

Contents

Foreword	xiii
The Rogue	1
Bruna	17
In Bairro Alto	31
Salò, National Version	47
The Living Dead	61
The Temptations of Saint Anthony	77
The Blood of Others	89
My Bones	103
A Perfect Common-Law Marriage	117
La Belle	133
Khristen	145
Black on White	159

The Rogue

"Any news?" Borges asked Sandra, his secretary, as he abruptly opened the front door of the Lisbon law firm Borges & Mendes. It was past one p.m. and the attorney's day already promised to stretch well into the evening.

"Indeed there are," Sandra replied. She was at the computer with the telephone close by. The silk drapes on the window behind her attested to the status the firm Borges & Mendes had acquired over the years.

"There is a lady waiting for you in the conference room," Sandra continued. "Unfortunately, her face looks like a chocolate cake with sprinkles. She's bruised black and blue with splotches of red."

"Sounds like she needs a medical doctor, not an attorney," Borges said, quickly crossing the hall.

"Her neck and arms are in bad shape, too," Sandra added. "Mr. Nunes called you on her behalf and said the matter is urgent."

"Probably another accident victim." As he uttered these words, Borges entered his office, dropped his briefcase, and grabbed a yellow legal pad. As he headed for the conference room, he contemplated the statistics that showed Portugal having one of the highest road accident rates in the European Union.

At the doorway, Borges saw a woman sitting by the large mahogany table. She was staring at the wall. She wore her coat and could barely open her left eye. Due to the state of her face, he could not determine her age.

"Good afternoon," Borges said. "I'm told a colleague referred you to me. I'm sorry I've kept you waiting." He shook the hand hardly stretched out to him. "I see you need medical attention."

"Perhaps I do," the woman answered in a low-pitched voice. "I hear you are the best attorney to help me."

"Your name, please?"

"I'm Ema Bivar."

"Interesting name. It reminds me, somehow, of the famed Emma Bovary."

"Oh, I hope not. Emma had such tragic destiny!" Ema replied.

As Borges wrote down the name on his yellow pad, he asked, "Ms. Bivar, what can I do for you?"

"Dr. Borges, I'm divorced, no children." As customary in Portugal, Ema addressed the attorney as if he were a medical doctor. She was having difficulty speaking and supported her jaw with her right hand. It seemed she could not open her mouth wide enough to push her words out. Her split lip oozed a tiny rivulet of blood.

"You aren't in good shape. Let me get you some water or coffee before you continue," Borges said. He pressed the intercom button and asked Sandra to bring the drinks.

"I'll get straight to the point," Ema said. "I need legal advice before I go to a hospital." Ema's voice was on the verge of cracking. "My ex-boyfriend wants to kill me; I left him a while ago."

"I assume you are using your words cautiously," Borges interrupted. He wasn't indifferent to human suffering.

"I might be murdered one of these days," Ema said, trying to be concise. "More than a year ago I met a man in Paraíso da Damaia—Damaia Paradise, how ironic! It's a *pastelaria*, a pastry shop, next door to the building where I live. He was a very handsome man, slim, more than a decade younger than I. He worked as a car mechanic before losing his job."

Ema took a deep breath and supported her jaw with her hand again. She was trying to loosen it up so that her words sounded clear.

"One day I sat down at the counter and we struck up a conversation. Nothing serious at first. Before going home after work I often stopped at the *pastelaria* for a break. I'm a manager in an industrial plant. After a while, I realized that Lucas—that's the young man's name—seemed to be waiting for me."

Ema interrupted her phrase, a painful look stamped on her face. Sipping her coffee, she gazed at the pictures hanging from the wall opposite the mahogany table. They were a series of engravings of pillories from the Alentejo region of Portugal, south of Lisbon: stone columns in public squares, surrounded by noteworthy

buildings—the city hall, the principal church, the palace. In the far distant past, criminals were punished by hanging from iron bars or rings attached to the columns. Then, for public viewing, they were whipped or mutilated, often causing a slow, torturous death.

Disturbed by the pictures, Ema looked away and continued her story. “Every time I stopped at the *pastelaria*, Lucas’s eyes captivated me. He enjoyed looking stylish and dressed in ragged jeans, like a teenager. He had a *cara lavada*, a clean face that exuded reliability. He personified someone yearning for me at the end of the day. How could I resist?”

“Were you obsessed with him?” Borges asked, trying to gather as many details as possible.

“It’s possible. While driving home at the end of the day, I started wondering whether Lucas was at the *pastelaria*. I drive a red convertible and I would usually park my car in the square in front.”

“Nothing in your description explains the state you are in,” Borges stated, wanting to get to the point.

“You need the whole story. That first day at the counter, we chatted and he said he had been waiting for me for months. After coffee, I asked him over to my place. We kissed by the front door and a few minutes later were in bed.”

“I see,” Borges replied.

“At the beginning all went well—really well—I was happy to have someone in my life. Saturday mornings we went shopping and in the afternoon we drove around in my car. I didn’t mind paying for all our expenses; they weren’t excessive.”

“What happened next?” Borges was eager to get to where things went awry.

“With time, men can’t stand women like me. Lucas wasn’t my only failed post-divorce relationship. Men envy the things that women get through hard work: money, a nice home, a convertible. In all, security.”

Borges listened to Ema in silence.

“Months passed and Lucas wasn’t getting a job. I know that the country, and the world, are in crisis, but Lucas didn’t seem to be trying hard enough. He visited the local national employment agency and applied for a few positions; but it seemed he was just letting time pass by.”

“Then what happened?” Borges was getting hungry for his midday meal and feared he might not have even five minutes to grab a bite.

"At first I paid for our weekend expenses, including the movies now and then. Then, dinner every night. Soon, Lucas started asking for money for transportation."

"Not good." Borges knew now where the conversation was heading.

"Originally I believed that Lucas wanted to get a job. The sexual relationship was good—really good—so I put up with his unemployment. When he asked, I bought him clothes; I didn't want him poorly dressed in my company. Our age difference was already a striking contrast." Saying this, Ema adjusted her jaw once more. She lifted her right shoulder as if to align neck and spine.

"Once in a while we drove to Madrid for the weekend. Lucas had never left Portugal and he loved travelling. I let him drive my two-seater sports car. It's a Fiat. Often we'd leave on Friday evening and not return until Monday morning. It was fun; we enjoyed flamenco dancing. When we got back Lucas began staying at my house a lot, sleeping all morning. At the beginning I enjoyed thinking of him in my bed."

"I see you enjoyed each other's company," Borges said, fondly remembering his own trips to Spain.

"Lucas loved my sports car. As a good mechanic, he always took care of the Fiat repairs. This was his way to reciprocate my paying his expenses. Once, he offered me a brand new top for the convertible. Black, very classy!"

Borges shaped his next question with utmost tact. "Ms. Bivar, if your ex-boyfriend didn't hold a job, where did he get the cash to offer you such a gift?"

"Frankly, I don't know, Dr. Borges. I asked and got an elusive answer. Lucas said a friend had bought it, and he wanted me to have it."

"As a gift?" Borges displayed a worried expression. Ema Bivar seemed naive.

"I interpreted the Fiat's expensive top as compensation for my financial help. For Lucas, my car was a toy." After another long pause, Ema added, "But, with time, things started to go sour; I needed an older, more responsible man by my side."

For effect, Borges emphasized his words so that Ema had a chance to reflect on something that seemed to have escaped her. "The convertible top had to come from somewhere. The question is where."

Ema ignored the detail. "Lucas is a jealous man. That's why

things were going wrong between us. I often have professional meetings late in the afternoon. Other managers come from branches around Lisbon, and due to heavy traffic, we usually start the discussions behind schedule. If I got home even half an hour later than the usual time, he'd start a fight. Then he cursed. I wasn't used to it, Lucas's origins are humbler than mine."

"Lucas was being possessive," declared Borges, all along taking notes in his yellow pad.

"I explained to him that my job was demanding, that my salary didn't simply fall from the sky. Getting home late was beyond my control. If the plant was launching a new product, the meetings with other branch managers were frequent."

"Of course!" Borges knew the business world very well.

"Lucas spent his days either with his friends or glued to the TV. He frequently made a mess of my place and never offered to clean up. For him, the grand moment was when I got home in the evening."

"Your description is rather indicative of his personality."

Ema moved her right arm and readjusted her position. "I got fed up. In the past I never saw myself as a victim of circumstances. So I told Lucas that things couldn't continue as they were. Either he did something useful with his life...or else."

"What exactly did you mean?" Borges gazed directly at his client.

"I told him we needed to head our separate ways. I was still in love, but a break-up was inevitable. His jealousy made no sense; my home was topsy-turvy every day. I was suspicious that he brought his friends over when I was absent, even if he denied it. Once Lucas introduced me to a friend of his at the *pastelaria*; the fellow looked derelict."

"Yes, that would be very unsettling!" Borges exclaimed.

"But sex with Lucas was satisfying, so I waited a while. On the other hand, what else did I get from the relationship? I got trips—that I paid for—and a sense of adventure. Besides that, there was nothing there."

"I understand your predicament," Borges said in a friendly voice. "Reciprocity is essential in relationships."

"Once we went to Barcelona to see the Gaudi architecture. What Lucas really wanted was to drive the convertible; he didn't give a damn for the buildings. He loved hitting the gas, and my car is very fast."

Borges glanced at his watch; the conversation had already consumed an hour. Here was Ema Bivar in front of him—a woman close to forty with a battered face—and he needed to turn to pressing matters in his agenda.

“You’re looking at your watch,” Ema said, once again painfully adjusting herself in the chair. “I’ll finish quickly. One day I was leaving rather early for work and Lucas was still in bed. I asked him to get up to help me bring in a heavy carton of beer from my car. It was a Monday morning; I remember the day as if it were yesterday. Since it was cold, I asked him to dress and put on his coat. As if in a hurry for work, I said I had his keys with me.” Ema took in a deep breath. “Downstairs I told Lucas our relationship was over.”

“Ahhh!” murmured Borges, anticipating the consequences.

“Lucas turned into a viper. He grabbed my arms, yanked my hands behind me and started pulling on them as if to rip them off my shoulders. I fell on my back and he began kicking me all over.”

“Lucas is dangerous!” Borges declared as he scribbled more notes. “We need to file a police report immediately.”

“Since that day—over six months ago—Lucas has attacked me repeatedly. He follows me everywhere: in the staircase of the building where I live, near the entrance of the plant where I work, even when I visit my relatives. I spent a couple of weeks with a cousin, but he found me there. He knows my routine, so he can predict my whereabouts.”

“This is inexcusable!” said Borges.

Ema Bivar felt reassured she had chosen the right attorney. “Lucas has beaten me up, on average, once a month since we broke up. And he’s threatened that he won’t rest until he is done with me—kills me or cripples me, or destroys me psychologically.” Ema paused. “I can’t go on living in fear, something needs to change,” she continued. “Otherwise I will disappear from this earth pretty soon.”

“I’ve got all the details necessary for a police report,” Borges assured her. “You need to go from here to the hospital so that we can attach a medical report. It’s really a pity you didn’t come to me earlier.”

“I thought Lucas might stop after the first beating. Now I see he is serious about his intentions.”

“Where did Lucas find you today? Were there any witnesses?” Borges grabbed the yellow pad again.

“He attacked me on the stairway of my building, I was leaving for work. If he goes around the block where I live and sees my car,

he knows I'm at home." Terrified, Ema continued. "As soon as I opened my apartment's front door this morning, he attacked me."

"Did anyone see what happened this morning?"

"I don't think so. When I started screaming—at first I held back—Lucas punched me repeatedly in the face and neck. Afterward, he dashed down the stairs." Ema opened her coat, which she hadn't removed during the interview. Placing her scarf aside, she showed the bruises on her neck and shoulders.

"This is bad. If you screamed, someone in the building should have come in your defense," Borges said.

"I went back into my apartment and lay in bed for a few hours. I felt so ashamed."

"Ms. Bivar, we must stop our conversation now. You need a medical doctor, and I need to file a police report. Please bring back the medical evaluation as soon as you have it. We'll also include all pertinent information about your ex-boyfriend. We'll put this scumbag where he belongs."

"I surely hope so."

"You don't have previous medical reports, correct?"

Ema shook her head.

"Too bad. But we'll state that this complaint refers to repeated acts of violence on the part of your ex-boyfriend." Trying to protect his client, Borges said, "You should consider moving in with your cousin, or a friend, for the next couple of weeks. At least until the police finish the investigation."

"But he finds me wherever I go!"

"I believe he'll change his tune as soon as the police call him in for questioning."

Borges stood up, and as Ema did the same, she was unable to stifle a shriek of pain. Showing concern, Borges led her out of his office.

Ema headed to the crowded hospital in her neighborhood. Examining her face in the car's mirror, she asked herself why had she taken so long to seek legal advice. Was it the recollection of the satisfying sex? A vague loyalty to someone she had felt close to? The memory of the fun trips in the convertible?

Or was it the fear of Lucas's retaliation?

She spent the entire afternoon in the emergency room waiting to be seen. Some other patients—a few had arrived earlier, others came in with strokes—had priority. Ema sat in a corner, willing to wait as long as it took for her turn. At least, there, with loads of people around, Lucas wouldn't be able to get her.

She considered visiting her mother in the South, in the beautiful plains of the Alentejo region. The idea of a few days' rest seemed wonderful. But her mother's side of the family lived with her in a small village: everybody would ask questions. How could she explain what had happened? Ema recalled the engravings on Borges's wall. The pillories were symbols of power and tyranny; for centuries they had represented physical abuse and public condemnation. No, her cousin's apartment was a better option. She didn't feel like opening her wounds to people's scrutiny, an unbearable humiliation.

The female physician who attended Ema was most sympathetic. Had the doctor been a male, an older one, things might have been different. The doctor disinfected and dressed her bruises, then prescribed medication. She wrote and signed a detailed medical report that Ema took to Borges's office.

A couple of weeks later Ema, in better shape, met again with Borges. She was more relaxed, her face and lips were healing. When Borges entered the room, Ema took off her sunglasses and greeted him. Her eyes opened normally now. Borges noticed a petite woman of about forty years with a sculptural figure. He thought of a Portuguese saying comparing women to sardines: the smaller, the better. She had a sensuous look and her eyes bore the intensity of a mature woman, ready for love.

"Your condition has drastically improved!" exclaimed Borges.

"I feel so much better that I expect to be back to work in a few days."

"Things are advancing here as well. A detailed report was sent to the police within twenty-four hours of my office receiving your medical evaluation. Here is a copy for you." He handed Ema the file. "My intention, of course, is to incarcerate your ex-boyfriend."

Ema now knew she should have acted after the first beating. At least she no longer felt ashamed of what Lucas had done, as if it had been her fault. She glanced through the police report. Lucas emerged as the man he was: carefree, unemployed, jealous, vindictive and violent when abandoned. A merciless offender, engrossed with his former lover.

"The police will interrogate Lucas very soon, if they haven't already. I contacted a friend at headquarters who will speed things up." Borges paused, studying Ema's expression. "Ms. Bivar, I need to ask you a delicate question, I hope you don't mind."

"Please, by all means. What is it?"

Borges was now a wolf in sheep's clothing. Breaking the suspense, he inquired: "Does Lucas have anything he can use against you in court?"

"We've gone through this before. I grew tired of the relationship and Lucas was unable to accept the break-up."

"That's clear. But think carefully for a moment. Does he possess any information that the police might use against you?"

"I don't think so." Ema's tone held a note of hesitation. She contemplated once more the terrifying pillory engravings on the walls of the conference room. They sent a shiver down her spine.

"You stating *I don't think so* will not suffice, unfortunately. We need to play it safe with the police." Borges said, shifting uncomfortably in his chair. "Could Lucas disclose something to the police in order to harm you?"

"Actually, there might be something," Ema said after a short sigh while still looking at the pillories on the wall.

"Let's hear it." Borges added promptly.

"As I told you, I have a Fiat convertible. However, the engine is from an Alfa Romeo. I let Lucas install the more powerful engine, one of the reasons our trips were so enjoyable."

Borges nodded, as if nothing could surprise him after his many years in practice.

"Where is the Fiat engine?" He asked. "Do you still have it?"

"It's in a box on my balcony."

"Good! Ms. Bivar, as you know, every vehicle's engine has a serial number registered to the vehicle's identification plate. The change introduced to your convertible by your ex-boyfriend is a felony punishable by law."

Ema remained silent and Borges was certain she understood what he was saying. "The situation is easily resolved. You must put back your original engine immediately." Borges said emphatically.

"You mean go back to driving like a snail?" Ema asked, unhappily.

"Absolutely! The police report has been filed, and you'll be called to testify on very short notice. You don't want to be hurt again, do you? You will be, for sure, if the police find out about the Alfa Romeo's engine in your Fiat."

"Okay. I promise I'll change it," she replied.

"Please take the car to a garage far away from your neighborhood. Pay someone—late evening might be safer—to take your Fiat engine to this garage. Then have the engines exchanged. Find a secure place for the Alfa Romeo's engine. Don't keep it at home, don't

sell it either. After this, we can relax and wait for the police to do its job.”

“This is utterly inconvenient—and expensive,” Ema protested, turning red. Her *joie de vivre* seemed vanished forever. “Like Lucas, I enjoy speeding on the road.”

“Your engine’s number and vehicle’s plate must match. It’s the law.” Borges stood up somewhat abruptly; he had another busy day ahead. “These are precautionary measures, you must follow my advice.”

While waiting for the elevator outside the law offices, Ema fumed. She now must part with her treasured Alfa Romeo engine. The celebratory mood of that remarkable day—the day she had agreed to Lucas changing her car’s engine—was gone forever.

The following morning at Paraíso da Damaia, Ema asked about Lucas but no one had seen him for weeks. Lucas apparent disappearance was a reason for concern for Ema. She knew only fear of the police might deter him.

Going about the rest of her day, Ema reflected on the vagaries of life. The affair with Lucas had been sheer pleasure at the beginning. He behaved like a cocky adolescent in his late twenties, like a Portuguese James Dean, overflowing with lust. Lucas was ready for adventure and stated so, unabashedly. He hated routine and his youthful excitement was intoxicating. After being long on the road, his sexual vigor lasted for hours on end.

Ema had discovered new aspects of herself in the relationship: Lucas hitting the gas on the road to Spain with the sound of the Gypsy Kings blasting in the background; returning from Madrid at dawn; the unforgettable nights of tangos, castanets, and the sweet, cold, *sangria*. Lucas dancing wildly like a bird trying to reach the sky—his hips like wings viciously undulating. He was filled with mischief—a *gingão*, a rogue—and that captivated her. Together they had discovered the rapture of life.

But reality had hit Ema with an ugly blow. Disillusioned now, she must move on. While being constantly on the lookout for Lucas, she had to get her car’s engine changed as she had promised her attorney and return to the never-ending routine of her work. Her schedule began at dawn and lasted the entire day. Only sacrifice after sacrifice—and boredom much of the time—guaranteed her paycheck at the end of the month. Fundamentally a disciplined person, she accepted the fact that she must continue with her long-established habits.

The mirror still reminded Ema of the recent assault. Close

to middle age, how was she going to rebuild her life? Certainly not with her recently divorced colleague who shared her office space—such a wary, bitter ex-husband.

No prospects at work. But returning to the office, she found her desk piled high with papers that required her attention.

Back home after work that first day, Ema opened her mailbox. Afraid of the dark entrance hall to her building, she had avoided getting her mail the past few days. She opened a notification letter stating that she was to testify the following day with the police.

The turnaround had been fast, no doubt due to Borges's friend in the head office. Police cases habitually take months before an investigation gets underway. For a split second it crossed Ema's mind to try to postpone the meeting. But she didn't want to disappoint her sympathetic attorney. Besides, he had mentioned how the police interrogation would affect Lucas and place him instantly on guard.

Ema felt pleased. Finally she would have her day to set the record straight and make sure Lucas never returned to her path. She needed to put the soured affair behind her, once and for all. She experienced a moment of soaring revenge. It would be a short step from her testimony to the police sending the case to trial in court. Lucas would be in jail soon, unable to enjoy the light of day.

For the deposition, Ema wore a brand-new cobalt blue pantsuit. Approaching the police station, she hoped parking wouldn't be a problem. Traffic was as intense as ever and she was already a bit late. Just then, someone pulled away from the curb and Ema slipped into the space. She still had to walk a couple of blocks but didn't mind. The light breeze seemed to kiss her face.

Once inside the police building, Ema walked endless corridors. The edifice was a maze filled with narrow stairways at every turn. She passed various departments with telling names: Fraud, Homicide, Organized Crime. She found Room 27, the office of inspector Possidónio de Sousa.

The room was empty, but almost immediately an officer came in. He pulled out a chair and politely asked Ema to sit down saying that de Sousa would arrive in a few minutes. Ema felt good about the attention thrown on her; her new pantsuit had certainly helped.

Looking around, she realized it wasn't a surprise that the inspector wasn't in his office. If she had a desk like his—so piled up with files, many of them wrapped up twice with twine—she might only enter her office at gunpoint. There was a computer on the desk but it was barely visible. Along the walls stood shelves filled with

legal codes. The phones rang nonstop and no one bothered to answer them. Ema had heard that with the financial crisis, crime had increased in the country. It surely appeared to be that way.

Inspector de Sousa arrived a few moments later. "Sorry, my boss called me with a pressing matter," he said kindly as he stepped into the room.

"I've just arrived." Ema extended her hand to greet the inspector but didn't get up from her chair.

"Let's begin, Ms. Bivar," de Sousa said, "Neither you nor I have any time to waste." The inspector brought one of the piles on top of his desk closer to him. "Our department already summoned Mr. Lucas Camacho, and I personally took care of his interrogation. For brevity's sake, please allow me to address Mr. Camacho simply as Lucas. I must admit to you this situation isn't looking good. Lucas has denied all allegations. He only confirmed that he knows you but denies ever laying a finger on you—not even with a flower, he said."

"Jesus Christ!" erupted Ema, a handy expression in a predominantly Catholic country.

"Your medical report helps your case; without it we couldn't even begin to proceed. But Lucas peremptorily denies that he assaulted you."

"It's hard to hear your words," Ema said somberly. "As stated in the report, Lucas didn't assault me just once, but several times. I spoke up only now because I feared for my life."

"Ms. Bivar, we've got a problem. You're a respected manager with a university degree and I have no doubt you're speaking the truth. But Lucas, your former companion, has denied all allegations. He says he never touched you. He says he feels sorry for you. He says one of your co-workers probably beat you up."

Ema couldn't contain herself. "Lucas is messing with me again!"

"Cases of domestic violence are difficult to judge. You and Lucas lived together for a while, you gave him the keys to your home." The inspector paused patiently. "I'm not expressing an opinion. Facts are facts. You don't have witnesses, and without them, I'm afraid there's nothing we can do." Seemingly annoyed with the situation, de Sousa hit his pencil against one of the files on his desk.

"Your former companion also said...let me show you the pages in his deposition..." The inspector leaned toward Ema across the files on his desk to say, "that he is still very fond of you."

"I'm outraged." Ema replied.

"We police officers deal with fact, the truth, and proof. These do

the talking, not us." De Sousa used a neutral tone of voice. "Lucas was already here twice, has collaborated with our inquiries, and provided invaluable details about his activities. I'm going to interrogate him one more time, tomorrow. Before that, I'd like you to confirm some of the case's particulars. Your attorney asserts that you had been assaulted earlier but you didn't press charges." After another pause, he inquired, "Do you have, by chance, medical reports documenting the previous aggressions?"

"Unfortunately I don't." Ema felt slightly alarmed now. The pillories in Borges's office came back to her mind. One in particular stayed with her. It was the usual stone column, in the main square of town, but it had on top four crossed iron bars inserted into the stone. The bars were large enough for the criminals to hang with the arms stretched out like Christ on the cross. Ema imagined the bisected bars above her head like a gigantic spider on the attack.

"It's too bad, it is easier to prosecute a repeat offender," de Sousa said. "Perhaps I could confer with the doctors who assisted you."

"That's fine," Ema asserted.

"Please bear with me now. I need to hear in your own words what happened in the ill-fated hours you were last attacked."

Gradually, with difficulty, Ema related the specifics of Lucas's last beating. She described her shock upon seeing Lucas waiting at her doorstep as she opened the front door to leave early for work: his deranged, blood-thirsty eyes as he attacked her. His fists relentlessly pounding her face, neck, and shoulders. How she used all her might to prevent him from entering her apartment. How she tried to reach the stairway lights.

"No neighbor came to your rescue, right? Why didn't you shout?" In a mechanical gesture, the inspector repeatedly tapped a stack of papers with his pencil. "Are you a hundred percent sure that no one in the building heard you?"

"I only shouted when I couldn't take it any longer. I think I heard someone opening a door—an imperceptible sound—but I was under such distress that I can't be sure. I felt ashamed, I only wanted to disappear inside my apartment, shut my door."

"How many tenants are there in your building?"

"There are fourteen apartments, the building has seven floors."

"Conceivably we could interrogate all tenants. Hard work. And people don't talk easily to the police. Names are recorded and folks fear retaliation."

"I'm not sure I want the police to interrogate my neighbors. This is very embarrassing for me," Ema said. "I'm a very private person, I don't want my secrets disclosed to others."

"We also summoned Lucas's mother," de Sousa continued. "She testified that on that day, at that time, her son was at home, asleep. We also called some of Lucas's neighbors; two people came in, a mother and her son. We checked, the two young men worked in the same garage a couple of years ago. The mothers are friends. These two testimonies matched that of Lucas's mother."

"What do you mean?" broke in Ema.

"Both neighbors, the mother and her son, stated that Lucas was sleeping at home that morning."

"Explain something, please. How do they remember the day I was assaulted?"

"Easy. The birthday of another neighbor took place the night before and they were all celebrating together."

"But Lucas was at my doorstep the following morning!"

"The neighbors corroborate Lucas's mother's story, that he was asleep at that time. They said, moreover, that this is a normal pattern with Lucas: he never starts his day before lunchtime," de Sousa asserted.

"How is it possible that you, Inspector, believe these people?" Ema was at the end of her rope.

"I explained earlier. Without witnesses on your side, there is no way to prove this case. The devil here is in the details. For all legal purposes, it's your word against Lucas's."

"And you deem Lucas innocent?" Ema shot out like a lioness.

"No, I don't. But without witnesses, we don't have a basis to press charges. The case will be automatically dismissed in court."

"Oh, please! If it wasn't Lucas, then who attacked me? My colleagues from work, as Lucas suggested? No one ever visited me."

"I think our only recourse is to talk to the people in your building; someone could provide new information." The inspector seemed ready to proceed with the investigation.

"You presume I enjoy mistreatment like the ill-famed Madame Bovary, don't you?"

The inspector stared at Ema, speechless.

"Or you suppose I engaged in self-flagellation, like a martyr in the Catholic Church, don't you?"

Ema was shaken as she pronounced these words. Suddenly she leaned back in the chair and covered her face with her hands. Lucas was still playing tricks with her; he was having the upper hand with the police. The inspector was right, without witnesses on her side there was no case. She felt she had reached a dead end.

"So, it's my word against Lucas's?" Defeat suffused Ema's statement.

"Lucas has witnesses stating where he was at the time of the assault; you seem to have none," the inspector concluded.

"Mark my words, Inspector: if I appear dead in my apartment, it's because Lucas murdered me." Ema's emotions had been chaotic during the interview, but now incredulity set in.

De Sousa spoke in a decisive tone of voice. "I want you to know we care, we're on the alert. We know Dr. Borges well; he has an impeccable reputation. You are naturally upset, but this investigation isn't over yet."

Ema started to feel dizzy and asked the inspector for a glass of water.

"You look pale," he said, handing her a glass. "We're finished here. I'll escort you to your car now, you are obviously not feeling well."

De Sousa helped Ema get up and they headed downstairs together. Ema leaned against the handrail feeling as if the ground was disappearing from under her feet. Her mouth tasted of rubber. She was now convinced the police would never find out the truth about her beatings.

And, on the loose, Lucas might succeed in his ultimate intention.

By the door, the inspector said, "You're white as a ghost. Where did you park?"

Ema mentioned the spot and they walked the two blocks together. She remarked, "Please Inspector, the fresh air is helping. It's not necessary for you to accompany me. I'm sure you're terribly busy."

"It's no bother, the short walk is good exercise."

Seeing her car in the distance, Ema Bivar pointed. "My car is the red convertible Fiat over there, the one with the black top. Thank you for escorting me."

This is when Inspector Possidônio de Sousa said in the most obliging tone: "Ms. Bivar, I hope you won't mind if I look at your engine. I need you to open the hood so I can verify the serial number. This will take only a few minutes."