

HANNA
HOLMGREN

A

Night
by the
Sea

NOVELLA



FEUER
WERKE
VERLAG

About the Book

A romantic hotel by the sea, an endless horizon, and a love that takes her by surprise...

When Lisa brings a forgotten wine delivery to her best friend Lennart at his dream beach hotel by the sea, she has no idea what kind of adventure awaits her. On her very first afternoon, she meets Johannes on the beach and feels an instant connection. As luck would have it, she runs into him a second and even a third time, though in ways she never would have expected.

The two grow closer and spend a wonderful evening together—an evening that feels like the start of something more. The sound of the waves, the bright moon, and Johannes's blue eyes make Lisa's heart race. But as her time by the sea draws to a close, Johannes makes a confession, and Lisa must decide whether she wants to see him again—or if it would be better to forget him as quickly as possible...

About the Author

Even as a child, I loved recording my memories of beautiful places and moments in a travel diary and turning them into lasting stories. Over time, these stories grew into full-length novels and eventually became my greatest passion.

Today, writing means pure relaxation to me. It brings sunlight, grains of sand, and the sound of the sea into my home office—soothing the constant wanderlust until the next trip, which still remains my most important source of inspiration.

Since leaving my former career behind, I've devoted myself entirely to writing heartwarming, feel-good romance novels.

Before You Start Reading

Every story takes its own little journey.

This one began in German and has now found its way into English, a suitcase full of sunshine and a hint of ocean air.

I've done my best to keep its soul intact, even if a few words may still whisper with an accent.

If you notice something that feels a little off, I'd love to hear from you at feedback@hannaholmgren.de.

Happy reading—and may this story take you somewhere beautiful.

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A Night by the Sea

Novella

Hanna Holmgren

Lisa carefully hoisted the wine crate out of her car's trunk, taking pains not to jeopardize the precious cargo.

"You're a lifesaver," a voice rang out behind her. Lisa turned around, grinning.

Lennart stood before her in full chef's regalia, arms wide open. She set the crate down carefully on the ground before falling into Lennart's arms.

"I'm more than happy to save your skin, Lennart."

"Not sure how much skin there is left to save; it's more like a well-upholstered cushion these days," he joked.

"I save cushions too, as a matter of principle, especially when there's a short trip to the seaside in it for me," she replied, laughing into his ear. "By the way, you smell like a deep fryer," she noted before pulling away from the welcoming hug.

"Deep fryer... pfft, that's the scent of the finest Greek olive oil, you philistine."

"Grease is grease and it smells like grease. But tell me, is this rich snob who has his wine hauled halfway across Germany visible anywhere yet?"

"I'll point him out as soon as he crosses our path."

"I've never experienced anything so decadent... According to Google, I could go on a pretty lavish vacation for the value of this crate!"

"Well, he can afford it," Lennart said with a shrug. "It was the supplier's mistake—but he had no way of getting it here today. Normally, I'd leave it at that and just offer one of our other good wines. But the customer insisted on this specific wine, and he demanded we source it somehow... no matter how, no matter the cost. It's a good thing you had time to bring it over."

"And that the supplier lives near me... Am I really invited?"

"Of course, the whole nine yards. I'm putting it all on his tab."

"Well, wonderful, then I'll start with the champagne," Lisa replied, laughing.

"Coming right up!"

"I was joking, Lennart."

"I know that", he countered, also laughing.

"Come on, I'll show you to your room."

Lennart bent down to pick up the crate.

"I'll never understand the hype over certain wines," she mentioned before setting off to follow her best friend into the hotel. Once inside, he placed the wine crate on the reception desk.

"Wait, let me see which room they've stashed you in." He went behind the counter and stared at the screen with concentration.

"Aha," he murmured, his hand sliding the mouse across the smooth wood.

Lennart noticed Lisa watching him.

"What?" he asked with a grin.

"Your hands, Lennart. I'd forgotten over the last six months *just* how beautiful they are," she teased.

"You're truly crazy."

"No, seriously. You could still be a hand model for dish soap commercials or hand cream."

"Okay, if the whole cooking thing ever stops working out, I definitely have a plan B in my pocket."

"You should definitely keep that in mind. Just make sure you don't chop off one of your gorgeous fingers before then, okay?"

"Don't worry, I'll be careful," he replied with a wink. "There, and if you like, you can head up to your room now. Number fourteen." He handed her the key card. "It's on the second floor. You've snagged a balcony with a sea view."

"Did you have to pull any strings for that?"

"Of course, I risked my life for you."

"I'll never forget this, Lennart Schmidt," Lisa replied with a smirk, giving him a quick squeeze.

"Will you have any time later?" she asked into his ear.

"Once I'm done with the barbecue event tonight, I'm all yours."

"Wonderful, I'm looking forward to it."

"And then you can tell me all about what's going on with you and Stefan, okay?"

Lisa sighed. "As a little teaser for that conversation, there's nothing going on with us anymore."

Lennart raised his eyebrows.

"Meaning?" he asked.

"He's moving out."

"Oh, wow. How are you doing with that?"

"So-so. But it was bound to happen. Somehow, I was prepared for it..."

"Are you sad?"

"I don't know, it doesn't feel like it anymore, not really. The second attempt at us was really strained. Maybe it would have been better if he'd stayed away last year, then I'd be completely over it by now... But let's talk properly later. I'm going to head up to my room."

"Okay, and if you want to eat, just grab a table in the restaurant. You'll be enjoying a five-course meal."

"Courtesy of the rich snob?"

Lennart grinned and nodded.

"Great, sounds good. I think I'll go for a run on the beach first." She gave a quick wave and headed off to get her suitcase from the car and settle into her room for the night.

Half an hour later, she was standing in her running gear on the sand of the Baltic Sea beach, looking toward the horizon. For an afternoon in late April, it was remarkably warm; the sun was already strong, warming her cheeks. She closed her eyes for a moment, feeling the warm wind tickle her skin, before lifting her lids and setting off with a deep breath. At a steady pace, her feet struck the sand rhythmically, and she savored this moment of inner peace. She kept glancing sideways at the sea and then back down at her running shoes, where the foamy edges of the waves washed over her path. Lisa smiled blissfully, inhaling the salty sea air with every stride. Suddenly, she flinched. Something had brushed against her shin. She immediately looked down, straight into the deep brown eyes of a medium-sized dog.

"Hey there, who are you?" she asked, slowing her pace and leaning down toward the wet muzzle. The black-and-brown mixed-breed dog sat down in front of her, kicking up the fine sand with every wag of its tail. Lisa stroked its head and looked around to see if she could spot the owner anywhere. This section of the beach wasn't very busy, so a dog owner searching should have been easy to spot. But at first glance, no one seemed to be missing their four-legged friend.

"Want to run with me for a bit?" she asked the dog, standing up and starting to jog again. The dog ran alongside her, looking up at her every now and then. She smiled. And so she jogged mile after mile, carrying that feeling of contentment with her. After a while, she stopped and turned around, followed closely by her companion, who was still running right by her side.

A loud whistle rang out. With a brief glance up at Lisa, the dog said his goodbye and galloped off toward the dunes. Lisa looked to the side. A man was standing by the dunes, evidently looking for his dog. Lisa watched as the dog danced around him in joyful circles.

"Thank you," the man called out, walking toward her.

"It's a good thing you aren't afraid of dogs," he remarked as he came to a stop in front of her, smiling. Lisa swallowed, as the man was incredibly good-looking.

"No, I love dogs," she replied, "I used to have one myself."

How old was he? He was wearing Vans, a baseball cap, and a hoodie; his hair seemed to be a bit longer, peeking out from under the edge of the cap. *Thirty*, she thought, *thirty could be right*.

"Unfortunately, Merle died last year, and I haven't been able to bring myself to get a new dog yet..." she continued.

"I'm sorry to hear that. That's exactly why I always struggle with the idea of getting a pet. You have to say goodbye so often..."

His smile was captivating. Lisa tried her best not to stare too much.

"Yeah, it's hard every single time. Merle lived to be eighteen... I miss her a lot."

"Wow, eighteen, that's a truly blessed age."

"What's your dog's name?" she asked.

"Joe."

"Hey, Joe." Lisa leaned down to Joe and scratched his ears.

"Will you do that to my ears too if I tell you my name?" he joked. "Sorry, that was cheesy. I probably should have kept that to myself..."

Lisa laughed.

"Give it a try!"

"Okay, I'm Johannes," he replied promptly, grinning ear to ear.

Johannes stood before her, waiting expectantly.

"Well, apparently that only works with dogs," he noted dryly.

"Apparently," Lisa confirmed.

"Are you on vacation here?" he asked.

"Not exactly. It's a crazy story. My best friend is the manager of the Dune Hotel over there." She pointed toward the hotel building. "And he's hosting a birthday party tonight. The customer celebrating ordered incredibly expensive wine, but the supplier forgot to deliver it. Lennart had to get it today, no matter the cost. By plane, if necessary."

"Seriously?"

"No, I made that last part up. But the person is probably rich enough that it would've been an option. Since the dealer lives near me, I hopped in the car and brought the wine in exchange for room and board. Money really does make the world go round."

"That really is crazy," he replied, looking a little taken aback.

"So you get to really treat yourself tonight?"

"Definitely. There's a five-course meal, and maybe, just maybe, I'll even have a glass of champagne. It's all going on the birthday boy's tab. He's probably so rich he won't even notice an extra person on the bill. Pretty decadent, if you ask me... though I probably won't actually order champagne for myself. That feels a bit cheeky."

"Why? You did the guest a favor, and if that was the deal, I'd drink champagne without a second thought. Or a glass of that expensive wine."

"I'm already excited about the good food. Besides, I'm not that big a fan of champagne."

"So how much does a bottle of this wine cost?"

"You don't want to know..."

"More than fifty dollars?"

Lisa waved the idea away.

"Oh, add another zero to that and then multiply it by ten bottles... I honestly can't understand spending that much money on wine. I really think this whole sommelier act is just a show. Give me a discount wine and some labels from an expensive vintage—and the world would be at my feet."

"Might be worth a try," he replied with a grin. He furrowed his brow for a moment. "Maybe you can join the party a bit tonight? I mean, since you were nice enough to bring the wine..."

Lisa laughed. "No, better not. It'll probably be a dreadfully stuffy evening full of boring conversations about investment funds and work-life balance babble."

"True, there's a good chance of that." He cleared his throat. "Better not risk it."

"Yeah, better not..." she replied quietly.

"Though, the evening would have the potential to be interesting just by your presence alone."

Lisa felt the color in her cheeks turn a deeper shade of pink. That always happened when she was stressed or when something was so exciting she could feel her heartbeat. She tried not to focus on it. In her experience, that only made it worse.

"That's nice of you to say..." she replied bashfully.

"It was nice meeting you..." he said then, out of the blue. He looked at her with clear question marks in his eyes.

"Lisa, my name is Lisa," she replied, immediately understanding what his questioning look was aiming for.

"That's a beautiful name." He cleared his throat again, looking a little uncertainly at the sandy ground. "Okay, Lisa, it was really nice meeting you. Maybe we'll run into each other again?!"

"Yes, maybe. That would be..." She swallowed the end of the sentence and with it the impulse to tell him she'd like to see him again. The two of them stood before each other a bit awkwardly, as if each was waiting for a reaction from the other.

"Well, here's to a lucky coincidence then," Johannes interrupted the moment with a smile, turned around, and started walking away. Lisa stood there as if frozen to the spot, watching him go.

Damn, she thought when Johannes was finally far enough away that his silhouette blended into the outlines of the other beachgoers. *I should have asked for his number.* She kept walking, passing the hotel, which was now on her left. A small path eventually led up to the promenade, which was bustling with people. Lisa was surprised—as empty as the beach had been, the promenade was packed. And then she realized why there were so many people up here. Dozens of sales tables lined the edge of the path, with all sorts of things laid out in varying degrees of order—it seemed there was a flea market happening today. Lisa loved flea markets. She couldn't resist checking out the very first stall. A small coin purse immediately caught her eye, its leather bearing an unmistakable patina from age.

"How much for this?" she asked.

"Twenty euros," answered the pot-bellied man with a mustache and a bald head, who was busy pushing his glasses up his nose. "It's a special piece!" he immediately added to justify his initial price.

"Eight," Lisa countered.

"Eighteen," the seller countered with a serious expression.

"Eleven, and I won't go a cent higher."

"Fine, deal," he replied, and Lisa was satisfied.

"Impressive," a male voice sounded behind her. Lisa turned around and looked straight into Johannes's eyes.

"Oh, hi," she replied, a little embarrassed, feeling the flush rise in her face again.

"Talk about a quick coincidence... You're quite the haggler. If you're ever looking for a job, I could use someone like you in sales. Anyone who can haggle like that can sell anything."

"That's kind, but I think I'll stick with my elementary school kids," she said with a smile. Joe, who was now on a leash, sat politely next to Johannes, watching the two of them closely.

"You're a teacher?" he asked.

"Yes."

"That must be a great job."

Lisa held the newly purchased purse tightly with both hands, as if she could steady herself with it.

"Yeah, I love working with children and wouldn't want to do anything else. For now, anyway... you never know how you'll feel in a few years."

Johannes smiled.

"Yes, that's true. You never know." He glanced toward her wallet.

"Nice piece, by the way," he noted.

"Yeah, isn't it? The leather is super soft. Feel for yourself." She held the wallet out to him. As he reached out to touch the leather, he accidentally brushed Lisa's hand.

"I'm sorry," he apologized immediately, swallowing hard.

"It's fine," Lisa replied softly, discreetly watching Johannes's hand as it glided over the surface.

Ask him for his number, she thought. But she couldn't quite find the courage. So, she settled for a smile.

"Do you like going to flea markets?" he asked.

"Oh, definitely. I think I know every single one in the Münster area. I'd guess that a good fifty percent of my belongings are secondhand."

The crowds squeezing past them interrupted the conversation a bit. "It's pretty packed here," she remarked. "And you? You're probably not the flea market type, are you?"

"Not anymore, but back in college, I used to frequent markets like this. Somehow I've lost touch with that over the last few years. Too much on my plate..."

The wind brushing against Lisa's skin made her shiver.

As if Johannes had a sixth sense, he said, "It's quite drafty up here. You must be cold, aren't you? Especially right after a run..."

Lisa nodded and smiled.

"Yeah, totally. I'd better get back to the hotel before I catch a cold."

He looked at her, briefly but intensely.

"Okay, then I'll just hope for a third coincidence? I mean, third time's a charm, right?"

"Yeah, that would—well, that would be really nice," Lisa replied, still too timid to ask for his number. "It was nice meeting you, Johannes," she added, before turning around and heading back down the path toward the beach.

Once she arrived at the hotel, she went straight into the shower. Johannes's eyes had been blue. As blue as the sea that had been churning behind them in rhythm with the wind. She had looked at them very closely because it wasn't often that you looked into a stranger's eyes and felt an immediate, strange sense of familiarity. Lisa let her eyelids flutter closed and took a deep breath. I should have asked him for his number...

When she stepped out of the shower, she went to her travel bag and pulled out her knit dress. Lennart's hotel might have had five stars and the restaurant a Michelin star, but it wasn't stuffy at all. You felt comfortable even in jeans and a sweater. With a little blush and mascara on her face, she headed down the stairs toward the restaurant a short while later. On her way, she passed the large ballroom, which was already echoing with lively chatter. I wonder if they've already opened the first bottle of wine? Lisa tried to catch a quick glimpse without being noticed or slowing her pace. But she couldn't see anything. The crack in the door wasn't wide enough.

So, she turned into the restaurant and waited at the host stand to be seated.

"Do you want to sit right here in front?" Lennart peeked out of the kitchen door and pointed to a table for two positioned close to the kitchen.

"That way I can keep an eye on you," he added with a wink.

"Then I definitely want to sit there," Lisa countered, blowing him a quick kiss. She sat down, leaned back relaxed against the chair, and let her gaze wander through the large window front opposite her. It was already starting to get dark outside, and the colors the sun was drawing out of the sea were simply fantastic. The sky was a deep blue, and a small ball of fire seemed to glow in the center, casting its rays across the shimmering water.

My God, it was cheesily beautiful. Lisa stood up and walked toward the balcony terrace to soak in the sight one more time without the interference of a windowpane. She immediately felt the drop in temperature. She crossed her arms over her chest and watched the beautiful natural spectacle unfolding right before her eyes.

"Good evening!"

Lisa turned around. A young waitress stood behind her, a champagne flute in her hand.

"For you. A glass of champagne, if you'd like."

"Uh, okay, but I didn't order any..."

"It's all taken care of. Enjoy the view and this fine vintage. Just between us, it's a really good one." With a smile, the waitress turned and went back through the sliding door into the restaurant.

Lisa turned back to the sunset and took her first sip.

Not bad at all, she thought. Finally, her growling stomach reminded her that a five-course meal was waiting for her inside. She took one last long look at the sea, went back into the restaurant, and sat down at her table.

A short while later, the young woman who had just handed her the champagne arrived with the first course in her hands.

"Here you go, foamed cabbage soup with pistachio bread."

"Oh, thank you very much," Lisa replied, leaning over the soup bowl to catch the scent. "That smells delicious."

"And I have the matching wine to go with it, with best regards from the birthday party next door."

"That's so nice," Lisa replied, visibly surprised. "Is this the wine that I...?"

"Yes, that's the one."

"Oh, okay, then I'm really going to enjoy this..." she promised with a smirk.

"You certainly should," the waitress confirmed.

"Enjoy your meal."

"Thank you."

Lisa tried the soup first and then the wine. Both tasted fantastic, and if she was being honest with herself, the wine definitely held its own. It paired perfectly with the soup.

Four courses later, Lisa sat contentedly at the table waiting for Lennart.

"Ten more minutes! Lennart's hurrying," a young chef noted in passing.

"Okay, thanks," Lisa replied, though the chef didn't seem to register it. He hurried past her. Lisa let her gaze wander. The restaurant was well-filled.

Eventually, Lennart came around the corner and plopped down onto the chair. Beads of sweat dotted his forehead.

"Done for the day?" Lisa asked, clasping his hands.

"Big time."

"Did everything go well?"

"I think so, yeah. The grilled course for the main went over really well. All meat-free—it was a nice change and a good challenge."

"The grilled vegetables were really good. And the wine and champagne, too, by the way. Thanks for sneaking them in for me."

Lennart waved it off.

"I had nothing to do with that. No idea who arranged it."

"So it really was the snob?"

"Evidently... He seems to be a very nice snob who knows his manners," Lennart replied with a tired smile. "He'd like to thank you personally and meet you, by the way."

"Oh, okay, we'll see," she replied, not sure if she was in the mood for that. "Is he a regular of yours?"

"I hope he will be starting today. But not yet; I didn't know him before now."

"Why didn't things work out between us, anyway?" he asked with a grin, not entirely serious, as he squeezed her hand tightly.

"Ouch, Lennart, my ring!" Lisa cried out.

"Sorry."

"Because we were fourteen, Lennart. And because you were a really exhausting boyfriend—and because we're just much better off as best friends. And have been for sixteen years now. Never change a winning team, I'd say," Lisa replied with a smile.

"Still a shame, somehow. I mean, look at how easy we are together... We don't even have to see each other and it works out perfectly. You accept without a murmur that I have no time for you; you're beautiful, smart, and..."

"As your partner, there'd be a daily complaint on your desk about your working hours. Don't kid yourself, my friend."

"Maybe we should have tried a little longer together. Who knows where it would have ended," he countered with a wink.

"Definitely in divorce court. Three weeks of handholding with you back then was more than enough for me to realize this wasn't going anywhere."

"Yeah, yeah, me too," he shot back, leaning relaxed against the back of his chair. "And for the record, you were a disaster as a girlfriend at fourteen, too," he added, grinning.

"Now, tell me about Stefan."

"There's not much to tell. He doesn't love me anymore, and that's basically the whole story."

"That's rough..."

"It's okay. Somehow I've had enough time to get used to the idea. We've run aground; I've felt it for a long time, and it was clear it couldn't go on. Besides, I'm still struggling to forgive his slip-ups. I sincerely tried, but somehow it stays in my head and I can't get it out."

"That's only natural. I wouldn't have forgiven him for the first affair... He didn't deserve you from the start; you deserve better."

"Well, the heart wants what it wants..."

"As long as you're not suffering."

"No, I'm not suffering. You don't have to worry."

"That's a relief. And eventually, the right guy will come sweeping around the corner. You need to switch your vibe to Ready for a New Beginning, and then men will be beating down your door."

She grinned. "I actually met a really nice guy on the beach... His dog kept me company while I was jogging. He liked me, at least."

"The dog or the guy?"

"Wise guy—the dog, of course. But the owner was really charming, too."

"Do you have his number?"

"No, I didn't think fast enough."

"Or you didn't dare ask?!" he challenged.

"Caught me..."

"Man, Lisa. Any single man with eyes in his head would be more than happy to give you his number."

"So you say... I just don't have the nerve for that kind of thing. It doesn't matter anyway—it's too late now. Regardless, the situation proves that I've made a lot of progress over the last year and that I'll be fine without Stefan. That's something, right?"

"Yes, that is something. And we'll find that guy from the beach. What did he look like?"

"A cap, dark hair as far as I could tell. And very blue eyes."

"Well, well, blue eyes... looked pretty closely, did you?" he noted with a grin.

"Yes, blue eyes, hard to miss! I didn't have to look that closely... okay? And he was wearing Vans, jeans, and a gray hoodie."

"Surfer, definitely. He'll be staying at the Beach Hotel. Do you have a name?"

"Just a first name. His name was Johannes."

Lennart pulled his phone out of his pocket and dialed a number immediately.

"Hi, Lennart here from the Dünenhotel... yeah. Thanks... Good, everything's great... yeah... Listen, without violating any privacy laws, do you have a guest there named Johannes? Okay, yeah, I'll wait..." Lennart looked over at Lisa and grinned. "Aha, wonderful. That's all I need. Thanks, Clara. Anytime..." Lennart's smile was sugar sweet.

"Clara?" Lisa's look was piercing.

"Yes, Clara. People know each other around here, okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, fine. I just thought that 'Lennart and Clara' had a nice ring to it."

"First things first, this is about Johannes and Lisa. And to get anywhere with that, Clara is going to let me know in a second how many people named Johannes are currently staying at her hotel." Lennart yawned.

"Tired?" Lisa asked.

"Exhausted. Having parties here is always super intense."

"You don't have to entertain me right now. Call it a night."

"I will in a minute. Would you like to come over for a second and introduce yourself?"

"I don't know..."

"Maybe he'll give you a bottle of wine... Then you can sell it and be rich," he joked.

"Okay, fine. But only if you come with me."

"Yes, I will. I have to say my goodbyes anyway." With an abrupt movement, Lennart stood up from the chair.

"Right now?" Lisa asked, confused.

"Sure, come on." He started moving even as he spoke. Lisa quickly stood up and followed him.

"Wait, Lennart, I want to walk in next to you."

"What's with you? You're not usually this timid."

"I am now. So wait up. Rich people scare me..." Lennart stopped, turned to Lisa, and pulled her close.

"I am absolutely sure you can do this. And they don't bite, they really don't..."

"Do I hear irony in your voice?"

"Now why would you think that?" Lennart released her and opened the door to the ballroom.

Discreet music underscored the murmurs and chatter that filled the room. Lennart looked around.

"I don't see him right now..." he noted, his gaze sweeping the room. Lisa looked around as well. And then her breath caught. Next to a table stood a small basket, and in that basket lay a four-legged friend who looked exactly like little Joe, the one who had just accompanied her on her run.

"I'm out of here," she mumbled, but before she could turn around, Lennart caught her by the arm. "Wait, there he is. Mr. Schuster?"

"Fuck," Lisa muttered.

"Did you just say 'fuck'?"

"Yes," she replied, annoyed, because she knew that disappearing was pointless now. He had already spotted her. "You're usually so good at small talk," Lennart noted, visibly confused, before putting on his most professional smile.

"Mr. Schuster, I just wanted to say goodnight and take this opportunity to introduce our wine supplier. Lisa, this is Mr. Schuster, and Mr. Schuster, this is Ms. Kampmann."

"A pleasure," he said, offering her his hand. He didn't lower his gaze even an inch and held her hand a moment longer than was customary.

"A pleasure as well," Lisa replied, feeling her cheeks change color yet again.

"Thank you very much for bringing the wine to us."

He was still fixing her with his warm gaze.

"It was, um, it was my pleasure. It was no trouble at all, and the wine was really delicious, so I certainly understand why you'd want it delivered..." she stammered, visibly embarrassed.

Lennart watched the situation with irritation. Then Mr. Schuster turned to him. "Thank you so much for a perfect evening and for managing to organize the wine after all. That really went above and beyond."

"I'm glad everything was to your satisfaction. If you'll excuse me, I'd like to head home for the night now."

"Thank you so, so much again, and this certainly won't be the last time I'll be here."

He shook Lennart's hand.

"Are you coming, Lisa?" Lennart asked.

"You're more than welcome to stay," the man said, looking toward Lisa.

"Um, well, maybe one drink..." Lisa replied. She felt an urgent need to clear things up.

"Okay, suit yourself," Lennart countered and pulled her close.

"Are you okay?" he whispered in her ear.

"Yes, everything's fine. We'll talk tomorrow," she whispered back.

"All right, and if Clara has any news, I'll text you." He glanced at Mr. Schuster.

"Well, then I'll wish you both—or you all—a pleasant evening." Lennart turned around and disappeared out the door with a yawn. Feeling awkward, Lisa looked at Johannes.

"I honestly wish the floor would swallow me up. I'm really sorry for talking about you so disparagingly..."

"It's okay," he countered, his face breaking into the most engaging smile Lisa had ever seen.

"No, it isn't."

"But you were right, it is decadent. I've been thinking about that all evening."

"I'm really sorry, I shouldn't have said it like that. If I could afford it, I'd probably do the exact same thing."

"I don't think so," he replied.

"No, I'm sure I would..."

"Should we drop the formal titles?" he asked.

"Yes, that would be nice," Lisa answered with a smile.

"I could have also told you that I'm the birthday boy, by the way," he remarked.

"Yes, you could have... that would have made things a lot less embarrassing." The spark between them was palpable. It was as if his eyes were physically drawing her in. North Pole and South Pole—each a magnet.

"First I had to put the pieces together," he explained, "and then I thought if you knew immediately I was that decadent guy, you'd write me off right away..." he continued.

"That definitely could have happened," Lisa replied, pulling the cuffs of her cardigan over her hands.

"Do you want more?" he asked, and Lisa didn't know which "more" he meant—more of the sea outside the door, or more of Johannes. Or wine...

"More what?" she asked.

"The sea, the water... the beach. Joe needs some fresh air."

"And your guests?"

"They'll still be here when I get back," he replied kindly.

"Then I'd love to come along."

He looked at her, appearing happy.

"I'm just taking Joe out," he called to a young man. The man nodded and gave a quick wave. A short whistle from Johannes sent Joe leaping up and running toward the two of them.

"Hey, Joe," Lisa greeted the dog, stroking his head.

"Let's go then," Johannes said, patting his thigh.

Joe gave a quick bark and trotted alongside them.

The three of them walked down the stairs to the beach. Joe ran ahead.

"Can you see okay?" Johannes asked, turning briefly toward Lisa.

"Yes, everything's fine."

The moon hung like a beacon in the sky, bathing the surroundings in a blue-white twilight. The soft whistle of the fresh evening wind mingled with the sound of the crashing waves, leaving a cool shiver on Lisa's skin. I should have put on a jacket... She crossed her arms over her chest to stay warm, just as she had on the balcony earlier, which Johannes noticed immediately.

"Are you cold?" he asked.

"A little, maybe," she replied, "but I'm okay."

Johannes stopped and took off his blazer.

"You don't have to do that, Johannes, I'm fine."

"I swear to you, I'm really not cold at all. Never, really. If I feel the cold, it means I'm sick."

"I'm basically always freezing..." Lisa admitted.

"Well then, it's a perfect match. I would have taken it off anyway, and if you put it on now, I won't have to carry it." He held the jacket out to her. "So you're actually doing me a huge favor by wearing it."

"Well, then I guess I can't turn you down," she countered, reaching for the blazer. But instead of grabbing the fabric, her hand landed on Johannes's skin. For the second time that day, their hands touched. She could see his smile in the moonlight. Carefully, she withdrew her hand.

"Thank you," she said softly, taking the jacket and slipping it on. Immediately, she noticed the subtle scent echoing from the fabric: it smelled fresh, a little spicy, maybe like leather? Lisa liked how he smelled right away. Nothing about it bothered her. On the contrary, it drew her in. Her legs felt weak. What was happening to her?

Johannes turned and kept walking. Joe was out of sight by now.

"Aren't you afraid he'll run off again?" she asked.

"Not really, what happened this afternoon was totally unusual for him. Normally he won't go with anyone; he's actually quite shy."

"So I should be flattered that he went jogging with me?"

"Definitely. Especially that he approached you. Joe is usually very reserved..."

"He didn't seem reserved at all," Lisa replied, amused.

Johannes stopped.

"Then that must be because of you..." he whispered into the moonlit night. Lisa swallowed again because the way he said it was so gentle it gave her goosebumps. A bark interrupted the beautiful moment. Joe stood beside them, tail wagging, a stick in his mouth, looking at them expectantly.

"Drop it," Johannes commanded kindly, and Joe obeyed. Johannes grabbed the stick and hurled it across the beach with all his might. Joe took off instantly.

"Will you tell me about yourself?" he asked, starting to walk again.

"What do you want to know?" she pressed.

"Everything might be a bit bold, right?" he replied.

"Do you tell a stranger everything?" she countered.

"Probably not," he answered directly. "But then again, maybe you do... I mean, a stranger doesn't know you, can't gossip about it, sees you without any past..."

Lisa thought for a moment.

"Maybe you're right, and being here today is my chance to confess my deepest, darkest secrets to someone," she said with a grin.

Johannes stopped and took a step toward her. He was standing so close now that she could feel his breath.

"Do you have any?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Do you have dark secrets?"

"I'm sure I do..." she replied softly, pausing for a moment. She felt the wind brush against her nose, heard the ebb and flow of the waves... and felt Johannes's breath. "And you, do you have any?" she asked.

"There are definitely some." He fell silent for a moment.

"Imagine you meet someone," he continued in a firm voice, "and you just start with the dark sides. No sugar-coating, no playing a role... I mean, if the other person still wants to get to know you after that, then that's pretty good, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," Lisa replied, her heart thudding in her chest. She felt that she would tell this stranger, who was only inches from her lips, a great deal. She had never felt anything like this before. She had been with Stefan for seven years, the spark had long since died, and she hadn't confided in him for ages. And now here she was, on this evening, on this beach. With a man she didn't know and whom she wanted to kiss right then and there, if she followed her heart. Slowly, he pulled his head back slightly and turned to the side.

"Joe!" he called. The dog came running immediately and dropped the stick at their feet again.

Johannes threw it a second time.

"I hate sleeping alone!" he said suddenly.

"That's not exactly a dark secret, Johannes," Lisa replied, laughing.

"I'm working my way up, okay?"

"Fine, so that means we're escalating our confessions?"

"Something like that. Now you, Lisa."

"Alright then, um, I'm afraid of the dark and I honestly imagine that hardened criminals are lurking everywhere. So I can't drive down a dark country road alone, which is really impractical sometimes."

"Are you afraid now?" he asked cautiously.

"No," she answered, "because... because you're here. I'm not alone..." She gave a faint smile.

"That's nice—I mean, that was a lovely thing to say." Lisa could clearly hear his breathing.

"I don't like talking about my feelings, even though there are quite a few inside me that would be worth talking about..." he continued.

"Why not?" she pressed.

"Because I don't trust easily..."

Lisa had to laugh briefly.

"Sorry, but this situation right here suggests the exact opposite."

Now he laughed too.

"Yes, you're right, but that's exactly what makes it so special."

Lisa swallowed.

"Why don't you trust?" she asked.

"Because people often aren't interested in me as a person, but in what I represent to the outside world. I've forgotten how to listen to my instincts when it comes to people." He cleared his throat. "Except for earlier—I listened to my instincts for the first time in a long while."

"What did your instincts tell you?"

He paused briefly. Then he took a deep breath before speaking.

"That this is a woman you could probably tell anything to—even your deepest, darkest secrets." His words sent a shiver through her body. Lisa stood there and swallowed hard.

"Okay, your turn again, Lisa!"

"I trust far too quickly," she remarked.

"Oh, so this isn't anything special for you?" he asked with a gentle smile.

"Oh, it is. The bad sides only come out later, and some things I never tell... Still, I always believe in the good in people."

"But that's a wonderful thing!"

"Not always; sometimes it gets exploited. For example, it takes me a really long time to realize when someone is cheating on me. And then I start by believing all the excuses I'm fed. And then I let myself be talked into forgiving and believe it'll never happen again. I even give my trust a second time... one hundred percent. Because I believe in the good."

"How often have you forgiven and trusted again?" he asked.

"Twice." For a moment, neither said a word. Johannes's face was so close again that Lisa's stomach filled with butterflies. What on earth was this?

"Shall we walk a bit further?" he asked, his breath brushing against Lisa's face.

"Yes, I'd like that," she whispered. She was so close to kissing him that she struggled to resist the pull. Joe barked, and it was Johannes who moved first.

They walked side by side in silence. Their hands swung so close together that they brushed against each other with every step—briefly, gently, yet intensely. The ebb and flow of the waves bathed the moment in a very special atmosphere.

"I don't have a problem with firing someone," he said.

"No problem? You mean you don't give it any thought, or how do you mean?"

"I do, but it doesn't affect me emotionally."

"Okay, I think we're approaching the real dark secrets..." Lisa remarked, buttoning up the blazer.

"Do you think it's very bad?"

"I don't know... At best, it has to be that way so you can protect yourself in your position. At worst, it's part of your character and you generally don't have a problem throwing people out of a moving car."

"Throwing them out of a moving car..." Johannes repeated, "...hearing it put like that, it sounds really harsh." He cleared his throat.

"I grew up that way; my father always ran companies. People came and went. He taught me that it's part of the job. But the way you say it, it shouldn't be. You shouldn't throw people out of moving cars." He cleared his throat again. "One more thing—it's not actually happened that often that I've fired someone, and when I did, there were good reasons. Compelling reasons. I don't want you to give the wrong impression."

Lisa stopped and smiled.

"Is it really that important to you what I think? Don't forget, I'm just a stranger."

Johannes laughed. "Thanks for reminding me. But yes, it is important to me what you think," he added. And then Johannes's fingertip touched Lisa's hand. Just a whisper of a touch, yet more intense than anything Lisa had felt before. Joe scurried around their legs, and then the moment arrived where she blocked out everything else around her. Only the sound of the sea enveloped them. Tenderly, Johannes took her hands in his, his thumbs stroking gently over the backs of her hands. Lisa closed her eyes, wishing so hard that he would close those last few millimeters between them. And then she felt him. He pressed his lips softly against hers, released her hands, and cupped her cheeks. It was a kiss meant for eternity—for Lisa's eternity. Moment after moment passed, tender and beautiful. And then he hesitated. Suddenly and abruptly.

"I think it's time we head back inside, or they'll be filing a missing person report," Johannes whispered, his lips still hovering against Lisa's.

"Okay," she replied, her forehead now resting against his. Johannes wrapped his arms around Lisa and held her close, then he slowly pulled back and let go.

"Come on, Joe," he called. It wasn't long before Joe came galloping over.

"Shall we?" he asked, holding out his hand. Lisa placed hers in his and strolled back to the hotel with him. He let go of her hand before they reached the stairs. Smiling, he turned and walked up the steps.

Once they reached the top, Lisa took off his jacket.

"Thank you," she said, handing him the blazer.

"I should be thanking you; after all, you were the one wearing it this whole time." He grinned, but then his expression changed.

"Lisa, that just now... that was truly beautiful..."

She swallowed.

"Yes, I thought so too. It's been a long time since I..."

"Lisa," he interrupted her gently, "I have to..." He exhaled a sharp burst of air.

"Okay," he continued, "now I'm going to serve you up a real deep, dark secret."

Lisa furrowed her brow.

"The wine—I didn't actually order it myself."

Lisa felt a sense of relief.

"Well, if those are your deep, dark secrets, Johannes, you could compete with any first communicant before their confession," she teased.

Johannes took a deep breath.

"My wife," he said, "my wife ordered the wine."

He turned around and slid the terrace door open. Then he looked at her one more time.

"It's more complicated than it should be... But nothing I told you today, or what just happened between us, was fake on my part. I just want you to know that. But I'm going inside now because I'm actually pretty confused right now." He ran a nervous hand through his hair.

Lisa stood there, not knowing what to say. Johannes looked at her warmly and affectionately. Not at all like a man capable of cheating on his wife.

"Sleep well, Lisa," he added, before vanishing through the door into the hotel.

Lisa rubbed her face, unable to believe what had just happened. She went inside as well and headed straight for her bed.

But sleep was a long way off. What on earth had just happened? It felt so surreal. As if she had been catapulted into the wrong movie. She tossed and turned from side to side. Again and again. Sleep was out of the question. She hadn't expected any of this. Not here in this place, not at this point in her life, and certainly not this way.

The next morning, a leaden exhaustion weighed on her body. She reached for her phone to check the time. It was 7:30 a.m. Only then did she notice a message from Lennart.

According to Clara, no sign of Johannes anywhere

"If you only knew..." she muttered, pushing the duvet aside and heading into the bathroom. She would go for a run before breakfast to get her circulation going. She slipped into her workout clothes and made her way to the beach.

The air was cool, and Lisa pulled the zipper of her windbreaker a bit higher. The sky was still overcast, but patches of blue were starting to peek through the clouds. According to the weather report, it was supposed to be a sunny day. Lisa gradually increased her pace, careful not to overtax her tired body. Eventually, she found her stride and let herself be carried by the flow. Her legs moved on their own, but her mind was restless; what had happened last night wouldn't let her go. Johannes had hit her like a bolt from the blue, and his confession was just as electrifying. He had flirted with her so openly, kissed her so tenderly, that she never could have guessed he was already taken. And so she ran along the beach, her head uncomfortably full. The screeching of the gulls motivated her to pick up the pace. Her pulse quickened until she was finally sprinting through the sand.

"This whole thing was a terrible idea," she scolded herself, coming to an abrupt halt.

She would have a quick breakfast now and then drive home. She had no desire to cross paths with Johannes again. It had been two insignificant encounters. Until yesterday, there had been no Johannes anywhere in her life, and that's exactly why she would simply file that evening away as a pleasant flirtation. Nothing more, nothing less. The main thing was that she was clearly handling the breakup with Stefan quite well. Last night was good proof of that. She gave herself a firm nod and turned back so she could leave the hotel as soon as possible. Lennart wouldn't have much time for her today anyway, she'd just come back to visit him another time.

Lisa ran back and jogged up the stairs to the hotel, just as Joe came toward her, tail wagging.

"Great," Lisa muttered, knowing she was about to run into Johannes. To her surprise, however, it wasn't him coming down the stairs, but a young woman with dark hair pulled back tightly and a pink wool sweater draped over her shoulders. The sleeves were knotted in front of her chest, partially obscuring her form-fitting white blouse.

Was this Johannes's wife?

"Good morning," Lisa greeted her politely as Joe inquisitively sniffed her leg, clearly delighted to see her.

"Down, Joe!" the woman snapped at him. Joe retreated to her side, whimpering with his tail between his legs.

"It's okay, I know Joe," Lisa said, trying to justify the dog's behavior.

"Still, he shouldn't just run off," the woman grumbled and walked past Lisa without giving her another glance. "Come on, Joe, do your business so I can go back inside," Lisa heard her say.

"Witch," Lisa whispered, a bit surprised by her own harsh judgment. But she had rarely met a woman so cold. Once in the hotel lobby, she looked around briefly to see if Lennart was there so she could speak with him. She tried to peek through the swinging doors to the kitchen but couldn't see anything.

"Is Lennart in yet?" she asked the server who was currently bringing fresh rolls to the buffet.

"Yes, he's in the kitchen. Should I let him know?" "That would be great, but only if he's not too busy."

"Sure thing," the waitress replied and walked through the swinging doors.

Moments later, Lennart stepped through the frame.

"Morning, fitness fanatic," he greeted her, eyeing her outfit. "Sleep well?"

"So-so."

"What do you mean, so-so?!" he asked, confused. "Our guests usually sleep like logs here."

"Well, most of them probably haven't had such a strange evening."

"Strange evening? You've got my attention."

"Mind if we sit for a second?" she asked.

"Of course not," he answered.

Lisa took a deep breath and told Lennart the whole story. When she was finished, he grinned at her.

"I don't think it's funny, Lennart."

"I do. The fact that Mr. Schuster is this mysterious Johannes is a stroke of fate. And besides, Mr. Schuster's wife is dreadful. No joke, she's high maintenance. By the way, she was the one who ordered the wine and apparently made a huge scene. The husband didn't know anything about it. I don't feel sorry for her at all. Katja from the service staff was genuinely intimidated."

"Poor girl."

"And on top of that, I think it's pretty wild that you just hooked up with a total stranger."

"Wild?"

"Yeah, it's not like you at all... so I actually think it's cool."

"He's married, Lennart!"

"Yeah, to a witch," he countered, grinning again.

Witch, Lisa thought. That title sounded familiar for some reason.

"Besides, that's his problem, not yours. You're practically single and allowed to do whatever you want. We clear?" Lennart punctuated his statement with a wink.

"I think it's intense. I mean, his wife was right there; how cold-blooded can you be?"

"Or desperate, or lonely, or head over heels...?!"

"Head over heels?"

"Oh yeah, smitten. With you. It happened to me too, after all. You are by far the most beautiful thirty-year-old currently walking around the Baltic coast."

He pushed the sleeve of his chef's jacket up slightly, revealing his wristwatch.

"And I am also by far the most in-demand chef this morning. Don't be mad, but I've got to get back to it."

"Of course, I understand. I'm going to hit the road soon, okay?"

"Sure, thanks again for your help. And if you start missing Mr. Schuster—I'd break data protection laws for you."

"I appreciate that, but I don't think you'll have to break any laws for me."

"I would, though..."

"I know."

"Come here," he said, pulling her into a hug. "It was good to see you again."

"You too."

"Drive safe."

"I will. I'll just grab some breakfast and then I'm off."

Lennart disappeared into the kitchen and Lisa went up to her room, showered, and packed her things. Back in the restaurant, she helped herself to the buffet and sat down at the same table as the night before. And then, inevitably, it happened. With a pounding heart, she looked over at him. Johannes was standing at the other end of the room, watching her. Lisa's heart raced as if it were fighting against a feeling.

Slowly, he began to move—heading straight toward her. Lisa wanted nothing more than to get up and leave. Kissing a married man was just about the last thing she ever wanted to do in her life. If she had known beforehand, it never would have happened. The closer he got, the more intense his gaze became. But then she appeared, now wearing the pink sweater, with Joe on a leash.

"Here," she grumbled, holding the leash out to him. "Glad you finally showed up. I'm done with breakfast."

"I hope you enjoyed it," he replied pointedly. Then he stole another glance at Lisa.

"I'm going to pack," the woman noted, walking past him toward the stairs. Johannes stood there, then took the final steps to the edge of Lisa's table. He was silent, looking sheepishly at her cereal. Eventually, he looked up and caught her eyes.

"Will you walk with me for a bit?" he asked, his voice steady.

"Johannes, where exactly would this walk lead? One floor above us, your wife is packing your things."

"She's packing her things, to be precise, in her room. My things are in my room..." he added quietly.

"Outside in ten minutes?" he asked, and now there was pleading in his eyes.

Lisa sighed.

"If I had known you were taken, I never would have gone out with you yesterday. That you even took that risk... Your wife only had to step out for a breath of fresh air and she would have caught us."

"For that to happen, she would have had to miss me first, and then actually care," he countered dismissively.

Lisa sighed again, and against her better judgment said, "Fine, in twenty minutes, down on the beach."

Johannes smiled tentatively.

"Thank you for giving me the chance to explain. It's not exactly my finest hour... see you in a bit," he replied, giving Joe a small tug on the leash and heading out toward the beach.

Lisa sat there, wondering if that had been the right decision. What did he want to explain? He had cheated on his wife with a stranger. How could she know he didn't do the exact same thing every night somewhere else?

Yet something about him drew her in. His eyes... yes, she was sure it was the way he looked at her. As if he really saw her. The real her.

She finished the last of her cereal and drained her coffee cup in one large gulp. Then she grabbed her denim jacket, pulled it on, and stepped out into the wonderful spring morning, which greeted her with a blue sky and the first rays of sunshine. The weather report was going to be right. Lisa walked down the stairs to the beach. She immediately spotted Johannes, who was busy throwing Joe's stick into the water. Lisa approached him slowly, her eyes fixed on the sea. Watching the incoming waves calmed her. It was the perfect rhythm to approach him.

"Hey," she said, when she finally stood before him.

"Hey," he replied, and once again there was that look in his blue eyes that went straight to Lisa's heart.

"Left or right?" he asked.

"Left. I already ran to the right earlier."

"Okay, Joe, you heard her, to the left," Johannes said, throwing the stick as far as he could in that direction.

For a long while, they strolled side-by-side in silence.

"It'll probably be hard for you to believe this right now," he eventually began, "but the situation with Vivian and me is a long story that has gone through a lot of lows. Serious lows, which led to two separate rooms and two lives running parallel to each other. I know I went too far last night. That shouldn't have happened. But the fact that it did happen showed me just how deep in the shit Vivian and I really are."

"Do you have children?" Lisa asked abruptly. The answer to that question could change everything. If children were involved, she would turn around and walk away right this second.

"No, no children."

Lisa was relieved.

"Johannes, I want to say something too."

He stopped and looked at her.

"Of course, go ahead."

"To me, you are a married man who has a lot of things to sort out. And frankly, I don't want to be dragged into it."

"I understand that completely," he replied. "What happened between us yesterday—I've never had that before, Lisa. I don't know if you can believe me, but it was just about the most special thing I've ever experienced in my life." He swallowed.

"I would really like to see you again..." he said quietly.

"Johannes, again, you are married."

She took a deep breath.

"Yes, I am married, and that was a big mistake. Because this thing with you, it doesn't feel like a mistake at all... even though technically speaking, it was one. You know, cheating on a wife and all that..." he said softly. Then he cleared his throat and added:

"Today is May 1st. So yesterday was April 30th."

"Great deduction," Lisa murmured, trying her best to suppress a smile. Johannes, however, didn't hide his.

"How about this..." he continued. "One year from today, we meet right here again. The same day, the same time that first brought us together here, the same place... If what happened between us really was that special, then in one year we'll be standing here, in this spot—without any baggage and ready to get to know each other. What do you think?"

Lisa stared at him, her eyes wide.

"That sounds crazy," she replied, and then he subtly touched her hand. Lisa glanced down at their four hands finding each other.

"I'm going to leave now," she said, giving his hands a quick squeeze before turning around.

"Take care, Johannes," she said in farewell, before starting back through the damp sand toward the hotel.

"Will you be here?" he called out.

"Maybe," she replied, without turning back to look at him again.

Johannes

Johannes sat in the car, the divorce papers neatly tucked away in a document folder on the passenger seat. The year of separation wasn't quite over—three days were still missing before it would become official. He was nervous, and if he was honest with himself, pretty unsure whether he'd driven the sixty miles for nothing. Today wasn't a particularly friendly day. The windshield wipers had been working non-stop for the entire journey. *Not a good omen*, he thought.

The past year had been turbulent, full of change and plans. The separation had come quickly; the evening with Lisa had been the catapult that finally hurled him in the right direction.

Johannes stared ahead, focused on the road. Only nine miles separated him from his destination. And the sea. He loved the ocean, and he was excited to be back there soon.

He hadn't expected how much a single kiss would linger. It had been clear to him immediately that something very special had happened on that cool spring evening, in the moonlight by the shore. But that the feeling would endure for an entire year—he hadn't thought that possible. When he'd suggested meeting again on April 30th a year ago, he hadn't really believed he'd actually follow through with it. Yet he hadn't been able to forget her. To this day, she still resonated within him—her smile, her lightness, and that incomparable kiss. He wondered if she'd thought of him at all over the last twelve months, or if he'd just been one of many men she had kissed in the past year.

He knew next to nothing about her, only that she had attracted him instantly from the first moment and that he had never felt such a quick connection to another person before.

Johannes smiled as the contours of the dike appeared ahead of him. He immediately pictured the roaring sea and the gentle waves washing over the sand behind it.

I'm going to buy a house here, he thought. Yes, someday I'll own a house on the coast.

Finally, he passed the town sign. So here he was, one year later, with a head full of thoughts and a free heart, ready to welcome the stranger Lisa into his life, hoping she would stay.

He pulled into the hotel parking lot, which was busy, and maneuvered his car into a tight spot.

As he got out, the first thing he did was take a deep breath of the salty sea air. Then he opened the back and Joe jumped right out. Wagging his tail and sniffing, he ran along the flower beds. Johannes took his suitcase out of the car. He would stay for two nights. He looked up at the sky. The rain was retreating, and far off on the horizon, the sun was even peeking out cautiously. Johannes pulled up the handle of his suitcase and started walking. He looked around hesitantly, hoping that Lisa might already be walking around somewhere. Before entering the hotel lobby, he took another deep breath. He opened the door and stepped inside.

The memories came flooding back instantly, even more intense here than the ones he had spent all year dwelling on.

"Good afternoon," he greeted the receptionist.

"Good afternoon," she replied warmly.

"Johannes Schuster, I have a reservation for two nights."

"Welcome, Mr. Schuster. It's nice to have you back with us. You're in room three, just like last year." Smiling, she handed him the key card.

"Thank you," he said.

"We hope you have a pleasant stay."

"I'm sure I will," he answered, hoping it would actually turn out that way.

Once in his room, he went straight to the large balcony and let the ocean view sink in. Suddenly, Lisa appeared on his internal radar. He felt like he had saved every single one of her freckles, every tiny wrinkle, and every golden fleck in her light brown eyes in his mind, as if he had taken a photograph of her with his eyes back then.

He inhaled the fresh air one more time, filling every corner of his lungs before heading down toward the beach. The rain had actually subsided by now, leaving the sky to turn blue bit by bit. Johannes walked down the stairs, scanning the surroundings as he went. To his left, a family was flying a kite; to the right, a couple was jogging along the beach. A group of young people, obviously taking a class, stood in a circle around a surfboard. Johannes intensified his search, making sure he didn't miss a thing. He looked at his gold wristwatch to ensure he hadn't gotten the time wrong. It was exactly 3:00 p.m. He trudged through the sand, trying to find the exact spot where he had whistled for Joe one year ago today.

"Can you smell her, maybe?" he asked, looking at Joe. But Joe didn't react. He was busy fishing a suitable fetching stick out of the driftwood. Johannes stopped and looked around. But she was nowhere to be seen. It was now 3:10 PM. He would wait, maybe an hour. Maybe a little longer. He still had hope that the evening a year ago had touched her just as much as it had him—and that she was simply running a little late. He took off his jacket and spread it out on the sand. Then he sat down, facing the sea.

Johannes's thoughts raced. But with every passing minute, his doubts about this whole idea grew. Lisa probably didn't want a man who cheated on his wife. But then, who could blame her? She was right... he had cheated on his wife with a stranger. That was Lisa's truth, and it was understandable that she'd think him a bad person. After all, she couldn't know how many times his "soon-to-be ex-wife" had already cheated on him. How broken that marriage really was, only Vivian and he knew in the end.

Johannes sat there. Minute after minute ticked by without Lisa appearing on the beach. Disappointed, he finally stood back up, brushed the sand off his jeans and jacket, and whistled for Joe as he headed back toward the hotel. He wouldn't stay. He would leave. He had gotten lost in a dream, and the more he thought about it, the more he was annoyed with himself.

Back in the lobby, he went straight to the reception desk and glanced at the clock. 4:20 p.m. She wasn't coming.

"I'm sorry, but something has come up. I have to check out immediately."

The receptionist looked at him with a worried expression.

"I hope everything is alright?" she asked discreetly.

"Yes, everything's fine. It's just an important appointment that came up. I'll pay for both nights right away, of course."

He placed his credit card on the counter and waited until the receptionist had entered everything.

"Then I wish you much success with your appointment and hope you can make up for your stay soon."

"Yes, I hope so too," he replied. "I just need to grab my suitcase from the room," he added, before heading for the stairs and then disappearing from the hotel. Back in the car, he started the engine with a yawn.

"All for nothing," he muttered, turning on his blinker toward the main road with a sense of disappointment. A moment later, he spotted a small bakery.

He pulled into the parking lot and got out. He desperately needed a coffee to drive the fatigue from his body. The anticipation of seeing Lisa had cost him his sleep last night. And after that, he would drive home to his old life and try to forget her.

Lisa

Lisa stood at the rest area, her head full of strange thoughts. She could hardly believe she had actually made the drive. And she certainly couldn't believe that her front right tire had gone flat.

As if he'll even be there... she thought, watching the young man who was currently busy removing the old tire. She gave herself a small, mocking smile because deep down, it was clear to her that Johannes had likely erased her from his mind long ago and was probably living happily ever after with his wife in some villa in Saint-Tropez. Yet, against every voice of reason in her head, she had gotten into her car today to chase after this foolish illusion. After all, she knew next to nothing about him. Only that his name was Johannes and that he was married. And that he had incredibly blue eyes and lips that knew exactly how to kiss. She pushed her jacket aside slightly to check her watch, hoping the kind attendant could mount the spare tire quickly. She wasn't going to make it on time, that much was certain. But she hoped that Johannes would have a little patience and wait for her. After all, this whole thing was supposed to be something special.

Eventually, the tire was on, and she was able to continue her journey.

"Thank you so much for your help," she called out to the young man who had done a great job. She climbed back in, started the engine, and at the same moment, her carousel of thoughts started up again. No matter what happened next, this was the craziest thing she had ever done in her life. She kept glancing nervously at the digital clock next to the speedometer. It was already four o'clock. She pressed down on the gas to try to make up at least a little time.

Finally, she arrived at the hotel parking lot. Almost twenty minutes late. Her heart was racing. It was beating so fast that she had to take a moment to collect herself and breathe deeply. She parked the car and stepped out. The screeching of seagulls, carried by a damp, mild spring wind, welcomed her. She looked around the parking lot uncertainly and then headed quickly toward the stairs, knowing from experience that the beach and the waves would calm her down. She hurried down the steps, her eyes fixed on the sea and the horizon. She immediately noticed a family flying a kite, and she saw a few people trying to stand up on surfboards. They kept failing and splashing into the water, accompanied by loud laughter and shrieks. Only one young woman stood confidently on her board. Probably the instructor, Lisa thought.

She scanned the area, her heart full of hope and dread. But she couldn't find Johannes anywhere. Had he really not had twenty minutes to wait for her? Or had he never shown up at all? Lisa stood there indecisively, and soon uncertainty joined her, clinging to her like a shadow. She would wait a little longer, then she would call the whole thing off and leave without a word to Lennart or anyone else. As if this day had never happened. The feeling that she was making a fool of herself grew steadily inside her. With every minute that passed without Johannes appearing, her self-confidence slipped further away. What had she been thinking? That a man like Johannes could seriously be interested in her? He probably never showed up and hadn't thought about her for a single second. *Two hundred miles for nothing*, she thought. She zipped her jacket up to her chin and started walking along the edge of the waves. She kept looking back, hoping that he might be standing somewhere after all, waiting for her. But there was no Johannes to be seen anywhere. And no Joe either... When she finally risked one last look across the beach and he still wasn't on her radar, she decided, disappointed, to drive back home. He wasn't coming, or he had already left. That much was clear to her now.

Back at the car, she got straight in, started the engine, shifted into reverse, and pulled out of the parking lot. Shaking her head, she stared through the windshield. "What a stupid idea," she muttered, focusing on the road ahead. Mile after mile passed until the flashing blue lights of a police car and a long line of vehicles brought her journey to a temporary halt. Anticipating the delay, she braked and turned off the engine. She looked around, confused. She couldn't see far enough ahead to figure out the reason for the traffic jam. Eventually, Lisa got out to get a better look at the situation.

"Was there an accident?" she asked a man who had also made himself comfortable by the roadside.

"Nah, it's a flock of sheep being moved. It might take a while. The sheepdog doesn't seem to have things under control."

"Can we go up and watch?"

"Just keep heading straight," he replied with a smile, pointing toward the police car.

Lisa started walking, and several other drivers did the same. The line of cars was incredibly long, suggesting that this whole operation hadn't just started five minutes ago. Craning her neck, Lisa inspected the scene, and now that she was almost at the police car, she could hear the bleating and baaing of the sheep.

Just as she saw the first sheep milling around in the middle of the country road, she felt something touch her leg.

"Hey, you're supposed to be herding sheep," she said to the four-legged creature sniffing at her shin. But then a jolt went through her body. This dog at her leg wasn't just any sheepdog; it was an old acquaintance.

With her heart pounding, Lisa looked up. And there he was, with a look as deep as it had been a year ago, with those same blue eyes and that same beautiful smile.

"I was sure you weren't coming," he said, swallowing hard.

"I was there," she whispered.

"Where?" he asked.

"On the beach."

"I didn't see you."

"I didn't see you either." He took a step toward her.

"What time were you there?"

"I was late. A flat tire. I didn't make it by four, but I hoped you would wait..." she replied.

"Why four o'clock?" he repeated, puzzled.

"We saw each other for the first time at just before four last year."

He smiled.

"No, I thought it was earlier, just before three... Hadn't we agreed on three o'clock?"

"No, you didn't give a specific time, just that we'd meet again at the same time."

"And that wasn't at three?" he asked.

"I'm certain it was four."

Now he was standing very close to her.

"So, we would have... I mean, without these sheep, we would have missed each other?!"

"Yes, without these sheep, we probably would have never seen each other again," Lisa replied softly. "Because I would have thought you didn't have twenty minutes of patience to wait for me... or..."

"And I would have been sure that you hadn't come at all," he interrupted her gently. "I waited for you for well over an hour... If I had known you were coming, I would have waited much longer, of course. All night, if necessary..." He looked at her, his gaze warm and inviting. She was no longer aware of all the other people around them. He tentatively touched her fingertips.

"In three days, I'll be free of my past, Lisa."

"What does that mean?" she pressed, her gaze locked deep in his eyes.

"That's when my divorce is final."

"Oh, wow, so soon?"

He swallowed and took a deep breath.

"No matter what happens here, I just want you to know that I'm not a jerk. I don't cheat on someone I love. With you, it was the first time, and I hadn't loved Vivian for a long while by then. I will never let things get that far again." He took a deep breath and paused for a moment. "But that evening with you... it changed everything," he continued.

The look in his eyes sent goosebumps over her skin.

"Do you feel like going for a walk on the beach?" he asked. "I mean, assuming we ever get out of here..." he added with a smile.

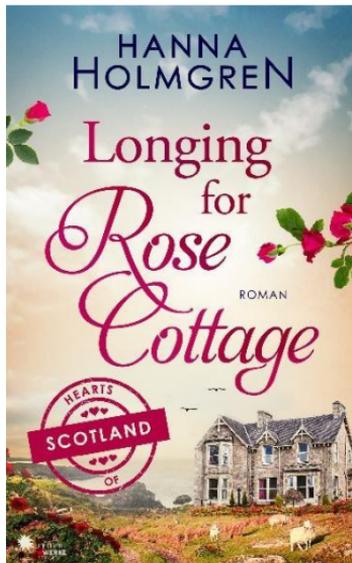
"Yes. Yes, I do," she replied, sinking into his eyes and the feeling that right here, in the middle of this flock of sheep, a real chance was waiting for her.

- The End -

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