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MARTHA, MY DESTINY
OR THE SALT OF THE DEAD SEA

Soap opera

Chapter 1

Robert was sitting at the desk in his office, flipping through the last issue of Forbes magazine. He looked with wistful envy at the photos of the rich and famous.

His appearance was mediocre—today you might see him, the next day you will hardly remember. His oval face had a smallish straight nose, faded lips, and a distant gaze of brown eyes under cropped light-blond bangs. Yet he possessed a certain charm; he was able to make an impression on others.

An affirmed bachelor, Robert sometimes had close relations with women, but had no intention of marrying.

His parents were originally from Sicily. The mother was, as they say, a woman of the patriarchal nature. Melissa tried to raise her two sons with simple ideas about life,

where there were God and the Devil, heaven and hell. She regularly went to church and brought her boys, Joseph and Robert, along.

Rough times awaited Melissa; first her husband disappeared without a trace under mysterious circumstances, and a year later her nineteen-year old son Joseph (her eldest) was shot. Her husband was never found (it was said that he was connected with the Italian mafia in New York and he was taken out by his own). While the son's killer was quickly arrested, it turned out that Joe died for nothing, by mistake. At that fateful moment, he sat in a car with his drug-dealer friend, the bullet's intended target.

God only knows what was going on in Melissa's heart. Her simple, naïve faith was deeply shaken, but it withstood. Melissa concluded that her husband's and son's deaths were her fault, her insufficient love for God. She became even more devout.

Robert reasoned differently. He had previously laughed at his mother's old-fashioned outlook, and after seeing his embalmed brother in the coffin, the yellow skin resembling a wax figure from Madame Tussaud's, he realized that there was no God and everything was made up.

There was no God. Okay. But who, then, so wisely connects people? Who throws them into the abyss of poverty and calamity, or elevates them to the heights of fame and wealth? That's when Robert discovered the concept of Destiny.

At first, Destiny appeared to him in the form of a she-wolf—a kind of ancestral curse, devouring the men of his family. Robert was an impressionable teenager, and the image of a fierce wolf haunted him for a long time.

Then Destiny lost its animal appearance in his mind's eye. He believed that one day Destiny would appear to him as a certain person who would radically change his life. Who will this mysterious unknown turn out to be?

Robert got admitted to college for Business and Administration, hoping to become CEO of a major financial corporation in the future. However, upon graduating, he got a job in a small agency as an insurance investigator, staying in this position for almost fifteen years. It was a cushy job but low-paying.

By the time he was forty, Robert—let's face it—wasn't very successful in life. And in his heart he remained an unsatisfied dreamer and an ever-ready adventurer.

Chapter 2

So, setting aside Forbes magazine, Robert took a folder with a new client's case. Attaching a blank sheet of paper to it, he wrote the first and last name of the client: James Greenwood, seventy years old.

When he started a new case, Robert, for fun's sake, drew a little miniature stick figure in the top corner of the sheet, the likes of which children usually draw: a ball for a head, a cucumber for a body, and sticks for arms and legs.

Same as always, the paper portrayed an amusing freakazoid. He looked at the photo of James Greenwood on a copy of the driver's license and, to bring the picture closer to the original, added a goatee to the little man. Winking at James—meaning, “now, man, we will learn what's behind your soul”—he drew close the reports on all of Mr. Greenwood's financial transactions from the last six months. Robert's face grew serious.

Before we continue this story, we need to briefly clarify what Robert's job consisted of. His agency helped people get Medicaid insurance. It is well-known that, in comparison with much other medical insurance, Medicaid is the best, especially for those

who are elderly, chronically ill, and in need of home care. There is no surprise these folks want to have Medicaid.

However, to be entitled to Medicaid, a person must be at the poverty line. Is there any way to get it if you are not poor?

It turns out, one such way exists! You had to become *allegedly* poor, almost broke. Some people who own whole fortunes resort to all sorts of tricks: transfer savings to different funds, put their real estate under the relatives' names, sell stock to fake individuals, etc. In short, they formally forego all their wealth and assets to obtain the longed-for Medicaid.

These types of "poor people," and often their relatives, were the clients which the mediation firm where Robert worked handled.

After about half an hour, Robert set aside the paperwork and cracked his fingers. "Yes, it looks like old James is not doing too well. I wonder how old is his wife? Oh, forty-five, not an old lady yet. Okay, Mrs. Martha, what's your story?"

Next to the figure of James appeared a drawing of a woman: with the same ball head and cucumber body, except with two brackets on the chest and a thick bush under her stomach. The figure of the woman was so successful that Robert admired her for a moment.

So, the mysterious Mrs. Martha Greenwood... Judging by the printouts of credit and bank statements, in recent months she suddenly began to lead the life of a socialite. She started frequenting the bars in Greenwich Village and Soho. She joined a fitness club. She decided to renew her wardrobe at all levels, from the top, at Royal's Fur, to bottom, at Victoria's Secret. The fitness club was not enough; she purchased a season

membership at the ice rink. And where did ten thousand dollars go? Yes, to Michigan, to the University account; her son and daughter probably study there.

Mrs. Martha led an exciting life. Forty-five years old, a woman in her prime. Her husband is most likely seriously ill if the wife is living life in such a festive manner.

Obviously, her husband's entire fortune passed along to Martha. His bank account only contained a pitiful \$850, exactly the amount needed to be eligible for Medicaid. James is dirt poor. Martha has everything. In addition, she managed to cleverly dispense the money between pension and insurance funds so that it couldn't be touched. She definitely has a good attorney. Yes, here it was: five thousand dollars for the services of the law firm Shapiro and Brown. Good job, guys; Shapiro and Brown are getting paid deservedly.

Martha Greenwood. Hmm... Is probably a blonde. A dyed blonde. Forty-five years old. Fitness club, half an hour on the treadmill. Then, the shower—melting strips of foam slide down her stomach and legs, still aching from the pleasant fatigue after half hour training sessions. Then a soft towel. A white ball of deodorant dives into the armpits of raised arms. Panties from Victoria's Secret, t-shirt. Then café, a vegetable salad and a fruit smoothie. Nothing salty, nothing too high-calorie. Forty-five years old. Be careful. Everything is good, but where is he? Where is that lover for whom you're putting in all this effort? Where to find him?

Robert imagined Mrs. Martha's whole life, while among other papers he was looking for one that would fully explain, once and for all, why Mrs. Martha began to suddenly go all out.

Yes, here are the monthly deductions for the newly-acquired life insurance for Mr. James Greenwood. How did she manage to insure his life? Either old man James is

not doing too bad, or she is so cunning that she was able to cheat the insurance agency. Probably the latter. If she started to frivolously spend money, then she doesn't count on poor James being around for much longer.

Turning the pen in his fingers, Robert's eyes lingered on the drawing: James and Martha, both in their so-to-speak "natural" outfits. Without hesitation, he drew a bracketed hole at James's feet, crowning it with a cross. To the grave, then.

He wanted to add to Martha's figure, but for some reason his hand trembled. Strange visions of an imaginary Martha—in the fitness club, in the shower, in a cafe—flashed once more in front of him with such clarity that Robert even imagined that he was touching this woman. He wanted to see her, or hear her voice. Moreover, he had a reason to call the Greenwoods.

"Hello, Mr. James Greenwood?"

"Yes, it's me," answered a dry, hoarse man's voice on the line.

"I am Robert Fabio from the agency Care and Trust. You have contacted our firm for help to get you Medicaid, right?"

"Yes, correct."

"Basically, everything is fine with the documents. A few insignificant papers are missing."

"You'd better talk to my wife about it. She runs our entire family office.

Marrttthaaa!"

A minute later, a woman's voice was on the line.

"Martha Greenwood on the phone."

"Good afternoon, madam. This is Robert Fabio, from the agency Care and Trust. You asked us to help you get Medicaid for your husband, right?"

“Right.”

“I’ve looked through all your documents. All in all, everything is ok; only the latest utility bills and your marriage certificates are missing.”

“Thank you very much for calling, Robert. I will make copies tomorrow and mail everything to you.”

“Her voice is pleasant, not having lost its resonance.” Robert again tried to imagine Martha. Upon hearing her voice, it was even easier to do so: a dyed blonde with perfect facial structure, beautifully shaped lips. Fitness club. Shower. Her body is toned like a string, waiting for one touch to ring.

“If you want it to be quicker, I can meet you tomorrow during my lunch hour and pick them up,” he suddenly suggested.

“Are you serious? You are so kind. In that case, where would it be most convenient for you?”

Chapter 3

On the way to this meeting, Robert had a feeling that something unusual was waiting for him.

The hunch was not wrong; when he saw Martha at the rink, he felt a strong excitement in his chest. A thought similar to a ringing arrow pierced him with a sharp tip and passed clean through—Destiny! Here it is! My destiny is Martha. Simple and clear as day, this beautiful September day.

He recognized Martha at once, though he never saw her until now. Holding her hands at the waist, she glided across the ice of the artificial open rink in Bryant Park. She

was dressed in a light sports jacket and black, tight leggings around her slender legs, which appeared even longer with the skates.

God, how she skates! Swoosh! The blades, having scratched the ice at the bend, caused a splatter of small needles. It was not a woman—but an amphora on skates! The legs are strong, tight. And the ass—forgive me, oh Lord!—although covered by tights and a jacket, oh how it dances and how it sings!

Martha was focused on herself. As if she had no business with other skaters or observers standing at the sides. It seems she was trying to relax—to take a deep breath, and then to exhale from her chest all the bitterness set in by her husband's illness, which chopped down their family tree. However, maybe that family tree was not that strong. Who knows?

Swoosh! She almost tumbled on the side of the rink next to Robert, who, as they agreed, was holding Forbes magazine in his raised hand.

"Mr. Fabio? Is it you? Good afternoon!" She blessed Robert with a charming smile. "Sorry, I didn't notice you right away. I did not think you would come so early."

"Don't apologize. I kept this magazine at my side so you wouldn't recognize me. I gave myself the pleasure of admiring you."

"Thank you for the compliment. Skating is the only thing that gives me an emotional release." A light shadow ran over Martha's face, for a brief moment really and not more. It was evident that this woman is good at controlling herself. "Can you wait for me a little bit? I'll change quickly and give you everything I've brought."

"Of course. Come in there," he nodded toward the open cafe.

Swoosh!! The blades hit the ice once again. Shaking her relaxed arms, Martha rolled to the glass changing room.

Robert started towards the cafe.

In the center of the lawn was a fountain in the form of a huge vase, with water pouring from its neck into a bronze bowl. On the edge of the bowl sat a sparrow, cleaning wet feathers with his beak.

Robert was drinking coffee while looking at the bird. Suddenly he was gripped by some bad feeling. "Wouldn't it be better," he thought, "to cast the overwhelming sentiments out from my mind, to forget Martha's charming smile, her silhouette floating on the ice and just leave? But her legs, aah... and the eyes... the whole sky of New York is reflected in those eyes! And so simple-looking, so, probably as cunning as a snake..."

"I'm sorry I took so long. We women are such dawdlers; we say five minutes and spend half an hour." Martha hung a cloth bag, stretched by her skates, on the back of her chair and sat across from him.

"Do you want coffee?" He asked.

"No, thank you. But I don't think I'll say no to orange juice. I'm not holding you up too much?"

"No, I have plenty of time," he lied.

The minute hand on the clock has a nasty way of accelerating during lunch. Now this hand was flying across the watch dial, which annoyed Robert immensely, as he would have agreed to sit next to Martha for all eternity. He was spell-bound by this woman but attempted to appear business-like.

"I need the missing documents to ensure that your case is fully completed. You know what pencil-pushers are sitting in our state offices; they will notice any small piece

of paper missing and everything will be returned.” He took copies of the documents from Martha and put them in his briefcase.

“Thank you, Bob,” Martha uttered. “You have no idea how important this is to me, and to poor James even more so. We need Medicaid like air. We can no longer bear the financial burden of the expenses.”

“I understand. If it's no secret, what's your husband's illness?”

“Oh, don't ask! What isn't he sick with?! Five years ago, he started to have colic in his stomach. I begged him to see a doctor, but he did not listen. My husband was busy with work; all of you men think only about your career and don't care about your own health. Well, and then...,” Martha sighed, taking a glass of orange juice from the table and raising it as though about to give a toast. “James was admitted to the hospital with acute pancreatitis. Then it all cascaded—ischemia, hypertension, diabetes, kidneys. Ah!” Tears came to her eyes.

“I am sorry.”

“It's fine, dear Bob. Your break must have ended a while back. Sorry for having kept you so long. But sometimes I just want to share with someone, and there is not a reliable person in sight.” She carefully dabbed a napkin to the bridge of her nose, near the corners of the eyes, so as not to smear the mascara. Then she took out a makeup bag to get her face in order.

“Will she leave now, and our acquaintance will end there? No, I can't miss a chance!” Moreover, Robert's intuition suggested that he and Martha were soul mates.

Standing up from his chair, he leaned over her and said insinuatingly, “Martha, I am the trustworthy person you are looking for.”

Returning late, with a beaming face, Robert entered his office. “She agreed, agreed to a date!”

All the women he had previously had relationships with were mousy, plain, nothing special. Could they even compare to Martha?

He took out the papers Martha gave him from the briefcase. But prior to dealing with them, his gaze lingered on the plain drawing depicting James, on the edge of the grave, and Martha, as the newly created Eve.

This family portrait, however, was lacking something important. Yeah, he knew what it was! With confident strokes he added horns to James. He also drew himself on Martha’s right, in all his naked glory, as a newly created Adam, but with a briefcase in his hand.

Now the picture had gained balance; the skew to one side, due to James, was eliminated because of Robert.

Now, then, cautiously—swoosh, swoosh—Martha in the middle, between the cuckold James and the excited Robert... The whole group started slowly moving in the direction of the hotel Grotto Amour.

Chapter 4

Three months had passed.

In the spacious hotel room there was a “roomy love bed.” Martha sat on the bed, nervously crumpling the fabric of her terry robe on her knee.

"Don't go, Bobby, listen to me to the end," she asked wretchedly.

Robert, with a wide towel around his hips, stood facing Martha, leaning his buttocks on the windowsill. He was well-built, but the muscles of the arms and shoulders had slight fat pockets.

He turned to the window with an inarticulate "hmm-hmm," and pretended to look at something on the street. There was nothing interesting there—a stream of red and yellow lights floating on the roads, the contours of skyscrapers, and the spire of the Empire State glowing blue-and-white in the distance, meaning the Yankees had beaten the Mets.

Finally, having composed himself, he turned decisively and sat down in an armchair opposite Martha. This position was very advantageous for him; he was in the armchair with his arms crossed over his chest, as a formidable judge opposite a criminal.

“Speak up. I'm listening.”

Martha paused for a short time, as if gathering strength before the decisive battle.

"So... If you recall, I told you that James was a biochemist by profession. He has a PhD; he did research, working in the laboratory of the University. He left science to pursue a career in cosmetology and naturopathy. James has always fanatically believed in the power of natural remedies. Notwithstanding his hopeless condition, he continues to buy these products even now. He forces me to take all sorts of naturopathic crap along with him—vitamins, herbal remedies, fish oil.” She curved her lips bitterly. “You have no idea what kind of torture it is. The doctor’s visits, hospitals, the stockpiling of bills. I am tired of holding out for hope. And, by some miracle, I was able to insure his life for half a million dollars.”

“Then you thought about poisoning him?”

She lowered her head heavily.

“You're judging me. And I hoped that you would understand me.” Tears shone in her eyes. “I sacrificed my youth and my beauty for him.”

Her cell phone rang as it lay on the dresser. Glancing at the Caller ID, Martha exploded.

“It's him again, damn him!” Wiping away tears, she pressed the screen to answer the call. “Yes, dear, I am running a bit late. My shrink saw the terrible condition I was in and decided to give me an extra relaxation therapy session. No, he said it's free; we will see once we get the bill from him. How are you feeling? Thank God. I am planning to go to Whole Foods to get ginseng for the tincture, since we drank the last one. Tell the home aid, if she agrees to stay with you for another couple of hours, we'll pay her time and a half. You don't want to? You think we shouldn't spend money. You're right. Kiss.”

Setting the phone down, Martha spoke between gritted teeth.

“Fucking moron.”

Then, turning her gaze to Robert, she took out a sheet of paper from her purse and handed it to him.

“This is for you, so you don't think I'm playing cat and mouse with you.”

One quick glance was enough for Robert to understand that he held a document written on the letterhead of the law firm Shapiro and Brown.

“It's a contract that I am lending you thirty-thousand dollars, interest-free, for three years. You mentioned you wanted to buy a condominium; this money can go towards the down payment. I was saving this money for many years for a “rainy day” and nobody knows about it, not even my daughter. But before I transfer the money to your account, you have to notarize this document at the notary and give it to my attorneys. I would like to give you more but, I'm sorry, I don't have any more.”

She crouched beside him, placing her chin on his knees like a kind faithful little doggy.

“Or is this not enough for you? How else can I prove my love for you? You know that our house in Riverdale is under my daughter’s name, and all our money is tied up in various funds and stocks.” She pressed his knees tighter to her chest. “Just imagine, Bob, how we are going to live once it’s just the two of us. We will go on a Caribbean cruise right away. Or, rather, it’s better to go on the Mediterranean. We will visit Italy; you said your mother had relatives there.”

The mention of his distant mafia relatives in Italy caused an unpleasant sensation for Robert, and his fingers nervously drummed on the armrest.

“What do you want in return?” He asked.

“What do I want in return? You sound like we're haggling in the marketplace. God, how hard it is for me to endure this humiliation!” She rose from her knees and circled around him, settling behind his back. Leaning down she whispered in his ear, “Understand me; James takes so many medications and his body is so battered that the doctors themselves wonder how he is still alive. You'll see. No one will ever find out. You just need to create the right formula. I already tried everything, to no avail. I consumed tons of specialized literature, visited different online sites; I can already work as a pharmacist myself. But nothing works on him, nothing breaks him! I must have an unlucky hand. I got into some vicious cycle. Help me, Bobby. Help me.”

“Premeditated murder. Plus conspiracy. Twenty-five years, at least, to life.”

Robert took Martha's hands, unclasped them, and stood up.

“I need to get refreshed.”

When he entered the bathroom, he sprinkled cold water on his face and took some deep breaths in and out. The dizzy spell seemed to have passed.

He tried to imagine that Martha had not just told him anything about her attempts to get rid of her husband. She didn't say anything. They entered the hotel today, as usual, giving the doorman a tip. According to tradition, they ordered chocolate and champagne to the room. Tipsy from champagne, Martha got used to first lamenting about her ruined life, and then arranged a fashion show, modeling underwear, to Robert's laughter and applause. Are his heavenly days behind him?

All this time his gaze did not leave the plastic jar with the label "Ahava" standing on the shelf next to other bottles.

The famous salt of the Dead Sea! It relieves stress. Relaxes muscles. Softens the skin. The label recommended dissolving three caps in hot water, then taking a bath for twenty minutes. Store in a cool, dry place.

Robert shook the jar, and the contents jumped with a noise. Unscrewing the lid, he poured a handful of salt onto the palm of his hand. He put a few crystals on the tongue—it tasted like ordinary salt, a bit bitter.

He came out of the bathroom with a jar in his hand.

Martha was putting on her pantyhose. She put her leg on the chair, smoothing out the folds, visible only to her, on the transparent fabric.

"Are you leaving already?" He asked.

"Yes. Do you want to tell me something? Like that you going to call the cops? It's your right. I don't care anymore," she said, finishing with the hose. She came up to the mirror, without as much as a glance in his direction.

Longingly, he observed her twitching buttocks in lace panties, her playful shoulder blades, her hair rising under the comb. “How can I lose such a woman? And with her so much money!”

“Are you going to take a bath?” she asked ironically, seeing Robert’s reflection in the mirror, pressing the jar of “Ahava” to his chest. Suddenly she turned around and, flashing her eyes, approached him. “Now I will tell you the truth. Yes, I agreed to become your lover, but only because I counted on you. You appeared to be a decent person that I can depend on. And you...” she said, grabbing him by the throat, “now you’re going to blackmail me. Bastard!”

"I know... I know a way," he rasped.

Chapter 5

They got down to business as business partners.

Robert spent his free time at the public library, where he studied everything related to the Dead Sea salt.

For centuries, the salt of the Dead Sea has attracted the attention of many. In the Middle Ages alchemists used it in the manufacture of the philosopher’s stone, and the Capuchin friars sprinkled it inside their cells to banish evil spirits. Robert picked up quite a few interesting bits from history, ancient and modern, even watching a popular science movie on YouTube about how Israeli factories boil water until crystallization and how various industries and medicines then use these minerals.

But, alas, "dead salt" appeared on no list of known poisons.

However, none of this dissuaded Robert. He assured Martha that the case was progressing and that he was close to finding a formula. In his opinion, the salt should be used together with some pills; but so far, he did not know exactly which.

In short, Robert decided simply not to participate in any poisoning, but to waste time and squeeze new financial concessions out of Martha. She has already agreed to add his name as a co-owner of some of her stocks.

Martha nervously carved out ice bits while skating. She tried to breathe deeply and evenly. She already began to suspect Robert of financial deceitfulness and just plain cowardice.

They still spent time in the hotel room, drinking champagne. However, Martha's lingerie shows became less common. It was evident that she was becoming run down. She started really seeing a shrink.

Meanwhile Robert was developing a taste for this, as they say; he was getting carried away. He appeared in the room, where Martha waited impatiently for him. Her bag with the skates lay on the floor. She asked in a shaking voice, "Well, did you find it? Did you find the formula?" She resembled a melting snow maiden.

Robert took off his cold kid-glove, and stroked Martha's head.

"Yes, my darling, I did."

She flushed like a shy young woman upon hearing her first declaration of love. She helped him take off his winter coat. They walked to the coffee table, where there was a bottle of champagne on ice, glasses, an open chocolate bar and an open Bible, which Martha had now started reading frequently.

Robert sat down on a leather ottoman, took the champagne bottle, and—pop!—poured it into glasses.

"For good luck! Cheers!"

Martha's face got even more red. Like a rose, ready to bloom. She also raised her glass.

"Cheers!"

Downing the glass to the last drop and throwing a piece of chocolate in his mouth, Robert began to speak about tolerance, the immune system, and genetic cell mutations. The more muddled his words were, the more freely they flowed in this huge high-ceilinged room, the heavier Martha's soul felt. She underwent a reverse transformation from a ready-to-bloom rose, through a shy young woman with blushing cheeks, to a pale snow maiden. Two melted snowflakes rolled down her cheeks.

One day Martha stated bluntly that she can wait no more, that James had suddenly begun to noticeably improve, even surprising his own doctor.

"We cannot stall anymore. I need to pay off my debts, including for this hotel room, where you spend so much care-free time with me. Anyway, either you provide me with the recipe, or I go back to James. For your information, James even started being sexually active, which had not happened since two-thousand ... I don't remember which year. Moreover, be aware that I won't include your name as a co-owner in any documents!"

Robert realized that everything had not gone according to his plan. Clinging to the herbs and roots for dear life, James seemed to be climbing out, and—God forbid!—it will be him going with Martha on a cruise, and Robert will wave to them from the dock.

"You're accusing me in vain," he said harshly. "How long did you work on the recipe? And what have you achieved? Only that your husband has developed immunity to any poison. But I..." then Robert made a weighty pause, "found it."

He took out some papers from the briefcase and shook them over his head. "So, pay attention. Here is the recipe:

Dead salt ("Ahava")—ten teaspoons

Xanax—2 mg

Phenobarbital—100mg

Oxycodone—300 mg

Commit it to memory. I think this will suffice. Crush everything thoroughly, and then administer to the patient one tablespoon three times a day, before each meal."

Martha sat there without moving. She stopped breathing. Even the champagne in her raised glass had stopped bubbling.

But now the wine played again in her glass. Martha's eyes shone. Leaping from the ottoman, she spun around the room in a dance, opening the closet doors, dropping vases with flowers onto the floor and turning over armchairs.

She performed a waltz, a waltz on skates. Swoosh...ta-ta! Swoosh...ta-ta!

"How soon will it work"? She asked, without stopping.

"Three days."

"Three days! God, it's so long!"

THIS IS THE END OF THE SECTION