DUTY CALLS

1.

„Amelia, the new client on line 2. A middle-aged man, abstracted and nervous. I would say the problem comes from above. Can you take over? “a young assistant recited officially, then held a breath and was ready to receive an avalanche of words from the other side of the phone.

„What is it about? “was an unexpectedly short answer.

„Excuse me, I didn't ask, he said he needed you personally and that it was very urgent. “

„Of course, it is urgent to everyone when it's over their head. I'll take over only attractive cases, and this pretentious mediocrity doesn't sound like it at all. “

„I apologize to be so direct, but I think this kind of case would be welcome. As I said, I think this is a large-scale intrigue, for which this man would be ready to pay rather large sum of money “, replied the girl, trying to calm her own voice trembling.

„Kimberly Harper, do I pay you to estimate the assets of my company or to take over calls such as this? I would like line 2 to be free next minute. Try to act a good assistant just one time, which is actually your job description! “

She hung over, and the young assistant finally started to breath and tried to calm too fast palpitations of her heart which usually followed each similar call. The phone rang again and the deafening sound stopped the silence in Kimberly Harper's office.

„When you finally decide to bring coffee that I asked, make sure the aspirin is next to it, if it's not too much for your crowded schedule. “

Kim immediately reached her bag and surprisingly fast found her phone by memory. She sneaked out of her office and hurried up through a long hallway towards the balcony, which had a Central Park view.

„ Zoe? Are you free? “

„Wait! Don't say anything. I'll can tell that you're calling because of your sadistically-minded boss who asked you, this time, to buy her cat a new mini-version of raincoat because yesterday's one is not in top ten most modern ones according to today’s Cosmopolitan? “

„Zoe, I can't stand her anymore! She doesn't behave as a human being! I still tremble because I had to turn down the man, who turned out to be the secretary of former supreme court judge, just because madam is at the moment in a mood for coffee, which she didn't even ask for! At least she didn't say it as civilized people usually do. Anyway, please tell me what happened to you today. I want think about anything else just for a moment to take away my thoughts from that creature! “

„What can I say? You know that my family is in large debts. I listen to lawyers for days and don't understand them and I don't wish or can understand them as an average librarian. But I also think that you have other important things to worry about. You understand that your mild and emphatic boss would throw you to her hungry sphinx cat if she heard you just called her madam? “

„Please, don't mention that hairless creature! As to your family, you know that you can count on me in any moment, if you think I can help. Unfortunately, I have to go now, someone needs an aspirin for headache caused by hairspray overdose. We'll hear, if I manage till the end of the shift. “

2.

Amelia Ryland looked through the covers of Times and Daily Mail, slightly twisting her upper right corner of her red lips, which should be understood as satisfying smile.

*Blair Lewis, is that the new pseudonym of famous American scandal revealer?*

*The veil has been torn off plastic surgeon Harris! One more success of affair queen, who still manages to hide her identity!*

After her blessed satisfied face expression disappeared and her face got harsh look again with indifferent red line above her chin, she picked up the phone and called her assistant.

„Kim, do you have anything to do with today's titles or these pretentious scribblers finally learned how to bring proper news? “

„No, Amelia, I didn't manage to talk to editors yesterday. I can't say I have anything to do with those titles. “

„Oh, I would never think before that your neglect will be of any use, but, fortunately for you, I can say that you successfully *didn't* do it. It was time that one can read something in the morning while drinking coffee! “

After her triumph speech, she blurted some more words through half-closed lips not lifting her head off the newspaper pictures:

„Close the door on your way out. “

After executing the latter order, Kim went to her office. As any time by exiting, her look stopped on the framed photography of a five-year old boy with big dark eyes. The boy smiled at Amelia's desk. She found out by chance that this was her boss's nephew.

„Another enigma“ she thought, imagining at the moment Amelia's eternally dark face next to the boy standing in front of her. She shook her head quickly not to think about it.

The phone rang again.

„Miss B.’s office. “

„Amelia, I need to cancel our evening agreement. I can't get what you asked me. Don't call me anymore. “

Hearing Amelia's name, Kim stopped breathing as the identity of her boss was kept as a top secret. She appeared publicly under various pseudonyms which usually started with the letter B. Kim didn't understand this need, but she didn't think much about it. She thought about it as her boss's trademark which every private investigator probably had. Namely, Amelia declared herself as such. As a matter of fact, if Kim put more attention to her boss's peculiar demands, she probably wouldn't be left too much time which she already had too little.

„K. Harper here, Miss B.'s assistant. She's presently unavailable, but I'll give her your message if you want it.“ She said it as if, by the least change of her voice mode, the unwrapping of tangled wool ball would be started. Especially because of the fact that the voice on the other side of the phone seemed familiar, in one very short moment, when the person lost his, up to that moment, very confident, deep voice. She blacked out for a moment. The calls of old clients always meant the same – the new lawsuit against Amelia. And this one, apparently, also knew her identity.

The call ended without an answer. Why would Amelia hide information regarding client arrangements and visiting? Kim always did that anyway! She was the one that answered dozens of calls a day from her own sources, the one who often went to secret parks, the highest floors of luxurious buildings, whose windows were usually carefully covered by heavy curtains, as well as to not too luxurious wooden cottages by night, all to get the newest information or acknowledges from clients or potential witnesses. They were, after Kim's procedure, examined by the boss having usual critics regarding time, but never regarding quality of done work.

„What was this supposed to mean? “ she thought and felt slight contractions in her stomach. She realised she was on the wrong line at wrong time.

3.

Three months went since the last big announcement of Amelia's venture. The list of refused calls grew longer, and Kim slowly, but certainly advanced to her breakdown. The last cases had always more indelicate mistakes and Amelia was aware of it.

Still, it seemed that nothing was more important to her than keeping her head in the skies as well as her heals on approximately the same height.

„Amelia, call for you from the ambassador White. Can you take it? “

„I said, close that case. I'm no longer interested. “

„But we are already engaged in it and I gathered several good stories as you said the case was intriguing and you would take it. I think we could come, in several weeks of work, to some revolutionary results. “

„Kimberly, do I have to remind you daily that the range of your work doesn't include deciding which case we will take as well as care for my company “, the boss answered to her with big effort, closing her eyes and gently massaging her temples, „stick to the calls while you're in the office because that's what I'm paying you for. Besides, who are you to evaluate the *revolutionism* of my results? You are here by my good will and you know it. Before you, my public echo was the same, if not bigger than today's, and believe me, it'll be the same after you. Therefore, I repeat, stick to your part of the work. “

„Amelia, I just wanted to say that we refused many cases lately… “

„Close the door on your way out. “

Already at the door of her office, Kim heard a ring. This time, it was her only contact with outdoor world – her phone, so that she ran, hearing only the beginning of the melody *River Flows In You* and quickly put it out of her bag.

She guessed - Zoe. Finally!

„Hey Zoe, I'm still alive, don't worry. “

„Did you tell her? “ was the question without greeting.

„Not yet, I tried, but it ended again with her monologue – *I don't pay you to advise me.* “

„And you let it finish like that again? “

„But you can't talk to her as you talk to a normal person. She doesn't listen to me at all! “

„Stop sounding like talking about some marriage problems! She doesn't listen to you…“ Kim almost felt strong shaking of the head on the other side of the phone. „The next thing for you to do is to go into her office, tell her all, although she already knows all of it, and show her that you are not primitive or naive as she thinks. And you'll leave *the door open on your way out*, did you understand! “

„You're insane! I adore you. Anyway, I would like to see you in this position, to have to tell to this kind of creature that your working conditions are not too satisfying for you “, mumbled Kim smiling at the phone.

„Then quit. “

The moments of stony silence followed.

„Zoe, you know very well that I can't quit. Maybe you don't understand it, because you never worked for this kind of company, but I'm within the system and can't *go out* of it just like that. Even if I had an argument with this freak, my name would still stand on documents. “

„With all the respect to you and her Kim, I would rather work, until the end of my life, in the library, than for some kind of celebrity *investigating* company which, above all, represents itself to be what it's not, and I'll say no more. I'll give you another advice, although I don't know any more why am I trying. You obviously don't intend to go out of that box of yours in which everything is solved by itself and everybody is satisfied in the end. Think about how many clerks, beside you, still work for Amelia Ryland. “

„Please, Zoe, you know that I don't think like that. I don't even know what I'm saying. I'm completely insane. “

„Maybe you'll get along better now. “

The call ended. Kim stood without moving not taking her sight out of the empty screen and thousands of thoughts raged in her head.

*What has just happened?! Is it possible that the horror situation from just before grew into even larger disaster that even overpasses this awful job?*

In one moment, it seemed to her she would faint, but a new phone call stopped her from collapsing.

She refused it. This time she was the one to refuse it.

„It's over “, went through her head while she bravely walked towards Amelia's office. The avalanche of thoughts in her head was distracted by a quick greeting of some unusually deep voice.

„Hello“, said a man of average height, pretty good looking. He successfully avoided bumping into Kim who was deeply into her thoughts. After she greeted him as well, she thought it was very unusual she didn't see him before here, as he wasn't from those she would forget right after seeing something else, like some pictures standing all over the walls of the hallway. The associations led her thoughts further to the interesting fact, which was a few years ago explained by Zoe, that men tend to change their voice when speaking to women. If they consider it important to sound like Sylvester Stallone, they should at least try to sound like him. Failed tries of transforming tenor into bas, like this one was, have completely opposite effect.

And then she came up with a thought which at the same time froze her blood and brought a smile to her face. This was the voice which seemed familiar to her the other day on the phone! Failed depth of voice imitation.

Overwhelmed by emotions about this revelation, she found herself in front of Amelia's office. She stood. Only misty glass door separated her from final freedom. And the door opened. Only before Kim knocked. Her boss stood on the door. Her eyes were flashing towards Kim, who was just a half meter from her while she was blurting one word through her teeth as long as she could.

„TE-LE-PHONE. “

„Amelia, I would like to talk to you, it's important. “

„You *would like to* sit at your table and pass the call which just ended. What do you think is that important that you should miss calls which… “?

„Please! I need to talk to you seriously. “

She knew that something like this is life-threatening. But now it was necessary. Such perfect expression of inner fury on her boss's face couldn't be seen for all these years. But now, it was there. At that moment, the longest silence of all ended by Amelia's praiseworthy performance of deeply disappointed righteous.

„Come in. “

„First, I would like to inform you about White case news “, after short presentation of her revelations during last week and unsuccessful trying to calm her trembling palms, Kim continued „and at the same time I would like to inform you that this is my last case that I investigated for this company. With this case finishes my work here. My cancellation period starts today. “

Amelia looked her directly into eyes, so penetrative that Kim shuddered, and then she said:

„Close the door on your way out. “

4.

Kim has already been unemployed for a week. Although she has been trying to convince herself that the whole story with Amelia and her company is in the past, something in her just can’t make peace with that fact. Is it possible that she misses it? No. Kim may be a sensitive soul who always places the needs, and even wants, of others far ahead of herself, but it still can’t be possible that she can miss that kind of terror. It has to be something else.

Communication with Zoe has started to resemble what it once was. The melody of *River Flows In You* has once again become a part of her everyday life.

Up until now, since she got her degree, Kim has never been unemployed. She was lost in her own loneliness and the all-consuming unproductivity she found herself in, was wholly unnatural. She was used to finishing tasks, revolving around deadlines and being under somebody’s control. Now, in order to forget about it all, she reached for her phone buried under a pile pillows, books, chargers with extension cords (from which one would assume that she planned on not getting out of bed for an extended amount of time) and a ridiculous amount of packages that used to host Doritos, pizza with extra cheese, Oreos, Ben & Jerry's and the rest of the Junk food family.

Her habit of opening every internet portal she knew, almost before even opening her eyes, couldn’t disappear even now, when nothing relating to politics, marketing or anything and everything in between the two was of any importance to her. Doing as she did every day, she was greeted with piles of, mildly said, hysterical headlines.

*Who is senator Banks’ classy secretary actually and is he visiting an investigation company privately or for business?*

*Senator Banks caught in an affair? What does his secretary want from a private investigator?*

*Miss B(anks)?! Coincidence or scandal?*

Her phone was only saved from its destined screen shattering by a thick quilt, after Kim unceremoniously dropped it from pure shock. Her head was swarmed by thoughts, information and data which she thought she successfully repressed up until a couple minutes ago. The roulette wheel in her head finally stopped spinning when her gaze landed on the cover photo of the article she opened. She found the eyes of a man with average height, but significant good looks, ones that wouldn’t be easily forgotten while looking at the numerous pictures standing all over the walls of the hallway of her now former company, staring up at her.

“Senator Banks’ secretary?” she thought, remembering the time she almost crashed into him in the hallway.

Yes! Now everything makes sense. Pretentious deep voice on the phone, the same one from the hallway and now the cover image. Alright, so maybe she didn’t understand when he said that he failed to acquire information for Amelia. And the fact that he knew her name, even though it was never, ever, mentioned in public, also wasn’t making much sense. And the sentence: “Don’t contact me again.” *Again?!* Does that mean that he was in constant contact with her boss, and that Kim had no idea, even though her main job was forwarding calls?

Alright, so nothing makes sense. She had to admit to herself that she was, yet again, on the beginning of the story of Amelia, the office, the company, the public and everything else she, so enthusiastically, gave up. And just so she felt like she was at the office again, the phone rang. Her face took on her old, pale expression, she felt her hands beginning to shake and the rest of her body freeze up, when her screen flashed up with a –B. She accepted the call.

“Kimberly”, said Amelia with a significant shake in her voice. Kim recognized it as a, to put it mildly, a sign of hopeless despair, “I want you to come back. The truth is that nobody else lives up to your standards, therefore I want you to come back to work on Monday. The girl currently calling herself my assistant, can only dream of the qualifications she supposedly has.”

“Amelia, I appreciate your words, but my decision has been made after careful consideration and I don’t intend on retracting it.”

“Alright then. I just want to know, what you plan on doing down the line? Find a job at a different investigation company? I hope you know that, that isn’t how it works…”

*Was that just attempted blackmail? Is it possible that she can’t issue a single request like a civilized human being?* But Kim had to admit to herself that she wasn’t really thinking ahead. By all accounts, Amelia wasn’t very likely to give her glowing recommendations. So yes, she was being blackmailed.

“Accordingly, you’ll have your own assistant, which guarantees you more freedom. I’m ready for minor concessions and regarding your salary…”, she said theatrically and after a successfully staged out typing on her calculator, she continued, “… I’m expecting you on Monday in my office.”

“Alright, I accept.” Kim uttered, felling shame, bitterness and a strange sense of satisfaction wash over her at the same time, “…under the condition that…”, but the call was already disconnected, probably a second after she heard the phrase *I accept*.

5.

In twenty days, in the period from her last visit here, Kim felt that the atmosphere in the office, as well as in the company in general, changed greatly. Something was in the process and just needed to come out and it seemed it would overflow the public and portals. In the office next to hers was a young, evidently frightened girl. It was easy to conclude that this was her new assistant.

„Hi, I'm Kim“, she said eagerly and enthusiastically as much as she could, in order to bring the poor girl back into life.

„Nancy“ said the girl and gave her nicely manicured hand, „Miss B. is expecting you in her office after talking to man who is presently in there. “

„Nancy, please don't talk to me in that manner, I'm barely older than you. Tell me, who is the person at Amelia's office? “

Hearing her name, the girl shook a little.

„It's confidential, but I suppose I can tell you. Eric Morgan, the general secretary of senator Banks. “

After more than half an hour waiting, misty glass office door finally opened. The secretary went out of Amelia's office triumphally, nodding his head when passing by Kim. She went nonchalantly towards her boss's office feeling as if she won former herself, who would normally, in this case, feared to death. The door closed.

„Kim“, started Amelia unusually quietly, „it's all collapsing, to be honest. I suppose you know the man who just left the room.“

„Eric Walker, the general secretary of senator Banks. You probably saw the articles… Amelia, what's this all got to do with us? I need to know.“

„What do you think, why did I ask you to come back? Here it is, I've got evidence of Banks' affair regarding arms trade. He's got connections with Arabian emir“ Amelia stopped suddenly, still went on after clearing her throat, „Malik Abbas.“

Kim frowned slightly after Amelia's pause and said.

„Ok, does Walker know about it? “

„Does he? Yes, and even more. He asks us to destroy evidence as everything is revealing bit by bit and the senator's position is in danger. “

„We will not do such thing, I suppose. The public needs to know this. “

„Wrong, this is exactly what you're going to do next.“ said Amelia. Her voice trembled again. Kim trembled as well.

„But we can't allow arms trader to sit in the senate. They are just discussing this statute amendment. “

„Kim, you don't understand! I *have* to do this.“ Amelia easily put off Pink Gold Prada glasses, easily folded them and put them on the desk. Then breathed in deeply and turned framed photography which stood on her desk next to Kim.

„This is Ryan. From the Arabian name *Rayan*, meaning brave. Just what his mother isn't… “

„What are you talking about Amelia? His mother is …“ Kim stopped and looked her boss. She looked her straight in the eyes, having completely opposite feelings than ever before and then, she easily nodded her head, almost completely pale. They sat for a while in silence as two friends. Then Amelia started:

„Now you understand why we must destroy the evidence. “

„Amelia, I don't know what to say, I, … I had no idea… “

„Of course, you didn't know, nobody did. What do you think, why did I need all those idiotic pseudonyms? I don't play private detectives from movies. “

„May I ask, I suppose, Ryan's father is … Abbas? “

„Walker supposed too, and today, he knows. I don't know who gives him information, but I do know that they can't go in public under any circumstances. “

„I see. He blackmailed you that he would announce the story in case the evidence wasn’t destroyed. Did he give some deadline? “

„Tomorrow at midnight, all media that anyone cares about, will be satisfied to have the story about *affair of affair queen* and those who are ready to transfer certain amount on Walker's account, will also have my and Ryan's name, family name and picture on the cover. “ Amelia took out a cigarette box from a Hermes bag and lighted a cigarette, in spite of a pretty big sign on the front door of the company, as well as bright white curtains. Kim slightly coughed, but after her boss looked her harshly, she recollected and continued:

„May I ask you one more detail that's not clear to me? “

„Ask, we are talking openly. “ replied Amelia slightly twisting her upper right corner of her red lips.

„What did Walker need to get for you, but didn't succeed? “

„I beg your pardon. For me? “

„Yes, that's what he said in the phone call before, you know, my resignation. “

„I don't know about any phone call by Eric Walker. “ Kim realised that she never really told Amelia about that phone call, about deep voice and everything. She shuddered. It would have been differently if she reacted in time. She should have realised it.

„I apologize. I don't know what else to say, I simply forgot. I thought only about my last days here and therefore I overlooked the fact that I didn't tell you. “ Another sharp Amelia's look followed and then also a deep breath.

„What did he say then? “ she said with effort closing her eyes again and tenderly massaging her temples.

„He said: ‘Amelia, I need to cancel our evening agreement. I can't get what you asked me. Don't call me anymore.’, I was shocked that he knew your name, but now I understand. I only don't understand what the call was about. “ Amelia started to laugh suddenly, in a way that was really hard to understand. The closest description would be something between bitterness, resignation, and honest human laugh and then she said:

„Oh Kim! This was not a call for me, it was for you. He knows very well that you answer clients' calls and that it is not very easy to get the phone number of my office. He wanted to upset you by giving you idea that there's someone out there who knows my name, but in the first place, to get you to suspect my honesty towards you. He wanted you to think that I hide information about clients from you, in which he succeeded, as you quitted your job. “

Kim stood in horror. Where does this lead to? First blackmailing, a secret child, then senator who deals with some Arabian arms trader, who is, in the end, the father of Amelia's child, whose picture is in her office and above all, some mental games that her, Kim Harper, the average girl from Missouri, directly involves into the story.

„Amelia, leave Walker and senator to me, and you deal other clients“ she said resentfully and proudly went out of office. Ok, not that proudly not to close the door on her way out.

6.

A luxurious Washington restaurant Sospeso was situated in one of the most popular blocks of H Street Corridor. An elegant synergy of history and modernism, yet rustically designed, made the hotel one of the most luxurious restaurants in this part of the town. Kim loved it always, especially because of its cosy Mediterranean and non-conservative setting, which made it completely opposite to stiff atmosphere of her office. But, instead, Kim wasn’t relaxed. She sat at the table by the window having turbulent city view, dressed in unbranded, very elegant white slim fitted coat having high collar. It was perfectly matching high heeled black boots reaching her knees and tenderly white gloves. This outfit emphasized her slim figure and long, thin legs. A man of average height, pretty good looking appeared exactly at 7 p.m. on the entrance door. He was wearing a black Burberry coat, perfectly fitted and elegant Gucci half boots. His attitude showed his confidence and self-importance. He directly approached Kim’s table and bowed slightly, getting nearer to her, although she was aware that this was more than deceptive. She only waited to see what kind of voice he will perform this time.

„Finally, we meet, Kim Harper. “

Although fear and excitement boiled inside of her body, which were also mixed with suspense of this plan, she managed to overcome her trembling voice as well as nervous drumming of her fingers on the table and nonchalantly said:

„Good evening Mr. Walker, feel free to sit. “

After that, the performance of indifference, icy looks and carefully dozed smiles continued.

„What can I do for you? “ he asked having elegant, seductive voice. Without saying anything, Kim gave him a photo turned upside down. Secretary’s face froze with startled expression.

Less than ten minutes from entering, Eric Walker left the restaurant quickly and left his company to finish her long espresso. Her face looked satisfied.

7.

Sitting back in white leather armchair in Amelia’s office, having glass of Evian water in her hand, Kim was retelling her boss the details of the meeting, showing her the photos of senator Banks in not too favourable situation on wild party in New York night club, surrounded by many, barely adult girls, among which, his fifty-year old wife would feel even older. Next to plenty of glasses and empty bottles, there was a phone having on its back side the traces of white powder. At the same time, Amelia told her the whole story about her five-year old son Ryan and his father Malik Abbas. From the beginning to the end, as if she was her best friend, she was telling her how she met him one summer on a business trip to United Arab Emirates. They were both on a business lunch with the ambassador of the United States, she, as a representative of an American technologic company, and he, as emir. He seemed to her, at that time, very down-to-earth and normal, especially for such a young man in that high position. Later, he turned out to be exactly the opposite. She didn’t know, of course, about his involvement in arms trade, which just began. Approximately a year after, Ryan was born in the United States. Malik Abbas already had a bad reputation and Amelia was more than terrified about it. Her career in investigating company was only planned, and she knew very well that this will end on covers, which will definitely have a negative impact on her career, if someone finds out that the father of her child is an arms dealer. But the situation developed positively in favour of Amelia’s company, as Abbas didn’t care too much, either for her, or for the boy. Until one day, when she already was a boss of her own company and had the assistant Kimberly Harper and started to investigate the case of senator Banks. From her, actually Kim’s sources, she got the information that the senator was involved in arms trade based exactly on stores from United Arab Emirates. The arms stores were owned by, who else, but Malik Abbas. And how life usually tends to spice up the things just when we don’t need any spice, the main secretary Eric Walker came, defending his employer, senator Banks. From still unknow sources, he found out the connection between Amelia and Abbas. And the blackmail chain started. The first one was started by Walker when he asked for destroying the evidence of senator’s connection with Arabs, threatening to reveal Amelia’s secret. In those days, she got a phone call from the area code +971 which was only to be connected to one person - Malik. Of course, he didn’t call personally, but through his secretary, or whatever the name is of such a position in his country. This one said emir wanted his son and had the right to be with him. The whole Amelia’s life flashed in front of her. Not only that her carrier was ruined, but her son was also in danger, being target of Arab arms dealers, with his father on the head. Accidentally, his father remembered that he exists and wished to have him by his side just at that time, giving him the opportunity to be some successor of emir or whatever. Amelia believes it was not a coincidence that this happened just now when Abbas’s main buyer from the United States was investigated by her company. And there’s a blackmail number two. In case Amelia doesn’t stop her investigation, Abbas will persist to take his son to Emirates.

Amelia turned to her assistant, took her hand, and honestly said:

„Kim, I want you to know that I never had a problem with you personally, I merely saw I had to have a firm attitude and couldn’t believe anyone. I was afraid for Ryan more than ever in my life. I can see now that I was wrong about you and I honestly admit that, without you, none of this could have been solved. “

„I understand Amelia. As for Walker, I have to say I wouldn’t have succeeded, if I didn’t follow their steps very carefully and used them exactly against them. So, the third blackmail in a row was, actually, mine. “