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# A Brighter World



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to all the wonderful people who  
encouraged and supported me



# Special Thanks

I've always loved reading the special thanks section in CD booklets (yes, kids, there used to be discs with music on them when I was young), so this is my chance of writing one.

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## Chapter 1

Alexander Senne opens the file in front of him. It's marked "urgent." He scans the content: twenty-one years old, several cases of shop lifting; fights; in custody because he stabbed a man with a knife. Nothing unusual so far. And then: Stopped eating six days ago; hasn't spoken to anyone since; self harm tendencies.

Alexander picks up his phone and asks the officer to have the detainee brought to him. Once more he reads what little information he has. The picture is inconsistent and fragmentary. He takes a deep breath. New patients *always* make him nervous. That little flutter that he calls stage fright because it feels as if he's about to give a performance. Which is true. First impressions aren't irreversible, but they are important. The kid probably doesn't want to talk to him, and chances are he won't. *The "kid" is twenty-one and dangerous*, Alexander reminds himself. He closes the window and rolls up the sleeves of his shirt. *How symbolic*. He smiles to himself but turns serious the moment there's a knock on the door. Show time.

The kid hasn't said a word, hasn't even looked at him. Slender, bordering on skinny. His long black curls hide his face, and that's not a coincidence. The knuckles of his right hand are bruised. His body language is highly defensive, and he's shaking slightly. His blood sugar must be dangerously low. The kid is starving himself. Alexander hates the idea of force feeding patients, but sometimes there's no other way. The kid isn't very far from that point. Alexander takes a breath. He'll try everything else first.

“What happened a week ago?”

The kid’s head snaps up and he stares at Alexander for a moment. He seems confused. *He thinks I should know, that it's on record, whatever it is.*

“Benjamin, I don’t know what happened. I won’t know unless you tell me.”

He’s been trying to find out if Benjamin is all right with being called by his first name, but didn’t get an answer. So he decided to follow his intuition. They’re only nine years apart. It feels like more though. Like Benjamin is younger than his years.

Benjamin Godan looks at Alexander without really seeing him. His jaw tightens, and then he drops his gaze. And suddenly Alexander realises what’s happening: Benjamin is fighting tears. Trying to be brave, or tough, not to show any weakness, in the face of someone he doesn’t know, doesn’t trust. Alexander knows this is it. This is the crucial point. He can wait, or he can push. He leans forward.

“It’s your decision, Benjamin,” he says very softly. “I want to help you. But you’ll have to let me.”

“I’m going to jail,” Benjamin says between clenched teeth. “People don’t usually feel inclined to help me. And why would they.”

“You’re not convicted yet. And it’s my job to help you.”

Benjamin doesn’t respond, but it’s obvious that he’s considering. Trying to come to a decision. When he finally

does speak, his voice is toneless and so quiet Alexander almost doesn't catch it:

"Eight days ago my mum died. It was an accident, her car—"

His eyes close and his lips form a thin line. He swallows and forces himself to go on:

"She was on her way here. To see me. Dad—they'd had a fight because he didn't want her to visit me. Said I didn't deserve it. She was probably upset and didn't pay attention."

Benjamin looks directly at Alexander, and his pain is almost palpable.

"She died because of me. I lost the only good thing I had left and it's my fault."

Alexander has to take a deep breath not to lose his professional mindset.

"I can help you deal with it. Process your loss."

Benjamin shakes his head.

"I don't need therapy."

Alexander nods at the file on the desk between them.

"You're not behaving exactly sane, are you?"

That was unexpected, Alexander can tell. *Good. Keep him on his toes. Keep him thinking, reacting.* Alexander's voice is calm, but insistent:

"Talk to me. Just a few sessions until you're more stable."

For a long time nothing happens, at least not visibly, but it's obvious to Alexander that something is going on in Benjamin's mind. And then the kid makes a decision. He relaxes just the slightest bit, exhales:

"Fine."

Alexander smiles at him. *There we go.*

## Chapter 2

The next day Benjamin still doesn't say much but eats a bit of breakfast. Their first session is like most first sessions: Alexander explains how things work, tries not to push but makes it clear that he expects Benjamin to cooperate.

"Start small," he says, smiling to himself as he wonders how many times he's said that line before. "You don't have to tell me everything at once. In fact you don't have to tell me everything, period. But do tell me something. Tell me who you are."

"Isn't that in the file?"

"No, it's not. The file is collected data concerning your person. I want to know who you *are*."

"Is there a difference?"

"God yes!"

Benjamin looks puzzled at the fire behind the exclamation. Alexander chuckles.

"Sorry. It's my favourite subject."

When Benjamin just looks at him his smile widens.

"Are you sure you want to get me started?"

The kid looks unsure, but Alexander decides it's as good an opening as any other.

"The central point of my studies was self-awareness. Still is, actually. How a person perceives themselves as opposed

to how others do. Or, in addition, to be exact. Have I lost you already?"

"I'm smarter than I look."

Alexander chuckles again.

"I wasn't implying a lack of intelligence. Just a lack of interest. Sorry. Making assumptions is unprofessional."

"So, you want me to tell you something that isn't in my file, but which I personally consider relevant."

*The kid has a way with words.*

"Precisely."

Benjamin takes a breath.

"Well, I would have to know what *is* in the file, wouldn't I?"

Alexander catches himself smiling a lot in this session. Without actually consulting the file he says:

"Son of a retired military officer and an artist, student of English literature, older brother in the Armed Forces."

He pauses for moment before going on.

"Your mother recently passed away. I am very sorry for your loss, Benjamin. Do you want to talk about her?"

"Weren't we supposed to start small?"

Alexander nods.

"OK. So what do I need to know about you?"

Benjamin bites his lip.

"Well, first of all, I'm not really going to uni."

Alexander doesn't react. Just waits.

"I mean I used to, but then –"

He shrugs.

"Did you like it?"

Benjamin looks up, surprised Alexander just lets it rest. Benjamin nods and takes a deep breath.

"Yeah. It's what I've always wanted. Read, write, teach. Literature, theatre. Guess I fucked up pretty spectacularly."

"You can always go back."

"Yeah great. I bet my future students' parents will be thrilled to hand their kids to a criminal."

Alexander is very serious now.

*"If you are convicted, you will have to work very hard afterwards to earn people's trust. But it's doable."*

The kid sits a little straighter.

"Do you really think they will let me do it?"

"Wrong question. Try again."

Benjamin frowns.

"Do I want it bad enough to work for it, not just academically, but personally? Do I think it's worth the effort?"

Alexander makes a gesture that might mean 'there you go' or 'smart kid.'

Benjamin's posture changes again.

"I'm not sure."

“Not sure you want it?”

“Not sure I—well, yeah. I fucked it up. That’s it. I’ll find something else to do. Possibly legal,” he adds as an afterthought.

Alexander calls it a day. He thinks there’s something else, something Benjamin isn’t telling him, but it’s too soon to push him too hard.

Over the next two weeks they talk every other day. Benjamin is eating properly most of the time. A few times Alexander notices fresh bruises on Benjamin’s knuckles. But it’s getting better. He’s more stable, albeit still reserved. Alexander decides it’s time to address his education again.

“You said you weren’t sure you wanted to go back to uni?”

“I’m not.”

Benjamin drops his gaze, playing with the hem of his sleeve.

“Actually—I am. I want to. I just can’t.”

“What would be necessary for you to be able to do it?”

Benjamin closes his eyes and doesn’t say anything for such a long time that Alexander thinks he might refuse to answer the question altogether. And then he realises he’s fighting tears.

“Wanna talk about something else?” he says softly.

“What, you just let me off the hook?”

Interesting. He thinks he needs to be pushed. Alexander refuses to comply.

“I’m still easing you in.”

That earns him a half smile, but Benjamin is still battling tears.

“I can’t do this,” he says after a while. His shoulders are tense, defensive.

“Why not?”

“It’s pathetic.”

“Try me.”

The tears are spilling from his still closed eyes now. Alexander gives him time. Doesn’t say anything. Benjamin takes a breath and opens his eyes, wiping his face with his sleeve.

“I used to talk to my mother about my studies. She always asked about my exams and papers and what I was reading at the time and she’d remember it all. It—Jesus.”

His voice sounds strangled. Alexander knows what’s going on. The kid is censoring himself. What he *wants* to say doesn’t correspond with the image he’s trying to uphold—or maybe even with his self-perception. This is one of the rare occasions a patient *needs* to be pushed.

“It what?”

“It fucking feels like I can’t do it without her, OK? Satisfied?”

Benjamin hates him right now, he's aware of that. The kid feels like he's being manipulated into saying something he doesn't want to say. He's openly crying now.

"I miss her, and it feels like a fucking knife wound and yes, I know what that feels like. She's gone because of me and I couldn't even say goodbye and that's my fucking fault as well. I was waiting for my useless shit of a so-called father to lift a fucking finger for me and lo and behold, he didn't. What a surprise."

He takes a few deep breaths, embarrassed about his outburst.

"I guess I'm not making too much sense right now, am I?"

"That's OK. We can sort the pieces later," Alexander says in the light tone that sometimes miraculously comes to him at just the right moments.

Benjamin laughs through his tears, relieved.

"I just barf it all out and we untangle it later? That how it works?"

"Sometimes. Wanna tell me how you feel?"

"Seriously?"

"Seriously."

"Fine—I feel...lighter, I guess. Embarrassed. Upset. But I breathe more freely."

Alexander *likes* this kid. He's a walking contradiction. Smart. Emotional. Eloquent. Witty. And then on the other hand there's aggression, self-harm, arrogance. Alexander hasn't seen that side of him yet, but it's there. The reports

add up. He's beaten people up, used a knife at least once. He has a temper that can flare to life in a moment. Why would a young man of Benjamin's abilities fight his way out of tricky situations, use his fists instead of his wits, beat people bloody and sometimes get beaten to a pulp himself, when he could easily talk himself out of them? Again and again?

## Chapter 3

“Why don’t we start at the beginning,” Alexander suggests.

Benjamin lets out a sigh.

“With the delinquent’s troubled childhood? Isn’t that a bit of a cliché?”

Alexander chuckles.

“Maybe a little,” he admits. “Tell me anyway?”

Benjamin’s gaze wanders.

“I’m not sure where to start.”

“What’s the first thing that comes to your mind when you think of a very young Benjamin?”

“Books. I was always reading, everywhere. Right after waking up, on my way to the bathroom, after breakfast. My mother had to take the book from under my nose or I’d never made it to school.”

“Where was your father?”

“Working. He left the house early in the morning and came home late. I didn’t get to see much of him.”

“How old were you when he retired?”

Benjamin’s shoulders tense and he hesitates. It seems odd, given the simple question.

“Fifteen,” he says eventually, and something in his voice has changed. Something happened back then, maybe related