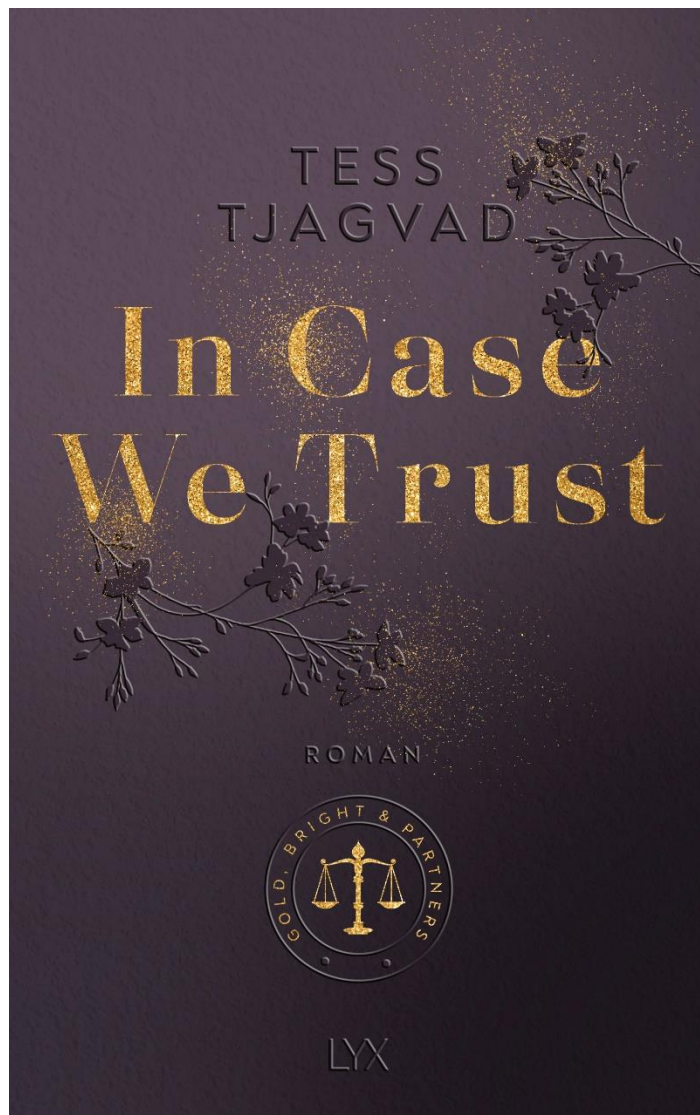


**Tess Tjagvad**  
**IN CASE WE TRUST**

Sample Translation by Alexandra Roesch



**New Adult**

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Not all words go in one ear and out the other. Some embed themselves deep in the fabric of memory, where they endure. Sometimes it's only for a few hours or days, but sometimes it's for weeks or even entire years.

One thing my father taught me early on was punctuality. And for some reason his words were firmly anchored in my memory to this day: *Cabots don't keep anyone waiting, Gracie. If you make someone wait, you convey that they aren't important enough and that you don't take your work seriously.*

Indeed, throughout my life I had often found that punctuality could save a lot of inconvenience. Arriving the first at restaurants often allowed you to choose your seat. In my case, it was always a table by the wall, because even as a child, I preferred swimming close to the shore rather than in open water.

Arriving early to a meeting allowed you to mentally go through the script one more time, so that you could navigate the conversation smoothly and avoid stumbling over your words.

Being on time also meant never having to come up with excuses or white lies for tardiness, which would stick in your throat throughout the entire meeting.

For all these reasons, I meticulously planned my appointments and checked them for accuracy at least three times before adding them to my calendar. The same applied to setting my alarm before going to bed.

How I managed to oversleep on my first day of work despite all this, I couldn't explain even after looking at my phone for the fifth time. Hadn't the alarm gone off? Or had I skilfully ignored it? In truth, it didn't matter, because the moment I realized it, I was already wide awake and out of bed.

Barefoot, I dashed into the hallway and knocked on Cassidy's bedroom door with my fist. Gently at first, then a bit more urgently. She had relied on me to wake her up, as I was naturally an early riser.

A mistake. A big mistake.

Perhaps when I moved out of my old apartment, I left behind more than just my last name.

'Cass, get up! We overslept!' I poked my head round the door. The grey morning light hung over her room like a veil, making the bare walls look even more dismal.

'What's happening?' She rubbed her eyes and blinked sleepily at me. Her fringe stood tousled in all directions.

'If we don't hurry now, we'll be late,' I said, tapping an imaginary watch on my wrist.

'Late, how?' She grabbed her phone and glanced briefly at the screen. The next second, she was sitting up straight in her bed. 'Damn it, I thought you were waking me up?'

We rushed into the bathroom, where the cool morning air had gathered overnight thanks to the open window. I stood shivering in front of the mirror, brushing my teeth while Cassidy stepped into the tiny shower cubicle with a torrent of suppressed curses.

This back-and-forth continued for the next few minutes, like a dance where we alternated steps: I showered while she blow-dried her hair. I blow-dried my hair while she put on her makeup. I put on my makeup while she brushed her teeth. All the while, I had to constantly wipe the mist off the fogged-up mirror with a corner of my towel just to see myself in it.

My father used to say I was the spitting image of my mother, and as far as I could tell from old photos, it was true. I had her dark red-blonde hair; it cascaded over my shoulders like shiny silk. The deep brown eyes, the fair rose-tinted skin, and the countless tiny freckles on my nose and cheeks were also the same.

Today, it seemed like those little marks were standing out especially strongly on my skin. My nervousness had taken up residence not only in my stomach but also on my face.

This was probably why I could barely manage a bite of the toast and jam that Cassidy had slid across the kitchen counter to me after I got dressed.

‘Are you sure you want to wear that?’ she asked, looking down at me doubtfully, prompting me to do the same.

Cassidy was in a black designer jumpsuit, but I had chosen a mustard-yellow ruffled blouse and a jacket that matched the knee-length navy-blue pencil skirt. I wore grey wool tights with white dots, burgundy patent leather shoes, and my mother's old red hairband, one of my few mementoes of her.

Perhaps I often liked to think in shades of grey, but I loved wearing colours. This outfit was a combination of my favourite pieces. I had hoped that if I couldn't give myself a sense of security, at least my clothing could do it for me. However, Cassidy's comment shattered all hope in the blink of an eye.

‘What's wrong with it?’

‘Absolutely nothing!’ she replied quickly, an octave too high. ‘It's *your* first impression. Wear what you want and what makes you feel good.’

Although I had known Cassidy for several years, sometimes it felt like we were speaking different languages. Unlike me, she didn't ruminate over her sentences multiple times in her head; she just came out with them.

I was aware that most of it wasn't meant maliciously, and yet I often found it difficult to filter her words and decide which ones to let closer and which ones to keep at bay. These were as sharp as the finest shards of glass. I could let them get under my skin, or I could let them bounce off me.

My hand clenched into a fist. It doesn't matter what she says. *As long as you feel comfortable, everything is really okay.* I relaxed it again.

‘All right then.’ She wiped the breadcrumbs from the corner of her mouth and checked her lipstick in the reflection of her phone. ‘Knowing you, you probably already have a plan for how we'll get to the law firm?’

Of course I did. A detailed schedule was one of the first things I took care of after waking up yesterday.

I opened my pocket calendar and skimmed through my notes. ‘Actually, I thought we'd take the train.’

However, the nearest station on Park Street was about a ten-minute walk. Along with a twenty-minute train ride towards Downtown and another five minutes of walking, there was no doubt that we would be late.

‘If we walk to the train now, we'll never make it on time,’ Cassidy voiced my thoughts. She put her phone away and looked thoughtfully out of

the kitchen window. Suddenly, her expression brightened. 'Look at that. Maybe we don't have to.'

"What are you talking about?" I placed my plate in the sink and followed her gaze down to the main street, where at that moment a taxi pulled up to the kerb. The driver briefly considered turning into the small side street that led to the window of my room, but at the last second, he decided against it.

'Don't you think he's waiting for someone specific?' I asked, furrowing my brow.

Cassidy turned her head to me and grinned. 'Yes, for us. Come on, hurry up!'

She grabbed her bag and pulled me by the wrist out of the kitchen. I managed to grab my things and a coat in the hallway before she dragged me through the stairwell. As soon as we stepped outside, the damp, cool fingers of the October morning wrapped around my bare neck. The sky was washed out and grey. The dark tower clouds looked as though they carried rain that was getting heavier by the minute.

Cassidy didn't hesitate; she ran to the taxi and knocked on the window with a broad smile. After exchanging a few words with the driver, she waved me over excitedly. 'Come on, he's taking us!'

If that wasn't a stroke of luck!

I had just opened the back door to slide onto the seat when someone tapped me on the shoulder. 'Excuse me, but I think this is mine.'

It was a warm male voice. Calm and deep, a bit like being wrapped in black velvet. I slowly turned around and froze as I realized who it belonged to. I wanted to burst out laughing because it was so absurd. But in the first moment of shock, I couldn't make a sound.

Unlike him.

'*You.*' The dark expression that flitted over his distinctive face like a shadow immediately told me that he recognized me too. His pale green eyes narrowed slightly. 'First, you spy on me, and now you're stealing my taxi?'

*Spy?* Was he serious? I gasped.

'Hang on a minute, I wasn't spying on you!'

He seemed far from convinced by my response. 'You know, strictly speaking, it could be classed as voyeurism and is illegal, right?'

My gaze briefly traced his tall figure. He wore a dark grey coat over his broad shoulders, a white shirt with a striped tie underneath, smart trousers, and black Oxford shoes with worn tips.

‘What are you, a lawyer? A police officer?’ I asked, chuckling.

My rival didn't change his expression. ‘I assume most people would know that. At least, that's what I thought.’

‘Oh? Then maybe you also know that for you to succeed in bringing charges, I would have had to take photos or videos of you, proving the whole thing. But I haven't. I just happened to glance over at an inopportune moment, that's all.’

The guy crossed his arms over his chest and tilted his head, causing a light blonde strand to fall onto his forehead. He had tried to shape his hair with wax, but the light breeze wasn't very kind. It was hard to tell whether he looked curious or surprised.

‘That's what you say,’ he replied.

‘Because it's true! But you're right. I'm sorry for disrespecting your privacy. *Truly,*’ I assured him firmly. ‘It's not my style, and it won't happen again. I promise.’

He opened his mouth to reply when Cassidy called out from the passenger seat, ‘Gray, what's taking so long? We're in a hurry, have you forgotten?’

I leaned my head into the taxi. ‘Just give me a second,’ I pleaded. Then I turned back to our neighbour, who was now looking me up and down.

‘Are you and your girlfriend new around here? I've never seen you here before.’

‘We moved in the day before yesterday,’ I muttered, pulling up the collar of my coat.

‘*The day before yesterday?*’ He made a sound that was half snort, half laugh. ‘Well, that's what I call a memorable first impression.’

A feeling of shame burned in my stomach. On one hand, I would have liked to sink into the ground; on the other hand, I wanted to kick the car tire. None of this would have happened if I had just gotten up on time. Instead, I was arguing with a stranger on the street and would be late on my first day of work. I couldn't afford to start off like this at the law firm. I might have shed my identity as a flashy Cabot, but that didn't mean it was okay to make

mistakes. Especially not like *these*. I didn't want to keep anyone waiting, and I didn't want anyone to feel like they weren't important enough to me.

The more I thought about it, the more anger welled up inside me. 'Listen. We really, really need this taxi. I can't afford to be late today of all days, okay? I have to...' ...do a good job.

'I can't...' ...fail.

My voice faltered, just like my heartbeat.

'Do you think I can afford to be late?' he asked, gesturing vaguely towards the car. 'That's my taxi. Get out and order your own if you need one.'

Even though he was having a discussion with me, he spoke calmly and composedly, and for some reason, it didn't make me feel any warmer towards him. Quite the opposite. It made me even angrier.

'We're not going to do anything of the kind! We're actually paying him double for the ride,' Cassidy suddenly interjected from her rolled-down window. 'So get in the damn car now, Gracie!'

As I obediently reached for the door handle behind my back with my left hand, my gaze darted back to our neighbour. He seemed to sense what I was about to do before I fully grasped the cool metal with my fingers.

'I would think twice about that if I were you.'

He had no idea that I usually wouldn't just think twice, but three times, if the circumstances were different. I would have asked Cassidy to get out and would have immediately apologized to him. But I couldn't. Not if this was going to be my fresh start.

'I'm really sorry, there's no other way,' I said as I slipped into the taxi and slammed the door behind me.

Hardly had the driver started the engine when the doors locked, preventing our neighbour from opening them. His face was contorted as he pounded the window with the flat of his hand. Then he spun around and walked briskly back to the entrance of his house.

Thank goodness. I sank deeper into the seat cushions and exhaled. My heart was pounding so strongly that I could feel it beating throughout my body.

'What the hell was that?' Cassidy's gaze was also fixed on our neighbour's front door, which was getting smaller as we moved away from it.



‘Well, we just blatantly stole his taxi,’ I mumbled, realizing that it sounded even worse when said aloud.

She shrugged nonchalantly. ‘So what? Even if we did. He’ll get over it.’

‘I don’t know...’ I looked up at the sky, which had become even more overcast in the past few minutes. ‘Shouldn’t we have at least offered to give him a ride? It looks like rain.’

Cassidy snorted and pulled out her phone, busily tapping on it. ‘It’s really touching how concerned you are about him, Gray. But we’ve got some real problems right now. Unless you have a Plan B that’ll get us to the office in eight minutes?’

Of course, I didn’t have one. Even though I wished I did. With a sigh, I leaned my head against the window and watched as the city sights passed by me.

Just like my father’s law firm, Gold, Bright & Partners was located in the heart of downtown. Having lived in Seaport until a few days ago, I was familiar with the area. Tall buildings with shining glass fronts, heavy traffic, and lots of people. Downtown was home to the major shopping, legal, and financial districts. Most office buildings were situated around the government centre, including both new and older structures.

I liked downtown, actually the whole of Boston. Mostly because of the expansive parks and the proximity to the water, but also because of the charming suburbs that could make you forget you were in a big city. The only thing I could do without was the congested streets in the early morning – especially in a situation like this. Traffic was moving slowly, while the numbers on my phone’s clock were advancing rapidly.

‘We need to be there in three minutes.’ Cassidy’s voice tugged at the edge of my consciousness, mingling with the siren of a police car and the patter of rain that had now started. ‘We’ll never make it.’

Who was she telling? The nervousness in my stomach had transformed into a solid lump that was steadily growing. *What if they started without us? If we missed something important, or if they somehow held it against us?*

I cracked the window open just a sliver and closed my eyes, taking several deep breaths. Never mind that the fine drops were wetting my cheeks with a thin mist within seconds.



When I opened my eyes a moment later, a horrified sound caught in my throat: right next to me at the traffic light, in the narrow gap between the cars, was our neighbour - on a bicycle. Rain ran down his face in rivulets, and his clothes were completely soaked. To make matters worse, he glared angrily into our taxi, so I immediately closed the window.

*Oh God, oh God, oh God.* Sweat broke out on my skin as I sank deeper into my seat, which unfortunately didn't swallow me up as I had hoped. 'Cass?' I squeaked.

She didn't hear me, as she was talking to the taxi driver. 'Isn't there some other way we can take?'

The driver thought for a moment, stroking the scruffy stubble on his chin. 'I could take a left here and see if going through State Street is faster.'

Cassidy nodded. 'Sounds like a plan.'

The light turned green, and the first cars started moving.

Our neighbour shot me a final scathing glance over his shoulder through a cloud of exhaust fumes. Then he mounted his bike again and rode straight ahead through the intersection, while we turned left. It should have brought me relief, but suddenly my guilt weighed so heavily on my shoulders that there was no feeling of liberation when I took a breath.

Hopefully, he wouldn't have to ride much farther in the rain. The thought of him catching something because of us made me feel sick.

At least it seemed the taxi driver's detour was indeed the better choice. Just under seven minutes later, he dropped us off in front of the law firm, without thanking us for the double fare.

Although I had stood in front of the imposing Gold, Bright & Partners building before, it didn't make it any less intimidating. It was a four-storey Federal-style structure, its façade made of rust-red bricks adorned with intricately designed friezes. The rectangular mullioned windows with white metal frames were crowned with ornate cornices. The entrance was a massive arched portal that led into the impressive lobby. On either side of the wide double doors, which had once belonged to an old firehouse, stood two planters with round laurel topiary trees. The mere sight triggered memories of my job interview and caused my palms to start sweating.

I had prepared for this interview for an entire month, studying the firm's major cases and rehearsing appropriate answers to every possible

question. Yet every third question still caught me off guard. *How would you have ruled in case XY as a judge? What three items would you take to a deserted island? How do you feel about the use of the Miranda warning?*

But the toughest question I had been asked was: *Your transcripts show a different last name, why did you change it? And what makes you want to work for us, Ms... Hoffman?* Because how could you explain to someone that you'd rather work for the biggest competitor's law firm instead of your own father's?

I hadn't given the managing partner, Natalie Gold, the real reason, but I hadn't lied either. It was true that I'd never had a close bond with my parents. And it was true that I wanted to achieve something without relying on connections or my last name.

She had seemed to like the idea. Or maybe she just wanted to have her competitor's daughter on her team.

Cassidy and I entered the spacious lobby with emerald-green marble floor tiles, passed a row of elevators with curved wooden frames, and finally arrived at the reception desk. It was made of dark mahogany wood, just like the panelled wall behind it, into which the firm's golden logo was engraved: a round seal with a set of balance scales, and above it, in elegant gold letters, Gold, Bright & Partners.

I recognised the older woman who was busy clicking on her computer keyboard while on the phone, immediately recalling her from my interview. But today, she wasn't alone. Beside her sat a young man in a suit, whom I estimated from a quick glance to be around thirty. His black, wavy hair was neatly combed back, and the smile on his narrow lips was warm and friendly. His name tag read 'Yuki Matayoshi'.

'Welcome to Gold, Bright & Partners,' he greeted us warmly. 'Can I help you?'

Cassidy was as breathless as I was from our hurried walk, so her next words came out somewhat strained: 'Yeah, hi. My name is Cassidy Lind. And this is Gracie Ca—'

'Hoffman,' I quickly interjected, throwing her a warning side glance. 'Gracie Hoffman. We have a meeting with Natalie Gold. We're the new trainees, uh, associates.'

I wasn't sure why I corrected myself. While we might have completed our law degrees, we were probably still seen as rookies with little experience

in the eyes of the people here. Typically, you gained experience during the first three to six years at the firm, until - depending on your performance - you had the opportunity to advance to senior associate, followed by junior and then senior partner in the hierarchy.

He glanced briefly at the expensive-looking watch on his wrist. 'You're running late.'

His smile remained, but the tone of his voice wavered as if he couldn't quite decide between friendliness and sternness.

'There were some problems with our taxi,' Cassidy replied, her expression remorseful. 'We're really sorry.'

He gave an understanding nod. 'The traffic?'

'Oh, yes. A disaster, truly,' she said, propping herself up on the tall counter with one elbow and twirling a strand of hair around her finger. 'You leave extra early in the morning and still end up late. Didn't even have time for breakfast.'

*So, extra early then?*

'Well, welcome to my life,' the receptionist sighed, sounding genuinely frustrated. But in the next moment, he returned to his initial professionalism. 'All right. Come with me, I'll take you to Mrs. Gold.' He pushed his chair back and gestured for us to follow him.

We walked through a large archway, descended two small steps, and soon found ourselves in the impressive gallery, which, as I had learned during my interview, was considered the green heart of the firm. Once you saw it, you understood why.

It was a three-storey balcony with a skylight dome, comprised of thick wooden columns and balustrades entwined with green climbing plants. Large-leafed philodendrons climbed the columns while birds of paradise and palms adorned the seating areas which had dark green faux leather sofas. Two staircases with wine-red carpets led to the walkways on the first floor on the right and left. According to the receptionist who had guided me to Natalie Gold's office last time, this was where part of the Civil Law department's offices were located—the other part was on the second floor. The third floor housed the slightly smaller Criminal Law department. Our heels clicked on the parquet floor, and from all sides, we received fleeting glances from hurried-looking individuals in elegant dark suits and

dresses. With each one, I became aware that mine was the only burst of colourful clothing in a sea of muted tones. So much for fitting in.

We walked through the colonnades on the ground floor, turned into a narrower corridor with several panelled doors branching off, and finally stopped in front of one of them. After a brief knock, the receptionist opened it, causing me to instinctively hold my breath. 'Natalie? I have two latecomers for you.'

Natalie Gold was the first of a total of eight individuals my eyes fell upon as we entered the light-filled conference room. Even during my first encounter with her, I had wondered how she had managed to remain looking so young over the years despite her nerve-wracking job. After all, she must be in her mid-fifties by now. She had her black hair tied in a neat knot at the nape of her neck, with only two loose strands framing her soft face. She wore large hoop earrings and a cream-coloured pantsuit that accentuated the golden shimmer of her tanned skin. However, it wasn't just that which made her shine. It was primarily her presence: power, charisma, and self-assurance. She reminded me of my stepmother: a tough woman whose critical eye you feared, leading you to do everything you could to avoid mistakes.

Alongside her, I also recognized her assistant, with whom I had communicated multiple times via email, and the second founding partner of the firm, who had also been present at my interview.

Alistair Bright was a slender, well-dressed man with thin strands of silver in his hair and sharp, slightly protruding facial features that reminded me of a bird of prey. His gaze held a watchfulness that had made it difficult for me to look into his ice-blue eyes during the interview. Perhaps it was this tactic that accounted for his success in the courtroom.

'Good morning. Apologies for the lateness... There were a few complications on the way here,' Cassidy hesitated.

*Complications.* I wondered if the biggest complication had arrived, wherever it was expected.

'Please, have a seat.' Natalie indicated the long conference table, where three young men and two women were already seated. 'I was just saying that it would be nice if we could all introduce ourselves briefly. Particularly at the beginning, it's a good idea for you to make connections. Even though sooner or later, you'll probably start bickering with each other.'

*Well, if that doesn't sound tempting!*

I nodded in agreement and headed for the vacant chair next to the young man with glasses and copper-red hair. Unlike the others, he had a warm smile and even moved out the chair for me. Cassidy took the seat to my left, her curious gaze on the guy opposite me, who with his stone-cold expression seemed as though he'd rather endure anything at this moment than a round of introductions.

I couldn't blame him. In rounds like these, I was reminded every time of how bad I was at talking about myself. They made me feel like I had to say something that I knew people wanted to hear. Not because I thought they were interested. More because I believed it satisfied them to hear that you were going with the flow, not against it.

Natalie sat on the edge of the table. 'All right, I suggest we -'

A heavy knock on the door cut her off.

'Well, that must be latecomer number three...,' Alistair Bright grumbled, now leaning against one of the window frames on the other side of the room, arms crossed.

The door swung open and a young man stumbled in. He appeared flustered, his clothes were wet, and his hair clung to his forehead. I knew who he was even before he opened his mouth. After all, I had just beaten him to a taxi a few minutes ago...

'Apologies for my lateness,' he gasped, breathing heavily. 'I had to switch to my bike at the last minute.'

At the sound of his voice, my heart sank into a deep pit, and suddenly I felt its thudding everywhere.

*This can't be. This is impossible.*

Alistair's bushy eyebrows shot up. 'Rather too many complications for my taste today.'

Natalie scrutinised my neighbour from head to toe, a concerned furrow on her brow. 'Goodness gracious, you're completely soaked. Can I have something brought for you?'

He waved it off, but I still noticed the red blotches on his neck. 'No thank you, it's quite all right. It will dry.'

'All right, if you say so... Please, take a seat.' Natalie nodded toward the conference table where we were all sitting.

Only then did he seem to fully notice the other people in the room. As he made his way to the only available chair, he glanced around briefly and lingered a bit too long on Cassidy. Then his pale green eyes landed on me and, for a fraction of a second, his step faltered.

I quickly lowered my head, trying to hide my face behind a curtain of reddish-blond hair.

Only after he had taken his seat did I steal another glance in his direction. He had slipped out of his soaking coat and quickly checked if the fabric of his white shirt had become transparent anywhere, which it hadn't. Only a little bit of bare skin peeked through on his upper arms.

'Now that we're finally all here, I'll start again by introducing my colleagues, some of whom you may also recognize from your interviews. First, my long-standing business partner, Alistair Bright. And secondly, my right-hand, Ms. Hodge, who sifts through mountains of documents for me day in and day out.'

With a sweeping gesture, Natalie first included Alistair, then her assistant. Ms. Hodge was a petite young woman with glasses, her high bun bobbing cheerfully as she nodded to all of us.

'Furthermore, I'd like to introduce you to Ms. Isabell Fraser. She's been with us for almost eight years now and was recently promoted to partner. Like Alistair and myself, she will also act as a mentor for you.'

At the other end of the table, a woman stood up whom I had almost completely missed until now, as she hadn't moved or said a word. She still seemed quite young for a partner, maybe in her early or mid-thirties. Her fiery red hair, shimmering in the light of the ceiling, cascaded in gentle waves over her black turtleneck.

'Pleased to meet all of you.' Her blue eyes briefly scanned our faces before she smoothed down her pencil skirt and took her seat again.

'All right, that's it from our side.' Natalie clapped her hands once and returned to her smile. 'Since you're all likely acquainted with me, let's start with you. Tell us something about yourself.'

I subtly looked around the room while fiddling with my ring under the table. Apparently, the rest were newcomers as well: five rookies: four men and one woman. That made a total of five people I would need to compete against here. Six, if I included Cassidy.

That was six too many.

‘I suggest we start with you,’ Natalie said, turning to the young woman next to Cassidy.

She was beautiful, with a heart-shaped face featuring high cheekbones, full red lips, and a pointed nose adorned with a constellation of freckles. Her dark hair, disappearing half under the collar of her jacket, accentuated the vibrant azure of her eyes.

It turned out her name was Laurel Bennett, and she had graduated from Yale. During her studies, she had assisted litigators in preparing and defending court cases, completed an internship at a major law firm, and regularly volunteered at an organization for underprivileged people.

The more she spoke, the more evident it became that her helpfulness and sense of justice seemed to drive her in her job. Presumably, that was also why she had gravitated towards criminal law.

I was genuinely relieved to hear that, at least in this area, we wouldn't clash, as she seemed like formidable competition. Intelligent, articulate, and confident.

But who was I kidding? Had I really expected anything different? Of course, the firm was interested in hiring as many graduates from prestigious universities as possible. Since its inception, Gold, Bright & Partners had maintained an average success rate of 88 per cent. Apart from Cabot & Cox, this was the only other firm in the vicinity that could match that rate. That's why my father had been so furious when I told him I'd been hired here.

After Laurel, it was Cassidy's turn. She enthusiastically shared her - to me, incomprehensible - preference for banking and finance law. Even in law school, she had enrolled in various courses in the field, while I had been more interested in the broad range of commercial law. Perhaps it was because Mr. Lind was a banker and had instilled a passion for numbers in his daughter from the start.

Finally, it was my turn. My heart pounded in my throat, and for a moment, I almost felt it might just fall out of my mouth when I opened it. ‘My name is Gracie Hoffman. I'm twenty-four and graduated from Harvard Law in the spring. Alongside my studies, I was involved in a student organization aimed at promoting a general understanding of the rule of law on campus. I also had the privilege of writing a few legal columns for our university magazine, The Harvard Crimson.’



*So far, so good.*

Judging by the looks of the others, however, that wasn't enough. So, I began to frantically rummage through my mental drawers for more information.

*Hobbies, Gracie. People have hobbies.*

'Oh, and I, uh... quite enjoy reading,' I added in a small voice. The last sentence earned me a few amused smiles here and there. It didn't help keep the uncomfortable feeling in my chest from spreading.

Natalie Gold, on the other hand, seemed genuinely delighted by my statement. 'Ms Hoffman, you graduated at the top of your class with *Summa cum laude*. You shouldn't casually disregard such information.'

Even more sweat formed on the back of my neck.

*Top of the class.* The phrase sounded wrong for many reasons, which is why I avoided saying it out loud.

In general, I didn't like speaking in superlatives, especially about myself. People who did that scared me because they were the ones you disappointed the fastest if you didn't meet their expectations in the end. The best, the greatest, the strongest... What did that even mean, and by what standard did they measure it? After all, there were nearly eight billion people in this world.

I didn't want to be the best. Actually, I just wanted to be enough. But I had grown up in a family where that hadn't been sufficient – and from that had developed an ambition that on some days became unhealthy.

I tore my gaze away from Natalie's smile and inadvertently let it wander across the table as I felt all eyes on me like spotlights. Including those of our neighbour. His expression gave nothing away, but when our eyes met, he clenched his teeth and turned away quickly. Apparently, his anger hadn't dissipated on the way here. Rather, my presence seemed to have reignited it.

After me, the young man with copper hair and amber eyes sitting next to me continued the round by introducing himself. His name was Samuel Andersson, he had studied at Cornell Law School in Ithaca, learned several languages over the years, including Latin and Norwegian, and dubbed himself a computer ace.

Just like Laurel, his interests lay in criminal law, and I didn't know why I found it didn't suit him. Perhaps because he didn't seem like someone

good at keeping a cool head, but more like someone who found it difficult to stay still in the long run. Or rather to keep his hands still. They were constantly in motion, as if he wanted to use them to give more meaning to his words.

Next was the new guy opposite us, whose expression had hardly changed since the beginning of our conversation. He let out a small sigh before placing his arms on the table and glancing briefly at each of us in turn.

‘Jude,’ he said then. ‘Jude Darling.’

Jude had a slight Scottish accent, was twenty-five, had studied at Yale just like Laurel, and had worked at a law firm specializing in banking and capital market law over the summer. Unlike Samuel, his story matched perfectly with the image he had taken on in my mind in his three-piece black suit. Everything about him seemed sleek and cool, almost as if cast in marble. The jet-black wavy hair, with a few wild strands framing his silver-grey eyes, the distinctive features... The guy looked like the flawless work of a sculptor. And I suspected he was aware of that. It would fit with the blasé attitude that many civil lawyers in his field displayed. He was probably one of those students who enjoyed tearing pages out of legal commentaries after their research, so others couldn't use them any more, or deleting assignments from other computers when they were left unguarded.

I wasn't sure if I was imagining it, but Natalie's gaze seemed to soften slightly when directed at Jude. As if there was a touch of familiarity in it that I, as an outsider, couldn't quite grasp.

However, I didn't get a chance to ponder this longer because my attention, heart pounding, turned to the young man next to him, who was now up. There were still scattered drops of water on his forehead. Apart from that, he was as calm as could be.

‘My name is Ira Briggs, and I'm twenty-four. I had a scholarship from Columbia in New York and have been living in Boston for a few months now. Besides my studies, I've worked in the legal counselling of a clinical environmental law program, taken a few virtual courses to improve my research skills, and participated in some of my uni's pro bono activities. Two of my academic essays received awards, and I also received a prize for the best grade average at my graduation.’ His gaze flickered to me, a sardonic smile tugging at his lips. ‘And every now and then, I quite enjoy reading.’

I blinked several times. Was he making fun of me? *Of course, he's making fun of you.* Everyone at this table was aware that law was one of the most literature-heavy courses. I certainly wasn't the only one who had fallen asleep over a stack of books because I'd been sitting in the library until late at night. But aside from that: how could he list all these achievements and sound so... indifferent? As if none of it meant anything to him?

Silence settled over the room like a heavy blanket as we all stared at Ira for a moment, realizing that he was probably the greatest competition. And suddenly, it was there again; that familiar pressure, like a tight rubber band around my chest. I knew it would snap sooner or later if I wasn't careful.

'It's a pleasure to have you with us, Mr. Briggs,' Natalie said with an approving nod, breaking the silence as the first to speak.

Yes, I thought, a *real pleasure.*

She looked to the last newcomer in our group. Otis McCoy was a young man with short-cropped hair and a thousand-watt smile that was so warm and engaging that you wanted it never to stop. He had also graduated from Harvard, a few semesters ahead of me, though. Subsequently, he had worked at his uncle's small law firm for about a year and a half but had ultimately realized that it wasn't enough and that he was destined for something bigger - his words, not mine.

I scrutinised our diverse group one more time, simultaneously trying to remember their names by linking them with a mental note: *Laurel is actually Justitia, Samuel can't sit still, Jude likes to stab people with his gaze, Ira is a clever head who's probably already planning to sabotage me, and Otis probably couldn't hurt a fly.*

As I did this, I was struck by a slight premonition that there was at least one of the names that I wouldn't forget any time soon.

'Thank you very much! We're very pleased to welcome you to Gold, Bright & Partners. Rest assured, you're all here because we see a lot of potential in you, which we naturally want to nurture.'

Natalie reached for a small remote and aimed it at the black screen on the wall behind her to turn it on. 'As we firmly believe in this firm that the finest lawyers are born out of competition, we decided to introduce an internal associate ranking a few years ago. This means that we assess your

performance and evaluate it based on points. The more initiative you show and the more you contribute to cases, the more points you accumulate. At the end of the first year, the individual with the highest point score will have the opportunity to collaborate with me on a case of public interest. Additionally, you will receive a one-time bonus of ten thousand dollars added to your monthly salary. You can check your position in the ranking every Monday within our system.'

Alistair Bright, who had meanwhile seated himself beside Natalie on the table, cleared his throat. 'You'll still be working on your first case in teams, but we will assess your performance separately.'

Was I mistaken or was the air in the room growing thinner with each word? *Ranking? Points? Teams?*

'We've taken the liberty of grouping you into teams based on your areas of expertise,' Natalie continued. 'Ms Bennett, you'll be working alongside Mr Andersson. Ms Lind, Mr Darling, and Mr McCoy will form the other team. And Ms Hoffman, you'll be partnering with Mr Briggs.'

It took me a few seconds to realize the significance of her statement. Did she say Hoffman and Briggs? This had to be a joke.

My panicked gaze flicked to Ira, who appeared to be equally averse to the idea. Although he made an effort not to show it to our superiors, I couldn't miss the slight curl of his lip.

'Any further questions?' Natalie inquired with a smile. 'Otherwise, we'll provide you with a brief tour and then assign you your first case. Does that sound all right?'

None of it was all right. I wanted to stand up and object, but Cassidy elbowed me. 'Psst, Gray. Isn't that Ira guy the same one from earlier, or am I imagining things?'

I clenched my teeth. 'No, it's him...'

And that, I feared, could sooner or later become a problem. Because if I hadn't been on his hit list before, I definitely was now.

[END OF SAMPLE]