

# GAME

FAINT SIGNALS

ALICE N.YORK

CAPSCOVIL

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Translated by Niall Sellar

CAPSCOVIL

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**FOR MOM**



**IN LOVING MEMORY**

# Prologue



Driven and experienced, Alex takes on a management position in the solar energy industry: an exciting game that she plays to win.

It is not the paycheck that drives her, but the recognition, the affirmation; the private smile that says: “Yes, I can”.

The job is like a dream come true, and serves as the perfect complement to her private life.

Until her world is turned upside down.

Until the rules change.

The story takes the reader through a world of innovative technologies, demanding challenges and delightful foreign surroundings.

Setting the scene.

Inching towards a conclusion that will have major repercussions for all those involved.



# Chapter 1



## January

Before Alex entered the PsoraCom building through the automatic double doors, she turned once more to Sandro. He sat in his slightly dented, red Hyundai and blew her a good luck kiss.

“In bocca al lupo!” he cried in Italian, wishing her luck in the would-be lion’s den. “Crepi!” came the obligatory, smiling response – although of course she didn’t seriously hope he would die.

She squared her shoulders and made her way confidently to the reception, asking politely for Thomas. For her first day at work she had decided on a plain black suit with a white blouse and flat, black patent leather lace-ups. She always felt good in this outfit because it was classic: not too feminine, but rather business-like and professional. Besides, black contrasted nicely with her copper-red hair, and Alex had never been that into skirts. Even as a child she had loved lederhosen and jeans because whenever she cycled, climbed trees or played football, dresses had just got in the way.

In her professional life she had encountered some women who displayed their feminine charms provocatively in order to achieve their goals. Alex had never understood the logic behind this. Despite being only five foot five she almost never wore heels, even though she thought they looked really good with suits. Unfortunately she couldn’t walk in them for very long.

While she attached her visitor badge and waited, she marvelled once more at the imposing, modern lobby, which seemed to be made completely of glass. Actually the exterior consisted entirely of solar modules, the electricity generated from which was fed into the company’s own energy network. “Building-integrated photovoltaics” was the name of this concept, she remembered. The solar modules were part of the building itself. The reception area was oval shaped, a good 1000 square feet, with a counter in the centre underneath a dome-like cupola. PsoraCom’s fir-green company colours stood in direct contrast to the breezy transparency of the glass. Three women dressed elegantly in green uniforms attended to visitors. Some distance to the right of the counter, surrounded by an oasis of palms,

were a few dark-green wing chairs and small plain chrome tables. Behind the counter, in front of the passage through to the building, there was a biometric scanner similar to those at airport security. To the left stood high bistro tables, amply spaced. Only these weren't just tables, but highly developed pieces of computer furniture whose entire surfaces doubled as touch-sensitive screens. Visitors could surf the net while they waited, or watch the latest updates from PsoraCom as they hovered in holographic 3D above the tables.

Thomas, her new boss, picked her up from reception. He was a good head taller than her and looked as though he had sprung straight from the glossy catalogue of a luxury gentlemen's outfitter. She guessed that he was probably in his mid-forties although there was not a single strand of grey in his black hair. He was sportily elegant and dressed in a classic double-breasted suit with a white shirt and grey pullover. Calmly, he came towards her.

"Good morning. I trust you had a good journey."

Despite the polite greeting, she found him just as impenetrable as she had at her interview a few months before. He was the type of person who was difficult to read. Not that he looked at her in an unfriendly way, just seriously and without any discernible emotion.

"Good morning. Yes, thanks. I didn't have far to go."

The biometric scanner briefly flashed green as Thomas led her through into the hallway, which forked a little further on into two double-storey corridors. Just as in the lobby, everything was solar-glazed and very bright. They took the left-hand corridor past the bright meeting rooms that Alex already knew from her first visit.

At the end of the corridor, past the glass elevator to the upper storey, they reached an enormous open-plan office. All the outer walls were made of pale-coloured solar modules and the approximately 25-foot-high ceiling furnished the room with sufficient air. A good hundred workstations had been set up in a circular arrangement, like a honeycomb in a hive, separated only by head-high walls of tinted glass that offered a little privacy from one's neighbour. While Thomas took Alex to his cubicle, she noticed that there was an outer and an inner circle, both of which were broken in four places by a gangway, dividing the room into eight segments in total. At each crossing there was a sign with the names of the people who sat in that particular segment. In the middle of the inner circle there was a colossal sculpture that looked like the pointed apex of a cone.

“Inside are encapsulated rooms for secret strategy meetings,” explained her boss as they walked past.

There was a free space opposite his cubicle which she could use for the time being. Alex wouldn't be allocated a desk in the office; she would work from home. This was not at all unusual: indeed many companies saw cost benefits in staff working from home. Field managers were with clients most of the time anyway – at least, that's what was expected of them. All the members of her team worked from home; only Thomas, as group leader, preferred a designated desk in the office building.

Alex put her bag down and Thomas led her back to a small room next to the elevator. There were coffee and drinks machines, as well as a few tables with ashtrays on them. It was highly unusual for an American company to have a smokers' room. Nevertheless, the tables were equipped with mushroom-shaped suction units, which ensured that there was no lingering smell of cold smoke. Coffee of all kinds, from espresso to latte macchiato, as well as tea and non-alcoholic drinks, were available to employees free of cost. The company probably hoped this would encourage them to work longer hours. After both of them had taken what they wanted, he accompanied her to the IT department.

“This is where new employees get their laptop and an IT systems briefing,” he said. “Everyone is on first name terms here by the way,” he added. “Come back to me when you're finished and I'll give you a tour of the office.”

He turned round abruptly and seemed almost happy to be rid of her for a while.

After an hour she went back to Thomas. He led her through the entire office on the ground floor and explained where Sales and Marketing and New Businesses were located. Whenever they met a colleague, he introduced Alex immediately. As time went on, she found it increasingly difficult to remember all the names, let alone their positions. On the first floor they found the design and development, book-keeping and legal departments. After the tour there was still enough time for Alex to collect her company car and home office equipment.

“Let's meet in the canteen for lunch,” said Thomas, after he had left her with the relevant colleague.



The facility manager was in her early fifties and told Alex that she had previously worked as a self-employed office clerk.

“I always took care of whatever my clients asked of me and became the go-to girl for everything, so to speak. PsoraCom was one of my first clients and after the company’s explosive growth they made me a very generous takeover offer. The good thing about the job is that I can afford to work just half days.”

That explained the state of her desk, perhaps: it was overflowing with all sorts of different papers, and she seemed to be a genius in chaos.

“Do you need a mobile?” she asked.

“Yes,” replied Alex. “But I’d like a Zeus68. Since I work in New Businesses, I should have the latest kind of netphone.”

“No problem,” said the facility manager. “I’ll order you one. It should be here by tomorrow.”

Alex loved new gadgets and would have bought one for herself anyway. Currently the Zeus68 was the only netphone with integrated thin-film solar cells.

Next they put together Alex’s employee ID. Unlike the temporary visitor badges, this wasn’t just a piece of plastic. PsoraCom highly valued the use of the latest technology and new employees were given a corporate accessory pack comprising a watch, bracelet, necklace and earrings. Each of these objects was a combination of plain but high-grade leather with beaded gold or silver, and included an integrated microchip containing all personal and biometric details. If lost, the items could not be misused. The microchip generated its electricity using body heat, or rather by using a thermo-generator, which exploited the differences between ambient and body temperature. If you took your watch off, the chip was deactivated; it could only be reactivated by an integrated voice sensor. If you lost it, it would be of no use to anybody else, other than as a nice piece of jewellery.

In order to programme the sensor, they needed to record Alex’s voice. Being somewhat vain, it took her three attempts. But that was nothing compared with some of her other colleagues, the facility manager smiled kindly.

Afterwards it was time for lunch and together they made their way back to the reception area, taking the right-hand corridor at the V-shaped fork, which also led into a big, round room. The canteen took up the front quarter, with the research department in a cordoned

section further back. Work there was top secret and only certain people were allowed access to this area.

“Hey, listen, I know your surname from somewhere,” began her colleague unexpectedly. “You’re not related to Franz Ruby are you? I worked for him before I became self-employed.”

“Yes, Franz is my father,” replied Alex, astounded. “Do you still remember him?”

“Of course I do, we worked together for a few years in an office by the station.”

“I can still remember that office,” Alex smiled. “My dad used to take me there occasionally during the school holidays. I must have been eleven or twelve. The thing I remember most is the big fridge with lots of coke cans. They were for clients, of course, but you could always take a few, and since we didn’t have coke at home I didn’t hold back.”

“I wish I had such fond memories,” laughed her colleague. “I remember one time when a colleague of Franz’s had a rip in his trouser seam just before a client meeting. Very unprofessionally, we used a stapler to mend it. After the meeting he came and told us that the whole time he had felt like a fakir.”

Thomas came into the canteen shortly afterwards and explained that the food was subsidised. There were various round counters with wooden roofs located on the left-hand side. Each counter offered different dishes, ranging from Asian, Italian and American, right through to vegetarian and traditional fare or just fresh salad.

There was no fixed seating plan so they sat down at a long table. Several people had already taken their place. All of them worked in Sales and Marketing. However, none of them were from Alex’s team. They greeted her pleasantly and some of them asked what she was responsible for at PsoraCom.

“I’ve been hired as part of the new Vabilmo team to work as a consultant for a select group of solar plant manufacturers. I’ve been in the power plant and energy sector for a long time and I’m really looking forward to viewing everything from the perspective of the solar industry.”

Her colleagues nodded appreciatively.

“That sounds very exciting – best of luck,” said one of them.

PsoraCom were the market leader for solar cells. Originally their photovoltaic cells were made from pure silicon. In company factories, solar cells were still made from big silicon chips, also known as wafers, and then used by PsoraCom's customers to build larger solar modules. In turn, plant manufacturers combined many electrically connected solar modules to build power plants.

However, the manufacture of crystalline silicon solar cells was expensive and used up too much energy; alternative products were therefore being sought. Alongside thin-film, concentrator and dye-sensitised solar cells, there was now Vabilmo: a new sector that aimed to be more cost effective and energy efficient when it came to mass production. Here, solar cells were processed using organic solutions. The cells were razor-thin and as flexible as film, enabling the assembly of completely new configurations, which, together with the reduction in weight, would result in considerable savings.

In the first instance, PsoraCom saw two principal markets for these polymer cells. There were the traditional solar plant manufacturers, who built both grid-connected plants and off-grid systems; and then there were the companies who made robots. These robots ranged from complex machines in the production industry to machines built for specific tasks, and even simple household robots that could cook, iron or mow the lawn.

Based on these twin approaches, their basic aims were to increase the efficiency of solar power plants and to reduce robot energy requirements, thus lowering cost. Once the polymer cells were market-ready, contracts needed to be won from suitable clients because the implementation stage would take one to three years, depending on the size and nature of the project. Only if the new solar cells were widely used in the industry could appreciable savings be made.

For this kind of product launch, PsoraCom adopted a two-fold strategy. First there was direct sales – the classic approach, which allowed the company to speak to solar module manufacturers. In order to generate revenue, they had to be steered away from the currently employed solar cells and convinced to use the polymer cells (internally code-named “Vabilmo”). Second, PsoraCom also had an indirect sales unit made up of consultants whose objective it was to influence new market trends. The consultants worked together with end customers – that is, plant and robot manufacturers –, analysed processes, delivered strategy recommendations and assisted in the transfer of knowledge.

Their job was to make sure end customers would buy from module manufacturers who used PsoraCom's polymer cells.

In the past few years Alex had learned everything there was to know about power stations. It was her long-standing knowledge and experience that had got her the job. At least that's what Thomas had said.

The task of the Vabilmo team was to concentrate exclusively on the potential market for polymer-based solar cells. Aside from Alex, the team consisted of an additional consultant, a colleague from direct sales and a developer who worked on new concepts for the configuration of the solar modules. As yet, Alex had only met Brian – the other consultant – at the interview. She was scheduled to have a joint strategy meeting with him and Thomas in the afternoon. The meeting would also serve as a training session on existing activities of the Vabilmo team.

Lunch went by in a flash. Alex was delighted by the warm welcome and the keen interest her new colleagues had shown in her. Somehow, she immediately felt as if she belonged. After lunch she accompanied Thomas to one of the conference rooms on the ground floor, which was elegantly furnished with black gloss marble tiles, a large, round polished wood table and high-backed, fir-green leather chairs. Everything in the room could be controlled by a touch screen device which stood on the table. Besides the obligatory air-conditioning, telephone system and Bonsai data projector, the device also boasted the controls for a large plasma screen with an integrated webcam for video conferences.

Brian followed closely behind and greeted them both with a jovial "Hello". At five foot nine, he was not only smaller than Thomas; his whole appearance stood in stark contrast to him. His ash-blond hair, bound untidily in a ponytail, was immediately noticeable, as was his goatee beard. Not to mention his very casual attire. He wore his striped shirt nonchalantly over a pair of faded jeans, from the back pocket of which hung a long key chain. Nevertheless, he pulled a black trolley behind him in a business-like manner. Its plastic surface was covered in all kinds of stickers, some of which Alex recognised as belonging to famous surf schools. He took out his laptop and hooked it up to the touch screen device using a cordless connection.

"I've put together a few slides on our strategic approach," he said as he turned the plasma screen on.

They sat down at the table like three points of an invisible triangle so that they could all see the presentation on the screen. The title page announced in bold letters: “VABILMO STRATEGIC OVERVIEW – BRIAN, SENIOR CONSULTANT, VABILMO TEAM EUROPE, NEW BUSINESSES, STRATEGIC DIVISION.”

Brian scrolled to the next page and began to explain the table illustrated there step by step. Thanks to the eight-point font the text was both barely legible and, as the table took up the whole page, extremely confusing. It referred mainly to plant manufacturers and their activities. He spoke very deliberately and paused regularly for dramatic effect. The way he chose to express himself seemed to contradict his external appearance. Occasionally, however, his search for the appropriate expression was unsuccessful, and a protracted “um” crept into his speech. Nevertheless he seemed nice and good-tempered, and he smiled openly at Alex.

While he spoke she had time to take a closer look. His sun-tanned face had already begun to display a few wrinkles, even though he was only thirty-five. Judging by his collection of surf-stickers, she put this down to too much sun and salt-water. The goatee corresponded to the surfer-snowboarder cliché, but it was a little unkempt and needed trimming. Working with him promised to be interesting.

Brian was self-confident. He had casually rested his arm on the back of the nearest chair and seemed to enjoy talking. She had already noticed this at the interview– but it was almost certainly linked to his wealth of experience. For the whole afternoon they went through projects and existing contacts to potential end customers. A major development contract had already been signed with a plant manufacturer, and Brian went into detail about this project. It sounded exciting and very promising. They paused once for a short break, after about two hours. For most of the time Alex only listened. She spoke merely when asked for her opinion or if something was unclear. Thomas said very little, simply letting Brian speak. Four hours later, he concluded the presentation with his take on the future.

“I thought that for the first few months Alex and I could deal with solar plant manufacturers in Europe, planning and designing all steps together. During this time I can teach her everything and familiarise her with the most important issues. At the same time I’ll show her the best-known methods, which I devised specifically for the development contract with Roffarm, and which have already paid off on

several occasions. After that she can take on some end customers of her own. I'll look for other manufacturers, and additionally try to establish myself in Asia so we can move things forward there strategically. I've got a few ideas already."

Thomas nodded. "Sure, why not?"

"Of course, sounds good!" Alex agreed.

Her probationary period was set at three months, during which time she was guaranteed her full salary – including the variable component. Thereafter the latter was based on her own performance and the percentage to which she achieved her objectives. She had collected over ten years' experience selling complex products and solutions and was used to having a defined sphere of responsibility. For her, work was neither duty nor habit, but a challenging game that brought enormous pleasure.

They decided to call it a day. Alex had received so much new information that trying to remember everything had made her head swirl. Even after the drive home, a normally relaxing thirty-minute journey on a country road past small villages, meadows and woodland, she was still buzzing.

Back at home, Sandro was already waiting and greeted her with a passionate embrace.

"So, how was your first day?" He had just made dinner.

"Great, but totally exhausting," she called from the bedroom, while she changed her suit for a more comfortable pair of jeans. Once she was back in the kitchen, she sat down at the counter and began to tell him about it.

"The building is really impressive. There are solar cells fitted to every window; or rather all the windows have been made into solar modules. It's a power station in itself, with the latest technology everywhere. You only have to look at my new employee ID."

Proudly she showed off her new necklace; he, however, used the opportunity to kiss her an inch lower.

"Do you want to know how it was?" she asked with mock indignation. "Or do you want something else?"

"Something else," he grinned mischievously. "But I'll listen first if I have to."

She smiled. "Good, then listen! There are so many people buzzing around in the office, it's like being in a beehive. I couldn't begin to



remember all of their names. In the afternoon we went over some of the projects. There's a lot going on already, but I've still got so much to learn."

"So you got a good impression, then?" Sandro stirred in the pot, while it all came gushing out of her.

"Absolutely. Everything is so new and exciting. It's going to be really interesting. So, what are we eating?"

"Pasta Pomodoro." As usual when he had cooked he stood there grinning mischievously, like a child expecting to be praised. He had already set the table and lit the candles. She couldn't resist that look.

"You're such a sweetheart!"

"You can show me after dinner," he gave her a conspiratorial wink. "But let's eat first, the linguini are al dente."

Her parents didn't call until Alex was getting dressed again; it was as if they had known what would happen after dinner.

"And how are your new boss and colleagues?" her father asked with interest.

"So far I've only met Brian. He made a good impression, even though he likes the sound of his own voice. A real surfer-type, but he seems OK otherwise. I can't work out my boss at all. He's so quiet and hardly says a thing. He probably just needs to thaw out."

In the meantime Sandro had collected their glasses from the kitchen and topped them up with wine. After the phone call they lay snuggled on the sofa, each happily lost in their own thoughts. Alex remembered how they had first met.

It had been in their previous company; she was in Sales and Sandro had been a freelancer in Research and Development. He had aborted his medical studies and turned his hobby of developing software components into a career; concentrating on programming different sensors. When implantable sensors used to regulate and control blood pressure and pulse came on to the market, he took his chance. They had first met each other four years ago in the small canteen, where she had gone to get a lunchtime salad.

"That looks delicious," Sandro had said to her.

"You look delicious too," Alex had thought to herself as she admired his Mediterranean looks, with his almost-black eyes and hair.

His muscular arms had been the icing on the cake. But it had been something else that attracted her to him. To begin with she had

pigeonholed him as a macho Italian, although he later turned out to be very shy. That was precisely one of the reasons she had fallen in love with him and ignored reservations about their cultural differences. He had, it was true, been born and brought up in Germany. Nevertheless, in his thirty-six years he had never lost touch with his Sicilian relatives – even if he seldom visited them.

Just now she realised again how attractive he was. A head taller than her, his stature was reminiscent of Michelangelo's David. He still had chin-length hair, tamed with a little gel. Alex was certain that Sandro was the man with whom she would start a family, build a home and grow old. The thought felt very good, prompting a small sigh.

“How was your day, anyway?” she asked him finally.

“Oh, same as usual. The project's been going well ever since I took it on - it's almost like a permanent position. But my boss can be very narrow-minded sometimes. I can't shake the feeling that he undervalues my work.”

“From what you've been saying, that really does seem to be the case,” she agreed. “Companies often don't treat external staff very well: frequently their motto seems to be no-one is irreplaceable.”

“That's true,” Sandro nodded. “I have to renegotiate every additional cost – he's a real bean counter.”

“He seems like a very hard-nosed client,” responded Alex. “Unfortunately, nothing comes for free in the working world. You have to prove yourself the whole time. Only then are you in a position to make demands.”

However, in order to make demands one needed to have a healthy degree of self-confidence, and that seemed to be where Sandro's weakness lay. She often tried to share her experiences with him, but knew at the same time that these could never simply be transferred from one person to another.

“But enough about work,” she added, drinking the last drop of wine.

“You're absolutely right. There are considerably more enjoyable things we could be doing.”

There it was again, that wicked grin she found impossible to resist.

The next few days Alex left early so that she could be in the office shortly before eight. That meant she could start the day in peace with a bowl of muesli or fresh fruit from the canteen. She almost always

took the desk next to her boss as most of her colleagues didn't arrive until at least nine. Things seemed to be done differently at PsoraCom. Thomas generally arrived an hour after her, surprised to find her sitting there already. She devoted her first half hour to looking at the Financial Times website and different RSS feeds. Then she went through her emails. Even on her first day she had received more than twenty mails. Colleagues and team assistants from different departments had been informed the previous year that they would have a new co-worker. In addition, for certain topics, such as general project updates, internal meetings and mandatory training, there was a fixed mailing list in which she had likewise been included. You had to give PsoraCom one thing: their IT department was highly organised.

Most of the mails were not yet directly addressed to her; rather, she had been copied in for information. That was good though – she had always liked learning things by reading. It didn't matter if it was presentations for clients or project plans; development transactions or white papers; product descriptions or general information about PsoraCom's far-reaching organisation: the more she could obtain, the happier she felt. When it came to knowledge, she was like a dry sponge greedily soaking up water. Even when she didn't require it, she liked to know the details in order to improve her understanding. Her studies, a mixture of electronics and mechanics with a little business management and marketing, meant she didn't shy away from technical descriptions. She always tried to expand her horizons, even if it meant tackling the limits of her comprehension.

Thomas mailed her some information and then referred her to other people. "Ask Brian when he comes. He has more material."

There it was again, the feeling that her boss just wanted to be left in peace. But Alex didn't dwell too hard on it. Even if she enjoyed discussing current topics and projects with other people, she would only ask him when it was absolutely necessary. The rest she would find out herself. She had never been particularly shy. Brian provided her with different links and intranet addresses later. With that she had enough material to keep herself busy for the time being.

There was only one more issue: she was expected to answer a few emails about an event in February.

"That's our yearly planning conference," he explained. "Employees are flown in to Florida from all over the world. During the day

there are product training sessions and in the evening our directors hold presentations. The whole team is going to be there.”

Her pulse quickened with excitement. Finally she was going to America again. To Florida! She had received an email about every little detail – flights, airport transfers and the hotel.

“Which sessions should I pick?”

“Just choose the same ones as me,” said Thomas without any further explanation, handing her a print-out.

After finishing her booking she returned the paper with a silent nod. Alex would get used to the way he dealt with employees. Printing out her agenda - Hard Rock Hotel booking included - she felt a tingle in her stomach. The last time she had been in Florida was eighteen years ago. If the agenda was anything to go by, she wouldn't have much time for herself, but she would still enjoy warm summer weather in February. It also meant realising a long-standing dream of hers: staying in one of the Hard Rock Cafe chain's hip casino hotels. Excitedly she went to get a coffee, bumping into Christopher on the way. He had also attended her interview, having been in charge of the Vabilmo team at the time. A month later he had swapped with Thomas and taken over as head of Consumer Retail. Job rotation was common at PsoraCom. The company recommended it to both managers and employees after two or three years so that they could remain flexible. Alex had found Christopher very agreeable.

“Ah, the new member of the Vabilmo team,” he hollered. “It's great to see you - welcome to PsoraCom.” His broad grin underscored the friendly greeting. His wavy blond hair looked a little tousled, although it suited his casual, neat style nonetheless.

“Thank you, thank you,” replied Alex, instinctively adapting to his open manner, which seemed to have been shaped by an upbringing in the countryside.

Alex spent the next few days reading through various intranet sites to gain an overview of PsoraCom's company structure. The headquarters were in California, in Oakland to be precise, on the other side of the Bay of San Francisco. Like so many other technology companies, they worked closely with Berkeley University because the company founder had completed his degree in the energy and resource faculty there. He had acquired a plot of land in the hills above a cemetery a few years ago. It was flanked by a country club and measured

the equivalent of fifty American football fields; in America, that was enough to get started. Thus, Human Resources were only about three miles as the crow flies from trainees, PhD students and future co-workers. A great number of management staff came from Berkeley.

Despite its relatively brief existence, the company had a complex structure. New sites had already been launched around the Bay Area. Explosive increases in revenue had led to the hiring of thousands of new employees and the establishment of offices all over the world; meanwhile a bulk of new purchases made to serve the solar heat market had necessitated a complete reorganisation of the company's ten-thousand-strong workforce six months ago.

Everything had been converted into a matrix structure. Verticals were responsible for the development of solar cells for certain markets and purposes. Each of their departments had a specific area of expertise, whether it was the use of solar cells for big power plants or smaller house-installations, for building components, or for appliances such as machines and robots. Horizontals comprised cross-divisional functions such as the sales and marketing, research, finance and legal departments.

The Vabilmo team was situated in the first of these and would be working mainly with specialist departments of two different verticals to receive both technical and product marketing support. One of these departments concentrated on traditional solar plants, the other on appliances, robots and machines. The organisational network was complicated by the fact that there were colleagues in Sales who already dealt with companies from different sectors using the traditional amorphous silicon cells. The Vabilmo team would therefore advise these colleagues internally, while at the same time jointly calling on clients until a contract was signed. Alex needed time to let it all sink in. That's how she knew she was part of a big company, not a simply structured medium-sized company.

Initially she spoke very little with Thomas. Only when she went for coffee or headed to lunch with a colleague did she ask him if he wanted to come. He accompanied her more and more often and Alex quickly began to feel happier. All of her colleagues in the office were very kind and had made her feel like one of them from the start. It didn't matter whether you met in the corridor or at the coffee machine, everyone said hello, and at lunchtime conversation came easily.

Apart from Brian, she still hadn't met anyone from her own team since they all worked from home. The first joint team meeting had been scheduled for the next week. Otherwise the days passed quite uneventfully. She, like her boss, stayed at the office until just after six. At home she cooked with Sandro and they talked about their days, just as all couples did in the evening.

Her first discussion with an external company took place before the team meeting. Brian had set up a meeting with a retailer. In principle, retailers were dealt with by a member of Christopher's team. Most of these companies sold solar modules to private home owners, with whom PsoraCom had no direct dealings. Nevertheless, some retailers offered machines and robots to end consumers, and were therefore of potential interest to the Vabilmo team as an additional sales channel.

Brian came straight to the meeting room from his home office. Although dressed in a black suit and checked shirt, he wore no tie. His hair was neatly combed and bound in a ponytail. Thomas was also present, dressed elegantly as always. Owing to the energy sector's extreme conservatism Alex had adopted an unobtrusive, somewhat muted, almost gender-neutral style over the years and wore a dark-grey suit with an apricot-coloured pullover. Apart from mascara and rouge, she wore no make-up. She wanted to be valued for her knowledge and personality, rather than for wearing the right colour of lipstick.

During the very informal discussion Brian presented the Vabilmo strategy. In the end, both parties agreed to remain in loose contact and to keep each other up-to-date. Afterwards Brian returned straight home to his office. A meeting where no tangible arrangements were made was a completely new experience for her.

The weekend passed without noticeable incident. On Saturday morning they went shopping, did their washing and cleaned the house. Later Sandro played tennis for a few hours as usual. He was almost addicted to it, and would spend almost every free minute on court. In the evening they cooked, made themselves comfortable on the sofa and watched a movie. Alex studied the rental properties in the local newspaper at the same time.

"The landlord doesn't lift a finger anymore," she vented her anger. "It's about time we got out of here. He's never really shown any interest in the house, and in the last few years it's only got worse."



“That’s true,” Sandro agreed.

“There’s even mould on the neighbours’ walls,” Alex continued. “A three- or four-room flat with at least 900 square feet would be ideal. We’d be able to fit everything in there.” She needed a lot of space for furniture, books and her extensive Harley Davidson collection.

“It would be pretty nice to have all my stuff in one place,” Sandro admitted. “Like the trophies that are still at my parents’ place.”

Alex nodded. “I’d like a flat with a garden next time. In the summer, it’s like having an extra room. And I’d love a mountain view. But I know they’re hard to come by in this area. Also I don’t want to be much further away from the airport than we are at the moment.”

“That wouldn’t make much difference to me.”

“But you don’t fly as often as I do, and PsoraCom’s not going to be any different from my previous companies.”

“If you say so,” he murmured to himself.

There was nothing in rental properties. Sandro continued to watch TV, even though it was he who had been pressing for the move. Alex leafed through to properties for sale.

“We could almost buy a house with the rent we’d be paying for these flats.”

“We’d need capital for that,” he replied, “and you know I don’t have much.”

“But I have some, perhaps it would be enough.” She had already been saving up for this dream.

But she wanted it to be a detached house. Not one of these pre-fabricated townhouses that were once again being talked up in the area like cheap wine. With them, you didn’t know who would be living next door, and the garden often was nothing more than a 200-square-foot, street-facing speck of land. The advertisements didn’t yield much and the few places that were of interest were all too expensive. She didn’t have that much capital. In frustration, she put the paper down.

Sunday began pleasantly and they both enjoyed a long, peaceful sleep. After a leisurely breakfast, Alex stretched out on the sofa reading and Sandro went to play tennis. In the evening they spoke to friends and family on the phone. The weekend had come and gone.

In the following days, Alex continued to bury herself in product descriptions, company presentations and intranet sites. When something was unclear, she searched the internet, referring to wikis for

an explanation. With time, she would understand the specialist terminology. She smiled as she remembered what her father always used to say: “Slow and steady wins the race.”

The inaugural team meeting took place in the second week in one of the sculpture’s four rooms. Besides the usual technical gadgetry, the room was fully soundproof. Lamps helped to create an atmosphere akin to daylight, while foliage plants around the room and on the ceiling made it feel almost homely. The setting was supposed to boost creative thinking.

A man with short peroxide-blond hair and a sun-tanned face almost completely devoid of wrinkles pierced her with his gaze as soon as she entered the room. He was wearing a violet suit and yellow shirt, from the collar of which emerged a dark-blue neck scarf. Thomas and he were roughly the same age but they couldn’t have been more different. One looked like an elegantly reserved Englishman; the other like his more colourful relative.

“Well, hello,” said the latter. “You must be Alex. I’m George.”

While he spoke he repeatedly drew breath, which, although barely audible, made his speech sound rather clipped. His laptop was open in front of him and he was holding a netphone in his hand. In an instant he was looking at it.

“This thing is an absolute piece of shit,” he said, turning back towards her. But it didn’t stop him from fumbling around on it with his little pen.

Alex secretly agreed with him. The phone had been on the market for over a year now but various teething problems had still not been solved. It bore no comparison to her Zeus68. Brian strolled in shortly afterwards, trolley in tow, and gave everyone a nod. As always, he looked as though he had come straight from the beach.

“Hugo is using the bridge,” Thomas explained to them, shutting the door.

“Internal network bridge number five, verification: Vabilmo.” He spoke into the equipment on the table, activating the system. Voice recognition software enabled PsoraCom employees to dial into a conference call.

After Thomas had welcomed them rather stiffly to the first official Vabilmo team meeting, they started going through Brian’s strategy presentation. Brian began with his report, at times speaking so slowly that he began to drawl.

“But Brian, we still need to identify a suitable inverter manufacturer for Roffarm and...” George broke in.

“Yes George, I know. We’ve discussed it a few times now,” Brian cut him short before returning to his report, only to be interrupted on several more occasions.

Alex sensed a slight tension developing but Thomas didn’t intervene. He just sat there and looked at the slides on the wall, completely devoid of emotion. It was almost as though George was a fox waiting for the rabbit to emerge from its burrow. He longed for any opportunity to pass comment, before finally tasting relief in the form of Brian’s final slide.

Conversation turned to PsoraCom’s direct clients, the solar module manufacturers for whom George was responsible. At last he was able to take the helm and inform them about current project statuses. This he did at length and in great technical detail, with the result that Alex was unable to follow in places. She noted all the catchwords he used to look up later. His unusual breathing patterns made his pace seem increasingly frantic – almost as if he were afraid time would run out before he’d had the chance to convey all the thoughts racing through his mind. He said a huge amount, but that didn’t bother Alex because she was in “sponge-mode” and greedily absorbed all the information that came her way.

Information was something George had plenty of, as he’d been in solar energy with PsoraCom for many years and had a lot of experience. Every so often Brian now interrupted George to ask a question: it was as if the two of them were engaged in a competition only they knew about. But George’s staccato continued undeterred, pausing only to allow comments from the light Swiss accent that came from the loudspeakers.

The comments supplemented what had just been said and were likewise very technical. They had to pay special attention because Hugo spoke very quickly and his accent was difficult to understand over the phone. At some point Thomas interrupted George in mid-flow to say that the meeting would end in five minutes. Two hours had gone by in a flash and it was agreed that no concrete decisions would be taken. Project work would continue as before. Ultimately, they were only just getting started and needed more experience.

“By the way,” Brian addressed Alex unexpectedly, “there’s a kick-off meeting with Roffarm next Monday. It would be good for you to be there. I’ll mail you the invitation, but pencil it in.”

“It will be too much if Alex is there as well,” said George.

“What do you mean?” Brian objected instantly. “The more people there from PsoraCom, the more the client will see how important this is for us.”

Thomas just shrugged his shoulders. “I’m okay with that. It’s just round the corner so there’ll be no additional travel costs.”

Although Alex had found George’s comment rather impolite, she didn’t want to draw any hasty conclusions. Perhaps he was all right, despite having made a bad first impression.

She spent much of the next few days reading up on the flagship project with Roffarm, although she wouldn’t be greatly involved in the discussion on Monday. Nevertheless she wanted to have enough background knowledge to follow proceedings mentally.

Away from her research, she got to know more and more colleagues from different departments at lunch or over coffee. Alex would never have any direct contact with the majority of them. Still, all of them were kind and interested in what she was doing. Of her team colleagues, she saw neither Brian nor George; Hugo she would meet for the first time at Roffarm. She was excited about that because he was the technical lynchpin of the team and they would be working closely on various projects.

Thomas seemed to be thawing slowly. Perhaps he felt bad about Alex obviously leaving him in peace. Although thrilled that he was loosening up, she tried not to show her pleasure for fear that he might retreat back into his shell.

At the weekend Alex and Sandro were invited to the birthday party of one of his tennis friends. It was held at the clubhouse and clearly a great deal of money had been spent: bistro tables had been set up with leather bar stools and the food came from an exclusive local catering service.

The evening proceeded as expected until Sandro moved on to do shots with the boys.

“Come and have a drink with us,” he said as he came by again to give her a quick peck on the cheek. He was already a little tipsy from various rounds of schnapps.

“You know that I have to drive,” she responded.

Disappointed, he returned to his friends to find the next round already waiting. After a further two hours Alex had had enough. Most of the people were good-natured but drawn-out conversations about the latest fashions and must-see events were simply not her thing. She turned to Sandro.

“Hey, I’m pretty tired. Let’s go home.”

“What, now?” he asked, a little annoyed. “But it’s just getting going here.”

“It’s already quite late and I’d really like to go.”

“Mamma mia!” His irritation showed clearly in his face and the drive home was anything but pleasant.

“Why are you being such a kill-joy today?” he continued in the car. “The atmosphere there was fantastic.”

“I’m just tired,” she repeated, “and you’ve had quite enough to drink. You know what happens when you drink too much.”

“I’ve haven’t had that much to drink. Just a few shots.”

“You’ve been downing them one after the other,” she countered, before realising straightaway that further discussion would be pointless. It was impossible to argue with people when they were drunk.

In the meantime, she had been forced to leave the motorway and stop the car because Sandro had taken a turn. It was exactly this situation she had wanted to prevent. He had to vomit. Now they could stop every ten minutes and take the back road home. There was nothing for it but to try and suppress her fatigue by chewing gum. Back home, Sandro went to bed at once and fell into an exhausted sleep.

As always, he apologised the next morning.

“I’m really sorry. I shouldn’t have been drinking so much yesterday.”

He put on his most convincing innocent smile and crawled playfully over to her side of the bed. It achieved the desired effect but later, however, it left Alex with a strange feeling and a few nagging doubts began to appear. Were they just too different? Was their lack of common interests more important than she cared to admit? And what about their supposedly shared desire to start a family?

Alex met the last of her colleagues on the day of the big kick-off meeting with Roffarm. At six foot three, Hugo was a giant in comparison with her, and in his formal brown suit he looked like a young student thrust into an unfamiliar second skin. His pale, round face was framed by black curls that made him look younger than he probably was. As he shook her hand with a shy smile, powerful muscles showed through the sleeves of his jacket. Then he nodded a brief hello to Brian and greeted George warmly. In person, his lisp was even more noticeable. But it could have been down to a combination of his Swiss accent and occasionally swallowed consonants.

After they had all registered by fingerprint, Roffarm's project leader took them into a big meeting room high above the roofs of the city.

As was so often the case, Alex was the only woman. There weren't many women in the energy sector full stop. During the introductions she outlined both her previous industry involvement and her current remit. Otherwise she let her colleagues take the lead as they had been dealing with this particular end customer so far.

Roffarm planned and built new solar plants every three to five years, depending on their size and location. Until now they had used crystalline thin-film cells, but attached great importance to being perceived as a technical innovator within the industry. They had already proved this in the past and wanted to strengthen this position in the future. That was the reason they had decided to test PsoraCom's polymer-based solar cells. If the deal was successfully completed, Roffarm would be the first company to use these cells in a new power plant. A corresponding clause in the contract, which Brian had negotiated, was set to serve as a guarantee.

Although the discussions in the meeting were mainly of a technical nature, Alex was happy to be taking part. She watched her colleagues in admiration as work packages were outlined and demands adapted to the project goal. George and Hugo were the most active members of the team and clearly the two with the most know-how. Brian seemed to be more *au fait* with contractual matters. These were keenly argued, particularly when it came to the formation of the project team and the question of how much both parties were expected to contribute. By the end Alex was exhausted, but happy nonetheless. She had obtained lots of new information. Brian and Hugo were unanimous in their opinion that Alex's attendance had been more than



worthwhile. Even George, dead against her presence originally, joined in the congenial post-meeting atmosphere. Her colleagues were certainly a colourful bunch, but all of them seemed competent in their own way. Alex was convinced that she could learn a lot from them.

In the following weeks, she continued to read up on the material and began to take on small projects that Brian had given her. These projects were a good exercise and could be taken care of over the phone. Most of the time, it was simply a question of passing on details about polymer-based cells or discussing possible methods of co-operation with different companies.

Of greater importance, however, was the monthly meeting she had been invited to attend by Brian. It was an internal conference call with product managers from the vertical division specialising in power plants. Although for the most part working on the project with Roffarm, they were also considering other avenues. The meeting was supposed to serve as a mutual information exchange so that everyone could be kept up-to-date.

Privately, everything was going fine, leaving aside the little quarrels that were normal for any long-term relationship. Only the flat hunt continued to frustrate her. There didn't seem to be any great willingness on Sandro's part to commit to buying a house together, let alone discuss topics such as marriage and children. Despite her impatience, she probably just needed to give him more time.

Still, having to pay so much rent to such an ignorant, unfriendly landlord pained her more than she cared to admit. Alex covered the rent because for the time being Sandro had only one client and wasn't earning very much. To make up for it, he paid for all household costs, which was fair in her opinion. She had never taken the trouble to count everything up, convinced that things balanced themselves out in other ways. How could he take her out to dinner or the cinema when high maintenance costs meant he had no money left at the end of the month? These little gestures were more important to her. He could have quit the tennis club, as the monthly fees there were exorbitant. But Alex knew that tennis provided a counterbalance to his work – just as jogging or reading did for her. Besides, almost all his friends were from the club and she could never ask that he give them up. Life was full of compromises; this was one she'd just have to live with.

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