changed every few steps, flat one moment, then sloping upward, then tilting down and to the left. Stranger still was the mismatch between the surface angles and subjective gravity, with a steep rise pulling Helena forward as if she was falling, while a flat stretch of ground felt like wading through mud. When she extended her hand to find the wall as she walked, her fingertips brushed a hard surface, then only air, with no edge in between. The sounds, too, were odd, her

footsteps muffled as if coming from far away, although the loud rush of blood in her ears could have done that. The air had no odor or taste but it tingled on her skin like static.

The brief experience was a lot to take in and, at the same time, barely told Helena anything. Human perception was a notoriously bad guide when it came to grasping the true nature of reality. Too many biases; too tempting to impose familiar patterns on anything new. She needed more objective instruments, more rigorous data.

But one finding was undeniable: the door led somewhere. To a physical location that shouldn't exist but did.

An extra space.

How? Helena didn't know, although her mind buzzed with speculations.

Was Julian's device like a hammer, punching a hole in the boundary of the local space-time to an adjacent one? Or more like a mirror, capturing a snapshot of a space and creating its imperfect but functional reflection? Or perhaps like a balloon pump, stretching a section of local space-time like a balloon?

Whatever the mechanism—Julian's discovery had been quite literally *groundbreaking*.

Helena felt a surge of pride mixed with resentment.

Why hadn't Julian shared it with her? Withholding the knowledge from his department made sense. But she was his wife and closest friend!

Was it too much to ask for Julian to trust her and keep her in the loop, so they could celebrate his accomplishments together? Was that the thanks she got for giving up her own career, her own dreams and aspirations, so her scientist husband could be more successful?

It wasn't fair, goddammit!

Helena shuddered, dismayed at her own thoughts.

What came over her? She'd never begrudged Julian his academic position or regretted her own choice to become a homemaker. His success had always been enough—it had been her success too. And yet . . .

Helena sprang from the bench. All these emotions were nothing but a nuisance. She had no time for them.

She glanced around her, noticing her surroundings for the first time. Where was she? She'd walked here in a daze, but she couldn't

be that far from home.

The building up ahead looked just like hers except for a handful of crucial details: a wrong pattern of flower boxes, bright purple curtains in one window, an overgrown vine that all but covered the wall of the center staircase, each dark leaf shaped like a heart. A group of girls did flips and hung upside down by their knees from a tall iron carpet-beating frame. Up on a hill, two old men sat across from each other at a stone table, playing chess and smoking pipes.

Ab. The checkerboard tables. A mental map rose in her mind. Helena knew where she was. She started walking.

Soon, her building came into view. She reflexively counted down the doors to her own staircase, smack in the middle, then moved her gaze to the second floor.

A breeze tugged on white lace curtains in an open window. Helena's breath caught. *Julian's office?* But thank goodness, it was her kitchen.

"Swollen feet, Pani Heleno?"

Helena stopped, startled, and her head swiveled toward the bench framed by the forsythia bush. She'd forgotten about the Crows. Olga, Klara, and Antonia all stared at her shoes.

"My feet?" Helena glanced down, and embarrassment stung her cheeks. She'd been wandering the neighborhood in her house slippers. She tried to cover it with a laugh. "Oh, I just love these slippers. So comfortable, I forget I have them on."

Olga studied her shrewdly. "Hmm. I'm sure you have a lot on your mind too."

Helena stiffened. A question about Daria was coming, she could feel it. *Quick*, she needed a distraction.

Her gaze snagged on the knitting needles in Antonia's hands. The pink, boxy garment now sprouted three long tubes instead of one. Not a sock or tights, then. Not a sweater, either.

"Pani Antonio, if I may, *what* are you knitting?"

The flashing needles stopped, and Antonia looked at her with wounded eyes. "Why, it's . . . it's . . ." Without warning, a sob shook her, and tears rolled down her cheeks.

Olga put her arm around Antonia's shoulders. "It's all right, my dear. You don't have to say anything. We understand." She threw Helena a sharp look.

Helena was flabbergasted. What was that about? The pink yarn was so cheerful. But clearly, she'd made some wrong assumptions.

A phone rang, sending a jolt of alarm through her. It was her phone. *Daria?*

But it was Tuesday, and they usually talked on the weekends. Had something happened?

"I'm sorry. I have to—"

Helena spun around and hurried to her staircase, her heart in her throat.

The voice on the phone was male, and for a moment, Helena's blood ran cold. If it was Sebastian, her son-in-law, it meant Daria couldn't come to the phone. But why? Was she ill? Had she had an accident? What about the baby? Helena sank into the armchair, clutching the plastic receiver to her ear but unable to make a sound herself.

"Pani Heleno? This is Piotr. I hope this isn't a bad time."

Helena gave a sigh of relief. "Piotr. No, no. I'm just . . . a little winded. You caught me walking in the door."

Her heart was still pounding, her mind slow to accept it'd been a false alarm, nothing bad had happened, Daria and the baby were all right.

"My apologies," Piotr sounded as personable as Helena remembered him. "I was going to call in the evening, but, well, my wife and I are finally breaking free. Our getaway train leaves at nine."

"Oh?"

Piotr laughed easily. "Pardon the bad jokes. Criminal justice is a serious matter. What I meant is, we're getting out of the city for three weeks. A much awaited vacation."

Ab. Piotr's wife was a prison administrator. Helena felt a shade of unease when she made the connection, although the reaction was absurd. Why should she be uneasy? She broke no laws by testing Julian's device. At least none she was aware of.

She said lightly, "That's wonderful. Where are you going?"

"Oh, just a small resort at the seaside. Nothing fancy," Piotr said. "We've been going to the same place every summer for twenty-two years. Can you believe it? First with the kids, after the school let out, and now just the two of us, carrying on the family tradition."

Helena's chest tightened. She never got to

do that with Julian. One salary meant a tight budget, barely enough for summer camps for Daria. And now Julian was gone.

Piotr's tone became earnest. "I'm so sorry, Pani Heleno. How insensitive of me. Your husband was a remarkable man and a brilliant scientist, and it is a terrible shame that we lost him so early." Piotr cleared his throat. "Which is why I was wondering, if you had time to look through Julian's papers yet. I know they have a sentimental value, of course. But if there is anything of Julian's that I could take off your hands—any unfinished analyses, any planned projects, or even notes—since I know he was working on some theoretical topics as well, topics like, um, topology."

Topology? Suspicion prickled Helena's mind. Since when was anyone in Julian's department interested in topology? "But you're going on vacation," she protested. "Shouldn't you—"

"Oh, it's no trouble," Piotr cut her off, sounding eager and a bit impatient. "I could stop by in an hour to pick up the papers and start reviewing them on the train."

Helena thought of Julian's discovery. How would Piotr react if she showed him the device and what it could do?

But she wasn't ready to hand it over yet.

"I'm afraid I'll need more time, Piotr," she said politely but firmly. She didn't elaborate. "Why don't we plan to meet after you get back?"

There was a pause, then Piotr spoke again, his voice considerably cooler, "Very well. I will be in touch. Have a good day." And he hung up the phone.

Helena rose to her feet. There was lots to do and not much time. If she wanted to conduct even the most basic testing of the added space, compile all Julian's notes on the topic, and draft an article for publication in his name, she better hurry.

But first, she needed to catch up on the research in the field.

The Polytechnic Library was the oldest and by far the most handsome building on campus. A complex stone structure with wide steps, sculpted columns, and a clock tower, framed by a row of old linden trees on each side. The rest of the campus looked dull by comparison—massive cement buildings

crammed chock full of offices, classrooms, and research labs. At least the linden trees eased the transition.

Helena had taken a tram to get here, never a pleasant affair on a hot day. The metal car was packed with passengers like a can of sardines, and all she could do was clutch Julian's satchel in front of her and endure the jostling as the tram turned, slowed to a stop, and got going again. It was a relief to step onto the sidewalk and feel the airiness of empty space around her.

Inside the library, she was nervous at first, feeling like a trespasser as she searched the card catalog, retrieved the books and journals she wanted from the stacks, and finally settled at a table in the corner. What if a former colleague of Julian's caught her studying the newest issues of topology journals, and reported this fact to Piotr? Could the department pressure her to give up Julian's papers? They sure had enough clout to cause trouble for her.

Maybe it wasn't wise to come here. Why tempt fate? Helena had too much to lose.

But an hour later, no one had approached her. Apart from a few pairs of graduate students flirting awkwardly while pretending to work, the library was empty. The semester was over, and every faculty member who could escape the city had already done so.

It wasn't the first time Helena felt invisible on this campus, but for once, she was glad for it. *I would make a good spy*, she thought, and felt dismayed at herself again.

By the time Helena was ready to leave, it was evening, and her eyes burned from squinting at the tiny print for hours. But the trip had been productive. She had lots of notes, and Julian's satchel was considerably heavier now that it held a stack of hardbound journals she'd checked out using his library card, somehow never deactivated. The strap dug reassuringly into her shoulder like a phantom hand. She could almost pretend Julian was right behind her.

On a whim, she stopped by the rack with popular magazines and scanned the bright covers of the science digest titles. They were hardly a reliable source, the information digested so thoroughly, nothing of substance was left. But Helena always found the cheeky mix of hype, speculation, and gossip entertaining, her guilty pleasure after a long day. And why

not? No one had stopped her and thrown her out so far. A few minutes of self-indulgence couldn't hurt . . .

One headline hit her like a hammer. *TOO MUCH CLUTTER? RENT A STORAGE UNIT IN ANOTHER DIMENSION.*

Helena snatched the issue and dropped into a chair, a rush of professional jealousy and thwarted ambition warming her skin. Had someone scooped Julian's discovery?

The headline came from a feature interview with a Swedish physicist and newly minted professor at the Stockholm Science Institute, Greta Gustafsson. A woman!

Helena read on greedily. The interview touched on quantum topology, one of Professor Gustafsson's research interests, but the storage space in another dimension turned out to be only a clever thought experiment. Helena breathed with relief.

She enjoyed the interview even more after that. The answer to the last question—about work-life balance—definitely resonated.

... Why should women have to choose between a scientific career and married life? Because that's what you're really asking, aren't you? In the picture, Professor Gustafsson radiated intelligence and good humor, but there was a fierce, defiant glow in her dark eyes. *My answer? Do both. There's no reason not to. My wife and I are both scientists, and we manage perfectly well, thank you.*

Helena read the last sentence twice, suspecting a typo. Then the meaning registered, and she laughed in delight. A lesbian couple working in science! How about that? Greta Gustafsson was full of surprises.

The tram car was much less crowded on the ride back. Helena even scored a seat for a few stops, which almost never happened, regardless of time of day. As the ceiling lights inside the car came on, she saw herself and the boxy interior of the tram reflected in the window, a faint projection superimposed on the street outside.

It made her marvel at Julian's discovery all over again.

The Swedish scientist may have been joking about higher-dimensional storage space for lease, but every joke had a grain of truth in it. Was she working on a similar project? How much progress had she made? Did she have a working device yet? What if she was months

ahead, with enough experimental data to publish her findings and blow everyone's notion of space wide open?

If Julian were to get the credit he deserved, Helena had not a moment to waste.

Days passed, a week, then two weeks, May turning into June, while Helena devoted all her waking hours to Julian's project, only leaving the apartment to check her mail or get groceries.

The sheer amount of work to be done was daunting, but Helena was never afraid of work. After another trip down to the cellar, this time to search through Julian's toolboxes as well as his teaching demos, she was equipped with several handheld, laboratory-grade meters that let her measure distance, mass, temperature, atmospheric pressure, light intensity, and electromagnetic field. They would have to do.

Still, despite her commitment, self-doubt plagued her.

Who was she to undertake this project? She wasn't Julian; she wasn't qualified. She still had no idea how the device worked; might never be able to grasp it with her limited mathematics. A big, gaping hole in any scientific paper she could patch together, right there. If only Julian had left behind some instructions, so she didn't have to grope her way in the dark!

Because—truly—how do you characterize a space that, according to the established scientific knowledge, shouldn't exist in the first place? What properties do you measure? What tests do you perform? It had been decades since Helena set foot in a lab or conducted an experiment. What if she was doing it wrong, and all the data would be useless? It's not like she could offer guided tours through the added space to peer reviewers. Her manuscript would have to convince them.

No, not hers—*Julian's*. She should be careful to always remember that. Julian had written the manuscript before he died. Helena only found it and prepared it for publication.

Sometimes a lie was the shortest path to the truth.

Once the work began, she became engrossed. Some people would find the testing tedious, but not Helena. She had endless questions, and every batch of new data provided answers. Were the conditions inside the added space stable—or did they vary over time? And

if they varied, what triggered the changes, and what were the patterns?

Helena repeated all measurements a dozen times, trying to anticipate and stave off future peer reviewers' challenges. The distance and electromagnetic data produced the most intriguing results, varied across the space but stable across sessions. Helena even repositioned the device itself relative to the closet door (by moving or turning the chair on which the device sat), but the measurements remained consistent. Although moving it to the living room produced a whole new pattern of data, suggesting that the dark space was somehow tied to the device's physical location, perhaps returning a distorted mirror image of it.

When she couldn't stand being cooped up in the apartment any longer, Helena would grab her purse and sneak out for a brisk walk. Even ordinary objects were often more than met the eye: a drying sheet that ballooned into a pillow case when the wind caught it, as if suddenly expanding in one dimension; a flock of pigeons in flight performing a series of spatial transformations in the sky, each shape existing for the briefest moment before fluidly morphing into the next.

On most of her walks, Helena managed to steer clear of the bulletin boards scattered around the neighborhood, but once in a while, she gave in to the temptation.

The boards were cleared each Monday morning, but by noon the same day, they would be cluttered with messages all over again, anything from fancy printed flyers to hastily scribbled notes. Some were humble pleas ("*Blessed with our second pair of twins, but no space to put the crib in 1R. Can you help?*"); others shameless bribes ("*Bonus: a brand new Skoda! Looking to trade 2R with tile shower and private balcony for 3R.*"); a few even resorted to veiled threats ("*Attention: The Special Housing Allocation Committee plans a major audit as early as July 1. If your living space exceeds your family's immediate needs, ACT NOW.*").

"Excuse me. Are you looking to switch?"

Helena spun around, startled. The woman was about Daria's age and clutched a handful of flyers to her chest, over her pregnant belly. Her blue eyes shone with hope.

Guilt stabbed Helena. "No, no. I'm sorry. I've got to—" And she hurried away.

The sooner Daria and Sebastian got back from Sweden and moved in with her, the better.

At least the Crows were gone, their bench mercifully empty, the forsythia bushes behind it losing their yellow flowers and growing young, green leaves.

As soon as she stepped inside her apartment, there was a knock on the door, so quiet she barely heard it.

Marta, Helena thought. *Something happened.*

But it was Oskar.

"Pani Heleno, may I come in? It's about Marta."

"Oh." Helena's chest tightened, and her purse slipped from her fingers.

"Let me get that for you." Oskar stepped through the doorway, one knee bending as if he intended to kneel in front of her. But he only picked up the purse and put it on the bench under the coat rack. Then he stood up.

The foyer was narrow, and Helena reflexively stepped back, her anxiety growing by the second. She didn't like the worried, uncertain look on Oskar's face. It wasn't like him. Something was very wrong. But was it any surprise? Helena had always known this misguided, inexplicable romantic entanglement would end badly.

"Where's Marta? Is she hurt?" she demanded. She wanted to yell, *What did you do to her?*

"She has a terrible headache." Oskar winced as if his own head hurt.

"A headache?" Helena sank onto the bench, light-headed from relief. She expected so much worse. "Oh, thank God."

Oskar frowned. "It's a bad migraine. I hate seeing her in pain like this. I told her to lie down and rest. I'd run to the pharmacy but I know the boys will bother her. So . . . I was hoping you have some aspirin I could borrow, Pani Heleno."

Helena blinked, her mind still sluggish. *Aspirin*. That's why he was here?

But Marta was meticulous about keeping her first-aid cabinet well stocked, what with her sons as willful and accident-prone as they were, collecting cuts, burns, scrapes, and bruises wherever they went. Impossible she would run out of an all-purpose staple like aspirin.

It wasn't worth a quarrel, though. Helena waved her hand. "Of course. In the bathroom cabinet. Let me—"

"I'll get it." And before Helena could protest, Oskar dashed down the short foyer straight for the bathroom door . . . but then turned right and vanished from view.

"Wait!" Helena shuffled after him, annoyed. "The bathroom is here. You missed it!"

But one look at Oskar crossing her living room—and she knew he missed nothing. He scanned every edge and every corner as if he was mapping out the space, his expression even more smug and shrewd than usual.

And no wonder. He'd played Helena for a fool and won a grand tour of her apartment.

Oskar peered out the large windows, scanning the balcony and the view outside, then hesitated in front of a door. It was left ajar, and it led to Helena's bedroom.

She gritted her teeth at the rudeness, but couldn't stop him from barging in and invading her personal space. At least the room was spotless. Helena always put away her clothes and made her bed in the morning, a lifelong habit of tidiness that now saved her from a horrible embarrassment in front of this nosy hooligan.

"Do you even need the aspirin?" she hissed at the intruder when he came toward her.

"Absolutely." And he slipped past her and stepped into the bathroom, another assault on Helena's private life. He took his time examining her shower, her washer and dryer, even her toilet.

"The cabinet over the sink. Top shelf on the left," she told him icily.

"Thank you." He snatched the bottle. "Marta will be most grateful."

If Helena was a man and knew how to fight, she would grab Oskar by the front of his shirt, drag him out the door, and throw him down the stairs. If he broke a few bones, so much the better. But she had no illusions what he'd do to her if she tried. Her age and gender would make no difference.

Then what could she do? Nothing, really. Even if she could get to the phone and call the police, what would she tell them, exactly? That there was a man prowling through her apartment, ogling her walls and groping her furniture? No, not a burglar, and not a complete stranger either; she actually let him

in. The police would laugh at her.

She concentrated on willing the intruder gone.

But when Oskar turned to the last room, alarm jolted Helena into action.

Julian's device was right there, in plain sight!

She blocked Oskar's path and yanked the door shut behind her. Her whole body shook. "The only way you set foot in my late husband's office is over my dead body."

Oskar scowled. "That could be easily arranged, Pani Heleno. A shaky stool when you try to change a lightbulb by yourself. Or maybe you make a trip down to the cellar and slip." He cocked his head. "Or I could just file a complaint with the housing authority. So much space wasted on one person. No one should be that selfish."

Helena's blood boiled. "Get out of my apartment."

Oskar chuckled, then strode past her down the hallway . . . and into the kitchen.

It took every ounce of patience for Helena not to grab a cutting tray and smash it against his back as he opened her cabinets, her fridge, her oven, clearly enjoying her agitation.

When he finally left her apartment, she slammed the door shut and locked it with trembling hands. Then she marched into her living room and pulled out a bottle of sherry from the cabinet. She poured herself a small glass and drank it standing up, replaced the bottle, and sank onto the couch.

Was Oskar bluffing about filing a complaint, just to torment her? She wouldn't put it past him. Underneath his easy charm, Marta's good-for-nothing boyfriend had a sadistic streak.

But Helena couldn't dismiss the threat either. If Oskar ever made good on it, she would need a recourse of her own, someone in a position of power she could appeal to for help. And there was only one man who might care enough to pull some strings, for her husband's sake.

Piotr:

But she better have Julian's draft ready by then, to secure his good will and seal the deal.

And if that meant handing over the device as well, so be it. Helena didn't have a choice. Anything to keep the apartment for Daria and her growing family.

Helena spent the next few days on pins and

needles, rushing to finish her tests with Julian's device but unable to fully focus, any noise from the staircase making her bristle.

She switched from tea to coffee, an emergency measure she hadn't used since cramming for the finals in grad school. But all the caffeine did was give her the same panicked dream night after night: she had to pack and move out in a hurry—all by herself, in a faint, grayish light that made her own apartment feel unfamiliar—and she was desperately trying and failing to fit hundreds of Julian's books into a handful of weirdly shaped boxes.

It couldn't be done. The problem had no solution. Helena woke up frustrated and exhausted each morning.

Oskar had more nasty tricks up her sleeve. She could feel it.

The sudden racket on the staircase almost gave her a heart attack. Erwin fell off the desk with a screech of alarm, his tail puffed like an orange dust mop.

Someone out there was yelling and stomping and banging on the iron handlebar like mad. On a Wednesday morning! What on Earth was going on?

Helena knew she should mind her own business, but she couldn't help herself. She hurried to her door and squinted through the peephole that bent and curved her neighbor's door and the short stretch of landing into a fish bowl.

It took her a moment to make sense of what she was seeing.

Oskar was carrying Marta in his arms, her face flushed in embarrassment but her eyes bright and laughing, while her boys looped around their father's legs a few times and raced on up the stairs, each brandishing a stick and screaming at the top of his lungs.

"Now, where is my key?" Oskar leaned against the wall, trying not to drop his cargo as he twisted himself to reach into his pocket with one hand. He was grinning too, his blue eyes blazing and his suntan positively glowing against his white dress shirt.

Marta giggled and tried to free herself, her face burning and her sandaled feet dangling in the air. She wore a shapeless, flowing lilac dress Helena had never seen before and clutched a manila envelope.

"Put me down, Oskar," Marta protested affectionately. "Please. Let me get the door."

“No, no, no. Hang on. I’ve got to do this properly and carry my wife over the doorstep!”

Wife?!

Helena gasped in shock, then recoiled as Oskar’s head snapped in her direction, his grin turning into a triumphant sneer.

Somehow, he heard her over the noise, he knew she was watching.

But that was the whole point, wasn’t it? The racket was deliberate. The man had put the sticks in his sons’ hands and egged them on—just to make absolutely sure Helena didn’t miss the news.

Oskar and Marta were married.

Without knowing what she was doing, or why, Helena opened her door and stared.

Somewhere above her, the two boys were still screaming and banging their sticks as they raced up and down the stairs, but she barely noticed the noise, her own thoughts just as loud.

How could this have happened? What was Marta thinking?

The marriage wasn’t a complete surprise. Helena had known it might happen. But not as suddenly as this! She’d had no warning, no time to prepare. Where was the church ceremony? The wedding reception with guests? Both took months to plan. Had the couple simply gone to the court and signed the papers? When had Oskar proposed—last night?

Bitterness filled Helena. What did she expect? That Marta would consult her first?

Oskar had finally managed to unlock his door—because it was *his* door now, and *his* apartment, as was everything else that Marta owned or earned from now on—and he strode through it with his blushing wife still in his arms.

Inside, he lowered her feet to the ground and let her stand but didn’t let go of her. Instead, he yanked her closer, his arms around her like a vice, and planted a loud, sloppy kiss on her mouth.

Martha laughed breathlessly, but her smile faltered when she met Helena’s gaze. “Oskar, stop.”

Oskar glared at Helena, then grabbed Marta by the waist and spun her around in the cramped foyer. “Why? You’re my wife now, and this is my house. We can do whatever we want here. And if someone doesn’t like it, they

better find another place to live.” And he bared his teeth at Helena and marched inside his apartment.

Marta pressed the manila envelope to her chest like it was a priceless treasure. A cheap ring glittered on her finger. “It’s the happiest day of my life, Pani Heleno.” It sounded like a plea.

Helena’s mouth went dry. She detested Oskar, but her feelings for Marta had always been complicated. Helena wasn’t even sure what she felt anymore. Was she angry at Marta—or sorry for her? Was it possible to feel both at once?

“Congratulations,” Helena finally said, trying to sound encouraging.

Marta nodded and smiled. “Thank you. I knew you would understand.” Then she hitched the long skirt higher and started up the stairs. “Tommy! Danny! Come down, please. We’re going to have cake!”

The next Monday, gray clouds rolled and tumbled across the sky like an appallingly dirty laundry in the washer, blotting out the sun entirely, and Helena was tempted to conclude that the nature itself shared her misgivings.

But it was a false comfort. The forces of nature were nothing but a complex machine, perfectly indifferent to human plight. The rain that pummeled the sidewalks was neither kind nor cruel. It made no sense to praise it for the blooming gardens or blame it for the ruined shoes. Only people could intentionally bring one another joy or pain.

Helena stood in her kitchen, anxiously peering out the window through the lace curtain, her fingers wrapped around a mug of tea that had long gotten cold.

It was almost ten o’clock. The mailman, Witek, kept a careful schedule and should arrive at any moment.

Dread clutched Helena’s throat. Would there be a thin, official-looking letter for her? A reassignment notice issued by the housing authority, with an order to vacate her apartment and move to a new address by a specified deadline?

She’d never seen a letter like that but couldn’t stop imagining it. Didn’t all government letters look alike? She pictured a single printed page with a few paragraphs of obscure regulations, followed by her details filled out

in a faceless clerk's careful block letters in black ink, as if to say, *See how impeccable the handwriting is? Like a machine's. That's how you know you can trust us. We have removed human flaws from the process. There can be no error here.*

Except it was all an error! One terrible misunderstanding!

Because Helena wouldn't be the sole occupant of the apartment for long. With Daria and Sebastian, there would already be three people per three rooms, a perfectly respectable ratio. And when the baby was born, the number would jump to four, and no one could claim any longer that the apartment was too big or that Helena was hogging more than her fair share of living space.

With the happy family reunion still in the future, though, Helena couldn't focus on her work until she checked her mailbox and verified that the danger of reassignment was evaded for another day.

"No, I can't and I won't, goddammit!" A man yelled, his loud voice cutting right through two walls and the steady drum of the rain. "Who do you think I am? Your babysitter?"

Helena shook her head. *Oskar*. Screaming at his wife.

There was a pause: Marta trying to pacify him or reason with him, keeping her own voice low so the neighbors couldn't hear. These one-sided arguments were a daily occurrence.

"No!" Oskar yelled, and something heavy hit the wall. "I told you I have a game to watch! Are you stupid or just trying to make me mad?"

Another whispered pause.

"I don't give a shit about the rain." Oskar's voice rang with resentment. "Stop treating them like damn pussies. They're not going to melt. They need the exercise to toughen up."

A door slammed, followed by a shuffle of feet and a cry of pain.

"No, they can't! Didn't you fucking hear me? I deserve a break too. You're taking them with you, or you'll regret it. I mean it, Marta! Don't push me."

Helena put her tea mug in the sink. Her blood was boiling, and she didn't trust herself to hold it. She pictured Oskar's face and glared.

Forget a honeymoon. In less than a week since the wedding, the man had gone from a

foul-mouthed freeloader to an abusive, hateful bully. So far, Marta wore a brave smile, too proud and too stubbornly loyal to complain or ask for help. But Helena didn't miss the red imprint of a man's hand on her forearm the other day. How forcefully did Oskar have to grab his wife to leave a mark like that? And what other, more painful bruises were hidden under her clothes?

Could a man like that ever change? Helena seriously doubted it. Marta was going to be lucky if her husband only broke her heart and not her bones. And what about the boys? What damage could he do to them physically or, even worse, if they learned from his example?

The thought turned Helena's stomach. Julian had never raised his voice or his hand on either his wife or his daughter. In Helena's opinion, any man who did belonged in prison. She wouldn't hesitate for a second to call the police on Oskar, if it ever came to that. But she shuddered to think of the shame and mortification it would cause Marta.

And what could the police do, anyway? Throw Oskar in a small, dark jail cell for a night? It would do no good. He'd only come back angrier and meaner the next day and take it out on his family, starting with his soft-spoken, quick-to-forgive wife.

No. Neither Helena nor the police could save Marta. She had to make the decision herself.

At the sound of her neighbor's door opening, Helena abandoned her post by the window and hurried to her own door and threw it open.

Across the hallway, Marta was on her knees, gently wrestling a bright yellow raincoat onto Danny, her younger. "We're going to stay dry, okay?" she cooed, her back to Helena. "It's no fun to get a cold in the summer." She looped her arm around his tiny waist and reached for his rain boots.

Seated next to his mother in the tight foyer, Tommy, already in his yellow raincoat, hurriedly pulled on his own rain boots and stood up. He screwed up his face. "Dammit!"

Marta's head swung to her older son. "Tommy, hush! What's wrong? You love your rain boots."

"No, I don't! I hate them! They pinch my toes!" And before Marta could stop him, he

kicked the rain boots off, slipped past her, and raced down the stairs barefoot.

"Tommy! You'll step on something sharp! Please!" Marta called after him, but he ignored her.

Helena watched the scene with a sinking heart.

Danny's eyes followed his brother, then he tried to kick off his own boots. "I hate them too! Get them off! Get them off!"

Marta held him close. "Danny, you need your rain boots. Be a good boy for mommy."

"No! You're stupid!" Her son made a fist and punched her arm, struggling to break free. "Let me go, you stupid cow!"

Marta released him, and he shot down the stairs after his brother, forever racing to catch up.

"Danny, your hood!"

"Quiet, goddammit!" Oskar hollered from the living room. "The game is starting! I'm trying to watch!" And the volume of the TV shot up from annoying to deafening. ". . . Most exciting moments from the Premier League Championship . . . And it's in! GOAL! GOAAAL!"

Marta flinched but didn't say anything. Only grabbed her umbrella and a heavy plastic garment bag from the rack, stepped into the hallway and hurriedly pulled the door closed behind her, blocking some of the noise.

She froze in her tracks when she met Helena's gaze, her face flushing an agonizing crimson all the way to the roots of her hair. "Pani Heleno. I'm . . . I'm sorry about everything." And she fled down the stairs, out the front door, and into the rain.

Right past the mailman, in a long plastic raincoat over his uniform and messenger bag, who was just heading for their staircase. He turned after her, alarmed, then stood and watched her until she vanished from view, his shoulders tense with concern.

There was no reassignment notice for Helena in the mail. But she knew it was only a matter of time. The guilty look on Marta's face was evidence enough.

Oskar was heartless. A father who kicks his own sons out into the pouring rain to watch a soccer game. He wouldn't think twice about stealing Helena's home. He'd probably gone to the housing authority and filed a complaint against her as soon as he got his marriage cer-

tificate. The only reason he had tied the knot in the first place. Because it definitely wasn't out of love for Marta or the boys. The man didn't care about anyone but himself.

If Helena wanted to keep the apartment, her only hope was to strike first.

The new Municipal Building took up an entire city block smack in the middle of the historical downtown, a "renovation" that left not a trace of the original. A massive block of cement five stories high, it towered over the much older and architecturally pleasing shops, galleries, and restaurants that lined the street. The building's decorative window frames and fake columns, added as an afterthought, did little to dispel the aura of grim efficiency, although their nooks and crannies swiftly became a popular hangout for pigeons, their droppings sprayed over the walls like some die-hard anarchist graffiti.

Helena braced herself and pushed through the heavy glass door, clutching Julian's satchel in front of her. She was taking a risk coming here. But what choice did she have?

She hurried past the Police Commissioner's offices on the ground level and up the wide, faux marble steps to the Housing Department on the second floor.

The customer area of the department that determined how much living space each citizen and family in the city deserved looked dot-for-dot like a bank—except ten times more crowded.

A long counter with a dozen service windows lined one wall. Longer, perpendicular queues of people waited their turn to present their case to the clerk tending each window. And on the left, a frosted-glass door led to a narrow hallway with offices on each side, each office belonging to a manager with the power to approve or dismiss a case with a scribble of their pen, and therefore off limits to any but the most important citizens. The smell of burned coffee battled with a clogingly sweet perfume and an acidic tinge of nervous sweat in the air.

The only thing missing was a secure bank vault. But if there was one, what would it contain? Unlike in a bank, which dealt with money, gold bars, and certificates of deposit, the asset traded here was living space. Not so easy to lock up in a box.

The queue advanced slowly, and as Helena waited for her turn, her knees stiff and her feet starting to ache, she passed the time by discreetly studying her fellow petitioners.

All ages and walks of life were represented, from fresh-faced young couples to middle-aged professionals to silver-haired retirees like herself. Several kids played tag, squealing and laughing as they dashed between the adults and ducked under the ropes that flanked each queue. A baby in a stroller spit out the pacifier and wailed for attention every few minutes. Someone was humming a melancholy tune, someone else grunting in irritation.

Which of the adults were here to plead, bargain, or argue for a reassignment, dreaming of that extra room in which to put their married bed or a crib—and which to stealthily report on a neighbor, friend, or family member, in the hope of snatching their space for themselves? Like trained poker players, the clerks' faces gave nothing away.

As the minutes and then hours dragged on, with the queue barely advancing, Helena's thoughts drifted to physics and the stories Julian used to tell her about his department.

Apparently, even physicists had wrestled with the uncertainty principle of the quantum theory—the reality it painted was just too bizarre.

Helena, in contrast, had readily grasped the idea.

Quantum uncertainty was like dealing with any bureaucracy. Each decision hovered in an unknowable limbo, and any attempt to ascertain it led to paradoxes. Thus, the relevant regulations did and did not exist, and some administrator did and did not have the power to decide your case. And after you'd located the office and filled out the copious paperwork, you might learn it was the right office but the wrong paperwork, or the right paperwork but the wrong office. The information was never complete and the outcome never assured.

What if you absolutely had to know? Well, the more complex the decision, the greater the risk of disturbing the process. A minor inquiry could trigger a vast and rippling wave of influence—a wave that would spread far and wide, sweeping across the random but coordinated offices of the city, upending your life and everyone's in your family when it hit.

Or not.

On the other hand, if you never inquired—never phoned and knocked on doors, never probed for answers—the fuzzy mesh of probabilities might never collapse and a decision might never be made. A cat both alive and dead inside the box. In other words: of no use to anyone.

What did people find strange about that? Helena wondered again now, as she waited in trepidation to speak to the clerk about her apartment. Quantum uncertainty matched her experience perfectly.

Still, she hoped this time would be different.

"I would like to register my daughter and son-in-law in my and my husband's apartment," she told the clerk when she finally reached the window. She undid the clasps on Julian's satchel with shaking hands and pushed a stack of papers across the counter. "I have all the forms already filled out right here, and all the required documents."

The clerk pulled the paperwork closer, his eyes already scanning the first form. He barely looked at Helena. "Verify your name, date of birth, and address for me."

Helena did. When the clerk asked nothing more, she watched him in tense silence, mesmerized by the speed with which he turned the pages, scanning one after another.

She'd prepared the paperwork diligently, checked and rechecked each answer multiple times, but what if she'd missed something? She detested filling out forms, the tiny cells that only fit a few words when she needed half a page to explain. *Occupation? Homemaker.* As if all she'd ever done was cook dinners and do laundry; as if she couldn't be several things at once: a wife, a mother, a neighbor, a thinker and problem solver, a trusted partner to a scientist, even if she'd never earned her own doctoral degree.

At last the clerk looked up. "So where are they?"

"Who?"

"Your daughter and son-in-law. Aren't they here with you?"

Helena shivered, suddenly chilly in the warm and stuffy air. "Well . . . no. They're still out of the country. On a temporary work visa. But they'll be back in a month. Two at the most. I thought it would speed things up if I—"

"The registration has to be done in person," the clerk cut in.

"In person?" Helena felt like the ceiling above her head was crumbling, about to collapse on top of her. "I don't understand."

"Unless your daughter and son-in-law are standing right here, with valid photo IDs in hand, I have no proof they exist. For all I know, you could be asking me to register ghosts. Believe me, you wouldn't be the first to try."

"But none of the forms mentioned it!" Helena protested. She felt tricked. The cat was never inside the box at all.

The clerk showed no emotion. "*All adults registering for a housing unit must verify their identity, citizenship, employment, source of income, and lack of criminal record before the process can be initiated,*" he recited coldly. "*Failure to provide the strongest available evidence may result in processing delays, a comprehensive housing history audit, and/or a corrective reallocation.*"

A corrective reallocation? Fear gripped Helena's heart and squeezed.

"My daughter is pregnant with her first child. I will be a grandmother." The words just slipped out, a reflexive appeal to sympathy.

The clerk was unmoved. "You cannot register an unborn child either."

"No, of course not. I just thought you may want to add a note to your records. Soon there'll be three more people living in the apartment with me." Helena actually teared up at the thought. What she wouldn't give to fast-forward to the moment Daria and Sebastian arrived at her door, bags and suitcases in hand, ready to move in.

The clerk's eyes glinted, but it wasn't compassion. He shuffled through her forms until he found what he wanted. "Hmm."

"What is it?"

"You said, *your and your husband's* apartment. But it looks like you are the only occupant."

"Did I?" Helena swallowed over a lump in her throat. "I meant: *my late husband's*. He passed away not long ago. He was a—"

"—a professor at the Polytechnic." The clerk was looking at another form and nodding. "Yes, now I recall the address."

It was like a splash of icy water. Helena's breath caught. "You . . . recall my address?"

Why? Has anyone . . . um . . ." She almost said *complained*, but that would be a dangerous word to use and an altogether wrong suggestion to put in a housing official's mind. "Has anyone . . . *inquired* about it?"

The clerk regarded her without emotion, his voice as dry as the countless pages of paper that filled the floor-to-ceiling filing cabinets behind him. "All cases are strictly confidential until SHAC reviews them and issues a decision."

Helena's mind was racing. SHAC. *The Special Housing Allocation Committee*. Hadn't she seen a flyer about some upcoming meeting? But what was the date? How much time did she have? "Please! Can you at least tell me when the next meeting is?"

The clerk pursed his lips. "That is official business and not something we advertise to the public. But if I were you, I would reflect on my obligations as a citizen and sort out any irregularities as soon as I can."

Helena bristled. He made it sound like she was a criminal, a common thief stealing from her neighbors, instead of protecting what rightfully belonged to her family. "*Irregularities?* What do you mean by that?"

But the clerk had already pushed Helena's paperwork back at her and was waving her away. "Next!"

She stuffed the papers back in Julian's satchel, turned on her heel, and marched toward the staircase. It was a good thing there was no door, because she wouldn't be able to resist slamming it behind her, and who knows what damage that would do to her case.

If her case wasn't already lost.

A loud crash startled Helena awake, and she sat up with a gasp, feet braced against the floor. What was it? An explosion? She glanced around her, pulse racing.

But the walls were still standing and the device was still on, the dark door it projected undisturbed.

She was in Julian's room. It was night. She'd fallen asleep at his desk while copying the last batch of data into the notebook.

Another loud bang shook the staircase, followed by angry shouting. A man's voice at full volume, raging and swearing despite the late hour.

Oskar.

Helena should have known. What was the abusive maniac doing this time? Shattering dishes? Breaking furniture? The man was out of control and getting worse. How his wife put up with him was beyond Helena's comprehension. But if he didn't quiet down, Helena was calling the police. She was surprised other neighbors hadn't called them already. The shouting and banging carried up and down the water pipes, Marta's misery broadcast to the entire staircase.

Unless the neighbors were afraid of Oskar and chose to keep their distance. If so, they were wiser than Marta. And more patient than Helena, who couldn't stand the ruckus any longer.

Helena's rotary phone was in the foyer. She pushed to her feet and hurried across the room, careful to walk around Julian's device. She snatched the receiver but a new sound froze her hand.

A woman's voice, painfully soft compared to Oskar's yelling, arguing back.

Marta—standing up to her unhinged husband.

Dread pierced Helena like a knitting needle. *He'll hurt her.*

And like on cue, there was a sickening thud, and Marta's voice rose to a cry and cut off. Then a door slammed, and angry feet pounded the stairs.

Helena rushed to her kitchen window just in time to catch sight of Oskar stalking off into the night, his hands still rolled into fists. The brute! What had he done to Marta?

A gentle knock sounded, and Helena spun around and hurried to open the door.

Marta stood in the hallway, barefoot and in a nightgown, her face pale like a ghost's. Except for a painful bruise blooming on her cheekbone, the skin cut and bloodied where her husband's knuckles had struck.

"Pani Heleno . . ." Marta's voice was a breathless whisper, but her eyes shone with resolve. She clutched a handful of papers to her chest. "I won't do it. I simply won't, and I told him so." She shouted on her feet and would have fallen if Helena didn't catch her arm.

"Marta. *My God.* He hit you! We should call the police."

Marta's eyes widened. "No, no, Pani Heleno. I'm begging you. I'm all right."

"You're not all right. Come in and sit down a

minute. Let me at least look at that cut." Helena pulled the younger woman down the narrow foyer, intending to lead her to the dark living room.

But Marta slipped from her grasp and hurried into the brightly lit office instead. "It's nothing. I just wanted to leave these for you. I'll put them on the table—Ohh!"

Helena hurried after the younger woman into Julian's office, but it was too late.

The laser lights blinked out as Marta tripped on the cord and yanked it out of the outlet, switching off the device. The dark passage was gone, nothing but the closet door left behind, plain and white and locked as before.

Except... that wasn't all. Something else was there. A bushy orange mop impossibly growing out of the white wood at knee level.

Helena's stomach clenched. Erwin!

Or what was left of him in this room, in the regular space, after he'd tried to dash through the dark door when Marta entered.

Was he dead? Killed instantly when the device stopped working? Or alive but suffering some unspeakable agony as his body was cut in two? The tail didn't twitch, didn't move at all, perfectly frozen. But it didn't touch the closet door either, a slice of air between them . . .

Marta saw it too because her eyes popped wide open. She blinked several times, as if to shake the image, then gingerly touched her bruised face, one hand still clasping the papers. "Gosh. Oskar must have hit me harder than I thought. I'm . . . seeing things."

Helena pointed with a shaky finger, feeling light-headed herself. Her poor neighbor had been through enough for one night, but there was no time to waste. "No, no. It's the cord. Behind you!"

Marta pulled herself together with remarkable quickness. "This cord?"

"Yes. Quick! Plug it back in!"

Dropping the papers, Marta snatched the cord and plugged it back in the outlet.

The device beeped sharply, making them both jump. Then a red laser shot forth, fanning out to a familiar pitch-black rectangle of the door.

The orange tail zipped inside it.

Marta was blinking again. "Was that—?"

But Helena hushed her with a trembling hand before turning to the dark door. "Erwin! Come here, kitty. Who wants a snack? Fresh

salmon, your favorite. Come out and get it. Erwin?"

For a few interminable seconds, nothing happened. Then Erwin strolled out, unharmed and unhurried, the ears alert but the tail no longer puffed up like a dust mop.

His orange eyes brushed Marta, then focused on Helena. He nimbly picked his path between the dropped papers and looked up at his owner expectantly. "Meow?"

"Oh, thank God." Helena heaved a sigh a relief, then waved the truant cat into the foyer. "Now off with you! Out! This room is off limits!"

Erwin hissed with indignation at being so horribly tricked, but obeyed and trotted out of the room.

Helena turned to Marta. "He's not supposed to go inside, and he knows it."

Marta peered inside the dark door, frowning. "Inside . . . where, Pani Heleno? It doesn't look like your closet."

"Of course it's not the closet," Helena snapped and instantly felt guilty. "It's more like . . . a reflection in the mirror. An extra space but . . . only temporary. Anyway, I'm still running tests." A sudden fear gripped her. She looked her soft-spoken neighbor in the eye. "But you cannot tell *anyone* about this. Promise me, Marta. Especially not your husband."

A mention of Oskar sent a shudder through Marta. "Of course, Pani Heleno. You can trust me. But . . . there's something I have to tell you."

Helena froze. "Tell me what? What did Oskar do now?"

"Nothing. Not yet . . ." Marta's cheeks flushed, the bruise like a shadow over half of her face. She looked down at the loose pages scattered at her feet and hurriedly picked them up. She offered them to Helena. "But he wants me to file this."

One glance at the page, and Helena's heart sank. It was a formal complaint form with the housing authority. Blank except for Helena's name and address in Oskar's impatient scribble.

Marta's soft voice continued. "I told him I won't do it, Pani Heleno. I cannot. You've always been good to us, and this is your apartment, and you'll need the room when Daria and Sebastian move in with you. When do they get back? It won't be long now, right?"

"Not until August," Helena said.

"August?" Fear flashed in Marta's eyes.

"Daria is pregnant."

"Oh!" Marta clasped her hand over her mouth, then quickly dropped it. "I mean, that's wonderful news, Pani Heleno. Congratulations. You'll be a grandmother." Marta's eyes shone with a feverish hope. "And with four of you in the apartment, counting the baby, surely the housing authority will not press you to switch. Have you tried—?"

"Registering my family in the apartment ahead of time? Of course I tried. And the clerk made it painfully clear that my daughter and son-in-law *do not exist* until they are standing next to me, IDs in hand. I can do nothing until they're here."

"But, Pani Heleno, August is so far away . . ." Marta looked crushed but attempted a brave smile. "No matter. I . . . I . . . will talk to Oskar. He has to understand we're neighbors, and neighbors have to look after each other, not fight like this. And . . . and if that doesn't work, I . . . will refuse. He's my husband, but this is wrong, and he cannot force me to do it. He . . . cannot." Her voice broke.

Helena felt numb. She didn't doubt Marta's good intentions, but they were no match for her husband's cruelty. Oskar didn't even have to hit her. All he had to do was threaten her sons, and Marta would do anything he demanded, simply to protect them. What mother wouldn't?

A door slammed below them, and angry stomping shook the staircase.

Helena and Marta both froze.

Oskar was back.

Helena reached for the younger woman. "Marta, listen to me. If he ever hits you again, I want you to come straight here!"

But Marta was already in the foyer and hurrying out the door. "No, no. It won't happen again, Pani Heleno. I'll be fine, really. I'm so sorry to bother you." And she dashed across the staircase and into her apartment, moments before her husband barged into view.

Oskar was drunk. He saw Helena and wheeled on her. "*What!?*"

She managed to close her door and turn the lock before Oskar's kick rattled the wood.

"Mind your own business, or I'll fix you up too! And you better start packing!"

Even after the angry muttering and shuffling

across the landing quieted, Helena got no sleep that night. How could she sleep when that ruthless brute was scheming to steal her apartment—and terrorizing his wife and sons in the process?

Time was already Helena's enemy, but now it became a cruel, willful thing. Each morning dragged something awful, the minutes stretching into eternity, until Helena could barely breathe, never mind focus on her work. She would pace the apartment, then stand by her kitchen window, her chest tight and her muscles tense as if someone was wounding her up.

Until ten o'clock—the mail delivery time.

As soon as she spotted the mailman approaching, Helena rushed down the stairs to the mailbox, ready to snatch her mail from Witek's hands and hurry back to the safety of her kitchen to open it. Was there a relocation notice—or was she spared another day?

Witek watched her with worried eyes but never asked; maybe he already knew. Once, Oskar burst from his apartment when Helena was getting her mail. Witek was at her side at once, a human shield between her and the man charging down the staircase.

Oskar slammed into Witek's shoulder. The two men locked eyes.

"Slow down before you hurt someone," Witek said.

Oskar sneered at him. "How about you do your job and stay out of my way? Any mail for me and *my wife*?"

"No."

"That's a shame. We're waiting for an important letter." Oskar's eyes flicked to Helena. "Isn't that right, Pani Heleno?"

Later that day, too rattled to focus on the data she collected or the paper she was drafting in her husband's name, Helena went for a walk.

She walked for hours, following a random path through the neighborhood, oblivious to the hot June sun reddening her skin, while her mind raced in circles.

What was she supposed to do? She needed a plan. She needed to act, to do something, anything. But what? She had no idea. All she knew was that, no matter what happened, she could not give in to Oskar and let him steal her apartment. Julian had worked too hard all his life to secure it for her. And what did Oskar do

to deserve it? Nothing. The man was a leech, a good-for-nothing liar and bully. He never bothered to get a job or contribute in any way; never raised a finger to help his wife with the boys or with her business.

These were the facts. Any rational person would see that.

"My God, Pani Heleno! What have you done?"

Helena halted, startled and blinking as her thoughts scattered.

She was back in front of her apartment building. Olga and the other two Crows stared at her from their bench framed by a luscious green forsythia bush.

"What do you mean? I haven't done anything," Helena said quickly, dread spiking. Did the Crows know about her trouble with Oskar? If so, they might rush to file complaints themselves.

"No? Just look at you!" Olga exchanged a look of horror with Klara, then with Antonia. "How long have you been in the sun? You're bright pink!"

Helena glanced down at her arms, finally catching up. Relief warmed her. They didn't know. Good. "Oh, it's just a bit of sun." Her eyes caught on the bright pink knitting project in Antonia's hands, the trunk now sprouting not two, not three, but four long tubes. "And what's wrong with pink? It's a lovely color."

"Sure, when it's clothes, not your skin," Olga snapped. "You're going to be in a lot of pain tomorrow, my dear. Which reminds me—"

"Sorry. Antonia? I have to ask." Helena turned to the quietest Crow, eager to deflect Olga's prying. She lifted one pink tube. "What are you making?"

Antonia let out a soft gasp, her eyes tearing up.

"I mean, it's very pretty. I love the color." Helena spoke quickly. "But the shape . . . I just can't figure it out."

Olga clicked her tongue impatiently. "It's for Leon."

"Leon?" Helena still drew a blank.

"Her dog," Klara said.

"Oh! Leon. Of course. I remember him." Four legs finally made sense. "But I thought he died," Helena blurted out.

"He's not dead! He's just . . . not alive." Antonia was wringing the pink onesie in distress,

but her voice was full of conviction. "He's still here, though. I can feel him. My good boy. And he always gets cold in winter, so this is to keep him warm."

Tears dripped from Antonia's chin and into her pink knitting. Olga put an arm around her. "Now, now. Of course, he's here. Just because we can't see him doesn't mean anything. The world is full of mysteries. Dead or alive aren't the only options."

Helena watched the three women, and her spirit sank, despair edging her thoughts.

Deep down, she'd hoped to reason with Oskar, to convince him. But who was she kidding? Oskar wouldn't care. He knew what he wanted, and he wouldn't stop until he got it.

And what about the housing authority? Would the clerk listen to Helena? Would anyone?

People were *not* rational. They believed whatever they wanted to believe.

Helena turned on her heel and fled home. While it was still her home, and not someone else's.

The crisis came a few nights later. A horrific bang that shook the floor and rattled the windows, yanking Helena from shallow sleep.

She sat up, wide awake but disoriented by the dark, her heart racing. She was in her living room, with the lights off. It was night outside. She had dozed off on the sofa.

Another bang echoed through the walls, and the familiar hateful voice screamed, "Shut up, Marta! Goddammit! I know you didn't go. You never do what I say. Stop lying to me!" Somewhere nearby, glass shattered and a boy cried out.

Oskar was drunk and back at it.

Helena hurried to her front door, her stomach knotted with worry.

Muffled sounds of a struggle came from across the hallway, with the boy sobbing softly.

"No! Get off me! Too late for that! I warned you!" Oskar's slurred yelling drowned the quieter, softer voice that pleaded with him. "It's all your fault, Marta! Did you file the fucking form like I asked? No. Because you don't listen. I'm your husband, but I get no fucking respect here. Well, I'm going to teach you respect. You and these little shits!"

More knocks and thuds, more glass shatter-

ing, and now two boys were wailing in misery. Was Oskar breaking windows? The man was dangerous.

Enough. Time to call the police.

Helena rushed to her rotary phone. She stole a glance at Julian's office. The room was washed in the warm glow of the street lamp outside. The device was on, the faint shaft of light it projected barely visible, but the dark door stark and perfectly real.

"*Don't you touch him!*" Marta's cry pierced the air, shrill with desperation.

Another struggle, more violent now, then a thud of a heavy body falling.

"You fucking bitch!" Oskar's growled in fury. "I'm bleeding! Now you've done it!"

Helena dropped the phone and threw open her door.

Marta was just ushering her boys into the hallway. Her sons stumbled and clung to her, their faces streaked with tears and snot. They were barefoot and still in shabby pajamas. "Mommy, Mommy."

Marta swayed on her feet, her whole body trembling as she held her sons close. "It's okay. We're just . . . going for a walk. Don't worry about the shoes, honey."

Helena intercepted them before they could take the stairs and pulled them into her apartment. "Come, come. Tommy, Danny. Quick! In here!"

"Take the boys, please, but I can't—" Marta glanced at the open door behind her. "He'll hurt you too—"

"Hush!" Helena pulled the young woman over her door still.

There was blood on Marta's arms, her legs, her nightgown. She left bloody footprints on the rug.

"*MARTA!*" Oskar screamed. "*I'm going to kill you, you stupid bitch!*"

That did it. Helena felt a shift inside herself, the anger ballooning up and swallowing the fear. Oskar was a monster and had to be stopped.

Dead or alive aren't the only options, a voice in her mind whispered.

She urged Marta and the boys into the dark living room. "Stay here."

Then she closed the door and hurried across the short foyer.

And just in time—because Oskar was already barging through her front door and

barreling toward her, his face twisted and his hands bloodied.

Helena rushed into Julian's office. "Marta, quick! Get in the closet! *Get in the closet!*"

Oskar was already on her, reeking of vodka. "Get!" He shoved Helena aside like a sack of potatoes and headed for the closet. "*MARTA! I'm coming for you, bitch!*"

Helena held her breath as she watched the drunk wife-beater stumble through the dark door.

She reached for the device, intending to switch it off—and froze.

She couldn't do it—and time was running out. Oskar could be back at any moment. And what would he do to them?

Someone slipped past Helena. A hand found the cord and pulled the plug from the outlet.

The device shut off.

The dark door vanished.

Marta gently touched Helena's arm. "Pani Heleno? Are you all right?"

Helena exhaled a shaky breath. "I'm all right."

"May I open the window for a moment?" Marta asked.

"Yes, of course." Helena could use some fresh air herself.

But, once she opened the window, Marta cleared her throat, then leaned out and shouted into the night, her voice hoarse and unused to yelling, "That's right, Oskar! Go away and never come back! Or you're going straight to jail!" Then she quickly closed the window and turned back to Helena, embarrassed. "I'm sorry. It was very loud."

"No. It was good." Helena nodded her approval.

She'd always known Marta was smart. A quick, clear thinker even in a crisis. And here was another proof.

Now any neighbors who were listening would confirm that Oskar threw a horrible fit and then stormed out, never to come back. A perfect cover. Although Helena doubted that anyone would miss the man or ask about him.

Helena glanced around the room. What else?

A thought struck her, and she bent over the device and changed the settings. Just in case.

Based on Helena's tests, the dark space changed with the device's physical location; move the device to another room, and the

dark door would lead somewhere else altogether. While she wasn't planning to use the device in Julian's office ever again, caution was best. Changing the settings was like scrambling the address. The chance of someone stumbling on Oskar's prison was close to null.

Because a prison cell was where he belonged. And that's where he was—in a way.

Trapped in the invisible space and frozen in time, where he couldn't hurt anybody.

It was done. Marta and her sons were safe.

And so was Helena's apartment.

"It'll be our secret." Helena put an arm around her neighbor. "Now let's check on the boys and let me look at those cuts on your feet. Okay?"

Marta sniffed, overcome with emotion. "Okay."

But Helena's relief was short-lived, the vector of her future changing yet again.

Piotr showed up at her door on Saturday morning, an unwelcome surprise. With everything else on her mind, Helena had forgotten all about him.

But here he was now, in a handsome linen jacket that still smelled of the sea and a hot summer day on the beach, and with a box of fancy chocolates in hand. A gift or a bribe, Helena wasn't certain.

After a few pleasantries, Piotr got to the point. "Pani Heleno, have you finished organizing your husband's papers? I seem to recall one project in particular that Julian and I started together. On quantum topology. A very new topic at the time—pure speculation, really—but the mathematics was solid even then. So we both knew that we were onto something, even if we kept our excitement to ourselves and our collaboration quiet."

Julian and I. We both. Our collaboration.

Helena pursed her lips. It was a nice story, but entirely fictional. She had no recollection of Piotr ever working closely with Julian.

Piotr must have sensed her displeasure, because he quickly added. "Most of the credit goes to Julian, of course. He laid most of the groundwork. I merely helped him flesh out the ideas and formulate the hypotheses. So the first author credit on any papers we publish is his, absolutely." His expression turned solemn. "Your husband was brilliant, Pani Heleno. And

it is both my privilege and my duty to make sure that *all his work* is published and gets the recognition it deserves.”

“Thank you,” Helena said. “But I’m not quite done with Julian’s papers yet.”

Piotr’s expression soured. “That’s . . . a pity. There is a special issue I was hoping to submit to.”

“Perhaps you could finish another project,” Helena snapped.

Irritation flashed in Piotr’s eyes. “Now, Pani Heleno. This is serious. We are not talking about family souvenirs. You have to realize that any scientific discoveries your husband made, whether applied or purely theoretical, belong to the Polytechnic. They may have tremendous value. Withholding them—why, that would constitute theft. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Helena held his gaze. “Can you steal something that doesn’t exist? I would think that defies physics as we know it. Don’t you?”

Piotr’s face darkened. “I was hoping we can come to an agreement without resorting to more . . . official measures. But you are giving me no choice.”

He reached inside his jacket and produced a folded paper. With calculated slowness, he unfolded it, put it on the table, and rotated it toward Helena.

Helena glanced at the paper and shuddered.

She’d seen it before. It was an official complaint form to the housing authority. But this one was fully filled out in Piotr’s elegant cursive.

Piotr was blackmailing her!

Helena rose to her feet, struggling to keep her voice calm. “You never cared about my husband’s work. I’m not giving you anything. Now leave.”

Piotr got up too, all pretense of civility gone. “Don’t be stupid! I’m trying to help you! This apartment is too big for one person, and you should’ve been reassigned long ago. And I’m willing to forget all about it in exchange for Julian’s papers.” He was practically hissing at her. “But I’m warning you. This is your last chance. I will not ask again.”

A knock on the door startled Helena. Who was it? Police ready to arrest her?

Helena pictured Piotr’s wife, the prison director, holding handcuffs.

She hurried to the door, conscious of Piotr following on her heels.

But it was only Witek, his heavy messenger bag at his hip.

“Good morning, Pani Heleno. Sorry to interrupt.” He glanced at Piotr and frowned slightly, a flicker of concern in his gray eyes.

“Not at all.” Helena smiled in relief. She’d always liked the mailman, but she’d never been happier to see him than right now. The young man had a knack for showing up at the perfect time to rescue her from thieves and bullies. She glanced at Piotr. “My husband’s former colleague was just leaving.”

The academic glared at her. “Very well. But I do hope you reconsider, Pani Heleno. I cannot wait much longer, and *your husband’s legacy is at stake*.” He made a show of sliding the complaint form, now neatly folded in three, into the inside pocket of his jacket.

“I am aware.” Helena forced a smile, although Piotr’s threat weighed heavier on her with every minute. “Good bye.”

Piotr marched out the door and down the stairs without another look at her.

Witek watched him, frowning, then he turned to Helena. He handed her a smooth, cream-colored envelope. “A letter for you, Pani Heleno. I thought you’d want to know right away.”

“Thank you, Witek.”

One glance at the round handwriting, and Helena’s breath caught.

The letter was from Daria. But what about? And why didn’t her daughter call? It would be so much faster.

Helena read the letter in Julian’s office. Then just sat in her husband’s chair, lost in thought.

Daria was fine, and so was the baby. But she had big news, which took several pages to explain.

They had decided to stay in Sweden permanently. She and Sebastian were applying for citizenship, and the baby would automatically be a citizen when it was born. They both had excellent jobs, and the benefits were almost too good to be true. Nine months of paid parental leave for both the mother and the father! Daria was also thinking of going back for a Master’s degree. She wanted to study languages and become a translator, specializing in natural sciences.

And last but not least, they made a down payment on a lovely apartment overlooking a park and a daycare. Helena could come visit any time, and stay as long as she wished. They missed her and couldn't wait to see her, Daria wrote, and Helena could see several tear stains blurring the ink and crinkling the cream page.

So that was it.

With the letter resting in her lap, Helena lapsed into a daydream, her dashed hopes playing out in her mind's eye like a movie.

She was hugging Daria and Sebastian at the airport, their suitcases piled on a cart; she brought cookies and lemonade while Daria painted the walls of their new bedroom and Sebastian assembled the crib after they moved in; she went for a walk with Daria, their arms linked; she rocked her grandbaby in her arms and sang them a lullaby.

Julian was there too, his hair whiter and his face more wrinkled, but his eyes bright with happiness. Reading picture books to the baby, fixing a radio with Sebastian, going over a science article with Daria, washing the plates after dinner while Helena towed them dry. And why shouldn't Julian be there? Imagination had no limits. One could bend time and space and bring back the loved ones as easily as tying a scarf.

Could one grieve for a future that would never come to be?

Because Helena's mind was made up. There was no way in hell she would give in to Piotr's demands. Underneath all the sophistication, he was just like Oskar. It might take a few days or a few weeks, but if he didn't get what he wanted, he would report her to the housing authority. And Helena would rather live in a cellar than let the backstabbing hypocrite take credit for Julian's discovery.

And now, Daria wouldn't be moving in with her anyway.

In life—like in science—sometimes you failed. Some problems had no solutions. The best you could do was stick to your principles and keep your head high as you dealt with the disappointment and the fallout.

Helena would lose the apartment.

There was no way around it; she had accepted that.

But she would lose it on her own terms.

Dusk was falling by the time she got up from Julian's chair, her joints stiff but her resolve

steadfast. She walked across the hallway and knocked.

Marta opened the door. "Pani Heleno. Is everything all right?"

"Yes and no," Helena said. "I need your help."

The younger woman didn't hesitate. "Of course. Anything. Come in. I'll make tea."

August was surprisingly mild, the air warm and the sky cloudless. A gentle breeze rustled the lace curtain, and lovely patterns of light danced on the wall. Helena kept the window open as she arranged Julian's books on the new bookcase.

"Who's got the next book?" she asked her helpers.

"I do! I do!" Tommy and Danny each offered her a book from a moving box. They were helping her unpack.

Helena pretended to examine both books. She was in no hurry and enjoyed herself. "Excellent choice, Tommy. You too, Danny. Let's put them next to each other. Now what's next?"

The bookcase was Witek's handiwork. It took up one whole wall, floor to ceiling, and opened like a two-door cabinet, each door an extra set of shelves. An ingenious design that saved space and delighted Helena. Julian would have approved of Witek's carpenter skills.

Marta had offered to paint the walls, but Helena declined. Marta had her own unpacking to do, even if her move was only across the hallway. As was Helena's.

They had switched apartments.

It was Helena's idea, and after the initial resistance, Marta gratefully accepted. Her sons could have their own room, and her bedroom-slash-sewing studio would be undisturbed.

As to Julian's papers, Witek had kindly mailed a large box of them for her to Piotr's office at the Polytechnic. Helena wished she could see Piotr's reaction when he opened the box. She had deliberately put the papers out of order. Every paper clip and staple removed; no two related pages together.

If Piotr wanted war, Helena would give him one. Let him brandish his petty threats. She would wield chaos and entropy as her weapons. And—yes—deception. Because after weeks spent sorting the papers into a

usable order and trying to decipher the meaning, Piotr would discover that none of it was new or publishable.

Because the important papers, the ones to do with quantum topology—Julian’s old notes, diagrams, and data tables, plus Helena’s hefty manuscript with new data—were safe on Daria’s desk in Stockholm, undergoing translation. And once translated, Helena intended to deliver them in person to Greta Gustafsson—together with Julian’s device. Daria had already made an appointment, and she would accompany her mother.

The thought of meeting the Swedish scientist face to face thrilled Helena almost as much as the prospect of seeing Julian’s work published. Helena had read her book, all the papers she could find, and a few more interviews, and concluded that Professor Gustafsson had a brilliant scientific mind—but no ego. Giving Julian and the Polytechnic credit on the paper would be no issue—Greta Gustafsson cared only about the science and using it for the good.

A knock on the door made Tommy and Danny race to the foyer. “Mom and Witek are here!”

Helena followed the boys to open the door.

Marta wore a summer dress, and Witek carried a big picnic basket. They were holding hands and looked radiant. It warmed Helena’s heart to see them together.

“I hope the boys didn’t bother you,” Marta said.

“Not at all,” Helena said. “They were great help.”

Witek turned to the boys. “Then who’s ready to go to the park and get ice cream for lunch?”

“Me! Me!”

“What flavor?”

“Cherry!”

Marta shook her head, laughing. “Not *for* lunch. *After* lunch. Our lunch is in the basket, remember?”

“Really? Well, let’s see.” Witek opened the basket, playing along. “Whoa! Ham sandwiches? Deviled eggs? Lemonade? Is this the most delicious lunch, or what?” The boys drew closer, and he let them admire the food. “How about lunch first, then ice cream? Yes? Okay. Now let’s put your shoes on. We’ll be walking all around the lake.”

Danny glanced at Helena’s slippers and frowned. “What about your shoes? You’re not coming with us?”

Helena smoothed the boy’s hair. “I can’t today, Danny. I still have to pack.” She indicated a suitcase.

“You’re moving away?” Tommy’s face fell. “But I thought you will live here now.”

Helena was touched. Free of the bad influence of their father, the boys were sweeter than she’d ever suspected. It was amazing how happiness brought out the best in people. “Only for a short trip. Don’t worry. I’ll be back.” Helena pulled both boys into a hug. “I will miss you both.”

“We’ll miss you too.”

“You’ll be good boys and listen to your mom and to Witek, won’t you?”

“We will! We will!”

Helena smiled. “Very good. Now go on and have fun.”

While Witek ushered the boys out, Marta turned back to Helena and hugged her shyly. “How can I ever thank you?”

Helena couldn’t help but tear up as she returned the hug. “No need. I’m happy that we are neighbors, Marta. Now go and enjoy yourself.”

With Marta’s family gone, the apartment fell completely quiet.

Then Helena heard a muffled noise.

Scratching.

But where was it coming from? She checked the foyer, the kitchen, the living room.

The scratching came from inside the new bookcase!

She grabbed both half-doors and pulled them open.

“MEEEEOW!” A puffed-up ball of orange fur shot out and zipped past her legs.

“Erwin!” Helena gasped.

How did he get inside? And how did he ever fit in there? The bottom shelves were packed with textbooks, the back panels of both doors snug against the spines. There was no room at all.

Unless...

But the cat was already gone, and if he knew something she didn’t, he wasn’t telling. ■

Vera Brook is a neuroscientist turned speculative fiction writer. She grew up in Poland, so this novella, while fictional, is very close to her heart.