

The Winner Stands Alone



Sixth Chapter

‘I promised I wouldn’t if you behaved in a more adult fashion and with due respect for my intelligence.’

He’s right. The adult thing to do would be to talk a little about herself. She might arouse the compassion that is always there in the mind of a madman by explaining that she’s in a similar situation, even though it isn’t true.

A boy runs past, an iPod in his ears. He doesn’t even turn to look at them.

‘I live with a man who makes my life hell, and yet I can’t leave him.’

The look in Igor’s eyes changes.

Olivia thinks she’s found a way of escaping from the trap. ‘Be intelligent. Don’t just give up; think of the woman who’s married to the man sitting next to you. Be honest.’

‘He’s cut me off from my friends. He’s always jealous even though he can get all the women he wants. He criticises everything I do and says I have no ambition. He even takes the little money I earn as commission.’

The man says nothing but stares at the sea. The pavement is filling up with people; what would happen if she just got to her feet and ran? Would he shoot her? Is it a real gun?

She senses that she has touched on a topic of possible interest to him. It would be best not to do anything foolish, she thinks, remembering the way he spoke and looked at her minutes before.

‘And yet, you see, I can’t bring myself to leave him. Even if I were to meet the kindest, richest, most generous man in the world, I wouldn’t give my boyfriend up for anything. I’m not a masochist, I take no pleasure in these constant humiliations, I just happen to love him.’

She feels the barrel of the gun pressing into her ribs again. She has said the wrong thing.

‘I’m not like that scoundrel of a boyfriend of yours,’ he says, his voice full of loathing now. ‘I worked hard to build up what I have. I worked long and hard, and survived many a setback. I was always honest in my dealings, although there were, of course, times when I had to be hard and implacable. I was always a good Christian. I have influential friends, and I’ve always been grateful to them. In short, I did everything right.

‘I never harmed anyone who got in my way. Whenever possible, I encouraged my wife to do what she wanted to do, and the result: here I am, alone. Yes, I killed people during the idiotic war I was sent to fight, but I never lost my sense of reality. I’m not one of those traumatised war veterans who goes into a restaurant and machine-guns people. I’m not a terrorist. Of course, I could say that life has treated me unfairly and taken from me the most important thing there is: love. But there are other women, and the pain of love always passes. I need to act, I’m

tired of being a frog slowly boiling to death.'

'If you know there are other women and you know that the pain of love will pass, why are you so upset?'

Yes, she's behaving like an adult now, surprised at the calm way in which she's trying to deal with the madman by her side.

He seems to waver.

'I don't really know. Perhaps because I've been abandoned once too often. Perhaps because I need to prove to myself just what I'm capable of. Perhaps because I lied, and there is only one woman for me. I have a plan.'

'What plan?'

'I told you before. I'm going to keep destroying worlds until she realises how important she is to me and that I'm prepared to run any risk in order to get her back.'

The police!

They both notice the police car approaching.

'I'm sorry,' says the man. 'I intended to talk a little more. Life hasn't treated you very fairly either.'

Olivia realises this is the end. And since she now has nothing to lose, she again tries to get up. Then she feels the hand of that stranger on her right shoulder, as if he were fondly embracing her.

Samozashchita Bez Orujiya, or Sambo, as it is better known among Russians, is the art of killing swiftly with one's bare hands, without the victim realising what is happening. It was developed over the centuries, when peoples or tribes had to confront invaders unarmed. It was widely used by the Soviet state apparatus to eliminate people without leaving any trace. They tried to introduce it as a martial art in the 1980 Moscow Olympics, but it was rejected as being too dangerous, despite all the efforts of the Communists of the day to include in the Games a sport which they alone practised.

Perfect. That way, only a few people know the moves.

Igor's right thumb is pressing down on Olivia's jugular vein, and the blood stops flowing to her brain. Meanwhile, his other hand is pressing on a particular point near her armpit, causing the muscles to seize up. There are no contractions, it's merely a question of waiting two minutes.

Olivia appears to have gone to sleep in his arms. The police car drives by behind them, using the lane that is closed to other traffic. They don't even notice the embracing couple; they have other things to worry about this morning, like doing their best to keep the traffic moving - an impossible task if carried out to the letter. The latest call over the radio tells them that some drunken millionaire has just crashed his car a mile or so away.

Still supporting the girl, Igor bends down and uses his other hand to pick up the cloth spread out in front of the bench and on which all those tasteless objects were to be displayed. He adroitly folds the cloth up to form an improvised pillow.

When he sees that no one else is around, he tenderly lays her inert body on the bench. She looks as if she were asleep; and in her dreams she must be remembering some particularly lovely day or else having nightmares about

her violent boyfriend.

Only the elderly couple had noticed them sitting together. And if the crime were discovered – which Igor doubted, since there were no visible marks – they would describe him to the police as fairer or darker or older or younger than he really was; there wasn't the slightest reason to be worried; people never pay much attention to what's going on around them.

Before leaving, he plants a kiss on the brow of the sleeping beauty and murmurs:

‘As you see, I kept my promise. I didn't shoot.’

Paulo Coelho

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