

LOVE ME TENDER TILL I DIE

B. Love, Sasha Shue

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"Yeah, baby, yeah, that's it, come on! I'm going to cum," I hear Stas whispers hoarsely behind me as he fucks me just like a slickly, sweaty rabbit in my pink girl's bedroom. The cool night breeze ruffles the weightless Italian curtains that cover the view of the luxurious well-groomed park at my parents' manor, and I whisper languidly back, moaning in one rhythm with my future husband:

"Oh, yes, honey, me too! Yes, yes, just like that," and I am glad that he does not see the indifferent expression on my face in the darkness of the room. If millions of poems and novels are written about it, hundreds of thousands of movies and TV shows are made about it, then I am absolutely not their reader and not their spectator...

"I feel so good with you, baby... And you?" Once again my fiancé asks me, apparently to make sure that he was the one who could bring me to the peak of ecstasy, and I, playing along with him, arch my back even more and, stretching my words, just like a porn star, answer:

"It feels so great, so good... Oh yes, only with you! You're the best, my love," and I start moaning louder and louder, so that he wouldn't have any doubt that I was in the seventh heaven of orgasm.

"All the more reason," I think to myself as my whole body is shaking from Stas's frantic thrusts, driving his aristocratic phallus furiously into me, "I should be fine with him. And only with him. I've never had anyone before him! And probably never will again," I sigh sadly, apparently louder than all the other sounds I made during our lovemaking. And my fiancé, taking it for convulsive sobs of the peak of pleasure, moans loudly in unison, and, trembling and freezing for a couple of seconds, collapses on my back with his whole sweaty tired body.

"You're a miracle, Pola," he whispers in my ear as I gasp under the weight of his athletic torso, trained in expensive private clubs, waiting for him to finally finish his tenderness.

"I can't wait until you and I are finally married," he tells me frankly, carefully pulling his rubber-suited cock out of me so as not to spill a drop.

Love is love, but the heir of the richest family, one of the most enviable grooms not only of our country, but also of Europe, should not spill his precious and insanely expensive seed outside the legal marriage. There are too many predatory huntresses and even hunters around, I suppose, to get into the full rich body of Weisberg's family: owners of factories, corporations, castles, yachts and mines.

I roll over onto my back and watch Anastas from my bed as he neatly knots the condom and puts it in the plastic bag he always keeps in his pocket to take with him. He has a nice slim body, tight abs, and quite an attractive face. Blue eyes, thick blond hair and soft, plump lips. All in all, a carbon copy of Weisberg senior. True, I wouldn't call his father very attractive, but I'm sure he looked like that when he was younger. And for some reason, another wave of longing comes over me.

"Just be patient, baby, it won't be long now," he leans down to kiss me before he leaves, his plump lips sucking me in. "Soon you and I will be sleeping together every night, waking up next to each other every morning..." he murmurs dreamily. "Here we go again, what are you doing to me, baby?" he jokingly whispers, and puts my palm on his cock, and I feel it starts to swell and swell again. "You're so beautiful, I can't stop," he rummages around for another condom and, failing to find one, suggests: "What about in your mouth, baby?"

And even though I'm not excited about the prospect of licking his million-dollar reproductive organ for another twenty minutes, I fake meow back at him:

"You're asking for too much, love. Let's wait just a few days until our wedding night...." And I coquettishly cover my naked body with the blanket so as not to turn him on even more.

Besides, I'm late.

"Just go out the back door," I still purr as Anastas Weisberg pulls on his *Armani* jeans and *Prada* T-shirt. "We're not married yet. Officially we don't have to do this," I say with a gasp, and I see Stas's fly start to swell again. "No, no, not now," I kneel down on my bed, bringing my face right up against his stomach. I love teasing him, especially when I know I won't have to endure his endless panting on me again.

Our wedding is only a week away, and Weisberg Junior has just as much to do before it as I do. Polina Arkadyevna Sonis. Daughter of one of the most famous and honored film directors of the country, and part-time owner of a movie theatres chain *SunCinema* and his own production center *SonisFilm*. And Stas understands perfectly well that he is grabbing not the most stale piece of the family pie. In addition to his beautiful wife.

I run my palm over his still young and flat pumped abs, look at him with my transparent gray eyes, and realize that now I look much better than thousands of other cover-girls, bloggers, actresses and rich heiresses, with whom he constantly communicates.

"Oh Pola," his gaze clouds over again, but things don't wait and his phone starts vibrating frantically in his jeans pocket. "I'll see you soon, baby, I'll send it to you tonight," and I imagine getting another dick pic of him tonight, which I already have a photo gallery stuffed with on my phone.

"I'll be waiting," I whisper into his jeans-clad cock, and I wrap myself up to my chin in my blanket again so he doesn't change his mind and fuck me one more time on my silk bed.

"I will not take a shower today, I want to leave your scent on my skin," Stas begins his tender game again, and I agree with him in return:

"I won't take a bath today either, my love."

I lean over the window sill and watch from my third-floor window as Stas's black, tinted Maybach rustles quietly across the smooth asphalt of our driveway toward the gate, and as soon as it's around the corner, I run to the bathroom for a quick shower and to get dressed for our scheduled meeting tonight.

I put on a light short dress, high heels, and run down the back stairs before my parents see me. I get into my Jeep and race down the nighttime highway toward the city, where we have a reservation for four at a fancy restaurant called *A Prince and a Mouse*.

The hostess escorts me to a separate small room where Sasha, Masha and Sonya, my best childhood friends, are already waiting for me. And for the past five years since graduation, we've tried to meet every last Thursday of the month to talk about what's going on in our lives and discuss our plans for the future.

"The bride is late today," Sasha exclaims, greeting me and waving a giant glass with ruby blood shimmering in it. "A penalty," she calls for a waiter, who generously pours my share of wine into the empty flute.

"I'm sorry, but, you know, it's a pre-honeymoon," I roll my eyes and immediately sip greedily almost half of the expensive *Amarone* for three hundred euros a bottle.

"I thought you were going to make up for lost time," says a sweet little bitch Masha, the most experienced and sophisticated of the four of us.

"Masha, a lot doesn't mean better," laughs sweet Sonya with the angel-like appearance of a pink nymph.

"You're one to talk," Masha doesn't let her get away with it. "How many fat daddies have you already fucked? Ten, twenty?" And generously pours new portions into our glasses.

"Do not laugh my booties off! Twenty," Sonya giggles stupidly. "It's only five! That's if you count only serious relationships," she clarifies, swallowing the pink transparent grape with her lovely, sticky mouth.

And while my best friends measure their handbags and boys, I silently drink tart, almond-scented wine and nibble on fragrant cheese, dipping it into the thick chestnut honey.

"Girls, we'll talk about men later," Sasha, the careerist, interrupts everyone. She must have come to our meeting today straight from the office, because she didn't even have time to change her

stylish business suit. "Tell us what's going on in your life, besides Poline's wedding," she says, as if giving us an order, and the atmosphere at the table immediately changes.

At one time, when we were still in high school, we firmly decided for ourselves that we would always follow our hearts and achieve something important in life, without being distracted by unnecessary social gossip, men and parties. Time passed, and so far, out of all four of us, only Sasha had really achieved the most. At least until tonight. She is only twenty-two, and she is already working as an assistant editor for *Glossy*, an international fashion magazine, though distracted by social gatherings, men, and gossip, but only for work.

Cute Sonia has studied to be a designer-architect, and until recently her studies were constantly interfered by numerous overly mature admirers, who could not resist her still quite childish dimples on her cheeks and butt, despite her quite mature age. As soon as she appeared at the next project with her architect, determined to prove to everyone that she is a true professional, as another owner of a country castle or chateau immediately fell for her, and began to distract her from work with his insatiable courtship: gifts, restaurants and voyages. Poor Sonya had nothing left but to capitulate once again, and instead of nights to work on sketches and presentations, the same nights to work on taking the passionate caresses of some elderly Don Juan. The grown-up rich daddies groomed their golden Lolita, imagining that they were opening to her a world of secret pleasures, and she looked at them with her bottomless blue eyes as a little pink-cheeked fallen angel, trying to sit comfortably on top of their masculine mature loins.

"Can you imagine, he just laid next to me for half a night and looked at me!" She whispered excitedly to the three of us in the second year of college, telling us about her new fifty-five-year-old admirer, and the hem of her short-pleated skirt shook excitedly in time with her story. "And then he went down there, you know, where," she added embarrassedly, "and caressed me with his tongue for an hour!"

"An hour?" Sasha interrogated our girl-friend as businesslike as ever, and Sonya nodded her head furiously. "Exactly! He has a clock on the wall in his bedroom, and I've timed it!" And we all started laughing in full voice, scaring away the customers of the cafe.

"And was it worth it?" Masha asks indifferently, who even at nineteen had sex only to satisfy her physiological needs.

"Well, in general, yes," Sonia hesitated a little, and then added embarrassedly: "But still I miss the feeling of a cock inside, you know? A huge hard cock with swollen veins!"

And Sonya did not shy away, but looked for cheerful hard cocks among our peers, who, perhaps, did not flood her with expensive gifts and did not caress her pink pearlescent sashes for hours, but clearly and purposefully performed the task set before them: to fuck the girl cheerfully, so that she could then calmly and languidly endure the tedious long caresses of her next daddy.

"Why don't you start a normal relationship with a man at least ten years older than you?" I asked her once after another affair with a rich sixty-year-old Frenchman.

"I don't know," Sonia looked down at me. "Maybe I lack some tenderness... And some care."

"And a father," concluded our Masha, who was studying to be a psychotherapist and could already draw far-reaching conclusions.

"And a father," Sonia sighed sadly. "You're all lucky, and you all have full families," and it was true. "I never even talked to my father much: we saw each other a couple of times, that's all."

"What about the numerous stepfathers?" I asked, perhaps tactlessly. Sonia's mom was a famous actress, and her eternal love stories never left the front pages of yellow press.

"Stepfathers?" Sonia mumbled fearfully, and in that moment I realized that I didn't need to be a psychologist to understand that it was Sonia's countless stepfathers that had started her love affair with over-ripe and overprotective men.

That's how she spent all her five years of study: every year Sofia interned at a new project, where she was sure to become the mistress of the owner of a rich mansion, and when the school year and the project ended, Sonia's serious relationships came to naught. And now we were just about to

hear our friend's next story about the new mature millionaire in his fifties who takes her to his velvet scarlet room in the far wing. But this time Sonya managed to surprise us all.

"I finally have my own project!" She shouts excitedly to the whole room, drinking her joyful news with wine.

"Interesting," Sasha raises one eyebrow. "Let me guess: a country mansion? Is the owner already of age? Is he your type?"

"No!" Sonia solemnly denies the insulting suspicions. "That's just it! I'm designing a small museum on my own! This is my first commercial order!" She triumphantly splashes her happy news on us.

"Wow, Sonia! Congratulations!" Masha finally brakes away from the duck breast with fig confiture, ready to take her friend seriously.

"And what kind of museum is this?" Sasha begins to ask with interest. "Art museum?"

"You can say so..." Sonia hesitates. "Museum of erotic art!" She blurts out, and drinks the rest of Amarone in a gulp, as if trying to hide her excitement in front of us.

"Sonia, it's just wonderful," I reassure my friend, and I feel a sharp needle of jealousy pricks somewhere deep inside me. "As a certified art historian, I can responsibly say that this is a wonderful project that I'm sure you'll do better than anyone else."

"Especially, if taking into account your varied and rich personal experience," Masha giggle, and we all started laughing as the taut waiter uncorks a second bottle of the divine drink for us.

"To Sonya and her wonderful work!" We clink our glasses, and Sasha continues her execution:

"Wonderful, one of us already has her own erotic project," she chokes up, "and that's just wonderful. Great start, Sonia! You deserve it. What about the rest of us? Any more news?"

"I'm opening my own practice," Masha says as a matter of course. "Already found an office. In the center. With a great renovation. In a month, I'll start taking appointments. You don't have to come," she immediately cuts off all our attempts to joke about it. "I'll give you the contacts of a good psychiatrist, if you need one. Speaking of psychiatrists," she pokes me with a fork with a cheese cube threaded on it, "how is your billionaire? I recently read an interview with him, he is obviously my client," she authoritatively declares, sipping from a pot-bellied glass.

"Leave Pola alone, Masha," Sasha interrupts her. "I wanted to ask you for exclusive rights to cover your wedding in our magazine," she sucks up to me. "You get money for advertising, clothes and fame, and I..."

"A raise from your bosses," I nod at her. "Okay, I'll talk to Anastas, you realize it's not just my decision."

"Of course, I understand," Masha agrees thoughtfully.

"Girls, let's toast Polina," Sonia babbles in her innocent voice. "In fact, she has the most important news for today! A wedding with such a handsome man, and even a billionaire — every girl's dream!" The glasses clink melodically, stringy wine tickles my palate, and I think to myself that of the four of us, I'm the only one who hasn't achieved anything. Nothing...

Well, yes, I am a very famous person, but that's a credit to my famous dad, nothing more. Of course, I have a promoted blog @pollysonis, where I regularly post about my luxurious life under the hashtag #sonislife, and sometimes make advertisements for cosmetics and clothes, but except for pocket money, it doesn't bring me any special satisfaction. I imagine millions of girls all over the country giving me likes, envying my life and ordering lipstick and perfume that I supposedly used to get the handsome prince Anastas Weisberg to marry me, only they don't realize that it's all been decided for me. And it's all about money. Money and ancestry. That's probably why I still haven't organized any online marathon or established any online academy, because I know very well that all this will be just a deception, a bubble, a way to get money for a girl who already has a lot of money. So for now I prefer to just make money from brands that can afford the budget for an opinion leader like me, and I'm thinking of selling the exclusive wedding coverage to some famous glossy.

"What are you thinking about again, princess?" As if waking me up, pulling me out of my own stream of thoughts, asks Sasha. "Have you forgotten that our bachelorette party is in a week? Have you already thought about a special menu?" She's teasing me.

"Do what you want," I smile back, "after all, you are bridesmaids! I trust you completely, just remember that you will have to return me untouched and unrumpled the next day to my dear fiancé."

"Extremely dear," says Masha, ordering the third bottle. Is it just me, or does she drink too much for a psychoanalyst?

"Fine," Sonia purrs, "we'll do what we want. You must be very sad to realize that you will never see another cock again," she says softly, and I, looking at her innocent porcelain face, understand why all the aging Humbert Humberts of the city are dreaming of banging her in their massive oak offices.

"I don't know," I ponder for a few seconds, rolling the tart wine around in my mouth, which now tastes like warm scented cherries. "I've never seen anyone's else, you know? Only in movies. But my dad's a famous director, so I know better than anyone that it's all fiction. A fairy tale. All that love and romance."

"Yes, yes, we understand, like in the sweet paperback novels of *Harlequin* series for two dollars ninety-nine," Sasha adds.

"Exactly," I agree. "Like in your glossy magazine, which girls buy in hope to see some beautiful life!

"Don't touch my magazine! We create sophisticated style!" Sasha gets indignant, and I grinningly parry her:

"You create a fairy tale. In which millions of people start to believe. But there are no fairy tales," I bitterly conclude, and Masha, seriously looking at me, remarks:

"I think our bride is already drunk. Let's call a car."

"Great," I mutter. "I'll meet you in a week. I promise I'll agree to everything and won't whine."

Ten minutes later, my caring friends put me in a cab, and Masha, bending down to my ear, whispers goodbye to me:

"Believe me, Pola, life is a fairy tale!"

And slams the car door shut.

2

I sit and suffer from hungover in our huge, bright dining room while our housekeeper, Dasha, makes me the world's most delicious cheesecakes with cherry sauce. I remember about the promo eye patches that were sent to me for advertising the day before, I take them out of the refrigerator, stick them under my eyes, take a cup of coffee in my hand, and, putting on a fake happy smile, take a selfie. I post it in my stories with a hashtag and a link to the online store, and continue to melodically clink my spoon in my glass, until my mom, sitting right there at the table, irritably asks me:

"Polin, stop it! After all, it's rude!"

I freeze for a moment, but still decide to ask her — the well-groomed socialite lioness Anastasia Sonis, with Botox and fillers, who has long dissolved into her eternal frozen youth:

"Mommy, tell me, did you love Dad when you got married?"

Mom takes a break from her tablet, on which she's incessantly scrolling through the news, and looks at me anxiously:

"What's the matter, Polin? Did you have a fight with Stas?"

"No, not at all," I reassure her, looking at the screen of my smartphone with the latest dick pics sent to me by my fiancé the day before. Why does he love his dick so much? I don't think it's anything outstanding.... "I just wanted to know how people feel when they get married. It's for life. At least, that's what it's supposed to be," I try to formulate a thought, but my Mom has already calmed down and she's already back on her tablet.

"Look, Poline," she mumbles, looking at another outfit her famous friend is wearing at some social event, "love was invented by plebeians. People without money and pedigree. Humanity has to survive somehow, right?" She looks at me again with a smile, and I remember my mother's eternal saying.

In her opinion, marriages are meant to be arranged only. And the rest is just lust and passion, which quickly pass away, and eventually leave behind only dust and decay. And tedious divorce

proceedings. Actually, I was raised from infancy with this idea and grew up with a firm conviction that this is exactly what it is. And to tell the truth, the more I look around at my friends and girlfriends, and especially at their relationships, the more convinced I am. And yes, the more Stas fucks me every chance he gets, the more I'm sure it's all just empty lust and uncontrollable passion. It's great that at least I know how to control my desires.

Dasha puts a portion of vanilla smoky syrniks¹ in front of me, and my mother, looking at me sternly, warns me:

"Just one piece, Polly, remember to watch your figure," and after waiting for Dasha to go away into the kitchen again, she adds with a smug grin: "Anyway, I'm sure your daddy loved me very much. Otherwise, we wouldn't have gotten married. Believe me, that's more than enough for a happy marriage. Does Stas love you? Is he happy with everything?" She asks me carefully, hinting, apparently, at our intimate life, and I, a little wrinkled, answer:

"It's okay, Mom, don't worry."

"That's good," she calms down and reminds me: "Don't forget to go to Doctor Tarasov today, he's waiting for you. We need to get all the medical reports from him."

"Is it so necessary?" I take a huge bite of syrnik, sprinkling it with sweet cherry jam.

"It's just a formality. Nothing more. Don't forget that we're talking about a lot of money," Mom looks at me with disgust as I eat: she's been on a diet of one piece of fish and a grapefruit a day for years, with only liters of coffee and unsweetened green tea. "And stop eating so much, you won't fit into your *Vera Wang* dress!"

"What do you mean, formal?" I put in a second pancake down my throat out of spite. "Like buying a breeding mare?"

"What an expression, Polin," Mom wrinkles her nose, sipping her fifth cup of coffee for the morning. "Dasha, put the pancakes away, please, we've finished," she shouts somewhere in the distance, and before our servants take my breakfast away from me, I grab the third fat cheesecake from the plate and, dipping it into jam, take a huge bite.

"This isn't just a marriage. It's a business contract, a merger of two empires. We're giving the Weisberg family the most precious thing we have," my mother exclaims, almost tearfully, and I would have believed her, if I didn't know her so well.

"Oh, yes," I say mockingly, as Dasha takes the dirty dishes away. "But you get something in return, don't you?"

"What are you talking about, Polin!" Mom exclaims. "Watch what you say! And yes, it's normal for people to make a contract! I'd say it's a necessity! Only cats and dogs can breed under the fence for free," she starts her favorite song again, and I respond:

"Okay, okay, I understand everything, I will take all the medical reports from Doctor Tarasov today, so that the Weisberg family can be sure in my cleanliness and excellent health! It's good that they don't require a certificate of virginity," I get up from the table and run up the stairs to my room.

I'm sitting in the spacious, bright office of the private country clinic of the famous Doctor Tarasov, who is also dad's best friend. And Sonis family entrusts him the most precious thing they have — our health and the final tests of their only heiress. Yeah, well, only cats, dogs and plebes get married under the fence for free, according to my mom. And such representatives of the elite as we are, must carefully weigh all the pros and cons to be sure that our blue blood God forbid does not mix with someone else's not pure and crystal. That's why there is a separate clause in the marriage contract, and I would even say, a huge section devoted to all the diseases and illnesses that may occur in our family members.

Weisbergs need healthy pure-blooded and ruddy heirs, that's why a month ago I was examined in the most thorough way: they took all kinds of blood, urine and feces tests, scanned me on a tomograph, listened to me, tapped and pierced me to show the noble family the proofs of my exceptional health.

¹ Syrnik is a traditional Russian dish made from cottage cheese or ricotta that is mixed with eggs and flour, shaped into small pancakes, and typically pan-fried until golden brown, often served with sour cream, jam, or honey.

"Hi, Polin," our family doctor hugs me warmly as he walks into the office and sits down across from me at his desk. "How are you feeling, my girl?" He inquires with a warm smile, looking for my tests in the piles of different papers. "Is your appetite good?"

"Just excellent, Uncle Vanya, as always," I cheerfully report, while he quickly looks through the white sheets with incomprehensible figures.

"Great, great, just wonderful," he mutters to himself under his nose, putting aside another sheet of paper, until his gaze rests on some invisible numbers and lingers on it a little longer than usual. As if he didn't trust what he'd written, he looks up at me, as if he wanted to make sure it was really me, and then he looks at something on his paper again. Silently he rubs his chin, looks at me again, again at the paper, and then picks up the phone on the table.

"Sveta, come in, please," he says to someone, and finally looks up at me. "Well, everything's just fine, Polin," he summarizes. "Just one more test, that's all, and I'll be able to send my girl you for your wedding with a clear conscience," he says cheerfully.

A pretty Sveta in a white robe enters the room and invites me to follow her.

"I'll write to you," the doctor waves me goodbye, "it's just a formality. I'll see you at the wedding, I think," and I follow the nurse, who leads me to the treatment room.

A couple hours later, I'm on my way to the *Vorontsovs' Palace*, where the entire grounds have been rented for Anastas and me to take wedding photos. Stylists, makeup artists, photographers and their assistants grab me as soon as I arrive like some kind of valuable prize and assemble from me, as from puzzle pieces, the ideal image of a perfect bride. Brand managers of the most luxurious showrooms brought their best dresses for me to look at them and, if I like them, deign to wear them. I choose a lush, like a cake, *Marchesa*, aristocratic, with lace, *Badgley Mischka*, and an unusual little pink and white dress from young Saint-Petersburg designers *WedEnd*.

I try it on just at the moment when Stas walks into my dressing room without knocking, and all the stylists, makeup artists and assistants delicately evaporate from the boudoir at the same moment, leaving us alone.

"It's bad luck, darling," I say to him with a smile, and he, not listening, comes closer to me, already unzipping his pants.

"No omens work for us, baby," he excitedly fumbles under my hem with his wet, trembling palms, pushing aside the lacy triangle of my panties. "I want you all the time," he dips his fingers inside me, his other hand deftly pulling the condom over his crimson mini-Weisberg sticking out of his fly.

"Oh, Polin," he whispers, already inserting his device into me, and setting me to the highest tempo of the jackhammer in the tunnel.

"Oh yes, honey, that's right," I moan in time with him again, as I have done throughout our affair, and I see in the reflections of numerous mirrors my side-swept hairdo, my face contorted with pain, which I guess Stas takes it as an expression of supreme pleasure, my breasts bouncing like balls from a net, and two strong, powerful hands gripping my thighs as their master hammers and hammers his gavel into me.

Anastas watches my face mesmerized and puts his thumb in my mouth, which I nibble gently and feel with my buttocks as his soft balls tighten and harden, whereupon he freezes for a split second and climbs out of me, carefully holding the rubber pouch to fold it neatly back into its precious package. His finger smears all my scarlet lipstick all over my face, and I'm thinking at this moment that somewhere there must be a special graveyard of used Weisberg condoms.

"Did you like it, baby?" My soulmate asks me thoughtfully, noticing my smile.

"Yes, very much," I answer him sincerely. I was really laughing once again. And laughter is very good. "Well," I examine myself in the mirror, not forgetting to flirtatiously hint to my fiancé on his manhood: "Everything is spoiled! How are we going to be photographed now?"

"It's okay, it's their job," Anastas answers, opening the door and defiantly adjusting his pants, and my whole team begins to correct my makeup, hair and outfit delicately and fast as lightning.

"Great dress," Weisberg Junior says meaningfully to the brand manager. "I love it. Wrap it up to take with us," and happy manager hurries up to satisfy his order.

Another half an hour, and then Anastas and I are standing in the pink bushes next to the statues of Apollo, Venus and Diana, pretending to be a happy couple. We are actually a happy couple in love. We are photographed by one of the best maestros in the country, Alexey Litvak, and my fiancé and I stand in the poses he wants.

"Just lovely, my kittens, just like that!" Alexey encourages us with sharp clicks of the camera shutter, and we don't stop moving and freezing, moving and freezing. "You can see at once that you are professionals," Litvak praises us, and he is absolutely right: perhaps few people take so many photos in their lives as we do, and for us it is a routine work.

We have long known with Stas all our winning angles, "work parts" of the face and figure, and we know how to build a beautiful and clear composition to look fucking beautiful on any cover. Besides, no one canceled retouching and photoshop. If you are the daughter of a famous film director, you learn all these wisdoms from diapers and just take it as part of your life. As for Anastas, it's not just part of his life, but also part of his job: his company's stock goes up as soon as he makes an official announcement on Twitter, and goes down as soon as another paparazzi takes a bad picture of him with a hangover. So by and large, everything in our lives is calibrated and calculated. Years in advance. And even a quickie poke with his fiancée in the dressing room is part of his PR campaign too, I'm sure.

I have no doubt that Anastas Weisberg's personal business consultant took an advice from the agency on this matter and made sure that such incidents have a positive impact on the overall image of the young billionaire. Young, handsome, fucks regularly. And with his wife. So, it's not a long way to future presidential candidates. I wouldn't be surprised that he consulted with an army of specialists about me, and that if they didn't approve my candidacy for a life partner, I'd have zero chance. Despite all the wild passion that I awaken in my boyfriend and my quite decent appearance. I hope it's also intellectual, but as I understand it, it's not as important to Anastas as my perfect-size-two breasts without surgical lifts and implants, my aristocratic thin nose, my full but moderately plump lips, my long slender legs, and the virgin-clean opening between them that no other man had dared to defile before him.

Half an hour more, and we are already in our new outfits, gazing lovingly into each other's eyes at the elegantly set table, and I am holding a glass of champagne in my hand. The bottle is standing there, but I haven't decided whether I'll agree to advertise this brand, and for how much. I think twenty thousand bucks, especially given the occasion, is a decent price.... Stas's wet-warm palm slides down into my low dress-cut on the back, almost to my tailbone, and while Alexey photographs us from the front, I feel long fingers at the hole in my ass, trying to sneak further in.

"Not now, honey," I whisper, trying to move away, and Stas smiles at me:

"Maybe we can go to my place after this photo shoot? You really turn me on in white."

"Be patient, my love," I mumble. "The last change of dress is left," and remembering Sasha's request, I look up at him and ask: "Let's sell the rights to the photo of our wedding to *Glossy*? I think they'll pay well," and I see how Anastas' eyes instantly take on their metallic glint when it comes to money and reputation.

"I don't know, Polin, I don't think that's the level. Besides, these things in our family should be decided by me, and only me, agreed?" And, apparently to soften his harsh answer, he adds, "You don't have to think with your pretty little head, why should you? That's what you have me for. And you can just relax and enjoy life. And I'll take care of the money," and I shriek softly as I feel his finger pushes almost all the way into my anus, and I see his expensive pants start to bulge in the front.

"Okay, good angle, cut!" I hear Alexey's cheerful voice as Anastas continues his quest in my ass, pressing his hardened cock against my side.

"Take a break," my fiancé announces, and literally drags me by force back into my temporary dressing room.

"What a sweet hole," my future husband whispers to me as he kneels me on the couch and unzips his pants. "I have the prettiest girl," he murmurs, and begins to screw his bolt into my anus, and I shriek in pain and surprise. "Oh yes, Polly, you're tight," he moans, almost to the entire manor house, and I'm glad I had thoughtfully turned the music up full blast on the speaker in the locker room. "I'm going to come, aren't you?" He asks me his invariable question with a gasp, as if I have to do it strictly on schedule and strictly with him.

"Oh yes, honey, yes, I'm coming," I play along loudly, my moans overlapping his to the upbeat voice of *Pink* singing "*You Just Like a Pill*".

"I love to have you in your ass," he finishes this incredibly ardent and fast-paced act of love, coming out of me. And I understand him: the poor boy has spent his whole life fucking only in a rubber wrapper, afraid to spill his precious seed on someone else's fertile soil. And now he can enjoy the unforgettable sensations that my narrow anus gives him, firmly and gently enveloping his bare skin and pushing him to a new level of pleasure. And it just makes him cum so much faster, I think to myself with relief, deciding that after our wedding, I'm going to close up this door. But now I take advantage of his relaxed state and purr again: "But maybe just this once, honey? *Glossy* will pay well, you bet, it's an internationally respected media with a reputation."

"Okay, I'll think about it, babe," Anastas replies much more softly, and I start to get dressed before the wave of unbridled hot desire hits him again.

3

The rest of the week before the wedding is hustle and bustle: dresses, fittings, stylists, beauticians and tons of promotional posts, of course! And it is not clear who has more time to spend on all these preparations: me, or my socialite well-groomed mom Anastasia Sonis, who, as it seems to me, thinks that she should outshine the bride, which is me, at the wedding. To be honest, sometimes it seems to me that her whole life is devoted to one thing: how not to suddenly get fat, not to grow old and not to lose love and interest of my dad. And I also think that my father needs a wife only for beautiful covers in the glossy, successful posts on social networks and for fashionable company at social events, because I do not often see that they communicate with each other alone. We very rarely see dad at home at all.

I don't have time to go out with Stas, and I'm afraid to imagine what he'll do to me on my wedding night. The only thing that calms me a little is the immutable fact that after the wedding passions subside, and couples stop having sex as wildly as they did on their honeymoon. And I sure hope so, because the hurried, sweaty hookups with my fiancé are starting to bore me. Or rather, I don't see any particular point to them, other than to satisfy him, of course. In the dusty hustle and bustle of these days I completely forget about the tests I had taken at Ivan Tarasov's clinic, so his call takes me by surprise:

"Polin, sweetie, we need to talk urgently, it's very important. Just don't worry ahead of time, please," and I start to worry immediately, of course. I don't understand why the hell doctors say this stupid phrase! It's as if they take a special course in institutes called "How to make the patient become more nervous".

"Is there something wrong with my tests?" I ask, and I feel my lower lip starts to twitch treacherously.

"Don't worry. Just come to my clinic. Right now," my doctor "calms me down", and I realize that now my legs are already shaking.

Passing all these damn Moscow traffic jams of early autumn, I almost fly into the medical center of Doctor Tarasov, where he is waiting for me in his office with an overly concerned and kind look, which makes me feel uncomfortable.

"Sit down, miss," he invites me, and immediately asks: "Water? Tea?" and, ignoring my negative answer, he calls his phone: "Bring water, please, with gas." Then he smooths his folders on the table for a few seconds, and, as if making up his mind, finally continues: "Polin, last time I didn't like your blood tests, and I sent you for a retest," he sighs, pauses, and blurts out: "By all accounts you have acute blood leukemia. But I still have my doubts about this test, because the numbers are too high for this stage and your general health, so we'll have to make a more thorough check-up..."

"Wait," I mumble with numb lips that feel like they've been injected with lidocaine. "What does leukemia mean?"

"Blood cancer," Doctor Tarasov explains to me, and I feel tears running down my cheeks in two scalding tracks. "Hold on for tears," Uncle Vanya tries to calm me down, and tries to give me some water, which has just been brought to his office: "Take a sip, calm down, I'm telling you, it's still not definite."

"Not definite?" A slight shadow of hope touches my mind. "Tell me, Uncle Vanya, how often do doctors make mistakes? How often do the tests lie?"

"Well," Ivan Tarasov drags the pause, "in principle, there is often confusion with this analysis."

"And in your clinic there have already been such mistakes?"

"In my clinic — never once, we work only with the most trusted diagnostic centers and only with Swiss equipment," Doctor Tarasov answers proudly, but he remembers when he sees my eyes full of tears. "Polin, don't worry so much ahead of time! I called you specially alone to discuss it with you in private!" he explains to me. "Because in our context," he mumbles, "I have no right to hide the results of tests and diagnoses from the other party," and I realize that he is not only concerned about my health, but also about the possible failure of the marriage deal, if it doesn't work out. If Weisbergs decide that they are being sold a rotten product. Not pure blue blood, but blood with cancer, and then I again become insanely scared and lonely, and I begin to cry out in loud voice, and the kind-hearted Uncle Vanya, unable to resist, calls a nurse into his office and I get a slight injection.

I don't know what kind of a drug they injected me with, but now I am sitting as if covered on all sides with soft absorbent cotton, and as if from afar I hear the calm monotonous voice of Doctor Tarasov explaining me the plan of action:

"Polly, dear, please, understand, everything is treatable now, especially with your capabilities. It used to be that people with such a diagnosis lived for two months, well, at most, three months," and I note for myself that, in principle, I have only three months to live, but I look out the window at the still young warm and tender autumn, which touched the tops of trees with honey colors, and life seems beautiful to me. My head is light and empty, as if it were pumped with helium, and I want to smile and just sit and listen to the kind doctor.

Uncle Vanya, apparently a little concerned about my too serene countenance, clarifies:

"Did you understand everything clearly, Polin?" And I nod happily in response, taking a sip of cold water, and the prickly bubbles immediately and cheerfully hit my nose, making me feel even lighter and happier at heart.

"Now you're going to go home and have some rest, okay?" Doctor Tarasov explains to me like to a dummy. "Then we'll all have to meet together with your family and Weisberg family to discuss the plan of action and possible consequences. So, everything will be fine, don't worry. You'll have one more test, a biopsy, and then we'll be able to make a definite diagnosis."

"And if it's confirmed, Uncle Vanya?" I look at the doctor with a blissful smile.

"If it's confirmed, then we'll think about it. Everything will be fine. In any case, chemotherapy, radiation therapy, it all helps."

"And if it doesn't, Uncle Vanya?" I whisper.

"There are many treatments. We don't live in the Middle Ages, thank God," Tarasov encourages me. "After all, there is also a bone marrow transplant. With very good results: three or four patients out of ten are cured."

"Thirty to forty percent," I mutter thoughtfully.

"Well, it won't come to that, I think," my kind doctor reassures me again, and, all pumped up with a powerful sedative drug, they send me home to hold a family council with the Weisberg clan tomorrow. I pensively look out of the car window at the sunny day passing by, and suddenly I realize that this may be the last September in my life....

I seem to fall into a soft sleep, when I reach home, until I wake up to a loud banging on my bedroom door and a frantic humming outside my window. I roll out of oblivion, trying to recall who I am and where I am, and outside the door I hear my girls yelling loudly:

"Polly, get up! Did you forget?!"

I really don't remember anything. What was I supposed to forget? Barely lifting myself broken into small pieces from the bed, I reach the door and open the lock, and immediately a whirlwind of

laughter, colors and scents pours into the room. And a whirlwind of my girls. They are so bright and beautiful, as if they came to me on colorful butterfly wings from the other side of the rainbow.

"How can you sleep?!" Asks indignant Sasha, always so businesslike, but this time dressed in a more than frivolous outfit: a black velvet corset and shoes on high stilettos. And nothing else. Except for the black fishnet stockings.

"Hey, wake up, today is your penultimate day of free life!" Shouts in my ear Sonya, bangs under my nose a two-liter bottle of French champagne and pours it all into glasses held by Masha. "Drink, drink, drink!" Loudly shout my best friends, until I drink the first flute to the end, and, strangely enough, I feel much better: my head clears up, I begin to remember that I really have a hen party today, and there is some annoying thought-memory of an unpleasant conversation the day before, but I resolutely drive it away, like an annoying fly, and drink a volley of the second glass of icy fizzing drink, which Sonya holds out to me.

"Now quickly get changed, and into the limousine!" Sasha commands, throwing a bag at me. I take out of it a scarlet silk corset with a bow, and my friend continues: "*Agent Provocateur*, the latest collection, we were sent to the editorial office for a photo shoot. Put it on quickly, you'll be like the most fashionable escort-girl of the city!"

I look around at my friends, now clearly seeing that they're all dressed in cheerful lingerie, and I go to the window, where someone keeps honking furiously, and I see the longest, shiniest, and pinkest limousine I've ever seen in my life. And a bunch of purple balloons on the roof.

"Do you see now? We are prepared!" Masha proudly declares wearing a navy-blue bodysuit with long sleeves but a thin thong on her butt.

"Oh, yeah, I can see it now," I laugh back, and run into the bathroom to pull on the dream corset of any call-girl.

I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror: pale face, sharpened cheekbones, tangled hair, not much like the polished image of the socialite from my blog. I quickly pull out my favorite scarlet lipstick from my locker, paint my lips, rub a few strokes on my cheekbones, and outline my eyes with a black smoky pencil. Okay, now the look is complete. But no, not quite: once again I look around the shelf full of pot-bellied glass bottles of perfume, and I choose "*Opium*" by Yves Saint Laurent: its heavy spicy smell presses on me, as if pinning my feet firmly to the ground, not letting me fall or fly up to the sky. Leaving a thick trail of bergamot, tangerine, and lily of the valley all over the room, I pull out my long-heeled boots from the closet, and now I'm finally ready!

"Well, saddle up, bitches!" half-drunk Sonia yells cheerfully, and we all pile out of the room, scaring our kind, silent housekeeper Dasha half to death.

I walk to the giant limousine, weaving in my high boots, and a muscular cacao-skinned driver in a snow-white shirt-front covering his firm cubes and a black uniform cap with a visor jumps up from the driver's seat and hurries to open the door for me. I plow into the leather seat with the girls, and our chauffeur smiles a white-toothed smile with the words:

"Welcome aboard! Are you ready to take a trip?" he asks more of a rhetorical question, and Sonya, concentrating on pouring a new portion of champagne into our glasses, commands:

"Go!" and our pink long ship, like a glossy metal phallus on wheels, moves off, slowly swaying its shining sides as we bob around in it like a flock of talkative, tireless parrots. We clink glasses again; the driver turns on for us my favorite *Pink* and lifts the impenetrable black window between the driver's seat and the passenger compartment.

"Let your life to change forever!" Proclaims Sonia, waving the flute and spilling some of precious beverage on her snow-white corset, covered with sequin patterns on her nipples and pubes, to cover, apparently, the most precious things from indiscreet glances.

"Drink, drink, drink!" My girls shout at the top of their voices again, and I, vaguely remembering that my life had really changed, obediently drink my share of good wishes. The roof of the limousine slides smoothly apart, and the four of us stuck out of vehicle, catching the hot September night air and waving to the passing cars. I breathe with pleasure, while bunches of balloons sway around me, ready to carry us and the car into the starry heights. My mind is light and completely empty, and I suddenly realize that I finally feel completely free, perhaps for the first time for the last five years.

We fall back into the soft, springy seats, and Masha asks us:

"Do you remember how we were planning to go on a trip to Europe together after our first year in college? By car?"

"Well, yes, I remember, and how could I not remember," Sasha agrees.

"And why didn't we go?" Masha asks.

"Well, personally, I had already got a job at the magazine for the summer, sorry, I couldn't," Sasha answers irritably. "And you yourself, why didn't you go?! The three of us could have gotten together without me!"

"Because Sonya seems to have met her second daddy, or even her granddaddy?" Masha remarks wryly.

"Yes, she did," Sonia agrees obediently with the accusations. "A beautiful castle in *Gorki Estate Park*, as I remember now... In British style," she falls dreamily into her memories, "a new promising project... Well, that's why, because you never got together, and Vitaly invited me to *Lake Como* in Italy. What was I supposed to do: stay in Moscow with you all summer long?! And wait for you to finally make a decision?"

"Indeed, why refuse such a skillful cunnilingus," I start laughing at the top of my voice, "I remember, remember the fascinating stories about your multiple orgasms! It was definitely not to be missed: morning cunnilingus in Italy, it's just a dream! He didn't seem to get his dick up very well otherwise," I recall innocently, taking another sip of the already slightly warm champagne.

"You know, at least I had a good reason!" Sonya is indignant for the first time in the whole time. "And what prevented you from going on the trip of our dreams? You've never worked a day in your life, as far as I remember, you've never had a relationship with anyone except your Stas! What, have you been sitting at home under the apple trees?" I've probably never seen Sonya so irritated.

I'm starting to remember: really, why didn't I go anywhere with my girlfriends? I was staying with my parents in our villa in Spain? Went to some parties and hangouts in the city? And I can't remember what so important I did that summer.

"Girls, don't fight," Masha tries to calm everyone down. "Especially today is Polin's day. What happened, that's already happened, I didn't go anywhere with you that summer either, because I had an internship at the rehabilitation center," she justifies herself, and to me her words sound like a mockery: everyone was busy with something really important that summer, except me! Sonya was busy with her nimble, elderly faun with a sticky tongue, Sasha was busy with her career, and Masha, oh, holy Masha, was busy with charity and good deeds. And only me who was just wandering around museums and looking at ancient faded frescoes. Foolishly and aimlessly....

But a sharp jolt shakes me from my next sad thoughts, the window between the driver and us smoothly lowers, and stretching his plump lips in an ironic smile, he says:

"Here we are."

"Where are we?" I am perplexed.

"We are exactly the place we are supposed to be," Sasha answers businesslike. "Why are you like a little girl, Polly, what's wrong with you today? Pull yourself together! Did you think that we took you out just to ride in the car on your penultimate day of freedom?"

"Yes! Exactly" Masha says. "Think about it! Penultimate day. It's not nothing!" She remarks, although I think she should behave more professionally, taking into account that she is a certified psychologist with her own practice. "Let's roll out!" the psychoanalyst shouts cheerfully, and the door of our pink car swings open.

"Wait!" Shouts drunk Sasha, "I almost forgot!" And handles us all black latex bunny masks. "Put them on quickly!" she orders, and we, giggling merrily, try to fasten them on the back of our heads.

"Did they bring these to your editorial office, too?" I wonder, and Sasha — now a rabbit with long pointy ears answers:

"Don't be silly! Every modern girl should have at least one mask. For a change. By the way, we wrote a whole article in the magazine about it.

"Yeah, scientific," I ironize.

"Maybe scientific," Sasha smiles enigmatically, and I should note that in the role of Playboy bunny she looks damn seductive. "Anyway, we're public media persons, and we can't show our faces too much in this place, remember that," she warns, and I put my foot down on the red carpet that leads to the black armored doors.

We walk as a rabbit flock to the entrance, where Sasha tells the huge guard in the suit, "Booked in the name of Jules Plenty," and the gates open like magic. We find ourselves in a golden corridor lined with mirrors in which we are reflected as a bizarrely lecherous quartet, and I can see my scarlet predatory mouth under the black trim of the mask, and a huge red bow under my breasts, as if asking someone to pull the tip and unpack me like a box of sweets.

A handsome receptionist comes running up to us, looking like Ryan Gosling, only much more muscular and tanned, except he's wearing only blue jeans, which are hold on his hips by a thread only, and every time he moves, I expect them to slide down, exposing his darkening pubes and the very base of his manhood.

"Jules and company?" He greets us and asks, "Which one of you is the bride?" And my giggling friends push me forward. "It's a great honor for us," he addresses me already, coming as close as he shouldn't. "Let me escort you all to our best table," he practically whispers in my ear as he leans toward me, and I feel his warm breath tickles my bare neck. And there's such a powerful wave of testosterone and desire emanating from his firm, strong young body that it takes my breath away for a split second. "You'll be the most beautiful bride tonight," Gosling continues to talk quietly to me, gently putting his arm around my waist and leading me to where the endless corridor ends in a scarlet curtain, where the rousing music is coming from....

4

The curtain parts, as if we were stepping onto a catwalk rather than into a darkened great hall, where a large stage glitters with lights and fireworks in the middle, on which I can see now five firefighters rocking out to the Rolling Stones.

Ryan Gosling, still holding me gently by the waist, only now sliding his palm lower and lower to my buttocks, confidently leads our foursome to a table on a small dais right next to the stage, and, gallantly pulling back a chair, sits me down in a soft royal chair with golden armrests, into which I fall like into a warm velvet cloud. My girls are seated in a semicircle, so that we can all comfortably watch the show, where the firemen have already taken off their vests and pants, and are left in tight boxers and helmets. Naked waiters, dressed only in leather Bavarian shorts with suspenders, immediately run up to us and pour champagne into glasses, already waiting for us in an ice bucket.

"Our dear Polin, may this day be like the last!" Sonia proclaims another toast, and Masha, choking up, corrects her:

"The last day of your unmarried life!" And we're all jingling crystal.

"I didn't expect this from you," I finally open my mouth.

"Of course, sweetie, because we love you," Sasha replies. "Did you really think that we would take our favorite girl to another boring, pathetic restaurant with foie-gras or sushi?! Especially on our last Thursday of free life."

"Why do you keep repeating that phrase 'free life'?!" I resent. "After all, we don't live in Saudi Arabia, where do you think I'm going to go?"

"Don't overreact, we love you," Masha calms me down. "We'll be happy if after the wedding you have nothing changes in your life. Only for the better. You are happy with your Stas, aren't you?" She looks carefully into my eyes, and I answer, just hesitated for a second:

"Well, of course I am happy! Thank you, girls!" And I gulp down my glass of champagne.

In the meantime, the stage is swarming with drunken women like buzzing bees, and the brave firemen to "*I Can't Get No Satisfaction*" are already dancing in a half-lying position at the very edge, and dozens of thin hands with bright nails, expensive watches and gold bracelets are reaching out to them, caressing them, polishing them to a gloss and tearing off the last of their clothes. Here the first stripper's boxers slip off completely and a smooth and shiny hose falls out of them, literally. I look at this performance with eyes wide-open, and Sasha, who is watching me, comments:

"Polly, don't tell me you've never been to a sex-show somewhere in Thailand before!"

And Sonya, to tease me, replies:

"No, Sasha, I'm sure that Polin has never been to such disgusting shows, right? Polin is an educated and well-mannered girl. An art historian, motherfucker," and at this word everyone starts giggling. "She goes to museums and theaters only, right?" And I don't say anything, because I do go to museums and theaters. As silly as it sounds, I have nothing to give to this world except my cheap hyped-up blog with a fake me, even though I myself adore painting, sculpture and architecture, which I personally have no talent for.

Speaking of sculpture: the same fireman with the body of the ancient Greek Apollo, already completely naked, except for his helmet, which can even pass for a Roman helmet, is holding in his hands a perfectly sculpted perfect penis, though much, much bigger in size than the ancient standards, as if offering the crowd maddened at his feet to lick it. And the woman standing next to him thrusts into it like a glossy red apple, pulling her scarlet lips over the crimson ball of the dick-head. The room erupts in screams, and the stripper, keeping up the tempo of the song, pushes his fire hose down the woman's throat, holding the back of her head firmly with his other hand.

I'm staring at the stage, and a quick waiter is pouring more champagne into my empty glass, which is frozen in my hand. At the same time the firemen are pulling more and more volunteers out of the crowd, and now one of the girls is lying on her back on the stage, while the stripper hovering over her is stroking her face with his tense phallus, and she is squealing with pleasure, trying to grasp it and push it into her mouth. The second firefighter has the woman on a chair and is dancing right on top of her in half-unbuttoned shorts, with his cock springing ready to pop out. Two more girls are trying to get undressed by their personal lifeguards right on stage, and they, lukewarm and drunk, stretch their hungry hands out to stroke and feel their muscular, shimmering bodies, clean-shaven pubes, and giant, half-assed hoses.

"I wonder if they'll put out the fire?" Sonia dreamily mutters, taking a sip of champagne and not taking her eyes off the bacchanalia going on the stage.

"We'll find out soon," Masha answers her, looking at the team of firemen with the same hazy gaze.

And then, as if reading our thoughts, the sixth squad leader comes out from behind the scenes, wearing a red helmet and tight shorts and already with a real fire hose, and, pointing the muzzle directly into the hall, sprinkles the squealing and laughing crowd with weightless white foam. And his comrades, as if on command, all five of them start, indeed, throwing out of their tightly stretched hoses flakes of foam, abundantly pouring the faces, breasts and bellies of their clients with thick semen.

"I wonder if they have some special diet?" Makes a scientific remark our Masha, swallowing scarlet strawberry and drinking it with divine sparkling wine.

And Sasha, fascinated by the topic, already starts googling this question and happily quotes us:

"Here you go, they write that *"the volume of sperm increases in proportion to the amount of liquid drunk, but some drinks produce the opposite effect. If there is a desire to increase the synthesis of sperm, you should minimize the amount of coffee, which contributes to dehydration of the body..."*

"Thank you, Miss Wikipedia," I laugh, and I realize that I am absolutely drunk and I really have had fun watching the sexy firemen with their abundant ejaculation.

"I wonder what kind of crazy menu they have here?" Sonya mumbles dreamily, and Sasha, as usual, without putting the question off, beckons the waiter over to us with a wave of her hand.

He brings her a weighty folder, which the girls begin to leaf through, while I watch as a bed on wheels is wheeled onto the stage, followed by a whole team of "doctors" in white coats, who begin their slow, full-bodied dance to *Ed Sheeran*. The crowd at the foot of the stage shrieks and moans with pleasure, and the slim, sexy doctors approach the screaming women, pull up their blouses, and listen intently through their stethoscopes. Even from my place on the pedestal, you can see the girls melting and trembling in their strong pumped hands, trying to rip off their clothes and get into their pants. To me, it's an interesting performance with beautiful bodies, but nothing more than that. I sit in the middle of this heated ocean of desires like some Snow Queen, because I understand perfectly well that all this is followed by a couple-three dry frictions with convulsive moans, and nothing more.

"It seems our Polly to be bored," Masha's voice breaks into my thoughts, while the doctors bring their next victim on stage and undress her right in front of everyone, and she, judging by her happy look, doesn't mind at all.

"Indeed, I'm very interested," I interrupt my friend, while the strippers are already laying the girl with her back on the stage on the bed and tying her wrist to the headboard with some silk cords. "It's a beautiful performance, I think it's completely staged," I turn to my girls.

"Why staged?" Sasha asks, smiling with all her thirty-two teeth at the sexy waiter passing by. "I think everyone here is really enjoying themselves. And you?"

"The pleasure of the performance is purely aesthetic," I parry, taking another sip of golden champagne.

"Do you think she's unwell now?" Sonya points her head towards the stage, where the "patient", sprawled on the bed, tries to lick two hot cocks right in front of her face, like two ruddy freshly baked pies.

"I don't think so," I answer, almost choking on my champagne, while the third doctor, climbing on top of the girl, makes wiggling movements with his hips in one rhythm with the melody, and she, wrapping both legs around him, tries to pull him to her. "I just think they're fake visitors. They're just hired stripper actresses. Well, tell me, who among normal women would actually want to do that?!" I reply irritably, and I see the surprised and incredulous looks of my friends.

"So, you don't believe that these women came to this very expensive private club, paying fabulous sums of money, in order to have fun?" Sasha asks me a question head-on, and I don't know what to say. Because I am trying to remember at this moment about one important conversation, which took place today before all this, and I can't.... As if the thought flew from branch to branch with a nimble fly, and I can't catch it into my net.

Meanwhile, the girl on stage is clearly enjoying being rubbed by four slender, tanned, muscular bodies, licking her, sucking her earlobes, running their hot, shimmering dick-heads over her face, breasts, nipples and stomach, while the head doctor is "treating" her, thrusting himself in and out between her legs while his taut cock, stuck to his stomach, swings in a living pendulum between their bodies.

"At least this girl on stage is definitely very satisfied," Sonia remarks dreamily, licking her round soft lips with her pink tongue, and I can see how the "patient" squirms under the pressure of several strong male bodies.

"The main thing today is that our Polly will be satisfied," Sasha raises her glass once again, "and how exactly you will be satisfied is only your own business, and no one else's, remember," she says to me.

I feel my head getting heavy, as if it were filled with liters of expensive French champagne, and I realize that I am desperate to go home and sleep, when suddenly my half-dream state is interrupted by the wild squealing of hundreds of women's throats, and I turn to the stage to see what the brave strippers have arranged once again.

The lights in the whole room go out, and we find ourselves in pitch darkness, with only the circle of the stage as a bright spot of light. The women's screams only intensify, and I expect to see anything: a crowd of gladiators with a young *Russell Crowe at the head*, *Matthew McConaughey* with *Channing Tatum*, or *Zac Efron* at least, though I don't like any of them.

But not the reincarnation of *Elvis*. He comes on stage in all black, and looks even out of place in this unbridled and drunken hall. Calmly and confidently he approaches the microphone set in the center of the stage and raises one hand up. It's as if an invisible switch goes off in all throats, and the beautiful, slender, austere Elvis Presley stands in complete ringing silence, still holding the long pause with his raised palm. I look at him with all my eyes, and I'm just struck by the amazing resemblance to the original. Could it be him? Back from outer space, as some people said after his death? He raises his eyes and stares straight at me, and my corset suddenly feels unimaginably tight. I forget about the flute in my fingers, and it splatters billions of times on the floor. Hundreds of pairs of eyes turn on me, but I do not pay attention, and look only at the bright circle of footlights on the stage.

But then, without taking his eyes off my face, he makes a hand sign, and the first chords of "*Trouble*" start, and *Elvis* lifts his head up, flicks his bangs, does his famous hip thrust, and starts singing, still looking at me with his eyes on me, as if he's only talking to me, and I still can't breathe, hot from his burning gaze:

*If you're looking for trouble
You came to the right place
If you're looking for trouble
Just look right in my face...*

The women in the club seem to go crazy. It turns out that what they wanted was not those pumped-up, oily naked bodies, big well-groomed phalluses and liters of semen, but that magnetic gaze, the almost chaste swaying of the hips compared to everything else going on here, and that low voice that sings: "*Well I'm evil, so don't you mess around with me...*" But in contrast to the piles of naked meat that have been dumped on me in the last half hour, this Elvis is the sexiest and most mesmerizing sight I've seen in probably my entire life....

I can't take my eyes off this performance where Elvis is already singing with his microphone at the edge of the stage, and dozens of hands are ripping off his jacket, tie and shirt, undoing his belt, but he doesn't let these ravenous jackasses undress him completely, and starts his frenzied rock'n'roll dance in his remaining pants and scraps of clothing, bends over to the scarlet lips of his admirers open in a scream and kisses them in the mouth, and I can see the black mascara tears streaming down some of their faces.

My legs involuntarily start swaying to the beat of the song, and I even regret that I'm sitting here on this stupid podium, like some queen on a throne, when I could have stood there and freaked out with the crowd, and then maybe I would have gotten one of those generous kisses that my Elvis is giving to his sobbing groupies. I'm even imagining the tart taste of him on my tongue as I'm suddenly pierced by a sudden memory. It's as if the billiard ball has finally found its hole and rolled into it.

Me. Deadly. Sick. Three. Months.

Five terrible words appear in my brain in blazing neon letters, and it's as if I'm waking up from a nightmare, looking around and not realizing where I am. But I wake up from a nightmare into another nightmare, where the terrible truth is clearly imprinted in my head.

I grab the ice-cold flute filled by the obliging waiter and pour it completely into my mouth, and feel the winter chill in my throat. But this, strangely enough, has a sobering effect on me, and now my thoughts are cooler and calmer. Okay, no panic. I'm here and now. Deep breaths in through my chest. I'm still short of breath from Elvis's bewitching gaze, but I take another breath, my chest rising and falling in the tight corset, and now I realize how Rococo beauties felt. Wasn't it me who has read hundreds of books and scientific researches on the subject, which are of no interest to anyone but me. As always, thinking about art takes me to another planet and soothes me like nothing else. Elvis finishes his performance and walks away, with his pants and bills falling out of his waistband, but before he plunges into the black curtain, he turns around and stares point-blank at me. At least, I think so.

"Polin, finally, impressed," suddenly gives a voice Sonya, although the whole performance Presley all four of us sat silent, as if pinned to their chairs and magnetized by velvet voice and animal energy of his dance.

"Please, this one," Sasha shows something in the menu folder to the manager who has come up to us, and he, stretching his lips in a flattering smile, replies:

"You have excellent taste, madam!"

"This is for our bride," my friend replies, nodding her head at me.

"Excellent, just excellent!" Enthuses the man, as if preparing to bring us now a specialty from the chef.

"And by the way, what are you ordering me, Sasha?" I'm wondering about my fate.

"It's a surprise from all of us. On your penultimate day..."

"Yes, yes, on the penultimate day of my freedom, I've heard it a billion times," I start to agree, until I remember again that it can be my last days. The last days of my life, actually.

"All the more you should take advantage of it," the wise Masha instructs me.

"Let me walk you out," the manager comes up to me and offers me his hand, as if inviting me to dance.

"Go on, don't be afraid!" The girls encourage me. "And try to get as much pleasure as possible!" they shout after me as I follow a muscular, tall, waist-high naked man somewhere deep into the corridors....

We're walking down some tangled corners, and I'm beginning to wonder about such a branching of passages in an ordinary-looking building, when my guide stops at a golden door with the number "777" on it and knocks gently, listening.

"Come in, and don't be afraid of anything," he turns to me, opening the door. "It's all paid for."

I step into the half-dark room, and I hear the lock click behind me. I feel terribly uncomfortable and scared as I stand at the entrance in my high stilettos and scarlet corset.

"Come in," I hear a low, commanding baritone from somewhere in the darkness, and looking closer, I see the back of the high chair he's sitting in. I instantly recognize that voice, and my entire half-naked body is covered in a million goosebumps.

I take a step forward, moving farther into the depths of the room away from the life-saving exit, and I can't help but walk towards that hypnotizing voice. "It's amazing how much it sounds like the real Elvis's voice," I think to myself again, and I can feel my stomach chill as I almost finally approach the chair.

"Closer!" He sits sprawled in the big arm chair, wearing the same pants he was wearing when he played his show on stage, but without his shirt, and I can see the scarlet streaks of a woman's fingernail marks spreading across his chest. Coal-black hair with that Elvis haircut, long lashes, and I think black eyeliner. A cold, haughty stare and sensual lips that curve into a contemptuous grin.

"Stay there," he says imperiously, and I stay where I am while he slowly and tastefully examines the whole of me, as if licking every curve and hollow of my body with the tip of his tongue. All the while, I remain still, unable to even look away from him, let alone turn around and walk away. And I can feel the anticipation growing hotter and hotter with each passing second, spreading through my body like warm cinnamon-sweet milk until it stops between my legs. And I think he feels it, caressing the bottom of my tummy with his gaze, where the soft beast of my awakened desire is waiting.

"I want you to open your breasts to me," he says a little hoarsely, and I obey him by lowering first one strap of my corset and then the other, and I feel my breasts jiggle, springing gently, freed from the unnecessary silk, and my nipples rise into two hard coral beads on the white fabric of my skin.

"Now come closer," he whispers to me, and I move closer to him, waiting, wanting him to sink his lips into my naked flesh.

But he just continues to recline in his royal armchair as I stand in front of him in my half-dismounted corset and mid-thigh boots, and I feel a moist, warm cloud gathering between my legs.

"You're cute," he says to me, and in his mouth it sounds better than any compliment I've ever heard for myself. Me, Polin Sonis, the first beauty of Moscow and the dream of tens of thousands of men in the country!

And here I am standing in front of some second-rate gigolo in a closed underground club, and I wait for his every curt, hoarse word as a long-awaited praise! And I'm surprised to realize that all this makes me so damn horny. Like nothing I've ever experienced before. And the only thing I can think about now is not the imminent wedding, which is in jeopardy because of my likely terminal illness, but about feeling his wet, warm lips on my swollen nipples, seeing them travel down, leaving a wet, sticky trail, lower and lower to my navel, sucking it in, and then hiding between my legs, where I'm starting to ooze all my viscous juices like a sun-bursting sweet fruit.

"And you smell like cloves and vanilla," Elvis whispers, and I remember that I'd perfumed myself today before I went out. Everywhere. "I see you like *Opium*," he murmurs, and I realize he's probably soaked in the perfume and scents of his clients, which I'm sure he has dozens, if not hundreds of them.

"I like the way you smell," he says, and I can see the zipper of his pants straining, as if some separate, self-contained force is coming to life in them. "Your scent," he says again, and he unzips the zipper, releasing the swollen phallus that juts out of his pants, jiggling with a thick scarlet club. "I want to watch you fondle yourself," he commands me, and I obediently slide my hand down, gently running my finger along the thin seam in the middle of the corset.

The thin, cool silk is already all soaked with my wet scents, and I get excited at the mere thought that he could come inside me, right here in this club, on the eve of my wedding. Or death. And thoughts of my illness are billowing in the back of my mind in a gray, transparent smoke, as if this isn't all happening to me. Not here and not now. The only things that matter now are his strong hands that he's never touched me with, his low, velvety voice that turns me upside down, and his bright, greedy lips that I crave so much right now. I run my index finger over the edge of the thin fabric, and it plunges into the wet, warm flesh, drowning in my honeyed desire that I can barely control.

"Yeah, that's it, baby, deeper," I hear his low, husky whisper as if from far away, and I push my finger almost all the way in, and feel a warm wave of excitement, sweet exhaustion, and unbearable desire wash over me from head to toe, keeping me on my high heels.

I couldn't hold back the moan that flies from my lips like a dark moth, and I can already feel the inevitable approaching as my vicious tempter gives me a new order:

"Down. On your knees!"

And I obediently knee on the soft pile of the carpet in front of him, with my breasts exposed and the scarlet cranberries of my nipples on them, my fingers wet with sticky lubrication, and the unbearable desire for his hands, lips, and caresses.

"Kiss him!" I hear another command, and I slowly bring my face close to his tense, eager cock, which stands perpendicular to his stomach.

Forgetting about all the women at the club today, who were in a frenzy to shove long stripper hoses into their mouths, I lick his round, shiny head with my tongue like the last whore, feeling the brackish taste of seawater on my palate. I hear his quiet sobbing above me, and I feel his penis filling my mouth completely with its full body, not letting me breathe. And at the same time, I realize how ready I am to burst with the ocean raging inside me, and I choke on the moan of pleasure trapped inside me. I feel the hot, sweet mercury of tears streaming down my cheeks, and the same hot, sweet mercury flows between my legs, capturing my whole body, which shakes under the volcanic jolts of my frenzied orgasm. My mouth fills with cum, saliva, and lubricant, and I don't mind that my bunny mask is long gone from my face, and I'm on my knees in front of a stranger stripper, licking and swallowing his lollipop.

"Holy shit, it's Polly Sonis herself!" I suddenly hear Elvis's voice as if from somewhere far away, and I instantly come to my senses at the sound of the camera clicking on one's smartphone. I raise my head in fright from his fly, and new flashes blind me, and my dear gigolo exclaims in excitement:

"What a lucky shot! What a beautiful shot, look here, baby!" And again and again shoots my face with his cock on the background....

"Don't do that!" I'm already yelling at him, trying to snatch the phone out of his hands, but his strong hands, whose touch I dreamed of just five minutes ago, are now steel bars blocking my way.

"Give me one reason why I should stop taking such sweet, sexy and exclusive pictures!" He mockingly replies.

"What about the honor code? Corporate standards, after all?" I try to reason with him, frantically pulling up the straps of my corset.

"Sonypolly, what standards are you talking about? Are you delusional?!" He laughs at me in a full voice as he stops taking pictures of me and zips up his pants. "I'm just a stripper. Who you just sucked off for your own mad money! What the fuck is the professional code?!" He laughs, and I realize how stupid I must look.

Desperation fills me with ink like a humming empty vessel, but then I remember today's meeting and Doctor Tarasov's words again, and strangely enough, it calms me down. I even smile at how often in this life I've been afraid of looking stupid. Or rather, my whole life. I've only done what good girls do. I listened to my mom, I listened to my dad. And then I listened to Stas. I pick up my mask from the floor, put it back on my head, proudly walk on my heels to the exit, and with the words "Fuck you, asshole!", with all my might I bang the cheap iron door in gold tinsel, behind which my escort is already waiting for me.

"Did you like everything?" He asks in a husky whisper, and I reply, arrogantly:

"Thank you. More than wonderful."

I stare at the golden French *Louis XV* candelabra somewhere behind and to the side of Weisberg senior while both of our families sit and listen attentively to the lawyer monotonously reading out the clauses of my and Anastas's prenuptial agreement. From the half-open huge window I can hear the rustling of horses from the magnate's famous stables in the distance, and I dream of being thousands of kilometers away from this place. Apparently, thanks to the buckets of champagne I drank last night, mixed with a magic sedative shot from the kind doctor, my head feels like it's full of sharp shards of glass, and even three tablets of painkillers couldn't help me today.

I vaguely remember how I got home yesterday and fell right into my clean, snow-white bed in my unpacked corset and boots, where our humble Dasha found me this morning when she came to wake me up for breakfast. Now I am wearing sunglasses, which pisses off my mother, sipping a strong, like a black shoe polish, espresso from a cup of *Sevres porcelain*, and thinking to myself, what would happen if I broke it? After all, it would probably be several paychecks for a grocery store clerk, or one or two paychecks for a middle manager? Probably, my dear Stas will not even wiggle an eye, and just ask the housekeeper to clean up the pieces. I am much more valuable to him than some gilded mug, even though it's crazy expensive? But then my strange thoughts are interrupted by the lawyer's muttering:

"In the section on the health of the newlyweds, we have clearly spelled out all the criteria by which we will assess their health and the risks associated with possible diseases. In any case, both parties have undergone a full medical examination in good faith before the conclusion of the marriage contract, and medical organizations have provided us with all the documents with findings and conclusions and on and on... So, there is one more clarification in the attached note," he mumbles inaudibly, reading into the written words, and then, pausing, looks at us all perplexed.

"What is it?" Weisberg senior asks irritably, and I notice how his lower lip, so attractively plump in his son, sticks out in adulthood and gives him a perpetually disgruntled and squeamish expression.

"I have here a note concerning this point," the lawyer shrieks fearfully, wiping his instantly sweating forehead with a plaid handkerchief, and I defiantly loudly sip my coffee and return the cup to the saucer with a clatter, causing all eyes to stare at me.

"Well, read it, don't take too long," Weisberg drives his lawyer even more excitedly, and he starts to read out the note, obviously made by Doctor Tarasov.

"It says, um, that two tests in a row have revealed extremely negative dynamics and mutation in the blood of Miss Polina Sonis, in view of which Ivan Alexeyevich Tarasov can't give a positive conclusion on compliance with all the mandatory terms of the contract, namely..."

"What the fuck tests?!" Stas is already raising his voice, and now the frantic lawyer, as if he himself was personally to blame for my illness, starts reading even faster:

"It says here that Doctor Tarasov is not ready to confirm the conditions of marriage, described in paragraph eleven of this contract, because for a positive conclusion Miss Polina Arkadyevna Sonis needs to undergo a deeper examination, namely, trepanobiopsy of bone marrow..."

"What?!" I hear the hysterical cry of my mother, who is already shouting at me, not even trying to keep up appearances. "A biopsy? Polly, what kind of diagnosis is that? You knew about it, and you didn't tell me?"

"Calm down, Nastya," my dad puts his palm on her hand, but still I notice through my black impenetrable glasses how his lips twitch nervously. "I'm sure it's some misunderstanding, or a joke," he murmurs uncertainly, though he knows better than anyone here that our serious Doctor Tarasov is not capable of such jokes. "Say, Polya, you know about this whole situation, don't you?" My world's best dad turns to me, and I slowly answer under the crossfire of six pairs of eyes:

"Yes, Dad, I'm aware of the situation. But I only found out about it yesterday, and I didn't have time and energy to talk about it... Uncle Vanya said that there are frequent errors in diagnostics, and I might have believed that I was dreaming it all. Or that it was just a bug in the system, you know?" I address to all the people gathered, taking off my glasses at last, and I see with what almost animal horror Weisberg senior looks at me together with his quiet and usually silent wife, dressed today for such an occasion in an elegant *D&G* suit.

"Here I am, I hope I was in time for the beginning," Uncle Ivan Tarasov himself suddenly bursts into our crazy room, and by the expressions on the faces of those gathered he immediately realizes that he is late. And for a long time.

"Vanya, motherfucker!" Yells at him my usually so balanced and calm father, and Tarasov, trying to remain professionally calm, stands in the center of the room by our table, raises both hands, and gestures for everyone to calm down.

"Gentlemen," he begins his explanatory speech solemnly and quietly. "I never thought that we would gather here on such an occasion, uh, besides discussing our wedding preparations," he gently tries to avoid the sharp edges of the conversation, but apparently it is impossible in this case, so he decides to act rashly, and not to swing his speech into parts: "So, I have very serious suspicions of blood cancer in Polin. Two consecutive tests have revealed extremely negative dynamics, and we can in no way postpone and delay the process of diagnosis and treatment."

"I see," the low voice of the owner of the palace sounds shortly and imperiously. "I think that further discussion of the contract is inappropriate," he concludes, leaning back in his chair and looking at everyone from under his heavy half-lidded eyes like at some curious insects.

I sit as if under a magnifying glass, and the daylight burns my eyes: like a two-hundred-year-old vampire sleeping in his crypt, I squirm and melt, ash covered in the merciless rays, and I imagine how I must look from the outside: with my pale, gaunt face and the dark purple circles under my eyes, I am like a walking illustration from a medical textbook. It's as if I'm here, and at the same time I'm watching the whole show from the outside. I've been sure all my life that when I'm not feeling well, warm hands are there to comfort and soothe me, but now I'm looking questioningly at my future husband, who swore his love to me a short time ago only, and I'm waiting for him to come over and hug me, but he's just sitting there, looking at me fearfully, like at some contagious creature that's dangerous to even touch.

"Oh my dear Stas, I hope you were careful," suddenly Madame Weisberg's voice comes out, and the whole seven of us shudder with surprise: she usually gives her voice so rarely that we don't even remember what it sounds like. It was as if someone had suddenly broken a glass in the ringing emptiness of the huge sun-king style hall.

"What?!" my father hisses quietly, but at the limit of his abilities, and I feel that he may explode.

"My wife wants to say that this has come as an unpleasant surprise to all of us," Weisberg senior still quietly and confidently speaks up from his seat. "And we are not ready to discuss the issues of merging our families and mixing genes. It's nothing personal, Arkady, it's all a matter of risks, you understand," he mockingly tries to explain to my father that his daughter has bad blood, which, of course, cannot be considered by the head of the noble family as a suitable match for their son.

I'm sitting there, stunned by this squabble, where some of them are trying to prove that we're a match for any royal dynasty, and others are dismissively trying to scrap us, and it makes me laugh just thinking that none of them ever asked how the hell I feel! Me! How the fuck should one feel when he finds out that he has only a little bit left to live?! Three months, right, according to Doctor Tarasov?

My cell phone vibrates. I look at the message sent to my account from a stranger with the stupid nickname @zorro: *"Come to Electric Lane, 9, in an hour. Otherwise these photos will be everywhere,"* and in the attachment I see my face, which you can't confuse with anyone else's, with this very mole on my right cheekbone, with black greasy mascara smudges under my eyes, and a scarlet mouth that encircles a huge cock in a tight ring. Kneeling in a scarlet corset with a bow. And that's it. Shit. Hearing nothing around me, I take the fragile cup with trembling fingers and pour the rest of the coffee down my parched throat. I do break the fucking cup, accidentally dropping it on the saucer. Everyone suddenly stops talking and turns to look at me, and I babble: "Excuse me, I have to go out," and I run out of the room, only to hear behind me the bewildered cry of my ex-fiancé Stas:

"Polly, where are you going?"

The taxi takes me through the alleys in the center of the capital and stops in some blind dead end at a building of obviously the end of nineteenth century construction of multi-colored bricks, like a stone painted Slavic tower. I walk out onto a completely empty street, with a tinted *Mercedes* parked alone on the sidewalk, and pull out my phone, which I had turned off. As I thought, it's flooded with messages and calls from my parents and Stas, but I'm not ready to talk to or see either of them after the

horrible scene I've just been through. With five minutes to go until the appointed time, I wonder why I even came to see the bastard. I think back to yesterday's fever of excitement, and the ripples of that ecstasy seem to run through my body again. On the one hand, I'm ashamed that I could even go to such lengths: the suspicious tranquilizer I'd been injected with yesterday and the insane amount of alcohol were clearly to blame. But still, how could I, a girl from a decent family, the soon-to-be wife of a billionaire and tycoon, and just a nice girl blogger Polly stoop to such a thing! And it's not even a piece of chocolate disgustingly delicious cake from the best French patisserie *Rabelais* for the night! I can always wash off a billion extra calories in the pool and work out on the gym, but what am I going to do about the insanely exciting and delicious pleasure I experienced last night blowing some cheap dancer with eyeliner!

I'm standing in the September sun-warmed street, self-defeating, but I can't forget his hoarse breath, his tart-salty taste on my lips, and I feel myself getting aroused again, even though I'm terminally ill. Shit! I hope it's the effects of my leukemia or this what's-his-fucking-blood-cancer! The first car I've seen in a while pulls into the alley and stops next to me. The window on the passenger side slides down smoothly, and Elvis behind the wheel commands me:

"Get in!"

I, after hesitating exactly one hundredth of a second, and reasonably deciding that actually I have nothing more to lose in this life, get on the front seat and slam the door of the old *Volkswagen Tuareg* with all my might.

"How are you after yesterday?" My blackmailer asks me with a wry grin, and a wave of furious rage suddenly begins to boil somewhere deep inside of me.

"Fine, thank you," I answer dryly, and continue, deciding to take the initiative into my own hands. "Why did you call me here? After all, you can just transfer money from account to account, didn't you know that?" I say coldly, even though everything inside me is boiling and exploding with small, sizzling splashes of lava. And even now I can smell him. The smell of a man: a little bit of cedar shavings, forest moss, juniper berries rubbed between one's fingers, and a cat's insolent mark. Which the first still cold March wind from the city's frozen back alleys invariably brings.

"You're not all dresses-up today, I see," he ignores my contemptuous phrase and continues in a businesslike manner, as if I were just some acquaintance of him who owed money. "I need you to withdraw twenty thousand dollars in cash, and hand it over to me tonight wherever I tell you. Otherwise, your wedding might not happen tomorrow, right? I'm sure it's just a paltry sum for you, I'd even say it's the smallest favor I can ask of you after the favor I did you yesterday," he looks right at me, and smiles cheekily, and I drown in his dark blue eyes with the blue-black lashes, and suddenly realize that he probably didn't wear make-up yesterday. He's just so damn handsome on his own.

And it pisses me off like crazy! I'm mad at myself for feeling like I want him more and more instead of digging my nails into his face, no matter what he's doing to me right now.

Like a wild animal smelling its prey, he stretches his viciously sweet lips in a grin and continues:

"You're not wearing perfume today, are you? But I can smell your own scent even more vividly, and I like it a lot better, like I told you yesterday," and he traced a line from the corner of my mouth up my cheekbone with his finger, as if he were tasting the freshness of the merchandise. I jerk my head away from him, preventing him from taking me into the infernal grasp of his touch again, and, with my chin held high and my voice full of dignity, I say:

"Yeah, you're right, twenty thousand bucks is a penny to me. It's like the cost of one blouse and shoes on me. Why don't you take it in clothes?" I look at him mockingly, and start undoing a row of pearl buttons on my hand-painted natural silk blouse. Do you need shoes?" I continue taking off my expensive sandals with my top unbuttoned to the waist. "*Manolo Blahnik*, the latest collection, by the way!" and I put my feet up on the dashboard of the car, with a pearly delicate pedicure and a gold ring with a sapphire on the toe. "You can have the ring too," I continue to mock, "though no, that would be over the top. Besides, it's a groom's gift.

"You think you're the smartest one, Sonny Polly?" He puts his hand right on the inside of my thigh, and I feel the burn on my thin skin. "I know perfectly well how much your rags cost. You can keep the ring. It's tasteless," he tosses my expensive piece of custom jewelry dismissively. With the delicate ligature on the bezel, "*I want you*" engraved, of course, by Stas. At the thought of my fiancé, my wedding, and my parents, all my insides curl up, and I shake off his strong, tanned hand and command:

"Let's go!"

"Where to?" Elvis asked in surprise, and I answer:

"To get the money. You wanted it. Why wait till tonight? I've got a lot to do. Preparing for the wedding, remember?"

"As you say," he answers calmly and puts his hand on the steering wheel, "tell the address."

"Let's go to *Moscow City*²!" I throw him, and look at the screen of the phone, which received a new e-mail notification.

"Polin, please check all the photos and approve the layout for printing. Sasha." And enclosed are centerfolds from *Glossy* magazine, the most glamorous publication in the country, which in just a few days will print our exclusive wedding photo shoot of socialite and just a good girl Polin Sonis and the powerful and wealthy Anastas Weisberg. I hit the *reply* button and write "OK." There is no going back. Let this be a memory of my beautiful wedding that never happened....

6

All the short drive to *Moscow City* we drive in silence, and already at the approach to the mirrored hulk rising in the center of the capital, Elvis turns his head to me and asks:

"Where to go next?"

"I need my bank branch in *Federation Tower*," I direct him. "Let's park on the embankment side. I'll be right there!" And with those words I jump out of the car, running into the bank office.

Passers-by and visitors stare at me suspiciously, and I don't immediately realize what's wrong with me, as I suddenly realize that I'm walking around the business heart of the city in an unbuttoned blouse, and everyone has already enjoyed the gorgeous view of my breasts in a bra. And even some asshole managed to snap a picture of me on his fucking smartphone. I angrily button my blouse and walk through the door, which the guard is kindly holding for me.

I go to the ATM, insert my card, and withdraw twenty thousand dollars. Then, after thinking for a while, I decide that I probably won't have enough for the remaining three months of my life, and I ask for the balance. There are sixty thousand more dollars in my account, and I don't hesitate to withdraw the rest, trying to cram it all into my purse.

"Let me help you," the receptionist runs up to me and holds out a branded bank bag, where I frantically scoop up all my hundred-dollar bills.

"Thank you," I mumble, and realize that I've probably attracted too much unnecessary attention. I fix my huge sunglasses on my nose and jump out into the street, where my Elvis Presley is waiting for my money. But this fool doesn't know what's waiting for him yet, I chuckle to myself, and plop down on the passenger seat.

"Let's go!" I commanded him, and answer his mute question: "Did you think I'd give you the money right in the cabin and politely leave?"

"But actually, that's exactly what I thought," Elvis grins back at me.

"I'd advise you to push gas pedal harder now and get out of here," I explain him with a charming smile. "Look, see that tinted Mercedes over there? Don't you remember it?" And I immediately answer his negative shaking of his head. "But he remembered you. He was already in Electric Lane when you arrived. And be sure, your car has already been tracked, and now they know who you are and what you are. And where you took me. And don't even think about sending those pathetic pictures of you anywhere, because I'll tell everyone how you raped me at gunpoint first. Hmm, I'll think about it, what kind you prefer, which excites you more: cold steel or firearm?" I stretch dreamily, licking my parched lips, "Which one excites you more?"

"Where are we going?" Elvis asks instead of answering, pulling out and cutting into the crowd of perpetually rushing Moscow cars.

"Straight ahead for now," I command, and notice how nervously the jowls are running on his handsome face.

² The Moscow International Business Center (MIBC), also known as Moscow-City and Moskva-City, is a commercial development in Moscow, the capital of Russia where the most sky scratchers are located.

"And if I can prove that you gave me a blowjob voluntarily," not turning my face away from the road, he asks me. "And even asked me to take a picture of the process because it turns you on so much?" He chuckles. "Actually, a lot of people like it, didn't you know?" And I shudder again at the thought of how many women he's already had sex with during his time at this club.

"Think about it," I reply confidently. "You're an unknown cheap stripper, nothing more. It's your profession to charm and deceive poor chicks. And on the other hand — the word of Polin Sonis, daughter of a famous producer, obedient girl and the fiancée of a powerful man. Who do you think they'll believe? You, or me?" I brazenly ask a rhetorical question, but I think to myself that I'm not sure of the answer. Especially now....

We turn to The Third Ring Road³ and drive somewhere to the northeast, and I continue my logical reasoning for the driver who is already silently listening to me:

"Decide what is more important for you now: to send all these dirty photos, and embarrass me, but maybe get a bullet in your forehead in return. Because no one wants their fiancée to do that, right?" I explain to him very calmly.

"Or what?"

"Or help me go away."

"Where to?!" He turns his head toward me, and I yell at him:

"Watch the road! You almost hit another car!"

"I'm a good driver," he grins at me, straightening the steering wheel. "Or don't you trust me? So, where do you want me to take you?"

"I'll think about it," I say quietly. "I'll tell you today. And yes, I'll pay you what you asked for your work."

"Why would you do that?" He asks me in surprise. "I can drop you off at any corner and you can go on with your luxurious life of leisure, can't you? Besides, you're getting married tomorrow, aren't you?"

But he doesn't realize that I don't want to go on living my empty, uninteresting life. Or rather, to live it out. And there won't be a wedding either.

"I don't know. I think I'm going to need someone close to me," I hesitate at the word "close", because I realize how stupid it sounds in light of this whole situation, and then I add: "an enterprising person. You know what I mean, I think," I explain.

"And what if I don't agree? Why would I want to get involved with a rich, spoiled bitch? Get the hell out of the car and be done with it," he says angrily, and even those harsh words sound insanely sexy as I stare at his masculine profile with its straight nose, sharply sculpted cheekbones, and sensual lips.

"That's your business," I purr softly, smiling back at him, and put one foot on the seat. "Anastas Weisberg's entire security service will be after you, and they'll track you down fast, believe me," I explain to him satisfied. "Your choice: a rich, spoiled bitch, or unspoiled tough guys, perhaps those who like anal sex with rubber truncheons...."

Elvis only presses harder on the gas in response, and we turn onto the highway, already leaving the Moscow Ring Road.

"Where are you taking me?" I'm starting to get nervous.

And I realize that if he wants to, he can easily do anything he wants to me, taking the bag of money I'm clutching in my sweaty palms, and I doubt he'll get anything for it. How long is he going to believe that bullshit I told him about being followed by Anastas Weisberg? And I wonder what my now ex-fiancé is doing right now? Frantically canceling all of our big wedding events? An off-site ceremony in the *Botanical Garden* with thousands of snow-white orchids, live butterflies and a symphony orchestra? The country's most famous host, Oleg Rukavishny? And even the wedding singer bought for fabulous money — *Mark Bono* himself, one of the most expensive singers of romantic pop of our time, almost like *Frank Sinatra*, only younger?

"To my house," Presley gloomily throws to me, already deftly maneuvering in the dense flow of cars.

³ A beltway around central Moscow, Russia.

"Why to your house?" I ask perplexed, breaking away from my sad thoughts about my sad fate.

"At least to collect my things and documents, and what did you think?" He grins mockingly again. "You asked me to be your escort. No choice. Didn't you?" He's talking to me like I'm crazy. "Of course, I understand that you can afford to travel light: surely you have a house or an apartment in every country in Europe with closets full of clothes, but we, simple Russian plebs, do not have such opportunities, you'll have to forgive us," he looks down at me, making it clear which one of the two of us here is a pleb. "And don't even think about it: I don't give a shit about you. I've had a bunch of women like..." But he still cuts off this rudeness, pulls himself together, and coolly finishes his thought: "I wanted to say that you can feel completely safe, dear Polina Arkadyevna. I am used to women seeking intimacy with me and falling into my arms, and quite insistently, and I have no need to seek anyone's favor. Especially your favor. Besides, you're not my type," and I feel my throat constricted by this arrogant tirade, while he continues to drive the car as if nothing had happened, keeping his eyes on the road.

And that's just fine, because he can't see my cheekbones and cheeks blooming with crimson petals of rage and anger, and I roll down the window to get some fresh air and not let him see how angry his words have made me. To get back at him in some way, I drop another dismissive phrase after a while:

"I don't get it, are you taking me to your country mansion? Or to your village?" To which my haughty escort does not even dignify me with an answer.

So, in full of contempt and dislike ringing silence our car rustles tires on the smooth, like a mirror, asphalt of the highway, and to somehow defuse the situation, I press the radio button on the panel. Another *Elvis Presley* hit comes out of the speaker, as if on demand, and I can't help but laugh, and my dear gigolo, turning to me, smiles involuntarily, and I realize that it's the first time I've seen his real smile. Warm and radiant, like this tender sunny autumn day, passing outside the car window....

But a little more, and we, having overcome all those tight Moscow suburbs traffic jams on the highway, finally turn off the highway, and after a while we almost dive onto a country road, covered on both sides of the roadside by thick age-old fir trees, like knights guarding a secret path in the forest. It seems to me that I have plunged into another world, the world of Moscow's dense forests, as they were long ago, before I was born. I am even surprised that in some only a couple of kilometers from the dusty noisy highway there are such islands of peaceful silence and serenity.

Our car sails like an enchanted ship along fences hidden in the bushes and trees until it hits the ivy-covered wooden gate, and my Elvis jumps out of the car to open it. And I realize that I haven't seen gates like this in a million years, gates that don't open with a remote control, but simply with bare hands and feet. Perhaps I've never seen them. And also, I know nothing about this man who has now brought me here. Absolutely nothing. Not even his name. And I'm getting chilly and uncomfortable just thinking about it. But then I think of the recent scene at the Weisbergs' manor: I knew nothing about my loved ones either.

And by the way, I could definitely know his name. His real name.

Elvis swings open the gate, and we pull into a small yard that is certainly a stark contrast to the driveway of my family's estate, with its trimmed alleys and rose bushes. Here it's as if we're in a deep well of forest, surrounded by trees with centuries of history, dusky giants scattered across the front yard. I note to myself that this is most likely one of those famous dachas⁴ near Moscow, which are still preserved unsold by the descendants of famous writers, musicians and artists. I look at my companion and try to guess: does he rent this house, or did he inherit it from a famous grandfather or great-grandfather? He invites me inside the wooden carved teremok⁵, as if drawn off the paintings of Vasnetsov⁶. I enter the cool, dark halls after my guide, and find myself in an old Russian fairy tale: with an old stone-encrusted chest, antique sofas and armchairs, and even a time-worn, expensive Persian

⁴ A dacha (Belarusian, Ukrainian and Russian: is a seasonal or year-round second home, often located in the exurbs of post-Soviet countries, including Russia.

⁵ Teremok is an ancient traditional Russian wooden small castle, in fairy-tales is a house for some magical personages in deep woods.

⁶ Viktor Mikhaylovich Vasnetsov, 1848 – 1926, was a Russian artist who specialized in mythological and historical subjects. He is considered a co-founder of Russian folklorist and romantic nationalistic painting.

carpet. I am well aware of the value of all these things, and I am curious about where my gigolo got all this wealth from. However, I am sure that his salary allows him to rent this house from some long-settled abroad great-grandchildren of Soviet party bosses. In any case, my upbringing and tact do not allow me to ask an unfamiliar person about the sources of his income, especially since I already have an idea about them. And especially more so about his property, movable and immovable.

"Feel yourself home," Elvis invites me with a wide masterly gesture into the spacious living room, which inexplicably fits into this seemingly small house.

I enter the room, filled with wood-smelling, shining parquet and upholstered with silk French wallpaper, as if I were in the hall of some art museum. All the more so because all the walls are hung with framed paintings. I turn to my companion with surprise, but he, without explaining anything to me, throws:

"I'll go and pack some things, so make yourself at home," and, making a deep pause, continues: "Oh yes, I'm sorry, I forgot that in such small houses you have only servants. Well, you'll have to be a little patient, I'm sorry, unfortunately I haven't had time to save up some money for a huge estate worthy of such dignitaries."

I, instantly flaring up, reply:

"I'm sure with your talents you'll earn it soon!" It's amazing how he can ruin the moment and make a mess of everything!

And my Elvis, slamming the carved door loudly, leaves without a word to me.

7

Left alone in an empty, humming room, hidden by the still dense foliage from the sky and the sun, I walk slowly around it, stopping at the paintings and scrutinizing each one. I think I have one of the most useless professions in my cramped world, but now I can tell that all the paintings were painted over a century and a half ago, and something about them makes me uneasy. It's as if I've known them all my life, and I'm trying to remember them, but I can't do it.

I run my finger over the ancient gilded frame, feeling its rough, cracked surface with my skin, and I can tell that it was made as long ago as the painting itself, and nowadays it can be worth much more than some modern artists' creations. The picture shows a little boy, about seven years old: he is sitting at a table and drawing something on a piece of paper, and his old-fashioned cut coat gives me the right to conclude that the boy on the canvas is at least a hundred and twenty years old. Next to his masterfully oil-painted hand lies a ruddy apple, as if washed by a golden ray of light, and all together it creates a picture of a calm autumn afternoon in some noble manor, where a little boy after lessons with the governess just draws, and when he finishes, he takes a bite of this apple, given to him by his mother as a reward, bright as the sun itself. And I can even see how the smallest dust particles in the air around his curly head shake. And the boy himself seems somehow very familiar and close to me.

And before my strange new friend returns, I quickly look through the rest of the paintings: there are landscapes, portraits of some noblemen, and even domestic subjects, but I can say that all these paintings are probably by the same author. And something in his manner seems very familiar to me, but I can't remember what it is.

In the corner of the room is a huge tiled stove, and I bet it's lined with real Dutch clay tiles. What kind of house is this? Not even a house, but a treasure box, I think, and who would entrust all this treasure to a random tenant?

I walk over to an antique sideboard with mother-of-pearl inlays, and I see a picture in a plain frame, so out of place in this intricate interior. There's a happy couple embracing: a girl with transparent light skin and golden hair, and behind her back is my Elvis, holding her by the waist. Only much younger. And with that kind, warm smile that flashed across his face just for a moment today. They're both so young, so in love, with some wall of paintings behind their back, that I can't help but envy their genuine happiness.

I wonder where that girl is now. Did he trade her for the throngs of groupies and easy money? Or did she leave him for a better party? And then I suddenly realize clearly to myself that men like him are not abandoned. If he stood there and held my heart as tightly in his hands as he does now in the

photo with a girl I don't know, I would probably feel the richest and most desirable in the world. But then I cut myself short. How can I even think that?! What nonsense! Why do I need this pathetic, pompous phony for? What is it about him that the rest of the millions, or rather billions, of men on the planet don't have?! I have to attribute yesterday's blurring solely to the effects of the suspicious tranquilizers I was drugged with beforehand. And today? And today is the effects of my dangerous illness. And nothing more. And while I'm having this crazy monologue with myself, glancing around at the knickknacks that fill this room, I hear the rustling of gravel in the driveway, and I look out the window and see a small *Range Rover* pulling into the yard like a dive into a maelstrom and squeezing in next to the owner's car.

The door opens and a woman in a scarlet silk *Balenciaga* wrap dress steps out of the car. Wearing the exact same one *Kim Kardashian* wore in one of her *Instagram* posts; wearing high heels that I have no idea how she drove the car with, and slipping into the compacted earth of the path with her chic, out-of-place shoes, she walks confidently to the front door. I don't know whether Elvis locked it or left it open, but I don't have time to think about it, and I take off my shoes and trot softly up the heavy oak staircase, and I hear the door open and a low, chesty voice says:

"Romeo, are you home?" And in the half-darkness I crash noiselessly with all my might into Elvis, who has heard the voice and come out. He clamps his hand over my mouth, and the only thing I'm thinking about right now, trying not to laugh, is that my Prince Charming in quotes is just called Romeo. Romeo, for fuck's sake! And without even giving me a second thought, he rakes me up like a pile of dry leaves and bird feathers, and without even letting me breathe or move, carries me across the big room and just shoves me into the huge carved cabinet in the corner. Just crumpling me up like an unwanted blanket in the summer. And turning the door on the key, he shouts over his shoulder to the whole house:

"I'll be right down, Alice!" And looks at me through the keyhole, putting his index finger to his lips. But I realize without his stupid gestures that I'd better keep my head down.

And we can only hope that this Alice will be gone very quickly. In her heels and silk dress.

But she apparently has other plans for the evening, and as soon as my Romeo leaves the room she flies into the bedroom, apparently sure that she is expected here. I decide that, first of all, the closet in this house, as well as everything else, is also antique and made qualitatively and to perfection, and therefore I can fit in it quite spaciouly. And even comfortably observe through the keyhole everything that happens. And secondly, I know this Alice from somewhere: in Balzac's⁷ time such women were called old women, but now she is a beautiful well-groomed lady in her thirties, or forties, or maybe even fifties, but her taut cheekbones, perfect lips and sculpted chin will never give away her real age. And thirdly, I don't even have time to think of what it is, as Romeo-Elvis, clearly blocking my view with his back, addresses his mistress:

"Alice, I told you couldn't come here," and he's obviously trying to get rid of her as soon as possible, because from the back he doesn't exactly remind me of a fervent lover rushing into his girlfriend's arms.

"It's your own fault, Romeo," and I cringe at the vulgar name. I wonder how he's so brutal and proud that he lets this woman treat him like some little lap dog. Or a male dog? I clamp my mouth shut again to keep from laughing as Alice strikes a pose in front of her lover and starts chirping to him:

"You didn't answer my calls and messages. What was I supposed to think! After we had such a lovely weekend in Crete!" And I want to shout at her through the gap between the closet doors I'm locked in: "That he's a gigolo! Who only wanted your money! He fucked us all, baby!" But I don't, and I note to myself that at least my freshly minted boyfriend has a Schengen, which means he can easily use it to travel to Europe.

"Alice, baby, I had a good time with you, too," Romeo says in such a soft and heartfelt voice that I almost stand up on my feet in surprise, thankful that the doors are locked and I can't fall out of the closet onto the floor.

"I miss you so much," the big girl sobs, and Romeo comforts her, saying:

⁷ Balzacian age is a woman between the ages of 30 and 40. Modern understanding of the term, derived from the novel by Honoré de Balzac

"I know, baby, I know. I miss you madly too. But you realize that we can't be together... You can't stay here, let you leave now, and in the evening we'll meet at our place."

I want to shout from my observation post: "Bravo, Roma! Come on, send her away as soon as possible!", and I am already waiting for the moment when, at last, this Juliet in love will leave and I will be released from my wooden dungeon, as suddenly my phone in my pocket rings, and I, instantly chilled with fear and covered with sweat, with shaking hands manage to pull it out and press the mute button. But the woman's sensitive ear has already caught the unusual sound, and she asks anxiously:

"What was that, Romeo?" And to my delight, he doesn't even step to explanations or pathetic excuses, but ignores her question and says:

"You smell wonderful today, Alice. What is it? Cinnamon, bitter orange peel, and rosemary... And that smell... Your smell..." And now I know for a fact that he says that to all his women! And without giving her a second thought, he leads her to the massive wooden bed that stands there like the bed of some medieval knight in a castle.

Is he going to have sex with her, or make love to her, or whatever it is, right in front of me? I don't think that dressed-up Alice suspects that they have an audience tonight, or rather, an audience in the closet. It's like a real Parisian peepshow, I decide to myself, and I nestle my eyes even closer to the keyhole. Meanwhile, Roma sits on the edge of the wide canopy bed, the kind I've seen in the *Yusupov Palace* in St. Petersburg, and leans back a little, gazing at his beloved Alice, who stands and wriggles in front of him like a virgin on her wedding night before her baron.

"You're so beautiful today," he says quietly in his honeyed, languid baritone, and even I, sitting in my closet, can feel small goosebumps running down my backside from the timbre of his voice. I can imagine what it must be like for Alice, who is soaked with desire and love who run to a boy who might be old enough to be his son. And disregarding all inhibitions and conventions. And it doesn't look like she's drugged, like I was yesterday....

"Take off your dress," Roma-Romeo continues, and I think he's looking through the closet doors at me right now! And his mistress obediently unties the silk laces, and the soft fabric slides silently over her flawless smooth body, licked and ironed in expensive spas.

I perfectly know the price of these ideal bodies from my mother's example: half a grapefruit a day and a protein omelet for dinner, and endless workouts with her personal trainer from morning till night. Just so she won't be abandoned by her rich husband, who doesn't even notice her. And he only thinks of her when he has to attend a business presentation or a social gala: he just pulls her out like a suit and just to hang her back on the rack in the closet after another party.

"Oh my sweet Alice," Roma continues to mutter his professional tempter's incantations as she stands in front of him, swaying on her stilettos, wearing a lacy black corset. "I want to see your breasts," he says, and the woman undoes the hooks supporting the bodice cups from behind, and the fabric slides down to her waist. "They're beautiful," he whispers, leaning back on his hands to get a better look at her, "now squeeze them," and Alice obediently takes her neat, rubbery, hemispherical breasts in her palms and begins to stroke them gently, and Roman encourages her, "Oh yeah, that's right, baby, fondle your babies!"

Sitting in my rosemary and lavender-scented dusty captivity, I wonder whether he is putting on this show for me on purpose, or whether he is honestly working off his trip to Crete. As if reading my thoughts, Roman decides, apparently, to diversify the show, and quietly and deafly orders:

"Turn your ass to me, Alice, I want to look at you from all sides," and she, like an obedient filly, turns her rump to him, and now I can see her pink nipples, which she gently squeezes with fingers with scarlet arrows of nails, her hazy look, and half-open flaps of plump pumped lips, through which burst out genuine moans of pleasure.

"Oh my boy, I want you so badly," her coral mouth whispers as her hands continue to squeeze the precious, perfect breasts. There she starts to slide one hand down, slipping her fingers through the lacy edge of her corset that has slid down to her lower belly, but a harsh shout from behind stops her:

"Good girls don't touch themselves down there! You're a good girl, aren't you, Alice?"

"Oh, yes, Alice is a good girl," she whispers back, and she drops her hand helplessly, and I hear her words shake in the ringing silence of the half-dark room.

"On the floor!" Roman orders, and the woman obediently gets on all fours before he kneels behind her and runs his finger inside her. "That's it," he whispers, slowly moving it inside her, "good soft girl, you're all wet, baby," and I can see from my vantage point Alice crying, begging:

"Please come inside me! I want it so badly!"

"All in good time, baby," he replies muffledly, as if he were some kind of surgeon inserting his thumb into her anus, and screwing his hand into Alice's juices. "Oh yes, that's right," he murmurs as the woman squirms and thrusts in pleasure under his masterful fingers. And Roman, with the serious look of a piano tuner, continues to play her like a fancy musical instrument.

"I can't wait any longer," Alice chokes back her sobs, writhing like a cat in his strong and skillful hands, and Roman nonchalantly continues his hellish foreplay.

"Bear with me, baby," he murmurs, and just as the woman's cries begin to grow, he stops his game, pulling his fingers out of her, leaving her lying on the floor, breathing noisily and moaning.

Her lover slowly gets up, pulls off his shirt, and, wearing only jeans, sits down on the edge of the bed again, ordering his partner:

"Come here!" and she crawls to him on her knees on the floor, and I can clearly see through my keyhole how her lips swell and glow with a fanciful flower, oozing viscous and sticky nectar.

Too much sight for me in the last two days, perhaps! Yesterday — women beating in ecstasy on the dance floor with hoses oozing semen, and today a whole lecture on virtuoso sex! I wonder what magic keys Alice has inside that he knows how to press? And do I have one? At least with Anastas I didn't experience anything even close to what I see now with my own eyes. And yesterday, with Elvis, I'll admit I had a blast. Until he started taking pictures of me and blackmailing me! The memory of that humiliation gives me new strength and anger, and I decide for myself that even under pain of death I will never have sex with that bastard again!

Meanwhile, Alice, with her soft head on Romeo's groin, rumbling loudly like a ravenous cat, is giving him a blowjob, and he, with his palm on the back of her head, is mockingly looking right at me! And I can swear it! And he keeps repeating, directing her:

"Oh yeah, baby, that's right! You're the best! You've got a magic tongue!" and the back of her head and her puffy smooth ass synchronously lower and raise in front of my eyes, oozing shiny transparent lubricant....

And even though I'm angry, I can't take my eyes off of this mesmerizing sight, and I can feel my own desire rising inside....

As if sensing it, Roman pulls his rod out of her half-open mouth, and gripping Alice's hair tightly in his fist, he spurts his semen all over her face, the white liquid spreading over her perfect cheekbones, her chiseled nose, and her closed eyelids, while her lips try again and again to capture the glossy lollipop of his head, licking off the remaining drops of nectar with a sharp tongue.

"Now you've been a good girl," her lover says imperiously, and turning her back to him, he thrusts his still-hard bayonet into her, and Alice lets out a deafening, wild-cat meow-like moan that makes me think the walls are going to crack and all the scattered neighbors are going to come running.

"Yes, that's right," Roma continues his soft trot on her, patting her round, tanned buttocks as she quietly wails like a little lost girl. I'm sitting in my moth closet, waiting for this light show to finally end and for a fully satisfied Alice to finally take off, and I feel like I've already spent half of my allotted time in this box. Which may be out soon....

I run my palm over the clothes hanging on the shoulders in the dark, and I'm surprised to find a long, thin dress. I wonder where it came from.... A man's suit of fine wool, Italian to the touch: well, it's clear here, gigolos have rich mistresses. I pull a soft anorak from the rack, as if made of cashmere, and wrap myself in it, making myself comfortable, because now it seems to me that these two will never stop. The soft wool envelops me with its warmth, smells of childhood and warm caramel, my eyelids get heavy and I fall asleep, insensibly to myself....

"Wake up, it's time to go," a warm, unfamiliar hand rubs my cheek, and a quiet voice brakes into my sunny, warm sleep. I open my eyes, and at first I don't realize where I am: wooden ceiling with openwork carvings. The soft rays of the orange sunset sun glide across it. Thin specks of dust swirl in the columns of light like little snowflakes, and there is a beautiful face leaning over me that I know, but I don't remember where it came from.

"To go where?" I ask, not fully awake yet, and then all the memories of the past day catch up with me in an icy wave.

"Wherever you say, baby," Elvis-Roma answers me mockingly, "the carriage is ready, princess."

"How did I end up here?" I mumble, and though I don't remember where I fell asleep last night, it certainly wasn't this room.

"I found you sleeping in the closet. You must have enjoyed my performance so much that you decided to take a nap," he laughs at me, and then I remember his endless dancing with that skinny Alice, and I answer him scornfully through my pursed lips:

"Oh, yeah, that's hard to forget. I guess you're so used doing everything in public that you can't even sleep with anyone in private, Romeo!" to spite him, I repeat his nickname.

"Look, you left me no choice," Roma says, wincing slightly. "Weren't you taught to mute your phone? Especially when you're peeking through the door?" He throws me a curt look. "Or would you rather the famous TV broadcaster Alice Monroe found you in the closet and told everyone about it on her show?" And I'm now remembering how I know this woman: the show and *YouTube* channel "*On the Alice's Kitchen*." "Do you think you would have been able to tell your dear fiancé a tale how I kidnapped you and hid you in my closet? Even your stupid Weisberg wouldn't have believed it!"

"He's not stupid!" I automatically defend my ex-fiancé.

And to make it even more painful for the insolent Roma, I continue:

"Anastas is the owner of the biggest businesses, a media personality. Of course, I realize he's a long way from being a virtuoso performer of erotic dances like Elvis Presley," I throw in his face dismissively.

"Anastas is just the heir to his father's businesses," Roman replies simply. "But if you love him so much, why are you running away from him? On your wedding eve?"

And then I don't know what to say to him.

"By the way, you slept so soundly that you didn't even wake up when I moved you from the closet to the couch," and I remark to myself that it's a good thing he didn't put me in his bed, soaked with their sweat and traces of love. "Your phone fell out of your pocket, and I think it's almost exploded from the calls and ran out of battery."

"Great," I mutter, deciding that if I'm going to have a long road ahead of me with this man, the least I can do is keep things on an even keel and stop fighting. After all, what made me so angry about the Alice Monroe scene tonight? It's his own business who he sleeps with and how he sleeps. "Do you have a charger for an iPhone?" I ask Roma calmly, and he shakes his head negative. Damn, he doesn't even have a normal cell phone like normal people do!

"Okay, what time is it?" I try to figure out how much time has passed, and Roman points to the antique clock in the corner: twenty-five past six. The sun will be setting soon. "I think it's time for us to leave," I say. "We'll buy me a charger on the way, and I'll see what messages I received. Are you going? Have you packed your clothes?" I ask him in a businesslike tone. "I think you should have stuff for ten days, no more. Take me where I tell you to go, and then I'll pay you. And you can go back. Back to your life," I can't resist from pinching him one more time.

"At least I'm not running away from it like you are," my Romeo-Elvis replies icily. Score: one-zero.

I get up from the couch, and I realize that I'm not comfortable going on a long trip in a silk blouse and *Manolo Blahnik* shoes — perhaps very expensive and fashionable, but terribly uncomfortable.

"Look, I'll probably have to stop at a couple of stores on the way to buy something more comfortable," I warn Roma, and he replies:

"We'll think of something," and runs up the stairs again, probably to rummage through his magic closet.

He comes back a couple minutes later with a pile of clothes and throws it on the couch next to me, saying:

"Look, maybe something will fit you."

"Your mistresses' forgotten clothes?" I wrinkle my nose in response squeamishly.

"As you wish, you can keep walking around city in your dress clothes. It makes you invisible, you know," he shrugs, and I realize he's right. My bright, color-painted designer blouse, tight beaded pencil skirt, and high heels make me a walking target for the paparazzi.

I start looking through the pants, dresses, blouses, and even a couple of bras and underpants, noting the excellent taste and expensive brands of all the Elvis women who've left their clothes at his place in hopes of returning, apparently. And I choose simple baggy *GAP* jeans and a closed T-shirt with Snoopy on the chest.

"Don't look, please," I ask Roma, who is sitting here in a carved art-nouveau style armchair.

"Do you think I'm so interested?" He turns away from me with a look of insulted dignity.

"No, I don't think so," I answer, pulling off all my expensive, uncomfortable clothes. "I'm sure you've seen everything you want to see in this life. And even what you didn't want," I continue to tease him, pulling on jeans and a soft, cozy sweatshirt. "That's it, you can watch," I let him turn around, and I notice him looking at me strangely, as if he'd seen a ghost.

"Is something wrong?" I'm already worried about myself, and Roma shakes his head, as if trying to chase away some momentary ghostly vision.

"Nothing's wrong, it's just that you remind me of someone," he mumbles. "Where did you get that shirt?"

"You brought it to me," I shrug, gathering my clothes from my formerly beautiful life into a pile. "Do you think I should take it with me or keep it for your next mistress?" I sneer, but he just stares at me, not saying a word.

But then, as if awakened from some secret thought, he says imperiously and firmly:

"Let's go," and looking at my bare feet, he goes into the hallway, where he rummages through a carved antique chest and pulls out an old pair of worn sneakers, about a couple of sizes larger than my feet, but still good enough for the first time. "Please, oh my beautiful Sonny Polly," he suddenly kneels down in front of me and holds out the old trampled sneaker as if it were a wonderful crystal slipper.

I play along and dive into the shoe with my foot, and Roma, gently holding my ankle, very carefully adjusts it on me as if it were a precious slipper.

"Here it is, it fits. It's perfect," he says and looks up at me with a smile, and I tower over him, and my body instantly remembering my hot desires from yesterday.

"Thank you," I squeeze out, and I take my foot away from his palm, which is burning me, and I realize that I'm about to dissolve into his gaze, as in the sea.... I'm swamped in the salty waves, drowning in the warm water, sinking deeper and deeper into the water until the light finally goes out around me....

"Hey, wake up! Wake up, Sonny Polly!" A disturbing voice comes from somewhere above me, as if pulling me out of the black, impenetrable darkness.

I open my eyelids and for the second time today I see that high, carved wooden ceiling, only this time I realize I'm back on the couch in the living room.

"What happened?" I wheeze with parched lips, and I see a handsome, serious face come into sharp focus right above me. His face.

"You passed out. You really scared me," he says in a normal voice, and I can see now that he's telling the truth.

"It's okay," I try to put on a carefree smile. "It happens to me sometimes, very rarely, it's just my body," I lie shamelessly, realizing that this might be the first sign of leukemia or whatever-it-is that's come over me. "Maybe I'm overexcited, it's been such a busy day," I pile one excuse on top of another, and I stare intently into his eyes, trying to see if his anxiety is subsiding or not. I don't want to spook him into refusing to help me! How am I supposed to get anywhere alone with fainting spells?! I wonder if I'm starting to die or if I'll live a little longer. I think I feel fine....

"Good," Roma interrupts my inner monologue, getting up from the couch. "We should go. Let's not stay here tonight. Otherwise they might come here to get us up."

Great, he still believes in my tales of surveillance and stalking. The more he's scared, the better off I'll be, I decided to myself, and, staggering on unsteady legs, I get up from the couch that had become so dear to me, to part with it forever.

We get into the car when the sun is finally hiding in the pine of the dense forest: September in Moscow extinguishes its lights very early, and we drive along the forest road almost as if it were night, until we emerge on a brightly lit highway.

"So, are you going to tell me where you and I are driving in the end?" Roma asks me, and I, after thinking for a couple of seconds, decide:

"First of all — to Belarus, to the state border."

"Wow," he grins in response. "I see you've decided to make a good mess of me."

"Of course," I parry. "You have to work for the money! Twenty thousand. That's a lot of money. You know that. And a few tough guys on my tail if I say the word."

"Great," he clenches his jaw and turns the radio up full blast. "But first, we gotta eat. I don't know about you, but I'm starving," and his mouth stretches into a mocking smile, and I remember that I haven't eaten anything myself, probably not since yesterday, if not take into account the gallons of morning coffee.

We stop somewhere in a residential district on Minsk highway, and head for a cheap-looking café, shimmering with cheap Christmas tree lights. At the entrance we are enveloped in a cloud of aromas of fried onions, burning oil and sweet smoke of hookahs: here they obviously know nothing about the prohibition of smoking in public places. I wrinkle my nose at the sight of the cheap interior and the worn, darkened wooden tables and chairs, but I realize that in the current situation it's not my choice: I can't go with this Elvis to one of the posh restaurants in the center, where I might be fed a fine diet meal, but I'll be detected in the next three seconds.

Okay, I have to get on my phone and see what's going on in the world and at least reassure my relatives, who I'm sure are already freaking out with anxiety.

We plop down in the corner, under a blaring MTV, and a waitress approaches us with a disgruntled look: a clearly tired-looking girl of about nineteen, with a nose piercing and purple hair. She throws a veer of laminated plastic menu sheets in front of us, and I squeamishly take one of them to try to choose something edible.

"Well, do you have just arugula and shrimp?" I ask, remembering the most ordinary dish, which, in my opinion, is available in every eatery in the country.

"Sey the menu — everything we have is in there," without even looking at me, she answers, handing Roman his part of the menu.

"And I'm ready to order right now," he cheerfully answers, and I am surprised to notice how close the waitress comes to him, and on her lips even begins to appear some semblance of a smile.

"Of course, what do you want?" She interrupts him with a melodious, chesty voice, and puts her palm on the table next to him.

"Angela, isn't it?" He clarifies her name, printed on the plastic nametag on her chest, and continues, "I wouldn't mind a good steak. You have steaks, don't you?" He asks heartily, and I watch indignantly as he places his palm on top of her hand!

"I'll check with the kitchen," the waitress replies coquettishly, and doesn't even think about taking away her palm. "But I'm sure our chef will be able to prepare it for you."

"But wait!" I cough into my fist, trying to attract attention and break this too intimate, in my opinion, dialog between the waitress and the cafe visitor. "And could you clarify at the same time with your chief about shrimps with arugula?" I remind her, to which she, turning to me, replies with the same irritated look:

"Mam, I told you that everything is on the menu!" And turns away from me again, continuing to flirt with my companion.

What?! Mam?! What the hell kind of mam am I to her! I sit there gulping for air, not knowing how to respond to this insolence and insult. Which is doubly offensive, because I see how my Roma can barely contain his laughter, still continuing to talk sweetly with this wimpy girl!

And then I remember that I am a super blogger, who can both promote any institution, and forever ruin its reputation, although I doubt that the reputation of this crappy eatery can be lowered even lower than it is. I take a deep breath, and with the sweetest smile I have in my arsenal, I answer the purple bitch:

"Okay, well, if you would be so kind as to bring me something with shrimps that you have on the menu. Surely there must be something in your wonderful kitchen. And perhaps you might have an iPhone charger?"

Ignoring me, the girl lists the order:

"Steak for you, how rare? Medium rare, with blood? That's great. Garnish, water. Something with shrimps," she turns to me dismissively.

"And an iPhone charger," Roma reminds her in a low baritone, finally removing his hand from her palm. Which I'm sure is already wet with sweat. Just like her panties, I'm sure.

"It's a very pretty ring, Angela," I tell her. And I add in response to her confused smile. "I remember, such were in fashion twenty years ago, in the days of my youth. But it suits you very well, so retro-chic, you know."

"Why are you doing this?!" I hiss furiously at him when the waitress finally leaves to take our order.

"Why doing what?" Roman asked innocently.

"Why are you flirting with everyone? Why is that so necessary? Is there such a great need for that?!"

"What's the big deal?" He's genuinely surprised. And I realize that my Romeo really sees nothing wrong with it. "Women are hitting on me themselves. Or would it be better if I was rude to everyone?" He says mockingly. "And so, why not take advantage of it, don't you think?"

And as if to confirm the fairness of his approach to the female sex, the purple Angela comes back to us and carefully pours water into Romeo's glass, leaving mine completely empty, and puts the charging cord she got in front of him with the most seductive smile.

While waiting for my order, I plug my phone in, and it instantly explodes with millions of notifications, among them flashes from Mom, Dad, Sasha, Masha, and Sonya. And, of course, from Doctor Tarasov. And none from Anastas. My heart feels like it was falling into a bottomless ice pit at the mere thought that he had taken me out of his life. Nice and easy. In just a couple of hours.

"Polin, we're worried! Are you all right?!" Messages from my parents jump out one after another, and I write back tiredly: "Yes, I'm alive. I'm fine. I'll call you later. I need some time. Don't wait up today," and I send it to them, not even knowing when I'll see them again.

Remembering the terrible revenge that I have prepared for this disgusting cafe, I log on to my blog, where an endless feed of photos starts flashing before my eyes, in which I recognize myself with horror, wearing huge glasses and an open blouse, walking around *Moscow City*. Some of the bloggers-geeks, as I call them, those who can't do anything themselves, and live only at the expense of constantly putting down and slinging mud in their reviews of various celebrities, have already managed to write sarcastic notes on the topic "*What is one of the most beautiful and wealthy brides of the country doing on the eve of her wedding in the very center with bare breasts in front of the Genentale Bank office?*" And thousands of hurtful comments on the subject, ranging from assuming that I'm drunk as hell to being kidnapped.... And it's not even funny anymore, because tomorrow everyone will have a new reason for ridicule and gossip when it turns out that my wedding with Anastas Weisberg has been canceled....

In the meantime, the pouty Angela gently places a huge plate with a smoking steak in front of Roma-Elvis, gently asking if he needs anything else, and he, staring defiantly at her cleavage, smirkingly replies in his low, soulful voice that makes me shudder:

"Nothing for now, thank you."

"Dessert, would you like?" She sticks out her pathetic breasts. But it doesn't help her.

"Dessert? Sure," he whispers back, and I can hear the lust dripping out of her. It smells as rancid, burning oil as she does.

The waitress indifferently sets down a cheap glass bowl of lettuce and a couple of pathetic shrimps, liberally drizzled with mayonnaise from a bag.

"Your shrimp," she tosses it to me squeamishly before she leaves.

"Looks delicious," Roman laughs at me, cutting off a juicy piece of steak that's oozing with bloody meat juices and popping it into his mouth. And I can feel my saliva starting to come out. "You want some?" He cuts another piece off the steak and brings it to my mouth with a fork, and I sink my teeth into it, feeling it practically melt in my mouth.

"It's divine," I moaning, awash in its flavor and aroma. "It's amazing that they could make meat like this here," I push my nauseating mayonnaise dish aside. "Can I have another piece?" Putting aside all my pride, I beg Roman for a new portion, and he generously cuts me another piece of his huge steak. "I just can't remember the last time I had such a delicious steak," I justify, and feel the blood rushing through my veins with renewed vigor. As if it was me who was dead tired from endless fucking, and not Roma sitting across from me.

"What do you usually eat?" He asks me with interest, chewing the meat.

"Well, shrimp," I try to remember, and we both start laughing, looking at their pathetic semblance. "Fish, vegetables, salad," I continue to list all the healthy foods recommended by the General Health Organization.

"And what tasty stuff do you eat?" Roman clarifies the question, and I try to remember the last time I ate exactly what I want. And as much as I want.

"Oh, yeah, syrniks!" I exclaim with a smile. "They're so fat and with jam, you know?"

"Of course, I do," Roma nods, cutting off another piece and handing it to me, and I snatch it right off the fork with my teeth, eating such unhealthy red meat in unthinkable quantities for myself and my body for the first time. My mom should see me right now! With her celery and eternal proteins.

"Meanwhile, tomorrow the most important social event of this fall will take place: the wedding of socialite Polina Sonis, daughter of the famous director and producer Arkady Sonis, and the largest businessman from the Forbes list, Anastas Vaysberg...." — suddenly the MTV news block from the TV above us breaks into our conversation, and I freeze with an unfinished piece of steak in my mouth.

"Nobody knows yet?" Roma looks at me very seriously, and his gaze sears me to the bone. "Not even your Anastas? Are you running away from him?" He's pushing me.

"No. I'm not running from him," I say quietly.

"So, who are you running from?"

"I don't know," I shrug, and the piece of meat gets stuck in my throat, so I spit it out into the pile of shrimp. "Probably from myself...."

I scroll through the messages from my girlfriends, who send me question marks with a picture of me in a bra and half-face glasses spread all over the social media, and I don't know what to write back to them yet.

"Dessert?" The nasty waitress comes back and hovering over Roma like a pesky fly, and he, with a seductive smile, answers:

"Absolutely. Come on, I'll choose," and adds, "And can I have the bill right away, please? My friend will pay," and he winks at me, following Angela's wiggling hips.

I'm thinking about my journey ahead, and things are starting to come together in my head. How I'm going to spend my remaining months. Out in the wild. Doing what I want to do at last. Without those ever-present pouty lips and smirks. The decorum and the equally boring parties. Where everyone's bragging about their new mansion, yacht, wife, breasts, cock and *Lamborghini*. Okay, it's decided I need to make a list of what I really want to do before I'm probably gone. I grab a napkin and start frantically writing down and then crossing off item after item, because the million wishes running around in my head seem silly and insignificant enough to be included on such an important list named after Polin Sonis. While I'm doing this important thing, they bring me a slip with a check, which I pay without even looking, and then I realize that it's been a long time since my sweet Elvis went to pick out his dessert.

I pick up my purse, deciding not to tip that bitch, and walk toward the restroom to take a look at myself.

From the mirror I see a gaunt, pale face with a bright, feverish blush. My eyes glisten and my undone hair is disheveled like a witch's. And only sweet Snoopy stares at me innocently from my sweatshirt. I wish my party could see me now, I grin at my reflection, and then a strange sound comes to my ear.

I follow that invisible shaking of the air until I find myself in a backyard littered with trash bags and empty boxes. In the far corner of it, there is a girl back pressed into the shabby concrete wall, and Roman is rhythmically and measuredly fucking her, wiggling his jean-clad buttocks. His belt buckle jingles to the beat, accompanying their passionate dance in the back alley, one foot on the ground, the other wrapped tightly around his thigh, her eyes closed, and I can hear him mumbling in her ear as she moans softly, biting her palm with her teeth:

"What a sweet bitch, do you like it? Just a little bit longer, yes," he continued to drive his piston into her as she whimpers beneath him like a dog begging for her master's affection. "Oh yes, good girl," he says as if training her, and she melts under his pressure, sinking her teeth harder and harder into the rib of her palm.

His thrusts with his hips become longer and longer, as if he had found some magic point inside her body, and begins to hit it with his hammer, beating out a secret melody of passion known only to these two now, each time thrusting her deeper and deeper on the stake of pleasure. The girl spreads like a melted puddle of syrup beneath him, and he continues to murmur some magical gibberish in her ear, and I hear her screaming back at him:

"More, more, more!" Roman just pulls away from her, leaving her standing against the dirty wall with her legs clenched tightly together, and he removes the used condom, tossing it on the dirt and muddy ground, unhurriedly fastens his belt, and rubs the girl's cheek in farewell:

"You're such a sweetheart, baby."

And turning around, he sees me huddled against the doorjamb, silently watching this outrageous scene. With a flick of his finger, he calls me to follow him, and I obediently follow him like another one of his bitches. And I'm pissed off.

"Dessert. And tips," he answers my mute outrage with a cocky smile, and we leave this godforsaken café forever.

9

All the way to Smolensk⁸ we drive in silence: I try to forget the scene I saw in the backyard of the restaurant, and try to think of what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. Especially now fate itself has kindly given me such a chance. Roma drives silently: he's just doing his job. He takes me from point A to point B. It's past midnight when we reach Smolensk.

"Let's stop for the night," I order him more than suggest it. After all, I'm paying the money!

And Roman obediently stops at the first motel on the highway. The entrance blinks with neon signs, and, judging by the row of parked trucks, the tired travelers are tempted by their bright splendor. Like nocturnal furry moths.

We make our way to the reception desk, where a tired woman gives us a key.

"We need two rooms," I clarify, and she grinning, holds out the second set to me, and turning to Roma, inquires:

"Okay, if you need a girl, call me zero one. I'll send her right away!"

"He won't need a girl," I answer irritably for him. After all, he needs a good night's sleep and rest before the long journey. I just don't know how he can have so much sex! It's so messy and vulgar.

"Thank you," Roman says, looking at me with a grin. "If I need anything, I'll let you know," and we go up to the second floor with him.

⁸ Smolensk is a historical city in western Russia, situated approximately 250 miles west of Moscow, known for its rich heritage and significant role in Russian history.

The elderly lady obligingly gives me a room in the farthest corner of the corridor, where I go with my head held high and proud.

"Hey, Sonny Polly," Roma calls out to me.

"Don't even think about it!" I answer him irritably, imagining him hitting on me at night.

"I just wanted to say good night," he replies calmly, and I hear the door of his room slam in the green-bottle light of the corridor.

"Good night," I mumble in return and open the door of my room.

Well... I have exactly what I expected: soiled walls splattered with beer, wine, and I'm afraid to imagine what else. The odor of tobacco and liquor, which is permanently ingrained in the cheap wallpaper, and a narrow bed, as if stolen from a Soviet pioneer camp⁹.

It's nothing, I reassure myself, just a few days on the road and I'll be where the sun and sky never end and the air smells of lemons and rosemary. As it is, in my clothes, I take a seat on the couch, which squeaks pitifully beneath me like a trapped mouse. I take a deep breath and just sink back into the littered bed, trying not to notice the smell of other people's sweat and fatigue.

The lights from the neon signs flicker in the window across the hall, drunken laughter and shouting, the noise of cars whizzing by, and I even start to fall asleep to the music of the night highway, lulled to sleep by its delirious rhythm, as I hear the fierce creaking of the bed at the back, behind the wall, and a woman's cries of "Oh yes, yes, harder!" and a man's heavy breathing.

Goddamn it! How much fucking can he do?! — I explode through my sleep, but when I wake up, I realize that it's definitely not Roman, who's checked into a completely different wing of a building.

I lay awake for a while, trying to ignore the raging sounds of intercourse that is happening right here right now in my head: the thin cardboard walls don't conceal a sound. But after a few minutes, I realize that this will probably never end, and I'm definitely not going to fall asleep.

Well, I was so eager for a real non-hothouse life, so I put on my trampled sneakers again, and go out into a world full of danger and adventure. In the courtyard of the hotel, looking around, I see a night bar, with the same inviting lights and a sign that says "*On the Road*", and I start to feel just like the characters in "*From Dusk Till Dawn*" movie when I cross its threshold. But my girlish reverie dissipates a little when, instead of a Mexican striptease bar, I find myself in a fly-infested country club with tables covered with oilcloth and some pop music blaring through the speakers. But since my new life, or rather, the remnants of my new life, has already begun, nothing can break my resolve to live my last days to the fullest.

I resolutely walk to the bar, stolen, apparently, from some nightclub of the nineties, and, holding out a thousand-rubles bill to the surprised bartender, I boldly declare:

"Tequila. For all the money."

"No tequila," he replies, but I don't give up.

"All right, then whiskey! I hope you have whiskey?" I clarify.

"I have whiskey," the guy confirms and puts two glasses in front of me.

"With ice," I ask.

"We're out of ice," the bartender replies, and immediately reminds me of the waitress Angela, only in male form.

"It's my treat," some big guy suddenly pushes my hand with money away, sitting down on a free chair at my side.

He takes one glass, and without asking, he just clinks it against mine and tips his whiskey into his mouth.

"Bottoms up, baby," he orders me, and I, not expecting such an impulse, drink my whiskey, which burns my throat and esophagus all the way down to my stomach.

"Tolik," he casually introduces himself to me, and makes a sign to the bartender, who instantly puts two more glasses in front of us.

⁹ Pioneer camp is a youth summer camp in USSR that was historically designed for the education and development of children, emphasizing outdoor activities, teamwork, and the principles of Soviet ideology, as a rule they were very poor-equipped and uncomfortable, with iron beds and very bad furniture.

"Polina," I reply politely, and we drink another shot of whiskey, and I can see now how the bar is becoming more like an American Hollywood club, and Tolik's face, on the contrary, is even becoming a little bit attractive.

"You have a very familiar face, Polina," Anatoly says, either complimenting me or suspecting me of something illegal.

And just when I want to say that I'm actually a famous blogger and he must have seen me somewhere on social networks, the man's face lights up with a flash of memory:

"So you're usually work on the fiftieth mile! Just next to the town! That's right!" And I smile back confusedly, not really knowing what that means. "Vasily, another shot," he waves to the bartender, and, snuggling up to me, whispers with his lips, blurring before my eyes in a drunken smile: "Here we are, sweetheart. I've wanted to try it with you for a long time," and his hand slips under my T-shirt, squeezing my breasts painfully.

I shriek in surprise, and with his other palm Tolik is already climbing into my jeans, trying to unbutton them.

I slap him back with all my might, and I realize from the slow blush on the man's face that I've only made him angrier. I cringe in my chair, expecting him to hit me back, when suddenly Tolik collapses onto the bar, hitting his head on it, and the second blow hits him right in the ear.

"Come with me," I hear a familiar voice with harsh notes, and I feel someone's hand grab me and yank me off my stool, pulling me outside, not letting me, the bartender, or Tolik, who had passed out on the bar, wake up.

Roma-Elvis silently leads me across the courtyard, and I follow him like an obedient, exhausted puppet. A stupid, spoiled doll. Who has never traveled further than the Garden Ring¹⁰, and certainly never socialized with real men who smell of beer, sweat, and desire. Which they used to shut up quickly and uncomplicatedly.

When I get to our floor, I swallow a lump in my throat and squeeze it out of me:

"Can I sleep in your room with you? I'm scared."

And Roma nods his head silently in response. I go in, the door closes behind us, and I feel like I've been wrapped in a warm cocoon, and now I want to stay here forever.

"Are you gonna sleep in your clothes?" Elvis opens his mouth for the first time since it happened, and I agree with him, just pulling off my jeans and T-shirt, leaving me in my expensive *La Perla* lace lingerie from a former life.

"Which side are you going to sleep on?" Suddenly, quite unexpectedly, I ask him the simplest of questions. One that can only be important if you're together.

"I'll lie on the side of the door," he answers me seriously. "To keep you safe from nightmares."

"Thank you," I squeeze myself out, wrapping myself in the laundered blanket that now feels better than all the luxurious silk bedspreads from the best hotels in the world.

"You're welcome, it's my job," Roma pulls off all his clothes in one motion, and I try not to look at his perfect taut body, without a hint of a beer belly or a second chin.

I lie with my back to him, and I can feel the pathetic crib shaking beneath him as he turns away from me. And my heart clenches with incomprehensible longing and desire.

"I want my fee, right," he mumbles, falling silent. "Try not to hit on drunk truckers next time."

There he goes again, ruining the whole moment! How does he do it? Outside the window, the distant music continues to blare to the accompaniment of cheap neon, the walls are still creaking, sighing, and groaning, and my eyes fall asleep and *Gumilev's*¹¹ lines spin in my head:

*In the dark blankets of the summer night
A young princess lost her way.*

¹⁰ The Garden Ring is a major circular road in Moscow that encircles the historical city center, serving as a significant thoroughfare adorned with parks, gardens, and notable landmarks. It can be compared to Central Park in New York and Russians usually say about snobs from Moscow that those don't know Russia out Garden Ring.

¹¹ Nikolai Gumilev was a notable Russian poet and one of the founding figures of the Acmeist movement, celebrated for his vivid imagery and exploration of themes such as love, nature, and adventure.

*A laborer working in the heart of the forest
Found her crying there.*

*He took her to his hut,
He gave her a scone with bitter lard,
He put a pillow under her head
And wrapped her feet in a blanket.*

*But why does her longing
Seems painfully known,
And the dirty logs whisper to her,
That she is only now truly at home?¹²*

I wake up in a warm, cozy bed, all alone, and try to remember how I got here, until the memories are clearly arranged on the shelves of my memory. It turns out that it's been exactly a day and a half since that wonderful bachelorette party, and I'm already lying with a stripper in the middle of nowhere.

I quickly climb out of bed and pull on my, or rather incomprehensibly whose, clothes. The door of our miserable room swings open, and a fresh and handsome Roman enters the room, carrying a paper cup of coffee in his hand.

"Breakfast in bed," he smiles his most charming smile, and I can see why women react to him that way. "I see you're up already. So we can go now?"

"Thanks," I sip my coffee, which is oddly good for a highway motel. "We're leaving in a second."

"What, you're not even gonna take a shower?" He grins at me again, and judging by his shiny, fresh look, he's washed his face this morning, and the thin layer of overgrown stubble makes him even more attractive. And it makes me angry. Because I don't have any eye patches, face masks, or magic creams that can turn me back into a princess from Rublevka¹³. But that's okay, the most important thing for now is to cross the state border.

A few hours later, we are already standing in a line of cars at the Lithuanian border, and I am clutching my plastic bag with cash to my chest. Border guards tiredly flip through our passports, asking duty questions about the purpose of the trip, and in the afternoon we are already rushing along the highway to Kaunas¹⁴. And then — Poland.

"So, where are we going?" Roma asks me the most important question.

"First — to Italy," I answer. Where it smells of lemons and rosemary. And maybe someone is waiting for me. At least I hope so deep inside my heart. "And then you can go wherever you like. Take me to Rome."

"All right, Rome," Elvis replies thoughtfully. "All roads lead there. Everyone knows that."

"It's one p.m." I realize suddenly, glancing at the clock on the dashboard. "It was supposed to be my wedding day."

I wonder what's going on down there. How did Weisbergs manage to explain to all the cream of society, invited to the celebration, that it is canceled in the end? And as if reading my thoughts, the news starts on the still remaining Russian wave. Announcers are cheerfully reading out the next news reports, until they leave the latest social gossip for the sweetest.

"Friends, we have just received a message in the studio that the wedding of socialite Polina Sonis and *Forbes* businessman Anastas Weisberg, which was supposed to be the most important event of this fall, will not take place. According to unconfirmed reports, the famous blogger could have been kidnapped by an unknown man, with whom she was seen yesterday in Moscow City. According to eyewitnesses, Polina looked very strange and was clearly worried about something. After withdrawing

¹² This poem "Princess" by Russian poet Nikolay Gumilev is translated and edited by author

¹³ Rublevka is a prestigious and affluent residential area located near Moscow, known for its luxurious villas and as a favored location for the Russian elite.

¹⁴ City in Lithuania not far from border with Russia

cash from her account, the amount is not disclosed, she got into a car with a stranger and drove away. She has not been seen since. We will keep you updated, friends, stay with us...."

My whole world finally crumbles after this news, and Roma, turns to me, and I can swear that scarlet flames are splashing in his dark blue bottomless eyes:

"What. The. Fuck. Is this?! Can you explain?!"

"Okay, I'll try," I answer quietly, and I tell him my whole sad story.

After my story, Roma is silent for a while, watching the road carefully, and I just stare out the window at the forests passing by at breakneck speed.

"And when did you find out about it?" He asks suddenly, thinking.

"That I might be dead soon?" I specify indifferently. "Just before my bachelorette party. Remember?" I grin sadly, and I see his jaw clench. From anger. Or disappointment. "I guess that's probably how I acted back then, you know? Unpredictable?" I tell him.

"I know," he says curtly. "Good girls don't sleep around, right? And they don't blow the first guy they meet, yeah?" And he turns and stares into my eyes, and I feel myself blush again at the mere memory of his hot body.

"Probably not," I agree with Roma meekly. "I've been a good girl for too long. And I've done too much of nothing in my life. And now I've decided to try something for the first time," I explain. And, swallowing a traitorous lump in my throat, I conclude: "And most likely, for the last time...."

In less than an hour we park somewhere near the main street of Kaunas, a sleepy, tidy town that still has patches of the Soviet past, but is already dressed in the austere clothes of a quiet resident on the backside of Europe. We sit down outside in a restaurant, at a table blown by the salty winds rushing past us from the Baltic sea, and a strict elderly waiter brings us a menu.

"No dessert today," I say meaningfully to Roma, and he doesn't even react to my words.

He's still silent most of the time, thinking about something.

"It turns out that Anastas Weisberg abandoned you? Abandoned you immediately, without thinking, when he found out about your illness?" He suddenly asks me, and I almost choke on my Caesar salad.

"That's pretty much it," I agree with him.

"Then what was that about surveillance and some cars?" He continues his logical reasoning, and then I realize I'm walking into a trap.

Should I tell him I was just bluffing? But then I don't know how the press got wind of all this....

"Wait, I need to check something," I mumble, and start to reread a bunch of hysterical messages from my mom, which before I just flipped through without going into them:

"Polin, those Weisbergs aren't going to get away with this!"

"Daddy's thought of everything, daughter."

"Paulie, you can go back now, we've sorted everything out."

"We've threatened the Weisbergs that we'll go to the press! We're waiting for their response."

"They agreed to our terms!"

"They thought they could just dump our daughter, but it'll backfire on them."

And then it dawns on me that my parents just made a deal with the Weisbergs: my family doesn't scream at every corner to the journalists about how their sweet, kind, terminally ill girl was dumped in the trash as soon as they found out about her plight. Anastas's PR people strongly advise him to avoid this scandal, and Stasik himself couldn't come up with a better excuse for the tabloids than my sudden kidnapping. Because no one ever leaves him willingly. He can't be abandoned. He himself, easily. But not the terminally ill innocent Poline Sonis.

Maybe later, after, when everything's settled, he'll figure out a way to get rid of me quietly. So as not to make a big fuss and make the stock market nervous. And not to ruin his reputation and his karma. Which he'll probably need in the upcoming election. And my photos with another man's dick in my mouth, leaked on the net, would have been very useful. But they weren't, and now I'm sure I'll pay for them.

"Yes, I lied to you at first," I admit to Roma calmly. "But it was a gesture of desperation. And now there's no turning back. Because the stakeout has indeed already begun. Anastas will try to bring me back. To decide what to do with me in the end. Or just wait for, you know, you understand, when I'm dead," and it suddenly dawns on me that that's a very likely scenario for my future life.

"And you've decided to just get away from it all?" He asks me quietly, his dark blue eyes burning through me. "Like a spoiled little girl? You didn't want to go through all the tests again...."

"Go through all the chemotherapy until my hair and teeth come out, and then go in for a bone marrow transplant with a one-in-five chance of being cured?" I'm picking up on his thought. And suddenly, I just tell him the truth at last: "You know, I didn't have time to think about it because you sent me those crappy disgusting pictures, and I just couldn't be there anymore. I needed a sip of fresh air. And then I couldn't stop. I just wanted to finally take a breathe, you know? I wanted to breathe deeply."

"These pictures aren't disgusting, by the way," he smiles at me for the first time in a while. "I liked them a lot. And I liked everything else," he leans in close to me, and I flare up like a dry match.

I frantically grab my water glass to put out the fire that's starting to ignite uncontrollably inside me, and I ask innocently:

"So you're going to delete these photos?" and I hope that in exchange for my candor a noble knight will awaken inside of his soul.

"Why?" The old mocking Roma-Elvis is back. "The money first, then everything else. If you want it."

"Fine," I glare at him with icy contempt. "You take me to Rome, get the agreed sum, and you can go on your way."

"It's a deal," he replies indifferently, and I want to stab him in the eye with the fork I'm trying to elegantly poke my salad leaf with.

Just to get away from it all I take out my napkin, on which I started to plan my future, or rather the rest of my life, and review my pathetic to-do list. It's just amazing how hard it is to come up with some really important wishes! Especially when I'm pretty much limited by nothing. Except time.

I stare out at the deserted town square, where a couple of unidentifiable seagulls are sadly tearing apart the remains of a sandwich someone threw in. So, I need to concentrate on at least ten wishes; it'll definitely be a lot easier, I decide. I cross out and write in new items again.

"What are you writing down?" Roman suddenly interrupts me. "Are you making a will?"

"Whatever. Even if it were a will. What's it for you?" I snap back, and then a treacherous wind snatched my wretched, crumpled paper out of my hands, and Roman catch it on the fly.

"Well, let's see," he mumbles, looking at my list, and I scream, unable to contain myself and blushing with shame:

"Don't you dare read it! It's confidential!" And I jump up from my seat to try to fight him, but he extends his arm so I can't reach for my napkin. And for a second, I'm close to him again, and I'm enveloped by the heat of his body. And I'm reminded again how powerful he can be. And desirable. And how I want to be in his firm and gentle arms right now.

Meanwhile, he's reading, holding the list above my head:

"So, item number one: to see Sandro Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*,"¹⁵ and I think he's going to fall off his chair in surprise. "Is that the one in the *Uffizi Gallery* in Florence?" He clarifies, looking at me very seriously.

"Exactly!" I shout it in his face. "I didn't expect you to know that word!" And I plop down in my seat again, carefully unfolding my rather wrinkled napkin.

"It's commendable, quite adorable that modern girls have such desires," he sits down on the opposite corner of the table, arms crossed over his chest and leaning back in his chair. And is it just me, or is he really looking at me curiously now, like an entomologist looking at a rare specimen of a butterfly he's caught? Or a bug.

"Well, you know, not everyone has such primitive and low desires," I parry haughtily.

¹⁵ The Birth of Venus by Botticelli is a renowned Renaissance painting that depicts the goddess Venus emerging from the sea on a shell, symbolizing beauty and love.

"Yeah, sure, I get it: to go to a club, get drunk, and fuck the first guy you see," Elvis smirks deeply.

"Don't judge everyone by yourself. And by your clients," I replied dryly, adding a new item to my list.

"So you're not like that," Roma leans toward me with interest. "And who are you, baby? Popular blogger Pollysonis?"

"Actually, I'm a certified art historian," I proudly declare, and now Roman is actually falling off his chair from laughter, finally scaring away the gulls, who scurry off toward the sea with indignant cries.

"You? Who? The art historian?" He continues to laugh, and I explain:

"Yes, what made you laugh so much! Just imagine, there are such professions in the world."

"I underestimated you, girl! And then there are librarians as well!"

"As well as writers and critics," I list a couple of other professions that are dying out nowadays.

"Okay, no offense," laughing, Roma answers me. "Forgive me, I just really did not expect that the daughter of a famous producer and the bride of a billionaire oligarch has such a strange specialty.

"You mean, unpopular?" I clarify.

"In general, yes," he agrees with me. "You always imagine in this role some strict spinster in a tight blue up-to-chin blouse and with a granny's cameo around her neck, you know. Or a museum archivist in a dusty robe and glasses," Roma explains to me, and I agree with him in my heart.

"Actually, it's just a stereotype, and you're just a victim of it," I explain to him. "Surely you expected that since I am the daughter of famous parents, I will choose at least the faculty of journalism or Legal studies and law? Or perhaps even finance. And you're thinking exactly like my mom," and he winks back. And I remember with what surprise and disapproval my parents met this news in their time. That I wouldn't be creating anything on my own, making movies like my dad, running his company or, after all, producing television stories, interviewing celebrities or writing economic articles for economic pages in media.

"I actually enjoy watching the birth of real masterpieces," I explain. "You see, it's as much of a mystery as the birth of a human being: you never know what will come out of it in the end. Someone will bake bread and rolls, and someone will become a famous couturier. Someone will go to war and become a hero. Or die. And someone else will shine in the sky, can you imagine?" I tell Roma my theory, and he listens to me with interest. "It's the same with any artifact: what makes an object a real work of art? Let's take this fork, for example!" I finally pick up my formidable weapon. "Who knows if our descendants will dig it up in a few tens of thousands of years, rusted and corroded by time and salt, and put it carefully under glass in some historical museum? And will it then be considered an object of art? And what about paintings? Which of them, painted even by a very good artist, will remain just a beautiful trinket in the interior, and which of them will conquer our mind and imagination forever?"

"Is that why you want to see *"Venus"*?" He asks me quietly.

"Yeah, that's probably why, too," I agree with him. "It was just the first thing that came to mind when I decided to make this stupid list," I slump my shoulders tiredly.

"Why is it stupid," Elvis-Roman suddenly answers me. "May I?" And now he carefully takes my napkin, spreading it on his palm like some valuable folio. "What's the second item? See Michelangelo's David? Listen," he lifts his eyes from my list and looks at me concernedly. "It's pretty messed up, from what I can see. You need a doctor, baby."

"Are you kidding me again?" I chuckle. "You think some spoiled rich bitch doesn't know what else to wish for herself?"

"No, I don't think that at all," he interrupts me calmly. "Never decide for others what's really in their heads."

"Fine," I agree with him. "As you can see, I'm not even sure what's going on in my head."

"Well," Elvis looks at me appraisingly. "I'll help you. Don't thank me. I'll make up your wishes for you. So you can die in peace, knowing that you've accomplished everything you really wanted to accomplish in this life."

"Phone," Roma holds his hand out palm up, and looks at me meaningfully.

"What does my phone have to do with it?!" I am indignant, though I understand perfectly well what he means.

"You don't want your dear ex-fiancé to find us out and fuck me with a rubber truncheon, do you?" He grins wryly. And when he sneers like that, I start to wonder if I'm so afraid for his anal virginity!

"My whole life is in here!" I protest, even though I realize he's absolutely right. With this beacon, I'll just be a glowing, burning target for my relatives, and much worse, for Stasik's relatives.

"I'm waiting," he gives me a menacing look, and I agree.

"All right, just let me send a message to my parents that I'm okay and that they don't worry, okay? It's in your best interest."

"Five minutes," he agrees, and I start frantically texting all my loved ones that I'm fine and I'll let them know about me in a little while.

I accidentally click on the chat with Anastas, and his adorable dickpics, which I hadn't seen in a while, pop up one after another, and I frantically try to close the screen, but Roman, who's watching me, has already seen everything.

"I didn't know you were also into strawberries on the Internet," he says, laughing at the top of his voice, "not just in clubs!"

"Shut up," I blush, deleting the endless row of my fiancé's erect penises from my correspondence and archives so that, God forbid, it wouldn't show up anywhere. "And anyway, I'm not the one who's dabbling," I mutter irritably.

"Oh, my God, I can't believe it!" Elvis continues to mock me. "Is our honorable owner of factories, castles and yachts so infantile that he needs to send proof of his manhood to others?" He raises his handsome eyebrow in surprise, and I struggle to keep from throwing my phone at him.

"What do you know about relationships?! Not a quickie?!" I snap at him. "It's done, take it," and I hand him my empty phone. And, to my surprise, I feel incredibly relieved, as if a ten-ton weight had fallen off my shoulders. Or was that how much those stupid pictures of Weisberg's boner weighed?

"You'd be surprised at how much I know," Roman says meaningfully, pulling the sim card out of my smartphone and crumbling it in his fingers like a dry, thin wafer. He takes my iPhone and bangs it lightly against the edge of the table, and it cracks like a light eggshell, covering my entire former life with a fine mesh of cracks....

"Now, to business. Before we go to see an unrivaled masterpiece by one of the greatest artists of the Italian Renaissance, we need to dress up a bit," he summarizes. At least you do.

"Great, let's go to the nearest mall, and I'll buy some clothes for the first time, because, you know, I'm tired of wearing your mistresses' rags," I catch his strange look at me again.

"Okay," Roma flips through his cell phone to find the nearest stores while I take a bill out of the bag and pay the waiter with cash.

"No cards," I explain to him. "I'm just as interested as you are in making sure I can't be traced in any way by my payments. At least not before time. Before I can get everything done," I swallow the traitorous lump in my throat again.

"You're prepared, I see," Roma looks at me in surprise. "Come on, there's a shopping mall about seven hundred meters from the parking lot."

Less than ten minutes later, he and I, like a couple in love, are walking past a row of chain stores that display their tasteless mannequins in gaudy clothes.

"Sorry, not *Outlet Village*," Roman mocks me again, and I take a deep belly breath and walk resolutely into the first youth brand I see, where everything is covered in fall sweaters, baggy jeans, and cheap wool hats. Without even considering what to get, I just throw the first thing I see into the shopper until it's stuffed to the top with rags.

"Let's go to the fitting room, baby!" My companion suggests, and I answer him as coldly as I can:

"I don't think I need your stylist services!" I head proudly toward the row of booths in the far corner of the store, but Roman follows me, and I start to feel that shiver that comes over me every time I think of the two of us again....

But I pull myself together, remembering my lofty mission to get to my personal lemon paradise first, perhaps hitting the Champs Elysees on the way, and clenching my teeth, I walk into the fitting room with my head held high.

I pull on my first chintz dress from the pile of rags, and I go out of the cramped cubicle into the corridor to get a better look at myself in the large shared mirror. And with surprise and annoyance I see that even here my Roman has already managed to make a sensation among all female customers! It is Saturday, and the small cramped room is packed with women and girls of all ages, but I can bet that all of them as one, with even more eagerness and flirtatiousness, are twirling in front of each other, throwing him unequivocal appealing glances.

And he sits, basking in their unconcealed admiration and adoration, leaning back on the round sodden sofa in the center of the fitting room like a madly beautiful king surveying his concubines. He's not lazy about giving everyone the most charming smile, and I catch myself thinking that he doesn't smile at me that way, and I feel a little pang of jealousy somewhere deep in my chest beneath the cheap fabric of the dress.

"Excuse me, could you help me?" Suddenly a tall, slender girl comes up to him asking him to zipper up her blouse from behind!

I watch this scene with mute amazement: Elvis stands up, and almost pressing himself against the girl, zips up her blouse, and his palm lingers on her sacrum, just above her ass. The girl is about to sweat and cum, I don't doubt it, and I yell in a loud voice like a grumpy wife to the whole room:

"Honey, what do you think of this dress? I want to wear it to your mom's anniversary party! By the way, did you buy diapers?" And the girl frighteningly hides behind the curtain, leaving behind the luscious sweet notes of some cheap perfume.

"Oh, yes, you're as gorgeous as ever, darling," Roman plays along, putting his arm around my waist and pushing me toward my stall with the rest of my clothes in it. "Let's see what else you can try on," he whispers, leaning in close to my ear, and my whole body feels like it was being electrocuted.

"Let me do that," he turns my back to him and stares into my eyes in the mirror as his hand slides down my back as a gentle, warm snake, undoing the zipper.

He slides the dress off first one of my shoulders, then the other, and it falls to my feet with a light, silky sigh as I stand in my underwear in front of him, my nipples pointing treacherously through the weightless, transparent fabric of my bra. I can smell his tart animal odor. For a second, his flat stomach presses against my bare back, and I feel the hardness of his cock through the denim on my ass. We're standing in this cramped aquarium of a tiny stall, like two fish caught in a jar, and the only thing I seem to want more than anything in the world right now is to savor the taste of his moist, glistening lips, and to choke on his saliva, rushing into my mouth just like seawater.... But instead I hear his calm voice:

"Try this one on," and he tosses me another skirt and blouse on the pouffe before leaving the stall.

So I pull on a short flared skirt that barely covers my buttocks and a tight synthetic blouse with the kind of cleavage any Renaissance courtesan would envy. Anyway, now I look more like a cheap hooker pretending to be a schoolgirl. I leave the stall to show my companion my strange outfit, but I don't see him anywhere. Well, I guess he decided to wait for me outside. I go back to the room to change, but I can't find the clothes I came here in. It's weird... I dig through the pile of clothes, but there's no sign of it. Well, I'll just have to buy what I'm wearing and tell that asshole what I think of him! But my purse isn't here either. And neither is my money bag.

I'm covered in a thin, sticky film of icy sweat at the mere thought that he just robbed me. Stupidly and ineptly. While I was standing there imagining him fucking me in that damned stall! Which he did, actually. He just fucked me. I've got no clothes, no money, no passport, no phone. In a foreign country. And I've probably only got a couple of minutes to catch up with him before he leaves!

I quickly tear off all the tags attached to my clothes, walk out into the sales area, and head for the exit: Roman didn't have much time to get far. I try not to betray my excitement and walk through the magnetic gate with a nonchalant look, trying not to look in the direction of the bored security guard. He seems more engrossed in his cell phone and doesn't look around much, when suddenly the magnetic gate starts beeping! I pretend it doesn't affect me and walk further and further down the hallway until I hear a shout behind me:

"Stoveti!" And I don't need to know Lithuanian to understand what it means! My brain instantly gives me two possible options: stop and wait to be examined, then asked to go to the security room, probably call the police, call Interpol and so on, or just run away! I choose the latter, and I feel wings growing behind me as I flare everything I can in this unbearably short school skirt and rush down the corridors and escalator, knocking down visitors walking calmly through the center.

Out of the corner of my eye I see an iron door to my right, push it open with my shoulder, and fall into the dark corridor, tumbling down the stairs to the underground floor, into the parking lot. The sound of blood in my ears drowns out all other sounds, and there is only one thought in my head: how to get out of this labyrinth as quickly as possible and run, run, run! I swing open another door and find myself among the cars in a half-dark and deserted garage.

All right! All that's left to do is to sneak along the darkest corners to the stairs to the street, and I'll be free. The parking lot is practically full of cars, and I have no trouble sneaking unnoticed along their endless rows. There is the door with the saving sign *Exit*: that's it, I'm saved! I push the long metal handle-pipe, as suddenly someone's rough, rigid arms wrap around me from behind, and a creaky man's voice says with an accent:

"Got you, miss," and without letting me realize it, and with his rough paw firmly around my wrist, he leads me to some far corner of the parking lot until he stops at an inconspicuous service door. He opens it, rifling through a bunch of keys, and shoves me roughly inside, locking the door behind him.

It must be some kind of security room, because there's a monitor on a small table with a perfect view of the whole parking lot, some leftovers, and a greasy little oil-stained couch squeezed into the corner. The door is closed, and the guard who caught me sits down on the sofa with a satisfied look, tossing a bunch of keys carelessly beside him, and examines me with undisguised interest. I'm trapped. And then I realize that my clothes are all bunched up from running, my breasts are almost completely exposed, tumbling out of my narrow cleavage like two ripe peaches, and the hem of my skirt doesn't even cover the bottom edge of my panties. Billions of all kinds of scenarios are running through my head, and I think he's supposed to be calling the police right now, or wherever-they're supposed to report in cases like this.

But this grown man in his forties is clearly in no hurry to go anywhere. He's breathing heavily, and I can practically feel his sticky gaze slithering over my skin with a rough eye just as a snail, stopping somewhere under my skirt and creeping up to my breasts, tracing each protruding sharp nipple along the alveoli with his slimy body. He's clearly enjoying my helplessness and his power. I see his oily eyes fill with lustful anticipation, and he, stretching his words lazily, finally speaks:

"Well, what are we gonna do?" And reclines on the back of the sofa, spreading his legs wide, not even hiding the tight oblong tourniquet clearly outlined under his uniform black pants. But I don't have any time at all. A few more minutes, and I'll stay here forever, in this stinking cramped room, smelling of musty beer, dried fish, unwashed bodies, and rancid male sweat.

All my life I had been wrapped in a cocoon of parental love and care, from the time I was in diapers. I'd heard of such things, but I'd never met such types, not even among our servants and guards. Perhaps I had always been too arrogant to notice them and pay attention to the long looks they gave me when I suddenly burst into their orbit. And now one of a crowd of men I had never noticed before, with a coarse network of veins on his spongy nose, gaunt and stout as farmer, with huge, heavy hands that could crush and crumple me like a sheet of paper, a greasy short ruff of blond hair, and eyes tearful with obvious desire through whitish lashes.

I take a deep breath, and suddenly I squeeze out a smile. Embarrassed and flirtatious at the same time. And in a quiet, chesty voice, I say:

"I think we'll think of something with you," I'm sure I've seen this scene in one of my dad's movies. And I'm sure I thought it was vulgar, because that's not how it works in real life. But now I know from the chapped lips of my jailer smiling contentedly, that it actually does!

"Good, girl, I know we'll come to an agreement," he says, starting to undo the buttons of his pants, even though he knew it was already settled between us.

"Wait, don't rush," I continue my game, smoothing my skirt and squeezing my breasts gently in my palms, causing them to roll out of my low cleavage in sweet hemispheres. "We both need to enjoy this, don't we?" And I see his eyes cloud over. "Jurgis, that's your name, isn't it?" When I read the name

on his nametag, I keep running my hands over my body, already pulling up the hem of my blouse and sliding my palm inside, under the fabric, and driving my other hand under the waistband of my skirt.

"Yeah," the man nods, his lips dry, clearly not expecting me to put on such a show. Now his pants are practically ripping open under the onslaught of rebellious, excited flesh, and he pulls his hands toward me, trying to pull me onto his lap.

Overcoming my inner disgust, I walk over to him and rest my feet on the couch as he frantically unzips his fly. I get as close to the man as I can. My breasts are only about one inch from his half-open mouth, and he tries to swallow them, but with a silly giggle I didn't even know I had, I duck as if to tease him.

"Dabar, dabar,¹⁶" he mumbles, and I feel his cock, freed at last from its captivity, with its wet head against the inside of my thigh....

And then I bend over to his side, grab the bunch of keys that he had so carelessly left here on the sofa, and slam it into his eyes with all my might, and without even allowing myself to turn around and see what had happened to him, under his loud cursing and cries of pain, I bullet-fly to the door, open it, and run out the underground parking. A split second and I just lock the door from the outside, dropping the bundle right there on the dirty asphalt of the parking lot.

My legs carry me away from this horrible place, back to the spot where I last left his *Touareg* with Elvis the bastard. I keep running, my lungs pounding, hoping he hasn't left yet, and hating him only makes me feel stronger. I run, and I imagine I'm the one who's going to stick a wrench in his eye and turn it a few times! I run up to the parking lot, out of breath, disheveled, not even paying attention to the fact that my skirt is up to my waist, and my breasts just jumped out of my cleavage, and, of course, I don't see our car there! I walk several times along the row of parked cars, back and forth, hoping that my eyes are just deceiving me and the black SUV with tinted windows is hidden behind a row of pink and blue *Renaults* and *Citroens*.

The horrible awareness doesn't come to me right away. But when I finally realize that I've been abandoned like a broken doll, and not for the first time in the past two days, I just sit down on the sidewalk and start crying. I don't think I've cried in years, and now the tears are washing away all the despair, pain, and sadness, leaving only the embers of disappointment smoldering inside me....

Through the salty stream, I can't immediately hear the honking of a car horn, which bursts into my personal funeral for myself. At first it annoys me, preventing me from indulging in unrelenting grief, then it begins to irritate me, and finally, angry at its nagging intrusion into my private life, I look up and see that Elvis is standing next to me on the emergency brake, shouting out the open window:

"Sonny Polly, what are you doing here? We're parked across the street! I'm signaling you, signaling you...." And I just burst into the car without letting him finish, and I claw at his neck, scratching his beautiful face with my fingernails, trying to shut him up.... And I don't even know what feelings are more prevalent in me right now: mad hatred, equally mad joy that he didn't leave me, or a lifetime of resentment for this stupid, inappropriate, and disgusting prank.

11

We've already left Kaunas and are driving on the highway towards Poland, and I keep silently looking out the window, not even turning my head towards Elvis, who has covered a deep scratch from my claws with a band-aid and now looks even more manly and beautiful with it. Asshole. I still can't believe he did this to me!

"Are you still sulking?" He breaks our silence, and I finally turn to him.

"Sulking?!" I'm starting to freak out. "You have the wrong word to describe my feelings for you," I throw word after word back at him hatefully. But they just pebble against his impenetrable wall of animal male magnetism and charm.

With a cheeky smile stretching the words, Roma answers:

"I bet you've never had such an adrenaline explosion in your life. Not even sex. Well, except that time with me," he adds with a smirk.

¹⁶ "Come on, come on" (Lithuanian)

"It's hard to call it sex, for all I care," I parry. But in the back of my mind, I suddenly realize that I've really never felt as free as I do today. And I don't even know at what moment: when I almost poked out poor and disgusting Jurgis's eye and broke out of that nightmarish room, throwing away the keys, or when I realized that Roma hadn't abandoned me, but was waiting for me in the parking lot, eager to see how it would end. And I don't even know if I'd ever felt the same bitter disappointment in my life when I realized he'd left me. Forever.

"Very good, Doctor Freud," I agree with him. "But still, one question really bothers me: what would you do if I did stay there? And that dirty guard raped me?!"

"But that didn't happen, Sonny Polly," he replies simply. "I never doubted you for a second. You deserve a real reward after such an ordeal."

"What is it?" I ask wryly, not believing a word he says.

"We'll stop on the way to visit Paris, eat oysters, drink champagne. Is that okay with you? My treat," he says simply.

"But you agreed to take me to Italy, and I don't have money to pay your way through France."

"Don't worry, this is my gift to you. Where you can choose one wish. But only one, okay?" And he looks at me with a smile. Not an unfunny one, but that warm and friendly one that so rarely lights up his face. "Do we have a deal?"

"Deal," I mumble back, not realizing what kind of man he is.

"You've been through too much today, Poline," he says my name for the first time, without that stupid nickname, and I swallow the lump that suddenly comes to my throat.

Because I realize that these are the words I wanted to hear from my relatives and Stas these days, but Stas hasn't even written me a single line, and even if he did, I'm unlikely to read it: my phone is lying broken somewhere in a distant trashcan near the Kaunas town square, and I'm completely cut off from communication with the outside world. And Roma was the first to give me words of encouragement.

"Put the seat down, there's a blanket in the back, you can cover yourself with it," he suggests. "Get some sleep, Warsaw is still hours away," and I lie down on the front seat, curled up and wrapped in a fluffy patterned plaid that smells like Roma. Confidence. Calm. And my hot dreams, which I didn't know existed until I met him.

The car sways smoothly like a ship on the waves, taking us farther and farther away from my home, my old life, my illness, and my steadily looming future. I watch the shadows of passing cars flicker on the ceiling, I feel safer than perhaps I have ever felt in my life, and my eyelids fall asleep by themselves....

I dream that I am lying on the shore, and the quiet waves are splashing at my feet, and I am roasting under the hot sun, like a jellyfish thrown on the shore, and I am melting and dissolving in its merciless rays. I am hot and thirsty, but I can't move a hand or a foot, as if glued to the pebbles, and there is nothing left of me but a transparent puddle, flowing through the stones and into the ground. I want to scream, but the scream gets stuck in my parched throat, and my lips stick together and melt, and I suddenly realize that I am already dead....

"Hush, hush, baby, wake up," I hear through the haze of the sun, blinding my eyes, which it had already burned through. "Poline, wake up," a familiar voice breaks into this nightmare, pulling me out of this deadly pit, and I slowly start to come to my senses. First I feel the tips of my toes, my hands, and I realize that my face, eyes, and mouth are in place, and I can open them. For the first few seconds I look in front of me, and all I see is a cramped coffin lid, until I remember that it's the ceiling of the car. Warm air blows in waves on me: Roma had carefully turned on the heater so I wouldn't freeze, and I realize that we're standing somewhere in the parking lot.

"Here we are, baby," Elvis says softly and affectionately, looking at me in the semi-darkness of the cabin. His eyes seem anthracite black in the light of the streetlamps, and his two-day stubble emphasizes his cheekbones and sexy chin even more. And I suddenly realize, for the first time in all the time I've spent with him, that I'm looking at an experienced and mature man. I mean, he's probably over thirty.

"What time do strippers retire?" I asked him, finally managing to loosen my parched lips, and he burst into a loud, boyish laugh.

"Is that the only thing you wanted to know?" He can't calm down. "I don't know what's going on in your head, girl!"

"I can say the same about you," I reply, finally getting up from my bed and looking around. "Are we already in Warsaw?"

"Better, Polin, we're already in Wroclaw. You slept for over ten hours, and I decided to just drive and drive.

"Great," I adjust my pathetic skirt and top. "Today, hopefully, we'll pick a decent hotel on the bookings. No drunken truckers," I say. "Too bad I'm dressed like a highway hooker. Thanks to your unfunny experiments."

"It's okay, I took care of everything," Roma hands me a bag with the *Karen Millen* logo on it.

"Don't tell me that you have a stash of clothes in your car!" I look at him dumbfounded.

"You think too highly of me, baby. I just bought this on the way to the car."

While I was apparently running for all my life, or rather, for all my buns, away from sweaty, nasty Jurgis. But I don't want to think about anything bad today. I reach into the rustling bag with joyful anticipation and pull out an emerald green jersey dress, a fur-trimmed sleeveless shirt, and I even find a pair of half boots in my size. I scrutinize Roma, and he laughs at me again:

"Well, I've got a sharp eye, don't I?" And I just nod in response. It's amazing how accurate he was with the size.

It's past midnight when the odd couple of us pile into the best hotel in the center of Wroclaw I could find, *the Altus Palace*.

I walk into the luxurious lobby, and it's as if I'm back to my usual normal life. Where the hotels are all five-star, the staff and concierges are friendly, and the rooms are deluxe and nothing less!

"Welcome to our hotel," a girl at the reception smiles sweetly at Roma, and I don't care so much about his truly magical ability to make all women within a two-miles radius ooze over him that I snatch the keys from her hand with a polite smile. I am paying, after all. And even though I'm dressed like a streetwalker right now, the thought of my new clothes in a branded bag warms my soul.

We enter our two-story suite, and I'm plunged into a realm of comfort and tranquility as I step into the marble bathroom, take a seat, springing onto the luxuriously oversized bed, and look out at the nighttime city glittering with sleepy lights.

"Don't wake me up before dinner," I instruct Roma, getting ready to plunge into the bathtub with fragrant foam and then wrap myself in a real warm blanket.

"You have exactly half an hour to get ready," my Elvis answers me nonchalantly.

"Ready for what?" I don't understand.

"The night is calling, baby. The night is calling," and I realize I can't get out of it.

Exactly half an hour later — it's amazing how quickly I've learned to get ready instantly, without foundation, concealer, lipstick, or mascara on hand — I emerge from my bedroom on the second floor, wearing a knee-length green dress that fits me perfectly. Its color magically accentuates my eyes, which now seem completely transparent, like a sea siren. Sharp knees stick out boldly from beneath the low hem, and the pointy-heeled boots make my legs look even longer and thinner. I'd just washed my hair and left it loose around my shoulders, and now it cascaded down my thin face, highlighting my sharp cheekbones and puffy lips, flowing down to my shoulder blades.

Roman must have showered in the downstairs bathroom, changed his clothes, and is waiting for me in the living room, sprawled on the couch and flicking channels on TV. I come downstairs, sinking my thin heels into the soft carpets, and he doesn't hear my footsteps right away, and, raising his eyes casually, stares at me longer than usual, as if he's seen a ghost. His gaze hangs on me for a few seconds, but then, as if waking from a dream, he shakes himself, pulls himself together, and opens his mouth at last:

"There's our princess. Let's go for a night stroll," he comes over and gallantly extends his elbow to me, and I slip my palm through his hand, head held high, and walk out into the warm September night with him.

Wrocław is simply marvelous: its gingerbread brick houses cluster on cobblestone streets just as they did three hundred and five hundred years ago, piercing the starry sky with sharp spires and weathervanes. At university I was very interested in the history of the Middle Ages, so I am now gazing at the buildings around me, imagining that I am a noble lady and her beau, stepping off a porter for a short walk to get some fresh air. We pass by sleepy buildings with high-end boutiques and expensive restaurants that have already closed, until we reach a busier street where the night never sleeps. Here the neon signs are already flashing with clubs and casinos, and I scrutinize them carefully to choose the establishment of my choice. No more cheap eateries by the road, I decided to myself, and my gaze settles on a casino in a respectable-looking building with a red carpet and security guards, where a luxurious black limousine had just parked.

"Come this way," I tug Roman's arm and head toward the entrance with a confident stride.

"Zarezerwowane dla ciebie?"¹⁷ A big shaven-headed security guard in a suit asks us at the entrance, and I answer him in English:

"No, we have just arrived."

The big fellow starts calling someone on his radio, but a man who comes up behind us, apparently the one who had just arrived in that shiny limousine, says something to the guard in Polish, and we are let through. I smile back at him with my most charming smile and nod silently, but the man looks at me with a keen interested gaze and his stiffly defined lips curve into a smile. I appraise him instantly: it's a skill I've had since birth, and it's how I separate the grain from the chaff. The expensive suit, the twenty-thousand-euro watch that peeked out from under his jacket sleeve for a split second, and, of course, the handmade Italian shoes.

And I know for sure that he appreciates me, too, recognizing me as one of our own circle, despite my relatively cheap clothes and overly handsome beau, who clearly doesn't have the trappings of wealth. Great, the evening is off to an excellent start, I sigh contentedly. A luxury hotel, a decent club, and finally normal people around, not some beggarly trash who will grab my breasts and get their sweaty dirty paws into my panties!

We are greeted by a well-mannered waiter and escorted to a small table in the center of the room. Well, although I'd prefer privacy, I like to be in plain sight. And I immediately start catching the interested stares from the public, which I'm so used to, being a famous blogger and Polin Sonis herself. And I don't think the Roma-Elvis charms are working here. It's as if they've been dimmed, like the lights in the room: yes, there's definitely an unhealthy interest in him, but I notice how the women look at him discreetly, not allowing themselves to stare at him openly like in cheaper places or just on the street. Everyone here is well-mannered and reserved, and hides their baser instincts under a wrapper of etiquette.

I look at the menu and choose my own food, leaving Roma to look around bored. As soon as I place my full order and the waiter takes it to the kitchen, the sommelier comes over with a bottle of French wine and uncorks it. I can tell from the name alone that this dry red from Bordeaux costs at least four or five hundred euros a bottle, and I try to stop the butler:

"Excuse me, we haven't ordered any wine yet!" And the waiter replies to me:

"Of course, madam, I understand. The gentleman at that table over there sent it to you as a gift. He said that this *Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon* from the sixteenth year would go perfectly with duck confit you ordered.

I turn my head in the direction the waiter has subtly nodded to me, and see my recent acquaintance sitting at the table, apparently with a friend, only raising his glass in response to my questioning gaze. I inhale the aroma of French summer, sunshine, ripe berries and a bit of sadness, raise my glass in response and take a tiny sip, smiling at my admirer and making a sign to the sommelier that the wine is excellent. He pours it into our glasses and walks away, leaving me alone with Roma-Elvis and his eternal taunts.

"What?!" I say in response to his usual mocking look. "What's wrong? You think I can't get a drink from a man who likes me? Just like that? Or it's only you who can just cut dividends from your over-ripe women?"

¹⁷ Do you have a reservation? (Polish)

"Well, it's up to you," Roma answers me calmly, pushing aside his flute and ordering a beer from the waiter. "I'll have your specialty sausages," he returns the menu to him. "At least I know how to do something for a living," he curves his beautiful lips into that grin that makes me hate him. "And you, Sonny Polly, admit it, are you worth much without all your dads, suitors, and partying? Who'd give a dime for you?" He throws hurtful words in my face, and I instantly flare up like a fuse.

"We'll see how much and who exactly will give something for me!" I snap at him, taking a huge sip of wine, draining the glass almost completely, and the well-mannered waiter immediately refills it with a new portion of scarlet blood.

"Great, we can check," Roma answers nonchalantly, enjoying his ice-cold beer in a fogged glass with a picture of a beautiful town hall on the barrel. "Do you think this man just admired your beautiful untainted soul and your art degree?" He arches his perfect eyebrow and breaks off a piece of warm, white salt-encrusted pretzel.

"Well, I understand your ironic attitude," I answer with dignity, and carefully spread the crisp white napkin on my lap, preparing to cut the first piece of my duck with blood. "But trust me, people in my circle are capable of appreciating something other than naked sexuality in people," I say with pathos.

Roma laughs in response to my remark, throwing his head back so far that I'm afraid he's going to choke on his pretzel.

"Calm down," I warn him quietly, taking a bite of the divine scarlet meat. Blood and wine: definitely something I've needed lately.

I raise my glass toward the man and stare at him for a long moment, not taking my eyes off him as Roma finishes his patois, picking at his fried sausages in the pan.

"Okay, fine, I warned you, though I thought you should be a little smarter," my beau calms down, "I just thought you should know men pretty well with your looks and fame. Considering the mores of your party. Believe me, I know about them firsthand," he explains, and then cuts off his monologue by looking me in the eye. "Wait, don't tell me you don't know men," I see a sudden realization dawn on his face. "Was Anastas Weisberg your first...."

"Yes, and the only one," I blurt out, feeling the warm wave of tart wine loosen my tongue. "What's the big deal? Does that surprise you, fiery Presley?! That there's something else in the world that doesn't fit your personal paradigm and mindset? That all women are whores?" I scream the words in his face, and I hate that I have to apologize for the fact that the only man in my life was my ex-fiancé, who I was going to marry. I don't care at all now, though, like I did that night at the club, and then I flinch when someone's palm rests on my shoulder.

I lift my face up and see the classy gentleman next to me, the one who's sent me a bottle of wine and is probably worried about me. And as if reading my thoughts, he asks in English with a slight Polish accent:

"Are you all right, my dear? Perhaps you need some help?"

I see Roma's eyes narrow with anger and his jaundices start to run frantically, and I answer with the sweetest smile:

"Thanks for your concern, but we're fine. We were just having an argument with my..." I hesitate for a moment to introduce my companion, "my chauffeur about the role of women in the modern world."

"What an interesting conversation you're having, and I'd like to discuss it with you, too," he looks very intently into my eyes, and I feel his hand gently stroking my shoulder, burning my skin through the thin jersey. "Perhaps you'd like to join me and my friend? We'd love to talk about it," he says, keeping his experienced adult male eyes on my lips, and I answer, finally angry and determined to prove to Roma that I'm not some inexperienced fool:

"With great pleasure," and I get up from my seat, and the man gallantly holds me by the waist.

I cast a triumphant and gloating glance at Elvis and toss him carelessly over my shoulder:

"Roman, I'll ask the waiter to bring the bill to that table for me, don't worry," and my new beau replies:

"You don't have to worry about the bill, I've already have it all settled down," and pulls back my chair so I can sit at the table with my new interesting buddies.

Groomed, rich and successful men. Adult and mature.

"I'm sorry, I still haven't introduced myself," my beau suddenly realizes, "Daniel. And this is my business partner, Mateusz," and his friend stretches his mouth in a friendly smile. Just as elegant and well-mannered.

"Eleanor," I say, suddenly, unexpectedly to myself, using the first name that came to mind. Playing grown-up games, all the way to the end. Let no one know who I really am.

Daniel makes a subtle sign to the waiter, and he instantly fills our glasses, we toast our acquaintance and laugh, and out of the corner of my eye I see Roma get up and walk away from the room....

To be honest, I feel like I haven't talked to normal people for ages, and now I'm just enjoying the usual casual conversation: we discuss with Daniel and Mateusz where was the best place to vacation this year: Khalkidhiki, or the good old Azure; we agree that Sardinia is probably not so relevant anymore, and the service has become lame, and that perhaps the future lies in Central Africa with its lovely private hotels with giraffes and safaris. We go to the same stores, wear the same brands, fly on the same private jets, and when two men, after countless drinks of expensive wine, suggest that we continue the evening at Mateusz's apartment nearby, where he has a wonderful collection of contemporary artists, of course I agree!

Although we could have walked, Daniel summons his luxurious *Rolls Royce* and we get into it in front of the queue for the nightclub.

"Champagne?" My companion pulls a chilled bottle from the bar, and I see the glass between the passenger seat and the driver's side creep upward.

All I do is nod in response as Mateusz is already filling my glass, and suddenly I feel Daniel's hand calmly and imperiously rest on my knee, squeezing it lightly. He smiles at me, but his eyes are already glinting with the predatory fire of a conqueror. I ponder for a moment what I should do, but remembering Roma's recent taunts about only one man in my life, I shake my mane with determination and smile back, tasting my wine. Well, tonight I might have two of them!

Daniel, as if he'd been waiting for my permission, boldly leads his palm farther and higher, to where my legs were interlocked, and I feel his rough, insistent fingers reaching over the edge of my panties, searching for the entrance to the holy of holies. Mateusz, meanwhile, kneels down and kisses my thighs tenderly, working his way up my dress until his face meets Daniel's fingers. He spreads my legs wide apart in a confident motion, and burrows his lips into my pussy while Daniel has already moved to my breasts, caressing my hardening nipples with his tongue and lips....

But now the car, swaying quietly, stops, and the driver announces over the speakerphone:

"Przyjechać!"¹⁸

"We'd better move upstairs, to my apartment," Mateusz says, as if waking up from a dream, though I can see his eyes are hazy.

We get out of the car and go up to the luxurious lobby, where the doors are opened by a uniformed doorman. The elevator doors open and we go straight to the penthouse on the very top floor, and my breath is taken away by the view of the city. I walk up to the panoramic window and look at tiny Wrocław in the palm of my hand. But then my heart ticks quietly at the mere thought that somewhere down there, below me, is our hotel for the day, and my Elvis-Roman might be waiting for me there right now. Or might not?

"And where is the promised collection, Mateusz?" I put aside my foolish doubts, and the man turns on the lights with y remote control.

I look around, and I can't believe my eyes: all the walls of the luxurious designer space are hung with huge paintings, or rather, pornographic pictures! Seven-foot long cocks, where I can see every follicle and hair, are succulently entering wet vaginas, with their impressive dimensions more like life-size caves. Giant tongues lick soccer ball-sized balls, and carved rhinestone-encrusted anal plugs the size of stools are stuck in someone's anuses the size of a quite large window.

I stand frozen, clutching my champagne glass in one hand, dumbfounded by this riot of overly modern art.

"What do you think of my paintings?" I hear the voice of my new friend, and turning to him, I see that he has not wasted time: he is already standing in his underpants. Leather ones, though, and

¹⁸ *We have arrived!* (Polish)

he's handing me the handcuffs so I can chain him to the metal chair standing here in the center of the room.

"Come on, Eleanor, we promise you'll love it," Daniel comes up to me from the side, already taking off his jacket and shirt and unbuttoning his pants.

And this is something that should give me unforgettable pleasure?! And then Mateusz will run to his secret dominant's room and bring me a spiked collar and a ball gag in my teeth?! And after I'll be given... — and then, as if reading my mind, Danielle holds out the strapon to me, suggesting me... to put it on? "It is an unforgettable experience, Polin, you're a lucky girl," — I mutter to myself, backing toward the elevator before the two alpha males could forcefully strap the rubber cock to me.

"Eleanor, where are you going?" Danielle rushes after me, tangling in his falling down pants as I getting into the lift car and press the first-floor button. It's only when I step outside I realize I'm barefoot. Fuck.

In the morning, as it is, I go into our room, sure that Roma is either asleep or somewhere with his new women. But, to my surprise, he's sitting on the couch, surfing channels. I walk in, and he doesn't even turn his head in my direction. Well, it's easier for me. I don't have to explain anything.

"Did you have a good fuck?" He asks me indifferently, and I respond, flushed:

"Great, just wonderful. Thank you!" And I go to my bedroom on the second floor.

The sun is beating mercilessly into my eyes through the attic window when the phone rings on my bedside table. I answer the phone, and the receptionist tells me in a cheerful voice that I have visitors waiting for me downstairs.

"What kind of visitors?" I don't understand.

"Wait a minute," the girl clarifies, "this is from Anastas Weisberg, your personal chauffeur and bodyguard."

"Good," I answer, and I feel as if my heart has just fell down inside and is hanging on a thin thread, ready to fall and shatter. "Tell them I'll be dressed and downstairs in fifteen minutes."

12

We are speeding away from the old gingerbread town with millionaire freaks at nearly one hundred and twenty miles per hour, deciding whether we should go through Dresden or Prague. And I sigh to myself, how nice it is that the attic rooms of old hotels have their own terraces and rooftop access to the back staircase.

"No more hotels or *Booking*," Roman warns me, and of course I agree with him: no more places where we have to show our passports and glow through the general reservation system.

"It's amazing how quickly they found us," I justify myself, though I realize that it was quite expected anyway. "But at least I have to go shopping again to get some clothes," I show Elvis my trampled sneakers, which I had to slip into again to avoid running barefoot from my ex-fiancé's thugs.

"Remind me," Roma turns his face to me, "why didn't I take my money and go back to Moscow without you yesterday?"

"Probably you didn't want me to tell Anastas Weisberg how you first kidnapped me and, threatening me with a gun, forced me to do various nasty things on camera?" I answer innocently, enduring his long stare, and Roma's lips stretched into an ironic grin.

"Great school, baby. You've got it — let's drive through Prague."

"Fine, I love Prague," I agree with him.

"I'm sorry I was so rude to you yesterday," my Presley suddenly apologizes, and out of surprise I don't even know what to say to him.

"Apology accepted," I say quietly. "And what made you apologize, may I ask?" Without any mockery, I wonder sincerely.

"To be honest, I have nothing against a good fuck, it's not for me to teach anyone about life," he grins again. "But yesterday I was completely pissed off by your way of exalting yourself as some privileged class. Well," he stammers, "you do belong to a privileged class, and it would be silly to argue

with that, but it's a little racist, don't you think? Are you the same kind of people, or do you bleed blue? Or do you feel more deeply than the average plebeian? Okay, maybe I don't know something in this life, and you actually had exquisite ethereal sex last night while discussing Kandinsky and Malevich¹⁹?"

And then I can't stand it, remembering these two masters of life in their leather ammunition and handcuffs. And I start giggling. It is very strange, by the way, that for their purposes they did not find a more prepared girl, I would even say, a professional... And then it dawns on me that they took me for a prostitute! Probably not the cheapest from the highway, but not the most expensive either! And then I start laughing in full voice, having imagined myself in this ridiculous outfit for non-standard pleasures.

"I don't understand, what did I say so funny?" Roma remarks in surprise.

"No, I am not laughing at you, believe me! I had a really unusual experience yesterday."

"Really?" My beautiful Elvis raises one eyebrow. "Will you tell me about it?"

"I think so, but not today," I nod.

"Polin, is it true what you told me yesterday about Anastas?"

"I didn't tell you anything about him, what are you talking about?"

"You know perfectly well what I mean. That would explain a lot. You're his trophy. He owns you. He's your only man, and I guess that's still keeping him from letting you go, right?" He turns to me, pulls out of the driveway.

"Yes, you guessed it again, Doctor Freud," I smile. "He was my first and the only man."

"And how is it that at twenty-two you've never dated anyone? Didn't you have boys at your elite school? Or at least at the art institute?" We look at each other and start laughing. "Your Weisberg must be in his thirties by now, right? How much older is he than you? Ten? Fifteen years?" And then I realize that Roma is now stepping on very shaky ground.

"Thirteen," I mutter faintly.

"That's a nice difference. Mature," Roman sneers again. "I can imagine how a good girl Polin Sonis exactly at the age of eighteen, right on the day after her birthday, met a beautiful and no less rich prince Anastas Weisberg. Or no, not so: they met somewhere at *Kinotavr*²⁰, where Arkady Sonis presented his new blockbuster, and the prince immediately fell in love with this stunning beauty with a mole above the upper lip," he turns his face to me again. "Is that exactly what happened? Am I right?"

"Pretty much," I answer simply. "Except I was twelve years old."

"Didn't get it?" The smile comes off Elvis's face.

"I'm saying it's exactly as you say, except I was twelve when I met him and he was twenty-five," I answer stiffly.

"Are you telling me that he just held hands with you until you were eighteen?" And I see him slow down and our car pulls into the right lane.

"No, that's not what I'm saying," I reply tiredly. "You heard exactly what you heard: I was twelve the first time Stas..." And then I stop talking, because I don't want to discuss it with Roma anymore. I've already said more than I should....

Because I was only twelve years old when Anastas Weisberg met me and, after inviting me to a some play in a theater, took me to his three-story apartment on Ostozhenka Street²¹ and made love with me there. At least, that's what I always wanted to think. And what else should a little girl think when a grown man brings her to his house, whispering that now she is his forever, and he will never let her go? What was I supposed to tell my happy parents when the richest and most powerful young man became "friends" with their teenage daughter?! Take her to exhibitions, concerts and fancy restaurants, and bring her home before ten p.m.? But before he did with her what he should have done with a girl his own age. "You're my fiancée, Pola, so you should do it with me," he always said to me as he locked his bedroom door, and my parents were careful to pretend that everything was within the bounds of propriety. And I never doubted that it was. Until now. All brides do it with their grooms, don't they?

¹⁹ Kandinsky and Malevich were influential Russian artists known for their pioneering contributions to abstract art and the development of the Suprematist movement, respectively.

²⁰ The Kinotavr Prize is a prestigious Russian film festival held annually in Sochi, celebrating and promoting independent cinema and featuring competition among filmmakers.

²¹ Ostozhenka Street is an affluent and historic residential area in Moscow, renowned for its luxurious properties, with real estate prices often reaching several million dollars per apartment.

I glance over at Elvis, who's staring at the road, and I can see the jaundice in his cheekbones. Just like yesterday, at the restaurant. He doesn't ask me anything else. And there's no point in continuing this conversation. It's all within the bounds of propriety.

We found a cozy apartment in the center of Prague on *Airbnb*, and I'm so tired during these three days that I feel like it's been a whole year since the date of my formerly planned wedding. I am completely cut off from the world, from my relatives, girlfriends and blog, and now I really only have one close person left in the whole world — my Roma Elvis. He's put aside his jokes for a while, and I can finally see normal human traits in him myself. True, he's still abnormally handsome, but that, as they say, passes with age. Sometimes.

We walk with him through the cramped medieval streets, looking for a store to buy me some normal clothes and shoes. At the first boutique I come across, the saleswomen, as usual, make small talk with my companion, ignoring me, but, to my surprise, he indifferently tells them that it's up to me to decide what I like best. I take a few things into the stall, still a little apprehensive about not finding my faithful knight in the hall, but there he is, obediently sitting and waiting for me to show him the next new outfit.

"Wait," he says quietly as I turn around in front of the mirror, trying to see how the pants and blouse with the normal neckline that covers my breasts fit.

"Is something wrong?" I ask, and Roma silently comes up to me, and carefully, as if squeezing the most fragile thing in the world in his fingers, zips up the back and quietly pulls out the tag from under the lining.

I didn't even expect such tenderness from his delicate fingers, now barely touching me, and I want to sit right there on the mat in this room and burst into tears in front of the astonished salesgirls and customers. But all I do — just smile and thank him like a lady of honor, as if it wasn't his cock that had been in my mouth a few days ago. My cheekbones instantly flush scarlet at that memory, and I glare at him, afraid he knows exactly what I'm thinking right now. So he takes his hands off my back and looks away, asking with a hesitation:

"Well, I think it's a great fit. Is that what you plan wear right now? It looks perfect on you," and he mumbles, damn it, as if he's embarrassed to compliment me!

I don't know what happened to him today, but I've never seen him so shy, delicate, and suave. I feel like I've known him for many, many years.

"Great, thank you," I say, "I only have shoes, socks and underwear left to buy!"

In the lingerie store, as expected, there is a full house, and all the girls as one suddenly come out of their booths almost in the nude to twirl in front of the common mirror. And in front of Elvis of course, who's still not paying attention to anyone. What's wrong with him?! To test my theory, I pull on a new bra and ask him to help me button it. And he obediently and breathlessly does it hook by hook while I can literally feel his fingers twitching slightly with my skin.

After I've replenished my closet enough to bravely travel to fulfill my desires, we finally return to our home under the roof for one night. I lie on the bed, almost melting in those freshly laundered sheets, and before I finally fall asleep, the last lines of that princess poem pop into my head:

*...Early in the morning, a sleepy worker
Walked the princess to the edge of the forest,
But more than once in the dead of night
Tears were shed for the hut.*

I wake up at dawn to birds singing outside my window and the rumbling of a truck that has arrived at the store on the ground floor below us. I can hear the movers and the owner talking, the bottles clinking, and the saleswoman laughing. I climb out of my warm bed, and I want to believe that my fatigue is gone forever, and that all my diagnoses are just a bad dream. Elvis is still asleep behind the tightly closed door to the second bedroom, and I decide, remembering how nice he was last night, to do something nice and sweet for him. I pull on my T-shirt and the pants I bought yesterday, new sneakers and finally clean socks. Careful not to wake my faithful companion, I open the front door and walk down the sleeping stairs to the street, already flooded with pastel September light.

I walk to the bakery around the corner, smelling the aroma of fresh cinnamon pastries hundreds of feet away, and buy a few soft brioche and two cups of coffee: a cappuccino for myself and an espresso for Elvis, as I think he might like something stronger. Just as quietly, I sneak up the stairs to our loft to surprise my buddy, and quietly push open the bedroom door. I'm already anticipating his surprised, sleepy face when I place my cute, impromptu breakfast on the nightstand next to his pillow.

"Oh, here is our coffee!" The stranger girl on the bed smiles at me. "Put it over there on the table, darling! Thanks!" And then she turns her face back to Elvis, who is hovering over her with his whole body, but I have not the slightest doubt that he has just entered her, judging by the sweet sigh she has just let out, like a balloon slowly deflating. And no longer paying any attention to me.

"Enjoy!" I can only squeeze out of myself in surprise, slamming the door behind me so hard that I feel like plaster is going to fall from the ceiling.

Well, my Roma, as always, in his role. He's back where he belongs. And I exhale with relief. Because I realize it would be really, really painful for me to hurt him.

"So, Sonny Polly, ready for Paris?" As if nothing happened, my Elvis asks me, when we, having loaded into his car and rumbled along the centuries-old cobblestones in the center of Prague, leaving it forever.

And I'm a little sorry that we didn't stay here for at least one more day to walk across the Charles Bridge at night, go into the Jewish Quarter and that amazing park next to Prague Castle. But I have my orange and lemon Italy waiting for me, and hopefully my David is waiting for me as well.

"Yes, I'm ready," I smile back at my companion. "I need a new phone after all," I tell him.

"Do you miss your social media?" Romeo asks. And I suddenly realize that I've spent days without visiting my blog. And I don't really care. "You're kind of a famous Influencer. Even I didn't have the slightest trouble finding you."

"Oh yeah, I see," I remember his nasty blackmail again. "You probably even registered under that awful nickname... What's it called, let me remember," I mutter, spying on his reaction. "It's kind of corny... Ah, yes! The Mask of Zorro, the angel of vengeance and all that. Who were you going to avenge? Me? And for what?"

"I just wrote the first thing that popped into my head," my Elvis mumbles, but I can definitely see how pissed off he is at this conversation right now.

"Okay, whatever happened, it happened already," I conclude conciliatingly, because I don't really care about any of that right now. "You better tell me, can't you really go a day without sex? Maybe you have a mental disorder, haven't you thought about it?" I ask him seriously.

"I thought so," Elvis answers calmly, and grins again. "But everyone relieves stress in different ways, right? I don't get drunk or do drugs. Besides, I'm sure I'm doing something good for others."

"What?! I can't believe what I'm hearing. "You really think fucking someone on the side of the road makes them happy?!"

"Polly, I think you're the one with a very serious problem," my catcher calmly replies. "Why do you think sex is something disgusting? Has it ever occurred to you that all these girls and women might actually enjoy it? And they actually enjoy it? Like you did, remember?" And I instantly flare up, and quickly turn away to the window so he doesn't notice my excitement. "Look at me," and I feel his hand gently touches my chin.

I turn my face toward him, and I see his dark blue eyes, without a shadow of mockery.

"Ask each of them if they liked what I did to them," he continues, "and I'm sure what she'll answer. Otherwise they wouldn't have come back to me. Wouldn't have sobbed under me. Wouldn't be spreading their warm, wet bodies under my stomach, you know what I mean?" Oh, yeah, now I know what he means.

I'm looking at his beautiful profile right now, and all I can see is that picture from the club. But I'm sure it's just a masterful manipulation, I tell to myself. I've read a lot, and I know that narcissistic personalities like my Elvis are brilliant at manipulating the mind. Especially women's minds. Especially those who want it. Like me right now. Shit!

We drive the rest of the way in silence, only switching radio waves, and I go over in my head all of Roma's women, whom I had been lucky enough to see over the past couple of days: the passionate TV presenter Alice, a vamp woman, and clearly not suffering from a lack of male attention. Scruff Angela

from the cafe, who was also not an innocent victim of the devil-seducer. And I'm not even talking about the free and absolutely no-complexes girl from Prague. And yes, I didn't see any signs of regret in any of them. Or despair. Or whatever else should be on their faces when a woman doesn't want sex. And Roma was right: all of them, as one, flowed, moaned, and pressed his cock into themselves even harder and more passionately, dissolving into him from his slow thrusts and hot whispers. What's he always mumbling in their ears anyway?! And then I catch myself thinking that I was very interested in that question. Oh, it's such a pity that I will never hear it. At least I hope that I won't!

I finally insert the sim card with internet into the smartphone I bought on the way, and re-register in all my accounts. I find the person I'm looking for, and I type a message to him.... And in a few minutes I get a reply. And I'm just happy, and I can feel butterflies starting to flutter in my stomach. Or maybe I'm just hungry.

13

Finally, the autumn sky bursts over our heads with endless sobs over the summer that is drifting away, and we, having never reached Paris, park not far from the main cathedral of Reims — the champagne capital of the world.

"Let's go out," Roma commands, and without too many questions I follow him.

After running under the pouring rain for less than a thousand feet, we fly into a huge Gothic temple, on the pointed roofs of which sit a pack of ugly gargoyles, spewing on guests streams of muddy rainwater. Inside is quiet and calm: apparently, Monday is not the busiest day for one of the main cathedrals of France, where the first kings were crowned. The evening service has just ended, and we are apparently the only visitors here at this hour.

Roma takes my hand, and compared to my icy palm, his skin feels scalding hot to me. He leads me confidently through the humming corridors until he stops at the huge stained-glass windows:

"My favorite place here. I wanted to show it to you," he looks at the window, and the soft blue skylight shines through paintings and figures I wouldn't mistake for anything else. "Marc Chagall²²," Elvis explains, and I stare at him in amazement.

"I know," I mumble back. But how does he know that?! It's like he's taken me to his favorite bar and recommended a dish he usually orders with his beer. I guess I'm a terrible judge of character. And certainly of the character of my companion.

"Light a candle, maybe your request will be fulfilled?" He advises me, and once again I am amazed that I did not expect from the best gigolo of the Russian capital such a serious relationship with God. Or with religion. Or art. Okay, I'm totally confused. So I'm going to buy and light the candles on. Three of them. And I make a wish on each one. Although I'm not sure that's I can ask the Almighty for such things....

We leave Reims Cathedral, and it seems to me that the heavenly streams have now simply turned into waterfalls, under which there is no possibility of continuing our journey.

"It seems to me, but Paris can wait," I say to Roma, and he replies, after thinking for a moment, taking my hand in his again:

"I know what we can do for you now."

We run across the square and rush into a store filled with various bottles of the world's most festive drink.

"This is the champagne capital of the world!" Roman explains to me, and turns to the lonely salesman, visibly animated at our appearance: "Une bouteille de votre meilleur champagne, s'il vous plaît!"²³

The enthusiastic shopkeeper chooses one of the best brands for us, explaining something in detail to Elvis, who speaks fluent French. And now we, having taken a couple of glass flutes, which my

²² Marc Chagall was a renowned Russian-French artist known for his vibrant use of color and dreamlike imagery, often blending elements of folklore, religion, and personal narrative in his works.

²³ *A bottle of your best champagne, please! (French)*

friend did not forget to ask the seller for, finally, all soaked to the skin, get into our car, which now seems to be the only surviving ark in the world flood.

"Take off your clothes," Roma commands.

"What!?" Only I start to resent him, as he, bending over the seat, pulls out a plaid and a dry sweatshirt from my sports bag. And starts pulling off his soaked clothes, leaving only jeans on.

"A little music, *ma chérie*," he adds a radio with some French wave, of course, and uncorks a bottle. The cork hits the roof of our car, and the champagne pours with a seductive whisper out of the bottle into the glass he had thoughtfully placed in front of him.

We are sitting in a fogged-up *Volkswagen Touareg*, as if in our own little enchanted kingdom: I am in a sweatshirt, panties and socks, and Elvis is wearing only jeans, we are drinking our second bottle, snacking on chocolates with champagne, and Roma is telling me how he first came to Paris at the age of eighteen and settled in Place Pigalle. I wonder how old he is now? Thirty? Thirty-three? It rains on and on, never stopping, when suddenly there is a knock on the window and the light of a flashlight hits us in the eye.

"The police!" I mumble fearfully.

"*Tout est bien?*"²⁴ asks the drenched pharaoh through the window that Roma has rolled down.

"*Oui, merci,*"²⁵ my Elvis answers him with a smile, and turns to me: "This is France, baby. Everything should be fine here."

Drunk and sluggish, stuffed full of the best champagne I've ever tasted in my life and the best chocolate truffles, I lie back and fall asleep on the folding seat, listening to the rain pounding against our safe roof, and my Elvis mumbling something in French until my eyes finally are closed from sleep and sweets:

"*Que dois-je faire de toi, ma bébé. Ma petite fille....*"²⁶

I'm gently swayed by the sea waves, and the sun rolls across the roof of the car as I slowly open my eyes.

"Did you sleep well, Polly?" Roma drives the car very carefully, so as not to spill me like expensive wine in a flute.

"Where are we going?" I mumble, lifting the back of the seat and looking around. But I already know the answer without him: we're rolling right into the thick of Paris's everyday traffic on Boulevard Haussmann. As any decent girl from a good family should, I've been here many times, and I even remember the chic hotel where we spent an unforgettable weekend with my ex-fiancé. Unforgettable for him. Because I had to spend most of the time with him in the luxurious penthouse room, almost without leaving it, because Stasik was especially excited by the view of the Eiffel Tower from the window. Though strangely, I always thought that towers are especially adored by girls....

But now, of course, no expensive hotels, no hotels at all, where they could demand my passport and instantly inform the Weisberg clan about my whereabouts. I wonder where Elvis is taking me after all. And he answers:

"To a place from my past life. You're gonna love it."

He drives the car so confidently, without even checking the navigator, that it's obvious he's been down this road more than once. Plus, he speaks perfect French, what was he whispering to me last night? I don't know anything about him. Whereas he knows everything about my life. Or almost everything.

A couple more blocks, and our car squeezes into the neighboring streets, and I can already see the red mill of the Moulin Rouge from afar, which means we're passing Place Pigalle. Quite close somewhere is Montmartre, which I know so much about because it is the most famous artists' neighborhood, perhaps in the whole world. To my surprise, Roma passes a few more houses, turns into an alley, and, barely squeezing between two parked cars, turns off the engine.

²⁴ *Is everything alright? (French)*

²⁵ *Yes, thanks. (French)*

²⁶ *What am I going to do with you, baby. My little girl..." (French)*

"Here we are, Polly."

I stare in surprise at the low, old building, obviously with apartments, before I could ask the question on tip of my tongue.

"Let's get out," Elvis says, taking my bag of clothes from the car, and I obediently follow him out in my underwear and sweatshirt, just as I'd fallen asleep last night. Passersby are in a rush for their own things, but no one seems surprised by my more than strange appearance. This is Paris, baby, this is Paris, — I breathe in the air of the city of love and art.

Elvis rings the intercom at the entryway door, and it swings open, letting us into a cool, narrow hallway with a wrought iron twisted railing.

"The elevator doesn't work, as usual," Roma grins, and ran up the stairs, going higher and higher, and I can barely keep up with him.

The last floor is the famous Parisian attic, and the darkened wooden door with the tiny gold license plate swings open, and a giant cloud-woman literally flows out of it, raking Elvis in her deadly embrace.

"Mon petit garçon, tu es venu!"²⁷ She shakes his rag-like body, and kisses him wetly and sonorously on both cheeks.

I stand a little behind and look at this unusual black lady: bright and huge, like an exotic flower, she smothers my little boy with her monumental bust, into which he pressed with his whole body. She's covered in a leopard-print jumpsuit that doesn't hide a single round crease on her soft and warm body, and I have no idea how she's able to keep her balance on those high platform shoes, but she seems to be quite comfortable in this garment. Her black eyes are moistened from crying, her long false eyelashes are flapping like butterfly wings, and her gold shimmering eye shadow is already smeared across her cheeks. Elvis looks a little embarrassed, but not scared, and I don't think he's in any hurry to get out of those huge hands that are strangling him.

"Hello, Mimi," he mumbles, and my scant French is enough to make sense of it. "And this is Polin."

"Oh, sorry, nice to meet you!" Mimi switches all her attention to me. "Quelle beauté,"²⁸ and with a sly smile rubs my Elvis on the cheek.

"Non, non, ce n'est pas ce que tu pensais,"²⁹ he mumbles, and I realize I've never seen him so embarrassed before.

"Ah, come on in, kids," she pushes her massive body aside as if to unlock the doorway, and we squeeze into the spacious, bright studio, which is bathed in the gentle Parisian sun.

"Mimi gave us permission to stay here," Elvis translates to me the Frenchwoman, who keeps gibbering with the speed of an artillery piece. "I hope Mademoiselle doesn't mind," he raises his perfect eyebrow questioningly, and I answer with a smile:

"Of course not! It's charming here, madame," I say in a pathetic mixture of my English and French to the black-clad panther. A little curvy, but still moving her grandiose rippling body with great grace and dignity in the space of this small room.

"I have to go, mon bébé," she licks Elvis's lips again, and addresses us both: "Enjoy Paris and each other! I'm expecting you tonight, you won't miss the show, will you?"

"Yours — never," Roma assures her, and Mimi leaves, moving her gigantic body regally and gracefully like a huge airship in space.

"You're full of surprises," I turn to my Elvis, and I don't know who he is or where he's from. In my usual world, everything is always very clear: this one is a businessman, this one is a TV host and blogger, and this one is a servant. Each has taken his place according to his talents, background and social hierarchy. Water does not mix with oil. I'm out of touch with the world of strippers and black panthers. And now I just look up, out the attic window, and realize for the first time how deep and gentle and blue the sky is over Paris. Where before I had mostly been in boutiques, fancy restaurants, expensive hotel bedrooms and the Louvre.

²⁷ *My little boy, you are back! (French)*

²⁸ *Such a beauty (French)*

²⁹ *No, no, that's not what you have thought about (French)*

"I told you that I'd make wishes for you, Sonnypolly. All dreams come true here," and he runs his thumb gently over my lip, as if he were wiping my mustache of invisible milk foam.

I'm lying in a shabby old bathtub on bronze legs just under the tiled roof, and the joy of the eternal city comes through the open window. I close my eyes, and realize for the first time that I'm probably not ready to die at all. How strange that this simple and clear thought had not occurred to me before. The shock of the first few days fades away, dissolving into the vervain-scented foam I borrowed from the lovely Mimi, and now I can think a little about what awaits me in the future. Or rather, who. Anastas and his eternal PR people, who would try to twist any personal tragedy to benefit him and his multi-billion dollars empire. My parents, who, as it turns out, have spent years investing in an empty shell. Me, to be exact. No successful marriage, no dizzying career. Just grief, illness and disappointment.... Perhaps a few of my subscribers will remember me, to discuss me on the networks and even, perhaps, to hype on my name. Not to remember again the blogger *@pollysonis*. You can't blame them for that. How many times have I myself flipped through other people's pages, other people's lives, as if looking through an ajar door, forgetting about them after a few minutes.

And Elvis? What about Elvis: just a couple more days, and he'll finally get his money and quietly leave me where I tell him to. And at the thought of him, my heart suddenly clenches painfully. For some reason, I'm so sorry to lose him. Although I realize it's Stockholm syndrome or whatever it's called. What could I possibly be attracted to this narcissistic, pompous, sex-crazed narcissist? And then I realize that's exactly what I'm attracted to. His self-confidence. His obsession. And his charisma. Goddamn it!

I crawl out of the tub, lukewarm and pink, wrapped in a huge towel, making way for Roma. After changing into the little wool dress I bought yesterday in Prague, I look around the unusual room that has become our home for the day. A bright and small studio with a closet in the corner and a heavy wrought iron bed in the center: all very nice and cozy. But here's what makes it unusual: dozens of framed and unframed paintings hanging all over the walls. Painted in charcoal, pastels and oils, each one immediately catches the eye: they are portraits, mostly of women, but also of men. Painted with rough strokes and brushstrokes, they leave no doubt that they were created by a true master.

Here is a girl in a corset pulling on stockings, apparently a Chinese: the artist has managed to show the moment when she looks a little tiredly somewhere to the side, as if she has been called to another client, and she is about to put on a smile and follow him. A heavy, bright blonde with a scarlet mouth and wearing tiger tights and a nude top is lying calmly on the couch, just looking in front of her, as if the painter caught her at the moment when she just lay down to rest after a hard day. And there is so much calmness and dignity in her that one could hardly call her a cheap whore.

In the very center of the light wall hangs a huge gilt-framed painting, as big as Mimi herself, with the inscription in the corner *Ma Reine*, and I'm breathtaking from this sight: a woman sitting on a high bar stool, barely holding the weight of her monumental body, with huge heavy breasts, descending to a domed, all in folds, belly, glossy and shimmering chocolate shades. One foot on a high pointed heel coquettishly set aside, revealing a surprisingly modest triangle at the bottom of the abdomen, on a cap of curls on her head nestled tiny gold crown, which Mimi coquettishly holds with one hand, and in the other she holds a meter-long mouthpiece, from the other end of which a thin stream of cigarette smoke pours out in a thin trickle, so voluminous and masterfully painted that I feel as if I could put it through my fingers. I have no strength to tear myself away from this picture, and I absorb every detail: the woman seems much younger to me here, and her whole face radiates with such calm dignity, cheerfulness and beauty that the spectators cannot even doubt that she is a true queen. And then I think of the painting in Elvis's wooden house: although that one seemed to me to have been painted at least a hundred years ago, and this one in front of me is clearly a modern work, I see common features in the technique: this volume and realism, with the ability to convey ordinary things in such a way that they seem absolutely fantastic.

It's amazing how this apartment could have such a painting, obviously not cheap. I have no doubt that the world's leading galleries would fight for the right to represent it. Like all paintings by this artist. I try to find the signature on it, because I'm sure I can identify the author from it. I grab my phone and take a picture of each painting to try to figure it out later, and I can feel the collector's passion awakening in me.

"So, are you ready?" Roma comes out of the bathroom, looking as gorgeous as ever, especially now that he's only wearing a towel tied around his hips. It takes my breath away, and I quickly avert my eyes so he doesn't guess how much I want him. Even now. Especially now. And even after everything he's done to me. But thank God we're not animals, and I know how to control myself.

"Yes, I'm ready!" I answer. And I think to myself that maybe Paris was a great idea! I can't believe I didn't think of it myself.

14

"Where are we going?" I ask Roma already in the subway car. To be honest, I can't even remember the last time I was on the subway. And certainly never in a Paris subway!

"You'll need a present," he says simply.

"Again for a present?" I roll my eyes. "I think you've given me too many surprises lately. I'd say too many," I mutter.

"Don't worry, it'll be a nice surprise," Elvis says simply, and then I notice something has changed. In the air, in me? Now I'm catching men's glances at me, glances that are stealthy and even more bold and frank. I stare at some guy sitting across from me for longer than is proper, and he smiles back at me. And where are all those female gazes, always clinging to my companion like flies to a sucked lollipop? It must be French magic, I decide to myself.

We step into the light, and I try to guess what part of Paris we've ended up in, until Elvis takes me by the hand and leads me to one of the most famous and desirable confectionery windows in the world — the Maître Rabelais himself! I look back at Roma in amazement, trying to read the answer on his face, but he gallantly invites me inside, and the doorman in his trademark clothes is already opening the carved gold door for us:

"Don't look at me like that, Polly! Do you think I'd have to be Nostradamus to guess from your perpetually hungry look that you only allow yourself cake once in a lifetime? And that's probably for your own wake?"

I approach the world's most famous showcase, and I can't get enough of the mountains of marzipan fruits, glamorous macarons and profiteroles in golden icing. Chocolate cakes are towering as separate bastions that you can't even take your eyes off, decorated with tiny chocolate cocoa beans. I stand at this display case like an Anderson's matchstick girl and realize that no force in the world can tear me away from it.

"Well, my little girl? I guessed with your wish?" Roma asks me with a smile, and I, unable to resist, hang around his neck and kiss him on his smoothly shaved cheek.

"Oh, my God! I couldn't even imagine after all your..." I try to express myself more softly: "antics, that you are capable of such a thing!" And then I realize that the people in the café are starting to applaud us. I abruptly pull away from Roma, and he also solemnly and dignified offers:

"Well, you can choose anything you want: I treat this time! Paris is Paris!"

"I'll have everything!" I almost shout back.

Five minutes later, we are sitting at a round marble table by the window, and an elegant waiter is pouring tea into fine Chinese porcelain cups. I look at them, and a memory flashes through my mind of the last time I had a terrible tea party at the Weisberg mansion, where I broke a cup worth several thousand dollars. I wish that family could see me now! And especially my mom! When two waiters come up to us with silver trays laden with all the confectionery treasures a girl could wish for. A girl who's spent her whole life watching her figure and dieting. I can't even remember the last time I could afford something more nutritious than a lettuce leaf with that everlasting chicken breast! And at my own wedding, I'd probably at most lick the golden spoon with five milligrams of the luxurious expensive cake we ordered months in advance. I can even imagine my fiancé whispering in my ear while we're being photographed for the socialites, "I can already feel you licking that cream off it, Pola...." and I cringe at the mere thought of it.

I put my wedding, my fiancé and my illness out of my mind, and I stick my fork into the most caloric, cognac and cherry liqueur-soaked cake I've ever eaten... And I have a real orgasm when my mouth is filled with this incomparable unbearable sweetness of being... This is what I'm ready to do again and again. For the rest of my life. I open my eyes and aim my spoon at the delicate kiwi mousse cake with tiny vanilla seeds inside, peeking through the dark green lime and grape flavored cream. But my taste buds have almost tasted such magnificent desserts for the first time in my life and are not ready to give up such dolce vita any longer, and my hand is already reaching for the purple macaron.

I lean back, lazily squinting my eyes and looking at the passers-by strolling along the boulevard. The September trees in Paris are as green as in summer: there have obviously been no night frosts here yet, and the French capital will not turn golden until November at the earliest. For a few minutes it seems to me that this is true happiness: to eat my favorite cake once a week, well, well, at least once a month, and not to worry about my figure. To sit and look out the window, as life calmly floats by, while the most handsome man in your life is carefully pouring you tea in a cup....

I can barely stuff anything in my stomach anymore, but I still continue to nibble a tiny piece from each dessert, but now I can finally take a satisfied look around. I immediately appreciate the stylish interior of one of France's most famous patisseries: modern though it may be, it's Art Nouveau, as if we're plunged into turn-of-the-century Paris. I can even make out the paintings adorning the walls, and I'm not surprised if it's a real Toulouse-Lautrec³⁰, or a masterful imitation of one....

"Vous allez bien?"³¹ comes a voice from somewhere above, and when I look up, I see a gray-haired, gaunt man in a white coat with the word "*chef*" embroidered on it. I can't believe that Monsieur Rabelais himself deigned to come to the café hall to talk to us in person!

"Yes, it was wonderful, thank you. Your desserts are a work of art," I reply with a smile as he turns to my companion and addresses him:

"Roma? Is that you?! Where have you been all these years?!" And my Elvis, caught by surprise, replies something in French that I can't quite make out.

But now I don't think so, I'm sure: in this city my Roma is known by many people, if not all of them. Where did he come from?!

Roma and Rabelais are arguing very heatedly about something, but my bad French does not allow me to catch the gist of their conversation. I'm sitting up to my neck stuffed with sweet pastry, cream and chocolate like a Bavarian sausage, and I'm just a little bit more likely to fall asleep here in the soft chair. I make a tremendous effort to pull out my phone and take a picture of my mountain of desserts, now irrevocably destroyed but forever imprinted on my memory. With difficulty, I lift myself out of my chair and walk over to the picture on the wall to take a closer look at it. I take a photo: later I'll try to look at the caption and figure out who painted it.....

"Do you like it?" I hear behind me a voice with an accent and I answer Rabelais, who came up to me:

"Of course! Where did you get it? It's very post-impressionist. Isn't that Toulouse-Lautrec by any chance?"

"Almost, ma chérie, almost," replies Rabelais. "Your girl has great taste," he turns to Roma, who's approaching us.

"This is Polin," my friend finally introduces us to each other. "And Poline... she is just a very good friend of mine," he explains, a little hesitantly.

"Well, you remind me a lot of someone," he looks at Roman meaningfully. "It was very nice to meet you, Polin. I hope you realize what a treasure you have inherited, so take good care of him. All your cakes tonight are on the house!"

"Thank you, Rabelais, we have to go," Elvis hurries to get me away from the too talkative pastry chef, who probably knows too much about my pal....

³⁰ Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec was a French painter and printmaker known for his distinctive depiction of Parisian nightlife and the vibrant culture of the late 19th century.

³¹ *Is everything alright? (French)*

"And now — for Cinderella's dress!" Roma proclaims when we're outdoors.

"Rue de Rivoli?" I ask, because every normal woman in the world knows where all the most expensive boutiques in Paris are clustered.

"Better!" Roma comes close to me with a grin, and, slightly bending over, passes the pad of his thumb over my upper lip. "Cream!" He licks the rest of icing, and I realize that I want to be this cream, a sweet milky cloud melting in his mouth....

"Bien!" I shake off this sensual obsession. "Tonight you are my genie. Let's go get our wishes!"

We walk through the bright old streets, and I feel sad that these are our last days together. It won't be long before I'll be very far away from here. Where I am loved and welcome. Always. No matter what happens.

I walk beside my beau and catch envious glances from women and smiles from men. And I smile back. I wish I could stay here for a while, just to walk the streets and not think about anything. I feel like this is my first time in Paris. Especially when I'm walking next to Elvis and I realize he knows every nook and cranny.

"How do you know the city so well?" I ask him in between.

"I just lived here in my past life," my companion answers me, looking thoughtfully somewhere in front of me. "Well, I think it's here somewhere," he mutters, checking his cell phone, and we approach an inconspicuous door with a small brass sign *Amélie Blanc*.

Roma pushes the door open, and we find ourselves in a small store with the same brass hanging rods along the walls, on which hang the most beautiful dresses I've ever seen in my life.

"There, voila," he solemnly passes his hand around as if it were his own store. "You can choose the dress you like, you have to look like a real queen tonight! I'll pay for it!"

"Oh my God!" I can't believe my eyes: anyone who knows about fashion and brands would realize that all this is finely handmade, no worse than couture, but the price here is much lower than in the luxury boutiques on the Rue de Rivoli. "Who is this Amélie? An aspiring designer?"

And then, from somewhere on the second floor, a slim little brunette in her thirties comes down, clearly the sales clerk or owner of this small store.

"Can I help you?" She starts in French, and before she finishes her sentence, she throws herself around Roma's neck, shouting, "Mon Roma!" and starts kissing him on all his cheeks.

They all seem to be having a night of reminiscing. I stand modestly aside, waiting for them to kiss and talk, and my gaze falls on the small table next to the armchair, where the glossy magazines are fanning out. And then on the cover of the French edition of *Glossy* I see my own detached and enigmatic face, and next to it stands my Stasik, with his arm around my waist and gazing somewhere into the future! The inscription unambiguously states "*Les russes: qui sont-ils?*"³² and I realize that my beautiful Sasha managed to arrange with her head office in Paris for the cover! It would have been a marvelous wedding present if it hadn't been so inappropriate now in this situation! It turns out that I can now be recognized by my photo here too, and my whereabouts can be communicated to my soulmate. I hope the nice French people have more important things to do rather than that, I decide to myself.

"Polin, meet my very good friend Amélie," Roma introduces me to his friend, and I see a shadow of recognition in her eyes. Of course, now every dog knows me here.

"Enchantée," she shakes my hand and continues in English: "Choose whatever you like, Poline, my atelier is all yours!"

"So this is your own atelier?" I look at her in amazement.

"Oh yes, didn't Roma tell you about it?" She turns to Elvis in surprise.

"Amélie, Polin doesn't know much about my past," Roman excuses himself, and she nods understandingly:

"I understand, Roma, after this. But I do hope you will love Paris, Polin," she says to me.

"Oh, yes, I already love it!" I reply, looking at the dresses hanging in the hall.

"Wait, is that you on the cover?" She picks up a magazine from the table and scrutinizes my face.

³² Russians: who are they? (French)

"Oh, no, no," I wave my hands in response. "It's some kind of Russian celebrity, apparently, we Russians all look alike, you know," I try to come up with something convincing, and Amelie shakes her head with a smile. Whether she believes it or not, at least I don't have to explain her now why I'm portraying some billionaire's fiancée on the cover.

"All right, let's see what might suit you!" She gets to work, pulling down the shoulder pads of ash-pink, powder and mauve dresses, clouds of airy dreams flowing in this sunny brass room.

"So, what else are you going to surprise me with today?" I ask Roma as we wander down the street with a large, branded bag from Madame Blanc's atelier.

Today I've dispensed with Elvis's help in the fitting room, where Amélie herself helped me try on several dresses and choose the best one.

"Let him be surprised when he sees you wearing it for the first time," she suggested. "And in general, we French women believe that first of all, we pamper ourselves," Amelie said frankly, spreading the magic silk folds on me.

"You know, I've never had a dress like this before," I told her sincerely, taking a picture of myself in the mirror: for some reason I wanted to keep the memory of this fitting.

"Thank you, but my advice to you is that no underwear will fit under this dress. Absolutely," Amélie told me in a completely serious tone, and I could tell from her look that if I were so bold as to wear a bra or panties under it, I would be immediately punished by God.

"Are you serious?"

"Absolutely," giggled Madame Blanc, and I decided better not to tempt fate.

"Tell me, how do you know Roma?" I asked her casually, while she was tying a wide satin bow somewhere around my tailbone.

"Hmm, didn't he tell you?" Amelie frowned. "We went to classes together. At the School of Fine Arts. A long, long time ago," she murmured. "He was supposed to have a bright future, if it hadn't been for that story..."

"What story?" I immediately tensed. No way! Elvis and art. And in one of the best places in Europe!

"Here it is, it's ready," Amelie never answered me, stepping aside and scrutinizing me from all sides. "I think my friend will appreciate it on you. But don't show him in the dress before time," she advised. "I think that story broke him... But I was so happy to see him with you today!"

"It's not what you think, we're just friends," I start to justify myself, but the girl just shrugs:

"That's your business. He's a real treasure. Hold him tight in your heart, is that how it's said in English?" And brushes an invisible dust from my skirt.

"We've got a couple more hours," Elvis looks at the phone. "I think we might as well go home and change for tonight."

"What's tonight?" I still don't get it.

"It's a surprise. First we have to get nice and dressed up," Roma answers me.

The swifts fly outside the window, and a warm breeze blows through the light-filled attic as I emerge triumphantly from the bathroom in my new dress.

"I'm going to have to ask you to help me tie this bow on my... back," I try to delicately describe the tie just above the fork of my buttocks.

Roma silently gets up from the couch where he was waiting for me and walks over to me.

"It's a very pretty dress," he says quietly, and I don't see a shadow of a grin in his dark blue eyes.

It's really perfect: I'm sure that very soon the name Amélie Blanc will be among the most fashionable designers in France, and will certainly be able to supplant Vera Wang's dresses. I chose the color of fuchsia: a tight bodice of dense silk, under which, of course, it is impossible to wear any bustier, because the back is completely bare, and reveals the skin above the tailbone. Where, of course, the tiniest panties would not fit. The skirt flows down to the floor, covering my legs with several layers of the finest chiffon, and when I walk, I feel like I'm floating on air. And the wide silk bow is tied in the back at the very bottom of the slit, and I'm sure Amelie knew what she was advising: no one could ever tie it without help.

"Wait," Elvis kneels behind me, and I feel his warm, trembling fingers on my bare skin as he tries to knot my ribbons. And it's like they're burning me with a scorching iron, leaving scarlet marks.

His breath tickles the tiny Venus dimples above my buttocks, exposed in this outfit. And I feel Elvis's warm, moist lips kissing first one dimple and then the other very gently. His tongue traces the crescent moon over my booty while his palms dig into the pile of my skirts, reaching deeper and higher until his fingers touch first my thighs, which he traces very gently downward, as if tasting the weight of every ball of my buttocks, and then slides between my legs, pulling my hot, wet flesh apart.

I've seen him masterfully perform his solo with other women so many times that I want to forget it forever, to be his only instrument. I turn to face him, and Roma looks up at me with a hazy gaze and ducks under the dark waves of my endless skirts. His soft head of hair tickles the inside of my thighs as his tongue works its way up to kiss my labia — all in anticipation of his hot mouth. And then they meet in a kiss, his hard, flexible tongue pushing higher and higher into my tight slit as his finger caresses the silken path from the tight ring of my anus and further down to my hole, where his moist, juicy lips dug into it.

His eager, trembling fingers open me like a book, and his tongue is already tasting my clit, a small lump tucked between two soft mounds. And just as I begin to feel the sharp thrusts somewhere inside me, Elvis pulls back for a split second to give me time to come to my senses and catch my breath, to meet the new hot wave, a warm geyser exploding inside me. His magic fingers (painter's? — a slight thought rubs through my head) are in both of my holes, fumbling for some secret nooks and crannies and buttons, and I realized that a little more and I wouldn't be able to stand on my feet anymore. As if sensing this, Roma comes out from under my skirts, stands up and picks me up in his arms, and I don't even have time to say anything in response. He carries me gently, like a precious vase, to Mimi's wide bed and lays me in the middle.

"I haven't had a chance to kiss you on those lips yet," he whispers, leaning over me and covering my mouth with his, mixing his saliva with my brackish lubricant.

His hands spread the dress aside, exposing my bare mound, and his fingers run over the taut, wet strings again, tuning my instrument....

I look at his face, so beautiful, and all that matters to me is the here and now: the past dissolved into this moment like a fizzy pill in a glass of water, and I know it may never happen again. My tongue slides into his mouth, intertwining with Elvis's, and I'm choking on his saliva, and it's only now that I realize how much I've wanted this all these days. My hands slide down his muscular, supple back, and grabbing the edge of his T-shirt, I pull it off him so I can feel the heat of his body.

Roma kisses my eyes, my cheekbones, my lips, his tongue sliding down my neck, the hollows of my collarbones, and I dissolve into his tenderness. I pull off the luxurious dress he'd given me, which has suddenly become unnecessary, and it lands on the floor in a sad cloud until I'm completely naked and defenseless in front of this man. Just like that time.

"Have I ever told you how beautiful you are?" He whispers as he stares at me, already pulling off his jeans. His hands squeeze my breasts very gently, and they both fit in his palms. I can see his tense cock sticking to his belly, but he takes his time, wrapping his lips around each of my nipples and sucking on them one by one, like sweet candy. Desire surges through my body, and the anticipation of pleasure burns like warm embers in the bottom of my belly.

I wrap my fingers around his soft, silky shaft and slide them down, smearing a drop of clear lubricant over his skin. Roma sighs convulsively, and I feel his flesh harden and gather beneath my hands. I dive down to his groin and gently kiss and slowly lick the head of his cock: I never thought this activity could be so delightful. The blood pulses in my stomach with sweet jolts, and I realize I'm on the edge of a cliff: just a little more and I'll fall into the abyss. I want to explore every nook and cranny of this man's body, and my palms stroke his buttocks, his thighs, reaching into the most secret places and folds. Elvis can't hold back a moan, and I can feel the sticky warm lubrication already running down my thighs. I swallow his cock even deeper, trying to take it all in, and he whispers:

"Wait baby, wait...."

With both hands, gently, like an expensive doll, he lifts me up off his now gigantic cock, and lays me on my back.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" He asks quietly, and I just nod:

"Do you?"

"More than anything in the world," he replies, and I see him pull out a condom and start to put it on.

"Don't," I pull off the rubber skin, tossing it somewhere on the floor. "I want to feel all of you. Now. As you are, do you understand?" And Roma covers me with his body, all his desirable weight, sliding the smooth polished bayonet between my sticky thighs.

"Wait," I whisper to him, pulling him back and climbing on top of him.

"Oh, Sonnypolly," I hear the last of it before I'm thrusting myself onto his heaving shaft, filling me whole, all the way down to my throat....

I slowly, as if in a dream, rise up on my hips, as if trying to let him out of me, but the two strong hands holding my ass tightly bring me back down. Again and again. And so each time, until delightful spasms begin to shake my entire body. I cry out in pleasure and feel his phallus throbbing inside me like a rabid fish, spurting out warm cum in short spurts, and Roma still holds me tight against him, not letting go, pressing all of me into his belly.

I don't even know how much time passes: a minute, ten minutes, or an hour, until our bodies stop resisting, and I fall exhausted against Elvis's chest, and he wraps his arms around me and strokes my hair, whispering in my ear:

"Que dois-je faire de toi, ma bébé. Ma petite fille...." And his words cradle me, soothe me until I fall asleep on him under this blue sky with swifts....

15

"Wake up, my sweet girl!" I hear through my sleep, and it's almost impossible for me to open my eyelids, as if sprinkled with Ole-Luk-Oie's³³ magic juice.

Through my eyelashes I try to see where I am and what's wrong with me. The only thing I know for sure is that I've never felt this good. Never. And if this is what legends are made of, fairy tales are told, and tons of first-rate and third-rate novels are written about, it sure deserves it. I'm afraid to open my eyes lest the marvelous evening disappear and the most handsome man I've ever met dissolve into this evening air. I open one eye to begin with: but there he is, he's here, he hasn't disappeared. Sitting next to me on the bed, and quietly stroking my hair.

"Come on, Sonnypolly! We're going to be late," and then I realize he's wearing a tuxedo. A tuxedo! With a bow tie.

"Where are we going?" I ask, standing up on the bed, trying to remember where I threw all my clothes.

"It's a surprise! Get ready and you'll find out. Are you going to take a shower?"

And I realize I want to keep his scent on me. Just for one day. Because I don't know if it'll ever happen again. Well, tonight evening is just beginning.

"No, help me put on my dress," I ask him, and, tangled in our hot fingers, silk skirts, and satin ribbons, we slip my exquisite outfit back on, but before we do, Roma kisses every inch of my stomach and thighs. And only the notification from the already arrived *Uber* stops us from sinking again into the endless stretching sweetness of each other....

We get into the cab, and I kiss Elvis on the lips again, unable to keep from that sweet moment, because I know it's my last night in Paris with him. And we hug in the backseat like schoolchildren, unable to tear ourselves away from each other as the city's smart streets, already colored in some places with evening lights, float past us outside the window. Not even ten minutes pass as our car stops in front of the grandiose building of the Paris Opera. I immediately recognize its carved lush columns and winged golden goddesses of Harmony and Poetry on the roof on both sides of the facade: of course, I have been here before. Still, I'm madly pleased that this is where my Roman brought me. I didn't think he could surprise me like this.

³³ Ole-Lukøje is a whimsical character from Danish folklore, known as the Sandman who brings dreams to children by sprinkling sand in their eyes.

"Please, mademoiselle," he holds out his hand to me as he opens the car door, and I drift out into the warm, gentle evening to blend in with a crowd of similarly elegant and dressy people.

We climb the famous central staircase, and I feel like Grace Kelly next to my tuxedoed companion, no less. I catch the admiring glances of men and women that I have become accustomed to here: my dress attracts attention, and so does my beau. In my short life, I've gotten used to excessive interest in me, but this is different, and I realize it. It's one thing to be a famous person who everyone already knows by sight from the many photos that have been circulated, but it's quite another to attract attention without having a certain status in their eyes. But only with a luxurious dress, no less luxurious companion and tickets to luxurious seats.

"By the way, what are we going to watch?" I remember the main issue.

"*Traviata*," Roma replies with a smile, escorting me to a closed box. And when did he just manage to buy tickets? "I'll be back soon," he says, and I'm left alone, looking from the height of my theatre box at the stage, the ornate, opulent audience, and the plafonds above the auditorium, painted by Marc Chagall. Chagall again, I think of Reims Cathedral.

The orchestra tunes the instruments, the conductor arrives, bows to the hall, and in response there is a rare applause; I look over to the other box visitors, and we smile politely at each other in anticipation of the first aria, which I will never confuse with anything. The opening chords are played and Alfred begins to sing his famous table song, and then Elvis appears next to me with two glasses of champagne in his hand. I have no idea who allowed him to bring them into the lodge, but we clink them together, and the other audience members shush us enviously. We only smile back politely and sip our share of the fun for the evening. I've gone to this opera so many times, but tonight it looks very special.

I stare at the stage, practically out of breath, everything about this production is beautiful: the performers, the costumes, and the sets. And Roma, who is sitting next to me. And I can feel the warmth of his body through the thin layers of my dress as he presses his thigh against mine. He refills our glasses with champagne from a bottle he's placed under the seat, and we drink this intoxicating date to the bottom. And I keep thinking about how my life might have turned out if Anastas hadn't met me when he did, if he hadn't taken over my life and will, if he hadn't wanted to make me his wife, and if I hadn't gotten those stupid tests the night before I signed the prenup. I would probably be sitting with Sasha and Sonya right now discussing my career progress and future plans, not wedding decor and honeymoon. And this elopement gave me such a welcome respite to think things over.

The first act ends, the curtain falls, the lights come on, and a girl sitting in a neighboring chair suddenly turns to me with a question:

"Good afternoon, mademoiselle, it's you, isn't it?" And shows me the screen of her phone with my *Glossy* photo. "You're Polin Sonis, aren't you? I'm subscribed to your blog!" And I can't escape her prying eyes. "I can't believe I ran into you! Can I take a selfie with you?" She gibbers, and without waiting for my consent, she snaps a picture with me against the backdrop of the auditorium with its famous chandeliers and blue lamps. "Very nice, I'll post it on my Instagram stories!" And I can't say anything against her: a blogger should always be nice and friendly to her followers. Dang.

"Let me steal my girlfriend from you for a while," Elvis takes my hand and smiles gallantly at the annoying subscriber. And I don't even know if it's his touch or the fact that he called me his girlfriend that's giving me goosebumps.

"But the second act is about to begin!" I object sweetly, grateful in my heart that he's saved me.

"You'll see it, ma chérie," he whispers in my ear, and leads me confidently to an inconspicuous staircase hidden behind a heavy drape that leads up to somewhere higher, under the roof.

We pass the mezzanine, the balcony, Roma leads me down some tangled corridors, and once again I am amazed that he knows every nook and cranny of the place. Even the Opera Garnier. Who is he? We come to an inconspicuous door, obviously for staff only use, Elvis pushes it open, and we find ourselves in the realm of mechanics, where chains and ropes are stretched everywhere, and some complicated lifting devices are installed.

"Monsieur, how did you get here? You can't come in here!" I hear the voice of an employee approaching us, and I'm ready for the fact that we are about to be kicked out of here in disgrace, and maybe even they call security, as a corpulent man in work overalls suddenly exclaims:

"Roma! Is that you?! No way! When did you arrived here?!" And this looking more like French Santa elderly gentleman starts hugging my Elvis and kissing him on both cheeks. Of course he does! No one likes to kiss like the French do, I decide to myself.

"Meet Polin, this is Jerome, a good friend of mine," Roma introduces me to his friend, and he kisses me just as warmly.

"Enchantée!" I repeat one of the few phrases in French I remember from school.

"Jerome is the king and god of all the mechanisms in this theater. Without him, no curtain rises and no airship sails through the sky," Roma explains to me as his buddy begins to work his magic before the second act. Through a small gap, I can see a tiny patch of the auditorium below me, the dark recess of the orchestra pit, and the height makes me dizzy.

The cacophony of the orchestra suddenly goes silent, as if each musician had been unplugged, the lights in the auditorium go out, and I hear the ropes and chains tighten and begin to wind on giant reels, exposing the stage with a wild scraping and clattering sound that can only be heard here, in our looking-glass. All the performers seem from the height I have climbed to, tiny little people in the palm of my hand, but even here I can clearly hear the sounds of the beautiful music and their singing. I stand leaning on the wooden railing, which may well have been there since the opera was built almost two hundred years ago, and imagine myself flying over the world in my own airship.

"Are you feeling dizzy?" Elvis whispers caringly, hugging me from behind and burying his face in my hair, and I'm amazed at how gentle and caring he can be. When he wants to be. Or when he needs to be.

Maybe this eternal city has washed away the varnish layer of cynicism and indifference he's built up since living in Paris. Or maybe I was the only one who saw in him what I wanted to see. But it's too late to think about that now, so I answer:

"Of course it's spinning!" And I turn with a smile to his lips, which are already seeking mine.

"Our meeting should be celebrated," Jerome is already rushing towards us, holding champagne of course!

Everyone in this city loves to kiss, and I think everyone carries a bottle of champagne in their purse or pocket to celebrate! Kind Santa pours us the evening gold into our flutes, and we clink glasses again:

"Do you remember, Roma, how much time we spent here with you and how much we drank when we were setting up your decorations?" Jérôme recounts his romantic memories in broken English, and I ask again:

"The sets?! Don't tell me you did the sets for the Grand Opera de Paris! What else don't I know about you?"

"It was a long time ago, in a past life, I told you," Roma replies, and Jerome protests very loudly, shouting over the music:

"It was a gorgeous beautiful set! We still use some of them in productions! It's a pity you didn't stay to work here then!" He shakes his head contritely, and I don't understand a thing.

Why the hell did a talented artist with prospects leave this city of eternal love and go to our eternally gray, dank capital to dance in front of drunken women? Even in the best club in Moscow? All right, well, I don't know anything about him at all.

The men talk for a while longer, while I listen to the opera from a perspective I had never heard before, and Roman comes up to me with the words:

"We've got to go, Polly."

"But the performance isn't over yet!" I try to argue with him, but he won't listen to me.

"You've got a lot more shows to watch, I promise," and he leads me away, again down some paths known only to him.

A few more flights of stairs, another service door, which Elvis opens with his key, and we find ourselves on the very roof of the Grand Opera building! The sight of the night boulevards, the twinkling Eiffel Tower, and the endless rooftops of Paris is breathtaking.

"I'm sorry, I couldn't let you not to see this for last," Roman says with a smile, turning his hand to the sky and... What? Hives?!

"You wanted to show me beehives? Where did they come from?!" I stare at them in amazement.

"Well, them too," Elvis smiles at me, leaning down to my face, and I bite his lips again and again, while all around us furry bees buzz around us just as the night stars, flying over the lavender flowers growing here on the roof in clay pots, and for a moment I feel like I've come to the place I'd planned: the south, where lavender always blooms and rosemary and lemons smell....

The opera is not over, and we are on our way to the Place Pigalle. Now its stone womb is filled with a completely diverse public: Tunisians, Moroccans and Algerians; brightly dressed and painted like flocks of parrots, transgender people; girls waiting for clients and just tourists, endlessly taking selfies and group photos at the fountain in the center and against the backdrop of the Moulin Rouge. And if during the day everything looks dusty and abandoned, with piles of garbage and scraps of paper carried by the wind in an endless circle, then in the evening everything is dressed up in shouting lights and flickering signs of the seventies, and I feel like I've fallen into the past. Although Roma and I get out of this atmosphere and style, dressed in our classic sophisticated clothes.

"You can't be late for Mimi's show," Elvis hurries me, and we approach the main entrance of one of the oldest cabarets here on Place Pigalle — *Chez Madame Arthur*. My companion says something to the guard and we are let inside, and we follow the majordomo who escorts us to a table in the center of the small room.

I sit and remember how just a week ago I was sitting in a club like this, but more glamorous and noisy, full of drunk girls just like me, but the atmosphere is strikingly different. Here I feel like I am plunged into the respectable world of the twenties and thirties of the last century, where bourgeois, single men, couples and, of course, Chinese tourists fill the tables covered with emerald tablecloths and lamps.

On the stage, the girls perform a classic cancan: everything is as it should be, raising their slender legs high in black lace stockings, but without underwear, exposing their smoothly shaved pussies in the dance. Well, the waxing fashion that has taken over the world is fully presented here.

The Chinese tourists applaud happily, Elvis and I order drinks and snacks: I don't think I've ever drunk so much in my life as I did the last couple of days in France, but surprisingly my head is getting lighter and freer, as if getting rid of all the empty and black thoughts accumulated in my previous life. The dance number ends, the girls with a cheerful chirping flock jump into the hall, where joyful tourists spread them in the elastic bands of stockings euro bills, while they callously once again lift up their lush skirts in front of the grateful, drooling audience.

"And now, madame and monsieur, we present to you the highlight of our program, the unsurpassed Mimi Boulanger herself!" Shouts into the hall brightly dressed and painted entertainer with a golden cane, and the hall explodes with applause.

"Mimi seems to be very popular here," I mutter to myself.

The backstage spreads apart, revealing a darkened stage, where Mimi stands in the center in a patch of warm light that seems to wrap her from head to toe. She begins to sing the most famous song of Edith Piaf "*Life in Pink*" and the whole hall freezes, staring at her. And she just stands there, not even moving, but it is impossible to get away from her. There is so much plasticity, grace, expressiveness in her even just simply standing on the stage that it takes my breath away. And if in front of me was not a black very full-figured woman, I would have doubted whether it is not a reincarnation of the real Edith. There is so much simplicity and dignity in her posture, her hand movements, the subtle swaying of her hips, that I forget that I am in a second-rate cabaret in Paris, which has clearly seen its best days. But judging by the audience's reaction, I'm not the only one who is taken my breath away from this seemingly uncomplicated number. I glance at Roma, and I think now I understand from whom he was able to learn such a masterful and sexy performance: when on stage you don't have to jump, undress, and you don't even have to sing, but the audience will still lose their heads over you.

The last chords of the short composition sound, and men in tight tiger catsuits jump on the stage from the darkness, with flexible cat-like movements surrounding Mimi, who seems to have completely dissolved in her performance number. But at the last note, she pulls a live rose from her cleavage and tosses it into the audience. And it falls right into the center of my table. I'm sure she did it on purpose, and over the years she has learned to hit the right table better than any basketball player. I pick up the rose and press it to my lips and wave my hand at Mimi, only now realizing that I have tears running down my cheeks.

And then immediately, as soon as the last echo of Edith Piaf's song fades, Mimi throws off her giant shawl, in which she was wrapped during the whole first number, and appears before us in a flesh-colored jumpsuit, shimmering with gold sequins. The first chords of Zaz's song "*Je veux*" sound, cheerful and rhythmic, and Mimi breaks out of her seat in such a rousing dance that the audience jumps up from their seats, some begin to applaud, dance, whistle, while the black giant cat on stage moves so plastically and erotically to the music that no one in the club has the slightest doubt that this is life itself and pure sex. I look at this stunning performance with my mouth open, and all stereotypes and previous ideas about what is beautiful, plastic and aesthetic fly out of my head one by one. Mimi, like a weightless fluffball, moves her big gorgeous body on the stage, jumping on high stilettos so easily and effortlessly, as perhaps I could not even in sneakers. The black goddess dances, her hair flutters, and I myself want to sink into her immense beautiful body, in which her impressive stern seems to sway smoothly and live by itself, delighting with its mesmerizing plasticity and beauty.

"Was it worth leaving the opera early for such a thing?" Roma asks me with a grin, and I can only nod silently in response.

The time is well past midnight, and some ordinary statisticians in feathers are already dancing on the stage, entertaining the audience, which doesn't want to leave. Amelie and a few of their classmates from art school are at our table. Everyone is talking excitedly about nothing, drinking and reminiscing about their student years. I'm sitting a little apart, but I don't feel like a stranger: I'm finally at ease. I am with people of my own circle. I am close and understandable to their topics about painting, contemporary art and design, because I also studied five years at the Faculty of Art History for a reason, to understand creative people, who are often very difficult to understand. And I am not made to feel like a stranger by filling my glass and bringing the cheese plate closer to me. Mimi, having finally finished socializing with all her numerous fans and changed into a more comfortable, but no less flamboyant outfit, sits down at our table, and now the company is even more fun.

"Do you know, Polin, that already in the first year our Roma presented a portrait of Mimi at the annual review of student work?" To keep the conversation going, Serge asks me. "And it won first place! You were offered some crazy money for it, remember?" He's now turning to Roma. "Where is it now, by the way?"

"Don't you remember, Serge?" Amélie makes signs with her eyes, and I don't understand the intrigue. "That painting was impossible to sell."

"Impossible? Why not? Everything sells!" Serge raises his glass lightly, but glancing at his friend, who is almost hissing at him, he remembers: "Oh, right, I forgot... I'm sorry."

"You have nothing to apologize for," Elvis answers him, but a slight shadow touches his face.

"Yes, if it weren't for these circumstances, Roma would be the most successful and best-selling artist among all of us," Serge continues, apparently having forgotten what he was apologizing for a second ago.

"Let's better have a drink," Amélie interrupts him. "Polin, tell me, how did you guys meet? Do you work in the field of arts too?"

And here I'm trying to put on a brave face and pretend:

"Yes, I came to his performance..." I'm trying to think of the right words.

"Oh, a performance! That's great!" cries out Nicolas, who's sitting next to me. "I love performances in contemporary art! I think it would die without them, because the whole point of what we do is the idea. What do you think, Polin?"

"Oh, me too," I take a small sip of wine, looking at Roma with a smile.

"O-la-la-la-la, so tell me what kind of performance it was!" The enthusiastic Serge doesn't give up, as suddenly a melodious female voice sounds above all of us, and we all, as one, turn around: it's as if the bell on the front door has rung.

"Salut, les gars!"³⁴ And out of the darkness emerges a delicate pale face with a neat aristocratic nose, high cheekbones and moderately plump lips. It's like she's stepped out of a Boucher³⁵ portrait.

³⁴ *Hi, guys! (French)*

³⁵ François Boucher was a prominent 18th-century French painter known for his lush and decorative Rococo style, which greatly influenced European art and culture.

"I couldn't miss your meeting," she continues, glancing around the momentarily hushed group, and I noticed the faint spark in her eyes when she focused on Elvis.

"Oh, Julie, there you are!" Serge smiles, and they all look at him, guessing who had decided to call her today.

"Polin," I extend my hand for a handshake. And something tells me that I won't be kissing this woman.

"Yulia, it's a pleasure," she answers me in Russian. "The whole city is talking about you, how nice to meet you. You've just arrived, and you're already on the covers and on all the social networks," she greets me with a polite smile and an icy stare. And with the look of a duchess invited to a dinner party for the queen, no less, she sits down on a chair that the headwaiter obligingly has ran up to pull out for her.

The whole company, except for sweet Serge, who doesn't notice the tension in the air, quietyens down, and that damned Yulia behaves like a hereditary aristocrat, and even I begin to feel like a peasant in my luxurious dress in comparison to her. She is elegance incarnate itself. The little black dress, stylish shoes and understated makeup make her look like, god sake, Audrey Hepburn or Grace Kelly. I don't wonder if she's about to pull a kilometer-long mouthpiece from the folds of her clothes and regally smoke. But she just smiles warmly at the whole company, and then I remember where I've seen this face: there, in Elvis's house, in the photo of this girl many years ago, smiling and happy, and now all that's left of her is this warm smile, which immediately lights up her face with sunlight. And everyone around her immediately begins to reach out to her like withered plants to the sun.

"For how long are you planning to stay here?" I hear her ask Roma quietly, turning to him as the waiter pours her wine into her glass.

I sit closest to Mimi and give her a very expressive look.

"It's a very old story," she sighs and shakes her head, and the conversation at the table slowly resumes as Roma and Julie talk quietly to each other.

I realize that this is probably his old love, which apparently hasn't gone anywhere. I look at them from the outside and see what a beautiful couple they are. Even I, the famous, rich and successful Polin Sonis, feel like a fish thrown on a dry land right now because I realize I don't stand a chance. Not even one. I watch as this exquisitely beautiful woman holds this man's heart tightly in her clinging hands, almost twisting it, and I see the flames of passion that never left his eyes. The passion that had been smoldering in him all this time, and now I don't need to be a seer to see how it has flared up again. But I'm not claiming anything, I say to myself. I have my own plan, and Roman is just the driver. A bodyguard. And a gigolo for one night. Nothing more. But why is it so unbearably painful for me to watch them talk as if they just haven't seen each other for a couple of hours, and to watch Elvis gives his best smile to her, which washes all his disgusting deeds and desires with an eraser?

"We'll leave you for a while," they got up from the table, and I looked at them as if someone had just cut the thin thread on which my racing heart was hanging....

"A real marquise," Serge says, shaking his head, and I stare at the silent group in a daze.

"What?!"

"Oh oui, c'est vrai....³⁶" Amélie just clucks her tongue contemptuously.

16

I am madly sorry to leave Paris, where I have been only for a day this time, but I feel as if I have lived here a whole month, no less.

I went back to Mimi's alone in the morning, because Elvis and Yulia hadn't shown up, and I peeled off my beautiful dress and plopped down on the bed where, just a few hours ago, I'd had the most delicious sex of my life. The dormer window begins to turn faintly pink with the approaching sunrise, my eyes fall asleep, and I fall into a colorful mess of a variety show, where men in skin-tight leotards, cat masks, and heels dance on stage around the giant Julie, dressed in a lavish Louis XV-era dress, with her whipped breasts sticking out of the neckline as if covered in gold leaf.... She is singing an

³⁶ Oh yes, that's true (French)

Edith Piaf song, clutching a golden microphone in her hand with long bloody fingernails, and under the stage is her Roma in his Elvis costume. He is standing with his back to me, but his whole figure is twitching unnaturally, until I suddenly realize that he is taking his cock out of his pants and masturbating right on his Yulia, until with the last chords of the song a tight stream of semen pours onto the stage....

"Get up, baby, we have to go," I suddenly hear his voice, and I wake up in a sticky sweat, relieved to realize that it was all just a dream. Or was it?

"Are we leaving already?" I sit up in bed.

"We have twenty minutes to pack our stuff. I brought you a cappuccino and croissants. You like cappuccino, don't you?"

"Thank you," I start to get ready. Wow, how gallant. "It's nice of you to remember me," I say sarcastically. While you were fucking another woman, — I think to myself. But what did I want from him: to suddenly change his attitude and personality in the three days I've known him? And why would I want him to?

So I calm down and take a bite of my freshly baked billion-calorie croissant with a sweet smile. And a cinnamon cappuccino. It's just delicious: every time I wonder what makes croissants so especially delicious in France — their homeland? The same flour, the same butter, but apparently a completely different air.

"I'm going to take a quick shower," Roma comes over to me and runs his finger over my lip, wiping away the milk foam. And I don't flinch or freeze from his touch as I used to.

"Fine, I'll go after you," I take a second bite of the crispy, still warm airy pastry: if you don't count the more than abominable dream, the morning is off to a great start. Especially since I'll be when I need to be in a day.

I take another look at the beautiful paintings on the walls, making sure I've photographed everything, I quickly throw all my few clothes into my travel bag. There's the sound of running water behind the wall, my cell phone trills on the bar table, and I walk over to it to check who the message came from.

I absent-mindedly stare at the screen with a pop-up message from some "*Security guy Kaunas*" "Where's the rest of the dough? I did everything you asked me to do! Only you didn't warn me that bitch might poke my eye out too!" Until I realize it's not my phone. The sounds of the shower subside and I put the smartphone back where it was laying. Roma comes out of the shower, divine as ever, and I toss it to him indifferently as I walk into the bathroom:

"Your phone was ringing," and I close the door behind me.

Half an hour later we get our stuff in the car and I kiss Mimi, and this time it's not a mere formality for me. I take a couple of selfies with her, and take a picture of her separately on a Parisian boulevard in another unimaginable purple outfit with feathers and sequins on the hem. The Paris streets are already chirping with sparrows and I see a couple of parrots perched on a branch behind my black goddess! Green and noisy, they seem to have materialized from the bright print on Mimi's dress, and like two escaped pictures are now mocking their mistress behind her back. Parrots, beehives at the Grand Opera de Paris and Toulouse-Lautrec in Rabelais's patisserie — what else did I not know about Paris and about life? And I realize there's a lot.

"So, to Rome?" I plop down in the front seat in my jeans and a sweater I bought in Prague. Because somehow I'm sure that Snoopy T-shirt once belonged to Yulia-Julie. And she was living in Moscow. And she loved my Elvis. And maybe she still does. And who am I lying to? He was never *mine*.

"When are we supposed to arrive? When do you think? The navigator says it's only fourteen hours away," I need to know the estimated time.

"I don't think we'll make it today," Roma answers and starts to drive. "Especially since I haven't slept all night, I'm afraid it will be too dangerous to drive the car for too long in this condition. You know what I mean," he says, and I feel angry. I'm supposed to understand something!

But I answer in the calm, poised tone of a mature, self-sufficient woman:

"Of course, I understand. Especially since I'm paying you. And you just have to get me there safe and sound."

"I will do so, baby," Roma answers me with a smile. "What's your business in Rome by the way? Some other item from your magic napkin? Visit the Colosseum? Swim in the Trevi Fountain? Climb the dome of Saint Peter's?" But I just don't say anything.

I'm so tired that I feel myself falling back into sleep, and it's only as I pass the hulking Eiffel Tower that I ask through the dream:

"Have you been on it?"

And Roman only shakes his head, turning the radio down:

"When I lived here, I thought it would always be in time, but as you can see. And you?"

"And I haven't either," I mutter back. "When I flew to Paris, I always thought it was so trivial to stand in a crowd of tourists for a few hours just to look down on the city..."

"The most beautiful city in the world," Roma replies quietly, and this time I have nothing to say to him, because in my memory it will remain a city of evening rooftops with bees and parrots fluttering over them.

We drive in silence, because I have a lot to think about, and apparently my illness is somehow making itself known, because I feel myself getting very hot, and a huge avalanche of fatigue comes over me. And I lie there, as if pressed down on top of this mass, unable to move an arm or a leg. And I'm going to need my strength. That's for sure. Already falling asleep, I feel Elvis stop and carefully lower my chair and cover me with a blanket, and I am sailing away again on the ship on my last journey.

"So, did you hear a lot about me last night from those old overachievers?" Roma asks me when, after driving for more than eight hours at breakneck speed, we are sitting somewhere on a highway near Milan, eating the most delicious gnocchi with salmon I have ever tasted in my life. It's amazing how this cozy little restaurant called "*Il Leone*" has survived among all those *Autogrill*³⁷ cafes and other chain gas station cafeterias. And here we are having lunch or dinner at a table set right in a small orchard under apple and pear trees, and the scarlet burst pomegranates on the branches shine through their diamond grains in the setting sun. A local Italian cat caresses my bare ankle with its soft coat, and I discreetly toss her bits of fish in cream from my plate.

"Nothing special, really," I answer indifferently. "It was just about your years together Art School," though in fact I had so many colorful cardboard pieces of memories poured into my palms yesterday that I had already started to put together a puzzle.

A puzzle of how the six of them, Amélie, Roma and Yulia, Serge, Nicolas and François were all searching for themselves, separately but together. They were all eighteen or twenty years old, and my Elvis was the oldest of them. How he first became fascinated by the work of Toulouse-Lautrec, Modigliani and Picasso, imitating them, although his academic work in the classical style always won first place in the annual Art School shows. How he, given to the romance of the Parisian streets, met all the dancers, strippers and actors who inhabited the neighborhoods of Montmartre and Place Pigalle, and how each of them had practically been a model on his high bar stool with its worn seat, posing in his studio room, where we spent such a wonderful evening last night. Or rather no, it's not correct, posing for both of them. My subconscious keeps throwing the sophisticated aristocrat Yulia out of the picture, but it doesn't work that way. She's the one who's been by his side in that workshop room all these years. As his mistress? A muse? The love of his life? I still have blank white squares that don't answer all the questions I'm interested in, but I'm sure I'll get them all in time. If I want to, of course.

"Good," Roma sips from his *San Benedetto* bottle, and I follow him with a sip of the house wine from my flute, which is as tart and burgundy as the pomegranates hanging above me.

A police car is parked outside the restaurant, and the carabinieri get out of it and hang around it for a while, talking to each other. I sit there and can't take my eyes off these two slender, sexy men in perfectly fitting, stylish uniforms, and I feel like I'm at a *Valentino* fashion show. Although, what am I talking about: it was Valentino and Armani who designed the uniforms for these handsome men. I'm so mesmerized by this sight that I discreetly take a picture of them on my phone, pretending to read the message.

"What, you want to get arrested?" Roma grins, noticing my trick, and I parry:

³⁷ Autogrill is a prominent Italian service station network that offers a variety of food and beverage options for travelers at airports and along motorways.

"Why not? I wouldn't say no to those! This is not some greasy Jurgis from the mall!" And then I think of today's message on Roma's phone.... And I look him straight in the eye and try to spin my hunch: "Maybe we should leave without paying? You know, so they'll hold us up? And then I'll offer them something in return, do you think they'll agree?"

And Roma just shakes his head irritably and calls the waitress over to pay the bill:

"We still have a couple of hours of driving, Polly, so for now you'll have to endure my company alone, don't you agree? And tomorrow you can have a break from me, I hope."

I smile indifferently, but suddenly the realization that I won't see him again hits me. And I don't even know how I feel about that. Because I don't think I've felt anything for a long time. At least not since that unfortunate cup of *Sevres* porcelain shattered in Weisberg Senior's luxurious hall, like my life.

After resting in the lovely garden, we hit the road, and in the dusk approach Florence, Elvis confidently darts off the autobahn onto the road into the city center.

"Florence?" I look at him, and he turns to me with a smile:

"Yes, this is my gift to you."

"I thought you'd forgotten about that stupid list by now," I reply.

"It's not stupid," Roma says briefly, deftly maneuvering between the scooters flying under the wheels.

And he takes me somewhere in the heart of the ancient city, to the place where Giotto's bell tower rises above the world.

I am amazed at how he manages to find such places, but in a quarter of an hour we are standing squeezed into a narrow parking lot by an old brick house, waiting for the elegant hostess, who in the darkness is clomping her heels all along the narrow street, approaching us.

"Buona sera, ragazzi!"³⁸ She flashes her white-toothed smile in the light of sparse lanterns. And we obediently climb higher and higher and higher following her up the wide, humming staircase until we find ourselves on the very last floor.

"You will like it very much," she continues in English. "You can have breakfast right on the roof," she flicks a switch, and I see that this apartment has a roof terrace overlooking Piazza della Signoria, where Michelangelo's statue of David stands! I look dumbfounded at Roma, and he only smiles modestly back, counting out the money to the landlady. Elegant, sophisticated and sexy. Like Italy itself. I wonder how much money he paid for this night? Or rather, for this view?

"There's *Prosecco* and cheese and olives in the fridge for you," she smiles sweetly as she says goodbye, and I can hear her sharp heels running off into the Florentine night.

"Here we go. David. Just like you wanted," Elvis opens the glass door to the roof. "And there's rosemary and lemons in pots."

And I throw myself around his neck. But I just want to snuggle up to him, and it seems that Roma, sensing this, embraces me, swaying lightly, and strokes my hair, as usual muttering something quietly in French....

It is amazing how long it takes Italy to fall asleep: we are sitting on the roof well past midnight, and the square below us continues to boil and bustle with people: conversations and laughter, the clinking of glasses, the clatter of horses' hooves on the paving stones, and the music of street bands continue unabated below. We drink *Prosecco*, thoughtfully left for us by the landlady, and I, looking at Roma's thin profile in the darkness, notice:

"You know that you are as beautiful as Michelangelo's David, don't you?" To which he answers me with a sad grin:

"When you're told that too often, words lose their meaning, don't they? Haven't you ever been told how beautiful you are?" He turns to me, and stares intently into my eyes.

I shrug:

"You're right, when you're told that from birth, it loses its value over time."

"You want more and more all the time, don't you?" He doesn't take his eyes off me.

"I guess so," I agreed with him. "Is that why you're always looking for affirmation from other women? Their looks, their adoration, their endless sex with you?"

³⁸ *Good evening, guys! (Italian)*

Elvis chuckles:

"You know, if you have too many of them, it loses meaning too. When you only need one single person that you can't have, you don't need thousands of other women, even if they fall into your bed in bunches, you know what I mean?"

"I think so," I nod, taking a sip of the fruity-soul *Prosecco*, remembering his Yulia.

I feel Roma's warm palm lay down on top of mine, but I pull my hand away, slipping out from underneath it as a cool lizard. I'm not going to get used to him or get attached to him. Yesterday was more than enough.

"Wake up, Sonnypolly," I hear the quiet voice which has become so familiar and special to me over the past few days.

"Are we leaving already?" I mumble, still in a dream in which I'm just walking through the streets of Florence, holding hands with Michelangelo's marble David. That's just great: soon my dreams will make a whole collection of surrealist stories. I'll publish it on *Amazon*, and maybe readers will be interested in my work. Hopefully not psychiatrists.

"Not yet, you and I have one more thing to do before dinner," Roma's voice comes from the terrace.

"Great, I'm taking a shower," I slap my bare feet on the cool tile and turn on the warm water, which washes away all the crazy adventures of the past days: sitting in the closet, stealing from a shopping mall in Kaunas, Polish millionaire perverts, the stained glass windows of Reims and the rooftops of Paris, the bohemia of the Place Pigalle, and the remnants of the most luxurious sex of my life with Roma. I can't even imagine how all this could fit into just a measly seven days. What am I going to do with the rest of my allotted time?

Today I need to look elegant, decent and dignified. I wrap myself in a fluffy terrycloth robe, leave the bathroom, and head to the terrace, where Elvis has already set up breakfast. I have to give him credit: he managed to run to the store, and now the table is full of melon with prosciutto, tiny snowballs of mozzarella, ciabatta with olives, and a full pot of coffee. Roma carefully pours my drink:

"Prego, Seniorita," he holds out the cup to me. "Milk? Cream?" And then I realize that I might have dreamed of this only three days ago. But now I just thank him with a smile:

"Cream. So in the end, what are we doing here in Florence?"

"Get ready, and you'll see," Roma leans toward me and runs his finger over my upper lip, where I always have a milk mustache. Ever since I was a kid.

"We have to be there by ten a.m.," Elvis hurries me as I follow him through the narrow streets of Florence.

One more turn and we come to the central entrance of the Uffizi Gallery³⁹. Of course! How could I have forgotten. In front of the entrance there is, as usual, many kilometers long queue of tourists eager to join the beautiful things, which we cannot stand until the evening, but Roma confidently leads me past it to a separate entrance.

"Prego," he holds out his phone to the ticket girl at the entrance, and we are let into one of the most famous galleries in the world. "I bought the tickets in advance, I know how hard it is to get in," he smiles at me, and I'm amazed that he remembered my wish on that crumpled, pathetic napkin!

He leads me, trying not to linger, to exactly where I wanted to go once more in my life: the Botticelli Room, to my Venus. He gently and carefully, like a small child, brings me to the canvas and places me right in front of it, and for a second I even think that he is ready to drive away from me random visitors, like pesky flies, so that no one would interfere with my enjoyment of the moment.

I stand frozen in front of this picture, just as I stood ten years ago when I first came here. I remember my mother rushing me, getting more and more annoyed, and I just physically could not tear myself away from the canvas, trying to absorb every feature of every face painted on it. And now it was as if I were breathing in the six hundred years that separated us. The only difference is that the Simonetta Vespucci depicted in the painting is still alive in this creation. And I will be gone very soon.

³⁹ The Uffizi Gallery is a prestigious museum in Florence, Italy, celebrated for its remarkable collection of Italian Renaissance masterpieces, including works by Botticelli and Michelangelo.

"Don't cry, baby," Elvis's voice came from far away, and I realized that I was crying in front of the painting I'd decided to devote myself to art when I saw it for the first time as a child.

"You know that for almost three hundred years this painting was of no interest to anyone, don't you?" I turn to Roma.

"Of course," he grins.

"I was amazed when I found out about it. But then some man dug it up, blew off a layer of dust from it, brought it to the light of God, and the world rediscovered Sandro Botticelli! I always wanted to be that man, you know?" I'm explaining to Elvis what's wrong with me.

"You can always be that person, Polin," he strokes my cheek, and I realize that I don't have much time left to become the person I've always wanted to be. Much less to discover someone.

"We should get going," I head for the exit, and I turn back to my favorite painting. "Thank you for bringing me here."

Four hours later, we park near the Piazza del Popolo in Rome, and I hand Roma the bag with the bills wrapped in it.

"Here it is, just as we agreed," and is it just me, or was his jaw clenched again with anger?

"Exactly twenty thousand greenbacks. In cash. And on top of that, ten thousand for the hassle, you know: all those apartments, restaurants, gifts," now he looks like he is going to hit me. But I continue in a carefree and businesslike tone: "Wait for me for a couple of seconds, I'll be right back."

I get out of the car to find the person with whom I have an appointment at a café table. A couple minutes later, we're walking back to the car together to pick up our things.

"David," my companion extends his hand to Roma. "Thank you so much for bringing my Polin safe and sound," — and he takes a sports bag full of my things from the back seat. "Can we go now?" He turns to me, and I, trying not to look at Elvis, answer with a smile:

"Yes, of course!" And, still turning to Roma, I wave him casually: "Thanks for driving me here!"

17

October has already painted the vast hills of Tuscany in ochre and copper, and David and I are driving in his BMW cabriolet through golden fields toward Florence. It's only been a few days since we met in Rome, and like a decent man he's taking me to meet his family. So soon. All this time I've been living in his huge apartment with infinitely high ceilings, antique furniture and paintings.

"You need to come to your senses, bella," David said to me that night, quietly shutting the bedroom door behind him. And I was so scared to be alone in a dark room, but I didn't say anything. Because it was so manly and honorable. Considering he'd been waiting for this moment for years. And now he had me, all to himself, but he wasn't in a hurry to rip off my clothes and get into bed with me, waiting for me to want to do it. But the thing was, lying in his cool bedroom that day, listening to the sounds of Rome coming from the street, I didn't feel safe at all. I was laying there drawing imaginary patterns on the ceiling, making them out of centuries of dust and the glow of light from the night streets, and then I turned on my phone, opened my blog, and started writing a new post under the photo of me standing, confused and serious, next to Sandro Botticelli's *"The Birth of Venus"*.

We met three years ago. I was nineteen and had come to Italy for an internship: we visited museums, worked with researchers and, of course, attended many lectures and seminars, one of which was led by David Monti, a famous gallerist and collector. Elegant and slender, with styled black hair, in a perfectly fitting suit, which looks so perfectly only on Italians, and in the invariable handmade leather loafers, he won all the girls' hearts, not only by his exquisite aristocratic beauty, but also a subtle sense of humor and an endless supply of knowledge.

Evil tongues said that he likes younger girls, but with us he always kept a clear distance "teacher-student". Although any of my classmates would have been happy to spend a night with him, or two, or every night of our practice. But the day came when we were assigned who would be doing a two-week internship at the Monti Gallery, and although there was an entire class, he chose me, even though I was

more interested in spending time in some museum archives. But my less fortunate classmates were sent to the dusty archives, and I became the face of the David Monti Gallery for a while.

I didn't really notice the slanted glances of his female employees behind me, but was fully engaged in what I loved to do: taking apart paintings, searching for new names on the vast expanse of the Internet, and telling stray visitors why they should invest their extra twenty thousand euros in this image of a beer cap on the sidewalk. All the while, I could feel David studying me, and I began to think that the subtle aroma of ambergris and cedar emanating from him had become brighter and more intense because I could feel his presence somewhere near me all the time. His soft hand began to linger occasionally on my wrist, and while looking at the paintings, he came a centimeter closer to me, each time reducing the maximum allowable distance between us. He was witty, alert, and incomparable, and I liked the attention of this experienced adult man, who wrapped his attention and care around me like a cocoon. We had common topics of conversation and jokes, he knew so much that he seemed to me a real magician, he never pressed, but his looks, gestures, and movements were more eloquent than any hints.

But there was an insurmountable barrier between us in the form of my Anastasis, who flew to Italy as soon as the vile rumors reached him. Although he did not insult me with his suspicions and accusations, my Italian vacation was covered with a glass ceiling: now I was sure that whatever I did was being scrutinized, studied, and recorded. But, strangely enough, David was not embarrassed by this, but only stoked the fire of his desire more. And if before he had deliberately kept his distance, keeping time, now, realizing that he simply did not have it, he, on the contrary, began to send me passionate messages, supposedly meeting me by chance in the cramped warehouses of the gallery, catching my kisses and getting under my skirt, and I was suffocating from his passion, his barely restrained desire and the words of love that he wrote to me. I read all these obscenities in a mixture of English and Italian, flashed and deleted, returning to my Stasik, who was obviously bored in Rome, and waiting for my practice to end. And from this boredom he made love to me even more fiercely every night in his luxurious air-conditioned room. I closed my eyes and imagined David, remembering the subtle scent of cedar and amber emanating from his skin.

I never fully understood what it was: perhaps it was my first love, which never had time to unfold and blossom. Or maybe it was just a banal infatuation with my teacher and mentor. In any case, I left Rome in confused feelings, having never taken a bite of the fruit I wanted to swallow whole, and David Monti has remained my secret failed lover ever since. My secret hope of salvation. And I would fall asleep in my parents' house, sometimes imagine that somewhere there was a man waiting for me who loved me for who I was. And would wait for me as long as it took. And he hadn't disappeared all these years, and he was watching me very carefully, I had no doubt about that.

And so, finally, I came to the one who promised to wait for me in any sorrow and joy, and for the first few days we communicate as if we were two strangers. Politely. Gently. Waiting for something.

Our car leaves the autobahn to dive into the vast fields and vineyards that cover the whole of Tuscany like a patchwork quilt.

"Tell me, David, do I have to meet your parents?" I ask.

"Don't worry, bella, they will like you!" He reassures me, but it doesn't make me feel any better. Especially I don't like the prospect of being liked by anyone right now. Is it just me, or was that what I was trying to escape from the other day?

The wheels rustle softly on the fine gravel, and we pull up to a beautiful house on a hill, with a mesmerizing view of the valley below us. I look around: this is where my faithful admirer grew up. We walk through the front door, and the walls wrap us in the evening chill. And a quick glance is enough for me to realize that this is a very old house, keeping traces of former grandeur and luxury, but which is very expensive to maintain, and it is slowly beginning to deteriorate in the corners: where it is not yet very conspicuous.

"Mamma, I'm home!" David shouts upstairs into the void, and I hear the thudding footsteps on the stairs.

A few minutes later, a gaunt, elegant elderly woman appears in front of us, wearing so much makeup on her face that it looks as if she's been made up for a TV show. She is dressed in an impeccably

tailored trouser suit, and has thrown a soft pashmina with *Gucci's* signature pattern over her shoulders, as if to emphasize her commitment to the brand.

"David, my boy!" She grabs her son in a tight embrace, while keeping an equally tight gaze on me, which makes me even more uncomfortable.

"This is Polin Sonis I told you about," David introduces me to his mother, and I shake her dry and cold, like desiccated anchovy, hand in the prickly bulky rings.

"What a beauty, it's a pleasure," she stretches her painted thin mouth in a fake smile.

"Francesca Monti," and I can literally feel her slippery gaze running over my figure and clothes, assessing them in a split second.

"It's a pleasure, Señora Monti," I squeeze out, and suddenly I realize that I really want to get away from here.

"I've prepared a guest bedroom for you upstairs," Francesca continues her Chinese ceremonies. "Dinner is in an hour, and I'll see you there," she says, and I realized the conversation is over.

"I'll just show Polin to her room," David says, as if to justify himself as he goes to the car to get my bag, and I strain to think of a single polite phrase to make casual conversation while I stand alone with this thin, straight-as-a-pillar woman with perfect hair and massive emeralds in her strained, flabby earlobes.

Luckily, my beau returns before any thought can enter my head, and takes me after him, up the stairs, and I feel immensely relieved and grateful that he has spared me the company of his Italian mommy. I wonder why I've been pushed to the farthest room down the hall, and when it's just the two of us, David closes the door behind us with the key sticking out of the keyhole and presses his lips to mine, hard and insistent, as if the walls of his home give him strength and fill his body with desire. And I feel his eel-like tongue thrust into my mouth without asking, and his saliva, tasting of bitter licorice and tobacco, mingles with mine. I gasp in his arms in surprise, but David runs his thin, aristocratic palms over my body like he's inspecting a statue for cracks and chips. His palms rub as sandpaper against my skin, which had become terribly sensitive over the past few days, and I somehow catch myself again in the dreary thought that I didn't belong here.

Meanwhile, David is already kneeling on the vintage Iranian rug in front of me, wrestling with my pant leg lock, which is jammed and won't come undone. My fingers burrow into his thick curls on his head and suddenly fall into the void: apparently, my prince is carefully masking the baldness that has already begun to appear, covering the pale glade of his skull with the still abundant curls on the sides. My hand involuntarily jerks away, as if I had stumbled in the darkness on a rat or a snake, and my passionate lover, apparently sensing that I had uncovered one of his little secrets, rises to his feet and whispers in my ear:

"Tonight, bella. I'll come to you," and without waiting for my consent, he disappears behind the door.

So, what I have for now: a stunning view of Tuscany, which I adore and have always dreamed of being in. An older than I thought he was, lover, with his mom. But still very beautiful, elegant and refined. An old Italian house filled with ghosts and legends. But probably crawling with moths and wood bugs. One horrible disease from which I must either be cured or die: there's no third way. And one cheap gigolo to whom I paid thirty thousand euros to plunge straight into an obscure relationship with an Italian aristocrat.

As I ponder all of this, I'm going through the things I brought with me, trying to choose a social outfit for tonight's dinner. Which doesn't seem to be easy and casual. I find the dress I bought with Roma in Prague in a small designer store, and I look at it, remembering how carefully and delicately he buttoned it on me then.... I look for the right shoes and stockings, and then my hand comes across a tab in a side pocket. I don't remember what I put in there, but maybe that's exactly what I need right now. I unzip it and pull out a plastic bag. And even before I unwrap it, I realize what's in it. The thirty thousand that Elvis put back in my bag.

I feel like I've been kicked right into my stomach. I sit up on the bed, trying to catch my breath, and stare out the window at the beautiful plains, as if painted on a Leonardo canvas behind one of his Madonnas.

I pick up my phone and type a message to my darling Sasha. Not a minute goes by when the screen blinks: *"So, how's your Italian guy? Have you fucked him yet? Your Anastas is going crazy here, he even stopped listening to his PR-consultants,"* and a smiley face. I type back: "Sasha, I really need to find out something, can you help me?", to which I immediately get an answer from my friend: *"Of course! Write: what, who, when and where. We have access to all classified information!"* I respond by typing a detailed text and attaching a couple of photos.

After a bit of thinking, I still send a message to Masha, too, and although I know she can't consult me as a psychologist, as a friend she can definitely give me advice. The message goes out, and without waiting for a reply, I walk over to the antique wooden dresser to put on my makeup. I don't like what I see in the mirror: my face is too thin and pale, as if I've just crawled out of the crypt I've slept in for the past two hundred years. My lips are slightly swollen from an overly passionate kiss. And the eyes. Too big and too empty. They remind me of two rooms with the lights out. And that's what bothers me the most. Hell, I've been waiting and wanting this for so long. Here they are — rosemary bushes under the garden window, trees dotted with yellowing lemons, and a devoted lover. Maybe it's just my silly little whims. But it's time to grow up, girl, time to grow up. I apply blush thickly to liven up my complexion, and I liner my eyes with a thin gray liner to match my eyes. I adjust my dress, which fits my figure just perfectly, and look at the clock on the wall: eight p.m. I turn the brass key in the door.

I walk down the intricate hallways along a series of closed doors, and everywhere I notice patches skillfully masking the general dilapidation of the house. The Monti family's finances clearly leave much to be desired if they don't have enough to put everything back in order. Though perhaps David's parents like the old dust and ancient junk. I hear the hum of many voices in the distance, and I am alarmed: I was sure there would be a quiet family dinner. The Italian son has brought his Russian girlfriend to his parents for the weekend — no big deal. But the chatter grows louder as I approach the hall at the end of the corridor, and as I enter, several dozen eyes settle on me, silent for a moment.

I notice that the owners have spared no expense in decorating this room: all the corners and niches are filled with beautiful floral arrangements, the antique candelabras are polished to a shine, and the flickering flames of living candles create a unique atmosphere of festivity.

"Here is my Polin, friends," I hear the voice of David, who had obviously been waiting for this moment to introduce me to all the many guests gathered in the room. Just what's the reason?

"David, what is the occasion today?" — I ask my beau quietly, before the guests resume their laughter and gossip, clinking their glasses with drinks in their hands.

"Nothing special, bella," he replies, putting his arm around my waist, "just a small dinner for our closest friends."

We pass from one group of people to another, and I try to smile casually and talk about nothing. Like I've always liked to do, about the weather and hotels in Sicily, the new *Prada* collection or the next Pedro Almodóvar movie, but if I've always felt myself like a fish in water at these social gatherings before, now I want to get it over with, and I realize that I'm angry at poor David for just wanting to surprise me so nicely. So I gather my courage and walk over to a sweet old man talking to some lady in a fur neckpiece. Oh, my God! Is it just me, or haven't I seen a neckpiece in a thousand years?

"Meet Polin, this is my father, Lorenzo Monti," David introduces me to a bald-headed gentleman in a pressed shirt and the same leather loafers as his son.

"It's a pleasure," I shake his languid hand, smiling, but I read some lingering concern in the corners of the older man's eyes.

To tell you the truth, I'm a bit confused about the whole parenting thing, but after all, it's quite possible that it's just the way Italians do things. Besides, we've corresponded with David for so many years that I feel like we know everything about each other: he knows that when I was seven I was given a black rabbit, which I named Harry after Harry Potter, and that when I was eleven I had my first kiss with a boy when I was on vacation with my mother on the Canary Islands. I know that David's favorite artist is Salvador Dali, and he's shy about it and won't tell anyone but me. I know that the first time he slept with a girl at seventeen was in Ibiza, and I'm even secretly proud of that confession. I know that his favorite writer is Jo Nesbo, and he knows that I have a scar on the inside of my thigh: when I was fifteen, I surfed and hurt my leg. All these years of correspondence have entangled us in such a thick layer of thin threads that I don't think they can ever be severed in an instant. And even my upcoming wedding has made our secret bond even stronger. It was like two accomplices agreeing to wait until the end of

our lives when we could be together. And that moment had arrived. He'd never been inside me, but he'd pressed against me so many times, pressing my thighs into his, that I could feel the shape and size of his hot cock burning through the thin fabric of his pants. How many times I wondered what this moment would be like, and it was David that I thought of first, when the whole world seemed to turn away from me, because he always ended every letter and message with the same phrase: "*Ti amerò per sempre, bella.*"⁴⁰

And now, all the guests have been invited into an equally lavishly decorated room next door, where a huge table has been set up and we are served by well-trained waiters. I am already a little tipsy from the excellent *Chianti* and *Amarone*, and we are served vitello tonnato, Florentine steak and gnocchi in tomato sauce. I pop one on my fork, and remember my last lunch with Elvis under the pomegranate trees at "*Il Leone*". He didn't take the money, he didn't take the money, — is the only thought pounding in my temple. But he did sleep with everyone he met, and that's saying something. And even with that emasculated bitch *Julie*, while my kiss was cooling on his lips! So I look gratefully at my faithful David, who suddenly stands up from his chair and raises his glass.

"Dear friends!" He proclaims across the room, and all voices immediately fall silent. "Today our Monti family has gathered here our closest people to tell you about an event that is very important to us. Important to me," he continues, turning to me, and I feel like a butterfly pinned to a plaque by an inquisitive entomologist. "Polin," he gets down on one knee in front of me, and I pray to myself that he won't do this, won't do this! And David takes my hand, which is lying on my lap, and puts on my third finger a huge massive ring with emeralds and pearls, which would be the envy of the Medici clan itself. "I beg you, bella, be my wife!" My secret lover solemnly finishes his speech, and I hear the sound of a fork falling to the marble floor in the ringing silence and it seems to me a heavenly thunder.

For a second, time seems to stop, and I think I can see a drop of wine slowly dripping down the stem of my glass, but then the hall explodes with loud voices and congratulations, and without even giving me a chance to say yes or no, numerous relatives and guests begin to congratulate, squeeze, smack and shake hands with me. I stand there, as if frozen, and I feel David's strong body at my side and behind me, as if supporting and sheltering me from all hardships, and my finger is firmly clenched with metal pincers heavy family ring of the Monti family. I stand at a loss for words amidst the endless congratulations, but all I can manage is a smile and silence, and I see Francesca scrutinizing me from her seat at the head of the table.

"David, we need to talk," I murmur to my freshly married fiancé, and he strokes my arm gently: "A little later, bella, a little later, let's enjoy the moment."

And I just let it go. The well-mannered girl inside me can't just take off and I have to make endless small talk with everyone, drink wine, eat and smile strainedly.

"Congratulations, Polin," my future father-in-law comes up to me and presses me against his hollow, aged chest. He smells of old money, lavender and oblivion. "I'm so glad you're going to be a part of our family," he continues. "And your whole family will be our family! Your father is a very famous producer, isn't he?" He asks me, as if that matters to him now.

"Yes, Arcady Sonis," I reply absently, trying to escape his clutches to go in to the garden.

I step out onto the terrace and finally breathe in the fresh evening air, cold and burning my lungs. David, impeccable and elegant as ever, comes up to me and hands me a glass of *Prosecco*. I drink it in one gulp, because I can feel my lips becoming as dry as parchment paper.

"I'll get more, bella," David whispers, and I remember again his paralyzing caresses and the words he's written to me over the years.

"David, there's a lot you don't know," I start again, but he puts his index finger to my mouth, and I suddenly remember how Elvis kept running his thumb over my lip, as if erasing my eternal invisible milk mustache. "Just bear with me for another hour, Polin, and you and I will have all night to talk," he whispers hotly in my ear, and I'm not sure I'm ready for that night....

I stand in my bedroom, and I hear the engine of the last car to leave the palazzo fade in the distance. My phone blinks on the nightstand, and I check the messages from my girlfriends, who just clogged up all the messengers. It looks like Sasha sent me an entire investigative journalism piece that

⁴⁰ *I will always love you, bella (Italian)*

I'll be sure to read a little later, and I flip through my phone looking for the answer I asked my Masha. And I find it. Those three words are imprinted in fiery letters in my brain when I hear a quiet knock on the door.

My next self-proclaimed fiancé enters the room, so handsome and confident that it takes my breath away again from his unrivaled Italian glamor and charm.

"Look, David," I mumble, trying to delicately say that I have no intention of marrying him.

"Oh my bella, I've dreamed of this for so long," my lover whispers to me, and his lips slide down my neck, stopping at the hollow at my collarbone, and I feel his cool tongue trace a wet trail along my delicate skin.

His hands deftly undo the zipper on my dress, sliding inside the slit in my back, pulling that cover off me until it falls to the floor like an unnecessary second skin. I'm left in my underwear and stockings, and David kneels in front of me and kisses my hand, swallowing the finger that's wearing the family's priceless ring. His deft tongue licks my every finger, and I begin to feel the slight arousal finally touching my skin just a little. My dormant desire is fueled by our shared memories of intimacy that never happened and our shared fantasies of what it might have been like while I dreamed about it in Moscow and he dreamed of it in Rome. David runs his tongue over the fabric of my panties, making them wet with his saliva, and his fingers are already pushing the fabric aside, revealing my glossy pink flesh to him. I sway slightly on my feet from all the wine I've drunk tonight and David's skillful caresses, and he's already gently kissing the scar on my thigh, almost where my legs meet.

I am about to fall into that maelstrom of the Italian night, ready to let his hot, flaming cock inside me at last, but then the huge ring slides down my thin, saliva-wet finger and falls to the floor with a thud, and it is as if I've awakened from the fog that had enveloped me. And three words from Masha flash before my mind's eye: "*Don't do it,*" echoing in me like an ancient incantation.

"I'm sorry, David, but I can't," I justified myself to him, as if I've just received an indulgence from some higher power, when in fact I've just gotten confirmation of my doubts from my best friend. A certified therapist. But the hell with it!

"Okay, okay, Polin, we can wait until after the wedding," David reassures me, but I confidently remove his palms from my body.

"You don't understand, David, there's no wedding. It just can't happen!" I explain to him like an unreasonable child. "You see, I'm ill, and I may not live to see the new year."

"Oh, Polin!" David whispers, and is it just me, or do I not hear a hint of horror or sympathy in his voice? "It doesn't matter! We can still get married. It doesn't matter to me."

"But it matters to me," I try to convince him, but then I get another text message, and I can't help but look at it: "*Your Uber is coming, baby!*" I read the message from Sonya, and it's like I have wings behind my back when I see it!

"Where are you going, Bella?" My ex David shouts after me as I run down the stairs with my dress unzipped and my bag and a few things in it.

18

I have no idea how much money Sonia has spent on the cab that is now taking me to an unknown destination, but I'm not even going to worry about anything else: I just fall asleep in the back seat, and only open my eyes when the driver wakes me up in a quiet voice:

"Senorita, sveglia, arrivato!" And I see in the window the facade of a small hotel.

"Where are we?" Is all that I ask my chauffeur.

"Hotel Vista Palazzo, Verona," he replies simply.

Well, the girls must have known where to order a cab, so I go to the front desk, where a friendly receptionist is waiting for me.

"Miss Sonis, your room is ready," he hands me the keys, and I in turn give him my passport.

"Has anyone else arrived already?" I ask him, although I realize that miracles do not happen.

"Not yet, but the room is booked for four people, and we are expecting more guests," he smiles at me.

I can't believe that my best friends have dropped everything they're doing, miraculously found tickets, and I'm going to see them soon! I think meeting the girls excites me a million times more than any of the most romantic dates and the prospect of the hottest sex! I'm so excited that I don't have the energy to sit still, I go into the luxurious room that Sasha and Sonya booked for us and take a quick shower so I can change and go for a walk around the city. I pull on my pants, which yesterday David tried so long and unsuccessfully to pull off me. And now, thinking back on last night's crazy circus show, I don't understand why he did it at all. What was the point of him proposing and marrying me? Besides, if he loves and wants me so much, as he's always claimed, why did the news of my illness not seem to upset him as much as it seemed to me? I try to imagine a normal person's reaction, and realize that none of the people closest to me have expressed much sympathy or understanding for me in the past few days. Except Elvis, perhaps? But I dismiss the thought of him, crumpling and throwing it away like the pathetic napkin on which I'd tried to fit my entire life.

I head first to the nearest restaurant for breakfast, where I am brought a huge cup of cappuccino, served an airy omelet with salmon and red caviar and a glass of *Mimosa* — freshly squeezed orange juice with *Prosecco*. I enjoy solitude and fresh food for the first time in days, and realize that this is exactly what I wanted: freedom and solitude. There are large terracotta pots of lavender next to my table on the street, and bees swarm around the last of the fall flowers. I look at them, and my heart clenches painfully. Shit! Will absolutely everything in the world remind me of him now? Angry with myself, I quickly finish my coffee, pay the waiter, and go for a walk through the old narrow Italian streets.

I take pictures of the stone walls and rooftops of the city, and take a seat on a bench to make another post on my blog. Over the past week it has changed a lot: instead of selfies from endless parties and showrooms, my feed is now filled with pictures of paintings, sketches of different cities with small stories about everything I've met during these days. My fingers seem to press buttons against my will, and I go to the account from which Elvis sent me those horrible photos. There's nothing there now, and the account is empty and dead. Nothing. No signs of life.... The only thread that had ever connected me to Roma was severed.

I sneak a glance at the happy couples around me: she in her unchanged cashmere pullover, slacks, and soft loafers, he is in polo shirt, slacks, and sneakers. They are walking slowly, helping each other up the stairs, their best years are behind them, but even now they are enjoying every minute they have together, traveling, sending photos to their grandchildren, or just licking ice cream cones. I'm angry at fate that I may never walk with my other half like this, I won't have grandchildren, and I probably won't have children either. And even the gentle October sun can't pull me out of the abyss of gloomy thoughts, in which I begin to sink again, as I get a message from Sasha: "*Pola! Where are you?*" and I run to meet my friends.

The four of us are sitting at a table in a restaurant, as we were just a few weeks ago, but I realize the huge gap between the old me and the me of today.

"Polya, the only thing I don't understand is why you didn't tell us!" Sasha indignantly pokes her fork with a pasta on it somewhere upward, as if she were preparing to prick an invisible enemy or a disease that had struck me.

"Somehow it didn't work out," I mumble, remembering the day I signed the contract and the pictures Elvis sent me. Without even giving me time to think about it.

"So you went to Italy with this Elvis from the club?" Sonia asks in amazement, taking a generous sip of *Prosecco*. "But why with him?"

"It just happened like that," I justify myself again.

"Is it true that he kidnapped you?" Sonya persists, and I shake my head tiredly:

"Don't be silly! It was all voluntary!"

"So you had something between two of you, guys?" My friend shows wonders of cleverness, and her eyes, rounded in amazement, are already attracting the attention of an elderly, elegant gentleman sitting nearby.

"I didn't have time to read everything you sent me," I try to turn the conversation to another direction, and approach Sasha. "So you managed to find out something?"

"Oh yes," the editor-in-chief glistens victoriously. "I have raised the entire editorial staff in Moscow and in Paris, and I have found out everything!"

"How interesting," says Masha, who has been busy with her pizza all this time. "Tell us quickly, what is it?!" And Sasha enthusiastically continues:

"So, this is the same Yulia Sheremetyeva studied at the department of painting fifteen years ago, together with the already well known to us Roman Khrustalyov in the The Moscow State Academic Art Institute named after Surikov. As they say, she didn't have the stars in the sky, but she knew how to scribble posters at least. Unlike Roman himself, who was one of the best students. And so, when it came time to distribute, which of the students will go to intern in France in one of the most prestigious art schools, there was no question: all the teachers as one pointed to Khrustalev. But then our gray mouse Yulia suddenly performed such an outstanding work that all the academicians in one voice cried out that she is an undoubted genius, which they did not see before.

And so our couple goes to study in Paris, where they simply blow up the French art community with their talent. Local critics are delighted with the two Russian students, who write amazing paintings, they are prophesied a brilliant future, the best galleries invite them to their exhibitions, and the local beau monde is crazy about the beautiful couple, and especially — from the beautiful Julia Sheremetyeva, who, it turns out, is not just some ordinary Yulia, but great-great-granddaughter of the great Sheremetyevs⁴¹ themselves. In a word, blue blood and white bone. The public is delighted: a brilliant artist, exquisite beauty, and even a countess! The girl is a hot commodity. Everyone wants her, calls her to visit them, to their salons, presentations and parties. And our Yulia is not lost: makes the right acquaintances, rotates in social circles and earns herself points. And the result doesn't make her wait long: you know how nice French people love Russian aristocrats," Sasha rolls her eyes theatrically. "The girl catches a real marquis on the hook — Gilbert de Vergis. That's it."

I listen attentively to Sasha, and drink a glass of *Prosecco* in a gulp without even noticing it. Here is one more square of the puzzle, which I missed so much, and my friend continues in journalistic fervor:

"So, this Yulia, apparently, in order not to give the marquis a second thought, very quickly marries him."

"A very talented girl," Masha dreamily inserts, and Sasha continues:

"And although she was in good standing at the Paris School of Art, her career as a famous painter ended as soon as her career as the wife of a marquis began. That's it. I don't know what her husband was counting on: her artistic talents or her noble lineage, which, by the way, I have big doubts," Sasha inserts, "but the fact remains: two talented and hopeful artists came to Paris, and only one Roman left it, without waiting for the wedding of his former girlfriend. All the paintings, which were so highly praised by critics, disappeared somewhere and never surfaced anywhere else, although, according to my sources, would now be worth quite a lot of money on the market."

"Amazing!" Sonia exclaims, and I sit there, thinking, trying to piece together the scraps of different facts in my head....

"Very murky story," summarizes Masha, phlegmatically finishing her pizza.

"Absolutely!" Agrees with her Sasha, finishing a glass of wine. "I do not believe in all these pathetic stories about noble orphans and other bullshit," she stabs her fork into another piece of pasta.

"By the way, look at her, don't you think she looks like our Pola?" Suddenly exclaims Sonia, showing us the screen of her phone.

"There is something, distant," agrees with her Masha, and Sasha confirms:

"That's the first thing I thought of when I saw her photo. But I didn't dwell on it. There are so many people in the world, and so many faces. Besides, our Pola is a million times prettier," sums up my friend.

"So in the end... you did it with him?" Sonya does not give up.

"Him who?" I ask again.

"You know, with your hottie David," Sonia finishes with an innocent look.

"I really hope not," Masha put in her word phlegmatically, sipping a good portion from her glass.

⁴¹ The Sheremetev family was a prominent and wealthy Russian noble lineage known for their vast estates and significant contributions to culture and the arts during all Russian history.

"Oh, yes, by the way, I forgot to tell you!" Sasha suddenly exclaims loudly, and the waiter who came up to us jumps up in fright. "Your David has a very big problem!" She says authoritatively. "He is bankrupt. The gallery and the family home are mortgaged. I don't know where he's gotten all that money. In short, only a miracle will help him," concludes the Queen of Investigations.

"Or a good marriage," I mutter quietly to myself.

Drunk, bellies full of delicious Italian food, we wander through the nighttime city, and make plans for where else we can go. I mean, we've been dreaming about this trip for so long. Back in high school. And it's so weird that we're just now getting it together. When there's no time for anything else.

"Juliette's house is around here somewhere!" Sonia suddenly remembers. "I want to stand on its the balcony! Let's go!"

"Did you know that Shakespeare had never even been to Verona?" Masha declares authoritatively, who even after a bottle of wine retains her sober mind.

"To hell with it!" Sasha exclaims. "Here it is, the power of art: writers create worlds and build entire cities, which then stand for millennia, even when the writers themselves are already remembered by few people!

"Not many people remember Shakespeare?" Masha remarks ironically.

Arguing and laughing, we turn into a small courtyard: it's late evening, and the house is closed to the public. All the better: the four of us are standing here, looking at the statue of Juliet and the small building with the world's most famous balcony, when suddenly a door at the side opens and a man, who looks like a clerk, calls me to him:

"Senorita Polin! Prego!" And I go up to him, not knowing what he wants from me. "Prego, prego," he invites me inside, and I follow him.

He leads me through a dark, humming house that must have once been inhabited by people, even if not by Juliette, who never existed. And now, in the corners of the large rooms, there are slightly illuminated display cases with clothes from those times, antique furniture, and a bed in the bedroom, which has the famous balcony.

"Prego," the old man invites me again, and I take a step outside, only now realizing that my heart is about to jump out of my chest.

I am standing on the balcony late at night, like a girl who never existed, who has become the symbol of all lovers for all time, and in the corner of the courtyard I see my friends talking and laughing loudly about something. But I am looking and waiting for someone else. Who? And then a familiar voice comes to my ears:

But, soft! What light through yonder window breaks?

It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.

Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon,

Who is already sick and pale with grief,

That thou her maid art far more fair than she.

I look down and see Anastas Weisberg in the center of the courtyard, on one knee, reading the famous lines of the great poet to me from his phone, and the tiny square of the screen illuminates his face with an unearthly angelic light.

"Come back to me, my love," he shouts to me from down the street, and then musicians with instruments suddenly emerge from the corner of the cramped courtyard, and a singer, and I wouldn't be surprised if it was the famous tenor from *La Scala*, starts singing my favorite Neapolitan song "*Dicitencello Vuie*" and I see the courtyard gradually filling up with onlookers and tourists strolling by, attracted by the beautiful music. I stand on the balcony and tears stream down my face: My God, millions of girls in the world could not even dream of such a thing, to be in Juliet's place, in my place! On a night balcony in Verona, bought by a fiancé who flew thousands of kilometers to pick me up.

And I can feel his breath, his body and his desire: he found me after all!

"I'm sorry, Pola, I love you so much," he kneels down in front of me, and the crowd below begins to applaud at the final chords of the song. "I'll do anything to make sure you come back," he whispers against my stomach, his warm breath spreads as a wet spot on my skin.

"And what about my diagnosis?" I raise a questioning eyebrow.

"I'll do anything to cure you. I'm very rich, haven't you forgotten?" He smiles down at me, and yes, I remember very well that he's very rich.

"What about the heirs of the Weisberg clan?" I ask with a bitter grin.

"I don't give a damn. If I have to, I'll hire hundreds of women to bear our children for you. And you won't have to spoil your perfect figure. Just come back to me!"

I stand and stare at my fiancé, whom I've known for ten years. I've never known any other men until recently, and it turns out they're all no better. Only, perhaps, much poorer than my fiancé. Much, much poorer.

"I brought this with me," he hands me a paper bag, and I recognize the little white and pink *WedEnd* wedding dress I wore for my wedding photo shoot. "Everything in this world reminds me of you," Stasik whispers to me from below, and shouts erupt from the crowd:

"Say yes to him, girl!"

I look down at the crowd, laughing and happy, and only my best friends are standing a little apart from everyone else: all three of them, as one, with their arms crossed over their chests.

We walk down to the courtyard with Anastas, holding hands, and only now I do realize how dead tired I am from this whole crazy race. And how wonderful it is to have a strong shoulder beside me. My mom was right: a successful marriage is the most important thing in any girl's life. Especially when your husband is handsome, young, powerful and rich. And can protect you from the world. And I snuggle up to my man's strong shoulder. And I feel his hot palm from behind slipping behind the waistband of my pants, gently stroking the bare skin under my panties....

"Good evening, señoritas," Stasik greets my girls with a smile, and Masha, after nodding him coldly, came close to me and says so that no one will hear:

"Just don't forget: Juliet ended very badly."

19

The hum of the plane drowns out the music in the cabin, where my Anastas has given us permission to listen to whatever we want today. So we blast Billy Ailish and Ed Sheeran at full blast while the stewardesses pour us *Louis Roederer* and serve us snacks. Our vacation was over before it had even begun, but Weisberg Junior had allowed my friends and me to buy up half the boutiques in Milan for the last time, and he was nice, kind, and helpful, so we couldn't complain about being treated badly. And now the four of us are trashing the cabin of his expensive private jet, leaving wine stains on the marble floors, wood paneling and handmade carpets. After all, it's all paid for.

"Polina, Anastas Petrovich wants to see you," a slender stewardess informs me with a conspiratorial look, escorting me to Anastas's office, which is equipped right in the airplane. It's a bedroom.

"I'm sure the girls will manage without you," Stasik tells me, locking the door behind me.

"There's still two hours to fly, and we have a lot to do," he whispers to me, already taking off my blouse and skirt and unbuttoning his jeans, from which his cock, ready for anything, is already jumping out.

"My little girl, I was so sick without you," he continues, laying me on his wide bed and pulling down my panties while my friends are having fun behind the wall. "He missed you so much, give little brother a kiss," he pokes me in the mouth with his scarlet hot penis until my lips close around it in a tight ring, pulling in the shaft that has been fucking me all these years in all my holes and grooves. "Oh, Polya, you know what to do," Stasik sways over me almost unconscious as my hands massaged his tight testicles and his phallus pushes deeper and deeper into my throat. "You're the best," he almost cries as his warm cum drips down my palate, and the only thing I want to do right now is spit it out on that expensive silk rug on the floor.

I want to go back to my friends, who are laughing and dancing right now, but Anastas is already laying me on my stomach, and I can feel his round head exploring the fork of my ass, looking for a tiny

tight hole he can safely enter without worrying about the condom. I wrinkle in pain when he finally dives into me, as I've wrinkled a thousand times before, and my future husband mumbles:

"Oh yes, my girl, that's it," while I stare out the porthole next to the bed at the azure blue sky with cloud lands passing below us. There's a price to pay for everything, — I think in my head, and I imagine falling into the soft absorbent cotton of the sky below....

The pilot tells us to land, and I go to the bathroom to clean myself up for the landing. I wipe off the mascara under my eyes and apply some blush to my cheekbones to brighten up my pale face. That's the end of my crazy ride, and now a feeling of some kind of hopelessness rolls over me. I realize that it's all just the whims of a spoiled girl who has everything: a loving fiancé, money, fame, and friends. And all my suffering seems so ridiculous and silly compared to the real suffering of women in the real world.

I grin to myself in the mirror: a poor little girl in a million-dollar private jet. What nonsense! I pick up my phone to take selfies for my blog, but then set it aside. It seems so cheesy and secondary to me now that I laugh at all these social media posts of girls taking staged photos in airplanes that don't belong to them and on private yachts that don't belong to them either. The pilot urges over the loudspeaker for everyone to return to their seats and buckle up, and I fix my curls one last time in front of the mirror. My gaze lingers for a split second on the marble surface of the sink, the brass faucets, and the gilded urn where the usual remnants of our violent games with Anastas lay. I put a happy smile on my face and return to the common cabin, where the friendly stewardesses are already serving *Perrier*, cognac or strong coffee to everyone.

So, the status quo is completely restored: my beautiful and caring fiancé returned me to my family, where my parents welcomed me into their arms. The former equilibrium is restored: I have to be examined again and start treatment, having signed non-disclosure documents with Anastas Weisberg beforehand. No one wants to look like the latest asshole in the eyes of the public. But he doesn't in any case. It's just a formality. There's a video from Juliet's balcony in Verona where he's on his knees begging me to come back. All our accounts are flooded with thousands of comments and likes, and, of course, a pile of heckling: where without it. But in our business, hate is the first indicator of success. So we can say that we are also mega-popular celebrities. My messengers are bursting with invitations to various shows and interviews, and I lazily scroll through them, because I'm only interested in one account with Zorro's mask on the avatar. Which seems to have gone silent for good....

"Polya, hi, I have a business proposal for you!" Sonya shouts into my phone. "You remember that I am now designing my own erotic art museum, right? Well, when my client asked me if I had someone in mind whom I could recommend as a curator, I said I do!"

"Yes, and who is it?" I wonder.

"Of course it's you!" Blurts out. "I showed them your blog, do you even know that you are now a super famous art blogger?" Sonia asks.

"Really?" I can't believe my ears. For the last few years, I've been a Lifestyle Influencer who basically promoted dolce vita, the right brands, the right jewelry and the right cosmetics. The right restaurants, the right travel and the right dating. I've just been bored to death with it lately. I chuckle bitterly: how ironic that "bored to death" sounds, taking into account my circumstances.

"Of course, you don't even remember what you write on your own blog, do you? And it's just so fucking interesting! Or did you hire journalists?!" My friend asks me indignantly.

"Of course, Sonia, I write everything myself. Why would I need journalists, I'm an art historian myself, remember?"

"That's right, I haven't forgotten a damn thing! So get on your feet and go meet your client. In three hours we'll be waiting for you at our site!" Sonya gives me the orders, and I agree:

"Okay, you got it, boss! Spell me the address! But I hope you didn't forget to warn him that I might not live to see the opening of the museum?"

"Polya, when you're going to die, then we'll warn him," my friend reassures me as if nothing had happened and hangs up the phone.

Well, it's the perfect issue for distraction from sad things. I'm getting ready for a meeting: I'm wearing a black business suit for once. Jacket, slim pants, and lace-up shoes. I put on scarlet lipstick and

put my hair in a bun at the back of my head. I look at myself in the mirror: I think this is the first time in weeks that I've actually liked my reflection. My eyes are sparkling, though it's probably just the feverish glow of illness, but it looks damn good on me. The mole above my upper lip adds a touch of charm to the whole look, softening the stern businesswoman image a little. I even feel like I look a couple years older, which adds a certain solidity and weight to my whole appearance.

On the way, I have time to stop by Anastas's office to sign all the boring, endless documents that accompany our relationship. Without warning, I go up to his office at the very top of one of the towers in Moscow City. Let it be a little surprise for him, I decide. He's never seen me like this before. Businesslike and strict. Let him get used to it. I smile at the receptionist, who immediately jumps up to escort me to the boss's office:

"Don't worry, Anya, I'll do it myself," I stop the girl.

"Anastas Arkadievitch is busy," she shouts back at me.

"I won't be long," I answer, swinging open first one heavy wooden door and then the second one behind it. I don't understand why he needs so many doors, — for the first time in a while, I wonder.

"Hello, my love," I burst joyfully into the office to my fiancé, who sits with his back to me and admires Moscow, which is spread out in the panoramic window in front of him on the whole wall.

Anastas shudders, and, without turning to me, says:

"Polya, is that you? I wasn't expecting you at all!"

"I decided to surprise you, darling," I head toward his desk, "I want to finally get all the formalities over with."

My boyfriend remains frozen in the chair, and I walk over to him, rounding the corner of the giant tabletop. It doesn't immediately occur to me that Anastas is completely naked below the waist, and his pants are down to the floor. On which one of his PR managers is kneeling and looking at me dumbfounded. Apparently, the girl is so frightened that she froze with my fiancé's cock sticking out of her hand. I stop rooted to the spot, trying to come to my senses for a couple of seconds. But I see what I see: the girl is giving my already-ex-boyfriend a blowjob, and there can be no doubt about it. There's her white blouse unbuttoned down to the bottom, with two ripe breasts spilling out of it, there's her black skirt pulled up to her waist, exposing her bare buttocks and the elastic bands of her stockings, leaving swarthy stripes on her tanned skin. This is my fiancé's penis — which I know in great detail down to every vein on it, especially since he's sent me millions of pictures of it in different angles! In the heat of the moment I grab my cell phone and take a few shots of his cock already beginning to fade in the sweaty girl's palm.

"What are you doing, Polya?" Stasik screams in horror. "It's not what you are thinking about!"

"I'm just taking a photo as a souvenir, my love," I reply. "I won't see him again! What a pity. And by the way, I'm not thinking about anything!"

"Pola, it doesn't mean anything," Weisberg Junior finally starts pulling up his panties and pants as his sex manager gets off her knees and adjusts her clothes.

"Yeah, you're right. It doesn't mean a damn thing to me!" I yell. "Just like those condoms that were lying in your trash can on the airplane, right?" I finally remember what's been bugging me for days. We didn't use condoms that day. We did it without them. "Fire your employees who don't clean up their master's shit properly!" I throw him into his face.

Then my eyes fall on a beautiful Sevres set, apparently arranged on the table for a tea party.

"And this is a little compensation," I walk over to it, and the thin, priceless cup flies into the wall, shattering into a million pieces with a pitiful clinking sound. "This is for my thirteenth birthday when I went to your villa on Lake Como instead of summer camp!" I grab the paper-thin coffee pot and drop it to the floor with all my might. "And this is for my high school prom, which I never went to with my classmate who was in love with me, because I went with your bastard friends to the Greek islands!" And two-hundred years priceless platters fly into the wall, shattering into pieces. "And if you try to interfere with my life in any way, this photo will fly all over publishing houses and the internet, trust me!" And I finish destroying the precious set, smashing the remaining cups and the milk pot on the table.

"Goodbye, Anastas," I head for the exit, and the porcelain shards crunch under my shoes. "And by the way, thank your PR manager for the great idea with Verona; it wasn't actually *your* idea, was it?" I slam one door behind me, and then the other one.

The meeting with the client goes perfectly. I am now the curator of a real museum, albeit an erotic art museum, and now Sonia and I have to figure out together where and how the expositions will be located in our small space, so that she can already draw the project.

"I never thought that in order to start living, you have to get deathly ill," I mumble thoughtfully, when we are already with her going to the meeting with Masha and Sasha.

"Speaking of sickness," Sonya turns to me with a serious look: "When are you going to take your tests?"

"As soon as possible," I look at her. "As soon as possible."

"Listen, I'm so glad you finally found out everything," Masha raises her invariable glass of red to me.

"What do you mean, finally?!" I resent it.

"Just a rumor," Masha vaguely answers me, and I look questioningly at Sasha, who is concentrating on her plate, pretending to be very enthusiastic about her carpaccio.

"Don't tell me you knew about everything!" I can't believe my best friends have been lying to me all this time.

"Polya, what difference would it have made?" Sasha makes a good point. "Who are we to open your eyes to one of the richest and most influential men not only in the country, but also, perhaps, in the world?"

"It's true," Sonia says sadly. "Look around you: do you know any woman who would voluntarily refuse Anastas Weisberg himself?"

"Now I do!" I, in turn, raise my empty glass, in which the waiter generously pours me *Amarone*. — It's me!" And we all start laughing. And I catch myself thinking that I have never felt such lightness, perhaps, in all my short life.

"By the way, have you thought of how you will dispose of your fee?" Asks me in a businesslike tone Sasha.

"What fee?" I can not figure it out.

"You don't remember, the one for the wedding photo shoot with Stasik!" The editor-in-chief of *Glossy* magazine reminds me. "I told you we're a solid international publishing house!"

"Oh shit! That's true!" I remember. "And how much money I can get for that?" And Sasha writes a number on a paper napkin that takes my breath away. With such a sum I don't need any payoffs from the jerk Weisberg Junior: our photos of the failed wedding covered everything in full.

In the evening, my mother is waiting for me in a dark room: my father is always on a movie shooting somewhere, or perhaps just with another actress, but my mother endures this all her life for the illusion of a happy family life.

"Polya," she calls me quietly when I, tired and cheerful, come home on slightly staggering legs.

"Mom, I'm going to bed," I answer her, keeping the light on in our living room.

"No, you're not going to bed until we talk," she cuts me off harshly. "Childhood is over, Polya, when will you realize it? Stasik called and told me everything."

"It's good that you already know everything," I cut her off in turn. "Then I don't have to explain anything."

"No, you don't understand!" My mom starts screaming. "You have no idea how much labor, nerves and mental strength it costs to keep all this in perfect order," she circles our darkened house with her thin palm.

"I have a good idea, mom," I reply quietly. "And by the way, in case you didn't know, my childhood ended ten years ago. You probably knew all that, didn't you?" I finally get the thought that I've been chasing away all these years.

"If you don't go back to Stas, then you can't count on me anymore," my mom cut me off, and then the most important thing finally hits me.

"Mom, I haven't been able to count on you for a long time," I squeeze out of myself, and feels the traitorous tears come to my throat. I run upstairs, to my room, and I hear Anastasia Sonis' words flying into my back:

"Polin, come back, we haven't finished talking!" But I realize that I have absolutely nothing to talk to her about. I take my suitcase and throw the first things I can think of into it: then I'll send a courier for the rest, and I call my Masha:

"Masha, can I sleep over tonight? And probably tomorrow, too," I mumble into the phone, tears dripping down the screen of my smartphone.

"Too much has happened in the last month for one person to handle, don't you think?" I ask my best friend, wrapped up in granny's heavy blanket on her huge sofa in the living room.

"Believe me, Polya, life is a fairy tale!" Masha concludes philosophically, and, carefully stroking my cheek, turns off the light.

And I fall into a deep dreamless sleep. There are no fairy tales, every infant knows that, — I have one last annoying thought in my head before I fall deep into a black downy well.

"Wake up, my sweet girl!" I hear the so welcome quiet voice whispering in my ear: "Get up, Sonny Polly," and my breath catches with happiness. I open my eyes, trying to focus my gaze, and through the Moscow October pastel light appear pale pattern of wallpaper on the wall, and from the kitchen comes Masha's voice:

"Get up, Polya, you and I have an appointment at the clinic!" And I cover my head with the blanket, trying to keep my disappointment at bay. What did I expect? I remember yesterday's events, and the day doesn't seem so radiant, but, after all, it's time to take responsibility for my life into my own hands, and I grab my phone from the nightstand, as it is, without styling, makeup and filters, sitting on my granny's old sofa in my pajamas, I record a short video for my subscribers, and explain why I'm going to the clinic. I re-watch the video and hit the "*publish*" button. I don't have expensive PR people, but I want to decide for myself what to do with my life.

I'm sitting in a hospital gown worn over my naked body on a couch covered with a medical diaper, and an attentive doctor, approaches me with a nurse, explaining:

"Now we will give you anesthesia, it won't hurt, but this is the most important test, which will show the state of your white blood cells — and I lie on my stomach while the nurse in rubber dry gloves runs an icy alcohol swab down my spine. I close my eyes, and remember the wishes I made then in Reims Cathedral.

20

We are sitting in our freshly painted, freshly plastered museum with Sonya, and the sound engineer is adjusting the microphones on us: today we are doing an exclusive interview for the famous You-tube channel "*In the Kitchen with Alice*", and the attractive presenter, whom I remember very well from that memorable day when I peeped from the closet at her and Elvis' sexual games, finally starts her interview.

"Tell me, Polin, how did a famous socialite, almost Missis Weisberg, gave up everything that modern girls can dream of, including one of the most beautiful and influential men from the *Forbes* list, to earn a living on her own and open her own art gallery? And, by the way, to become one of the most popular blogger-influencers in contemporary art?"

The cameraman takes a close-up of her perfectly ironed face, which can be seen in thousands of modern women who look after themselves and regularly post selfies on social networks: well-groomed, cheekbones and a bit artificial. Well, everyone has the right to be beautiful and desirable. Let's see what I'll look like thirty years from now!

I take a deep breath, look at Sonya, who, as always, is an ethereal pink-and-gold angel looking at the camera, smile, and begin:

"Let's start with the fact that it all began with my terminal diagnosis, which I was made almost six months ago."

"Oh my God!" Alice makes a horrified face, even though she knows the whole backstory. But our viewers don't.

And I can see through the window, where the February snowstorm is swirling with soft, fluffy flakes, as a courier leads a giant cloud of scarlet and gold balloons down the street by a string. It's Valentine's Day, and someone has decided to confess his love to someone.... The blizzard snatches one red balloon out of the boy's hands, and it flutters in the wind, wrapped in white down feathers, until it begins to drift higher and higher, dissolving into a scarlet drop of warm blood in the white milk of winter snowfall.

I smile at my thoughts, looking at this balloon that has flown away into the uncharted heavenly distances, remembering how I took the paper with my tests out of the nurse's hands with wet from sticky sweat palms and shaking knees, trying to read the lines blurring in front of my eyes, and how the woman, seeing my condition, explained:

"Everything is normal, don't worry so much! There is a slight deviation, but the doctor will explain everything to you!"

The imposing doctor, scrutinizing my tests, rubbed his palms together, and, raising his face from the leaflet, said:

"Congratulations, Polin, everything is just fine! Nothing was confirmed!"

"What do you mean, it's not confirmed?" I could not believe my ears. "What about all these tests, Swiss equipment," I continued to babble, but the doctor interrupted my incoherent stream of thoughts:

"You should know, this diagnosis is very often made incorrectly! So it's quite common. In addition, the results can be affected by various factors: alcohol consumption, too much fatty food, and so on!" He scrutinized me, and I remembered my parties with friends, where we, as usual, drank a couple of bottles of wine, and a portion of fat *syniks*, which I ate then to spite my mother right before these tests. That's it, I'm not drinking alcohol anymore and I'm eating nothing but lettuce and arugula only the rest of my life!

"So you're doing great," the doctor smiled. "The only thing is that the general fatigue is very noticeable. But a healthy sleep, walks in the fresh air, a proper diet and a course of vitamins will improve things very quickly. And don't worry so much, Polin," he winked at me: "Life is a fairy tale!"

And I believed it when I finally left the clinic. I believed it when I found a cozy apartment for rent in the center: small, but only mine, where I could come and hide from all my misfortunes. Or invite my girls over. I believed it all the more when Sonia called me, excited, and started gibbering into the phone that she had found out that by a happy coincidence there was a perfect space for a small private gallery for rent near our museum, and that she was ready to do the project for free.

I believed it when artists and people willing to invest in art started writing to my increasingly popular blog, and my account finally turned into a virtual exhibition of contemporary works. The money from my wedding fee was just enough for a concise and stylish renovation of my own contemporary art gallery, Polin Sonis, which opens just today, at the same time as our small private museum of erotic art. Of course, there will be a huge private party in the evening, to which all the cream of society has been invited, and *Glossy* magazine has been given the right to be the first to exclusively cover the opening. Thanks to my Sasha, we will have the most famous journalists, photographers and designers, and Masha is responsible for several patrons from among her solid clients, to whom she has been discreetly handing out invitations to the museum and gallery opening in her psychotherapy sessions for the past month.

Did I write to Mimi and Amelie during this time? Of course. I sent photos of the paintings I had seen in her studio to gallerists I knew in Europe, and they confirmed to me their great artistic value. Moreover, Monsieur Gilbert at *Le Bleu Gallery* in Paris kindly told me that he remembered very well the scandal of these works: they could not be sold or bought because they were co-created. Of course, I knew that this happens, but artists usually resolve this issue between themselves.

"Impossible, impossible, ma chérie!" The gallery owner lamented. "Both sides were not ready to concede, and the paintings remained frozen. They cannot be sold until the two parties do not come to a common agreement, or one does not transfer the rights completely to the second author — they explained to me the nuances of our profession. "A very rare case, but it happened. My heart bleeds as I imagine that such unique works are dusting somewhere in the closet — sad Monsieur Gilbert. Or from

the fact that they cannot be exhibited in your gallery for a fabulous sum and crazy commissions, — I thought to myself, but in response only thanked my dear colleague. And now I had no doubt who were the two authors of these works. And those in Rabelais's pastry shop. I wondered, if each painting is worth an average of ten or thirty thousand euros, how much could the total sum add up?

Mimi told me that the Marquise Julie de Vergis had taken all the paintings from her studio and she had never seen them again. Nor had she heard anything about Elvis. Thanks to my Paris post about the Opera Garnier on my blog, Amelie's dresses have become famous not only in France, but now there is a queue of fashionistas from Russia, and she doesn't have time to sew new outfits. We sometimes correspond, but Roma's account still shows no signs of life. I try to forget about him, but I'm not very good at it. I went on a couple of dates organized by my girlfriends, but all of them didn't even last until dessert, nothing more. So I just plunged headfirst into my work: after all, isn't this what I've always wanted to do? To find old frozen paintings and give them a new chance at life. A long and happy life.

Of course, I don't tell all these details to the famous journalist Alice: it's enough for people to see a pretty candy wrapper, and that makes them happy. But our little success with Sonya may well turn into a triumph for both of us: for the evening we have ordered boxes of drinks and tons of snacks, I even prepared a little surprise for the guests, but it's a secret for now. Already now little bits of the interview are starting to float as paper ships all over the internet, sparking everyone's appetite before the main course. Sonya and I tell Alice about our friendship since high school, about my diagnosis, about the crazy trip, leaving out, of course, all the personal details, and I keep thinking to myself: is Alice still seeing Roma? Is she still dating him? Does she go to Greece with him? And are they still playing crazy games? I once went to that forest near Moscow, hoping to find the magical little house that Roma had once taken me to, but I couldn't find it: just endless fences, concrete slabs, and construction sites. As if it never existed on the map of Moscow. Or did I dream it all up?

We give our guests a little tour of the museum, and we really hope that some of the exhibits will have the right effect on the audience. I'm even showing a piece of my gallery: tonight it will open its doors to its first visitors, and I'm very hopeful that some of the works will already have found their new owners.

Before noon we have time to do all our chores, and we start to prepare for the gala evening with Sonya. Masha and Sasha are coming, and we are definitely going to have fun tonight! Isn't that why I almost died of blood cancer? Though it was a mistake from the beginning, but my life was definitely turning into a fairy tale.

Six o'clock in the evening, and here to our cozy museum begin to flock representative cars, spewing on the scarlet velvet carpet, which we with the girls were not lazy to order, dressed in their sexiest outfits men and women, who were specially warned that they are expected a real carnival. Sexy hostesses at the entrance hand out masks to everyone, and no one refuses. We ourselves meet guests in our corsets, which we once wore to my memorable bachelorette party at the club. But I, hesitating at the last second, decided to wear my favorite magic dress from Amelie Blanc, which I have never walked anywhere else after Paris.

We greet everyone with champagne glasses at the entrance and let them into a narrow, cramped passageway that opens with a silk curtain and then turns into a narrow and long vagina corridor that we invented with Sonia! The dark, damp walls seem to throb and moan as the stunned guests pass through the first room, where they find themselves in the penthouse of a skyscraper with a view of New York City at night. Admittedly, I took this idea from my unsuccessful date with Mateusz and Daniel, and that's why all the walls of the room, filled with sex units of different companies and eras: from the oldest French ones to modern author's sex chairs, are densely hung with works of famous erotic photographers: Helmut Newton, Jan Saudek, Terry Richardson and others. There is also a photo made by me, but I left it unsigned. And although it is one and a half square meters in size, I modestly called it *"The work of an unknown contemporary artist"*.

The guests keep coming and coming, filling up like a syrup bottle our space, which we have darkened on purpose to make the whole setting as intimate as possible. The audience flows into the other rooms, laughing loudly, marveling and taking endless photos: here they are in the boudoir of a

Parisian courtesan, where they can lie down on a carved bed under a golden cover, decorated with feathers and gilded carvings, looking at paintings by Boucher and Courbet from the bed. And in the next space — a stylized geisha's room with household items and photos of Kyoto inhabitants is waiting for them. Of course, a good half of the room is devoted to ancient Japanese hentai paintings, and on a huge plasma panel erotic anime is constantly playing.

"Do you think the guests like it?" Sonia asks me, and Sasha confidently answers:

"Absolutely, it's a success! Just look at the number of publications that have already appeared on social media! And it hasn't even been an hour yet!"

"And the main course hasn't been served so far," I mutter, and run into the next room to get everything ready.

"Polya!" suddenly I hear such a familiar voice, and I can't believe he's here after all! And even though he remembered to put on his velvet black mask, I can recognize him from a million other men. "I can't be without you," he whispers, pulling me against him, his hands already sliding down my bare back. "Without your eyes, that mole above your lip, without that little girl that you'll always stay to me..."

"Until you find yourself another one?!" I hiss angrily at him. "What the hell, Stas? Or has your PR manager come up with another ingenious move to get me back?" I try not to raise my voice, so as not to alarm the other guests. I'm sure from the outside it looks like we're cooing like two lovebirds.

"Pola, don't you agree? You're all alone. Is there anyone better than me?" Stasik whispers hotly in my ear, and I resolutely take his hand and lead him along.

"I could guess it would happen," I take him over to the photo of the "*unknown artist*" and place Stas right in front of the self-portrait of his penis. "Now you can look at yourself in a museum," I continue. "And if you don't bother me, no one, believe me, no one will ever know whose work it is, okay?" And without even waiting for an answer, I leave him alone to admire his giant, half-wall dick pic. I think he was pleased.

I run into the still closed hall, set up like a Parisian cabaret, where everything is almost ready for the show. I check everything carefully once more before I give the order to our manager to swing the doors open, into which the already merry and tipsy crowd piles in with colorful pebbles. Without giving them a second thought, we dim the main lights and the gorgeous Mimi takes the stage with her crowning number *La vie en rose*. The guests instantly fall silent, dumbfounded by this matchless performance that I'm sure they've never seen anywhere else. And Mimi fills the entire cramped space of the hall in the center of Moscow with her royal black grace, and for a moment I even think that I am back at Place Pigalle. The last chords fall silent, and I can't stop the tears that roll down from under my cat mask.

The audience applauds, whistles, and stomps: Mimi's number alone is enough to make the museum opening a success, but then the lights go out completely, and I realize that something has gone wrong. I'm ready to run to our organizer to solve technical issues, when suddenly the spotlight flashes, illuminating a patch of stage where my Elvis is standing, in jeans, a white T-shirt and a guitar. I can't believe my eyes, but then Chris Isaak's "*Wicked Games*" starts playing, and Elvis, who is no longer Elvis but Chris, starts playing one of the sexiest songs in the history of music. As before, he doesn't even have to do any acting or miming, he just stands there with his guitar and sings. I feel how the crowd of guests begins to come closer and closer around the stage, as if bewitched by his magic magnetism, and I see in the back of the stage Mimi, who is singing along to him, in some unimaginable turquoise cape. I, swept up in a wave of heated and excited women, find myself at the very edge of the stage, face up, like dozens of other female audience members. I remember all too well the effect Roma always had on women. Whether he sang or just kept quiet. And now I see dozens of eyes moistening with desire: the whole of our little hall in the museum of erotic art has turned into one continuous lust, and does it just seem to me, or are some of them already embracing their partners more passionately than the place and circumstances demand, and are their hands already slipping under the hems of short skirts and dresses?

I stand swaying, as if in a trance, to the voice of Elvis, Chris, Roma, whatever the hell he is, and all I want is for this song to never end. Never. Because I have absolutely no idea what I'm going to do

with all of this when it stops. There are too many loose ends, incompletions, and scraps between us, and I have no idea how to stitch it together or glue it up.

But then the melody ends, and my Roma finally raises his face and looks attentively into the hall, and I'm sure that every woman is waiting with bated breath for his gaze. But he stares indifferently around the crowd until his gaze rests right on me: pressed by dozens of heated bodies right at the edge of the stage.

He takes a step toward me, kneels down, and runs his thumb over my upper lip, as if wiping away an invisible milk mustache. And then he simply leans toward me, and his lips touches mine to the loud applause of the excited crowd. My warm, salty tears mix with his saliva, which smells like honey and cinnamon, and I remember what my own desire tastes like. His palms gently hold my face like the most fragile thing in the world while his tongue gently pushes my lips apart as if asking permission to enter me. I lose track of time until I suddenly realize that the lights in the auditorium are turned on full blast, and the crowd around us has dispersed further down the halls as the two of us stand here alone at the very edge of the stage.

I finally take a step back, pulling away, and realize that this is the kiss I've been waiting for months, but it's not capable of taking me back to last fall and the past me.

21

"Polya, go to the gallery, quickly!" Sonya suddenly comes running up to me.

"What's wrong?" I'm frightened.

"I don't know! The alarm went off!" Shouts my friend, and I rush straight in my sandals through the snow into the neighboring building, where the doors are still locked. I can't let anything happen to my priceless paintings that my artists entrusted to me!

With shaky hands I insert the key into the keyhole and rush into the still dark, cool room. Strangely, it's completely quiet. Roma comes running in after me, and the door slams shut behind us.

I run through all the halls, but everything is quiet and still.

"I think it was a false alarm," I mutter, and head resolutely for the door.

"Sonny Polly, wait, we need to talk," Roma stops me, but I pull out of his arms.

"We don't have anything to talk about," I tug on the knob.

Strangely, the door is locked. I try to open it with the key, but something's in the way. That's all I need: the lock's jammed.

"Don't leave me," he pulls away from me, and I feel my heart shatter again into millions of pieces of Sevres porcelain.

"You can't leave someone you've never been really together, can you?" I cry it in his face, and only now do I realize I'm still wearing this stupid cat mask. I take it off and throw it on the floor, and it's a small velvet installation left lying surrounded by the paintings on the walls.

"Not true, Polly," Roma replies quietly. "You've been with me a long time. Always."

And then a wave of indignation comes over me: to think that he's no better than the bastard Anastas, or even the balding David! I start pounding furiously at the door again, but no one seems to hear me.

"When, may I ask?" I scream in his face. "When you did take those pictures to blackmail me with?! Or when you left me at the mall where I was almost raped by a security guard?! Or when you fucked every girl you saw?! Is that when you had me in your heart?!" I'm getting angry, remembering all the ways I've been wronged by him, and I don't understand how he can justify it.

But Roma stands with his hands down and listens to me intently:

"I can explain everything. Or almost everything," he tries to object, but I can't stop myself:

"I can forgive everything, except the fact that even after you and I made love in Paris, even after that you continued to lie to me!"

"But I didn't lie to you, Polly," Roma tries to get closer to me, but I take a step back:

"Stay away from me! Stay there!" I warn him, because I realize in the corner of my brain that if I let him get too close, I won't have any more strength to fight myself. In the meantime, my anger and

rage are helping me, protecting me from his sweet shackles, which he could put around me at any moment.

"How could you go off with that damn marquise of yours!" I yell at him, and then I realize I'm crying like a little girl with resentment. That's all I need! I've come such a long way to become an independent adult woman, and now this motherfucker Elvis is playing his stupid games with me again.

"Don't cry, my baby," he approaches me, and I don't have the strength to resist him. "I didn't have anything with Yulia, and I couldn't have," he wipes the tears running down my cheeks with his thumb.

"Then what did you do with her that night?" I ask, and he explains very seriously, like a teacher to a student:

"I was the one who called her to that meeting. I had to deal with a very delicate matter between us."

"And did you solve it?" I ask, calming down, but still not fully believing his explanation.

"Almost," he grins sadly. "But who knew you were going to Italy to some dude!"

"He's not a dude!" I automatically start to defend him, but I immediately stop myself. "You're right, though, yes, he is a total slicker! What did you want me to do? For me to trust the first blackmailer I meet?" I begin to resent again. "You're the one who acted like a scoundrel from the beginning!"

"I'm not arguing," Roma replies quietly. "I have no right to reproach you for anything. After all, I got what I deserved."

"And what is it?!" I ask.

"Pain and disappointment," he replies sadly. "But believe me, I'm willing to endure any pain if I have the slightest hope of having you with me."

He sits down right on the floor, on my newly greased parquet floors, and continues:

"When I was offered to go to Paris to the institute, I couldn't imagine how I could live there without my Julie, so I went for a fake: yes you've probably already guessed it. I painted a picture for her, and she signed it with her name. But she still did not have enough money to study, and I mortgaged the house of my great-great-grandfather, the artist Roman Khrustalev, which I inherited. And what happened in Paris, you already know from my friends. I couldn't imagine that the person I love was just using me all these years to get fame, fortune and the title of husband. But the one thing she couldn't fake was talent. So I just left, abandoning all my work in France, realizing that she alone could do nothing with it. Several times Julie offered me to sell back my right to them, but I didn't answer her. My life became easier, and that's how I existed in Moscow: just performing in the club and earning enough money to gradually pay off the debt on my house. In general, I was satisfied with everything," Roma chuckles bitterly. "I was no longer drawn to painting, much less to starting a serious relationship with someone. I just took from women what they wanted to give me, even though I didn't ask them to do so."

I sit down next to Roma right on the floor, and my luxurious dress spreads on the parquet with an ashy lake. And he continues:

"And when I saw you in that room at the club, I just snapped, you know?" He says quietly, not even looking at me. "You were so young, like Yulia used to be when we were at the institute. And I knew that you were a bride who I was given to by her friends for a bachelorette party! A rich, spoiled girl who would cheat on her fiancé on the eve of the wedding, nothing more. I wasn't getting revenge on you, but on the girl who betrayed me once, even though that doesn't excuse me," he whispers quietly, and I can feel the shame pooling between us.

"But then, as I got to know you better, I realized that you don't know a damn thing about life or people," he looks at me. "And that weird napkin of yours with some ridiculous childish wishes... But, no, I'm sorry," he stops me, ready to burst into another tirade, "of course not ridiculous. It's touching and funny."

"And that's why you decided to leave me at the mall?" I'm still mad at him.

"I didn't leave you there. Or rather," Roma corrects himself, "yes, it may seem that way, but I made a deal with the security guard, paying him to just scare you. I thought it was funny and educational at the time, I'm sorry," he looks at me guiltily. "No one thought you could hurt a man!" And I remember that strange message from the "Security guy Kaunas" that I had accidentally read on Elvis's phone in the Paris apartment.

"I would never have believed it myself," I start laughing. "Nothing to say — a brutal school of life in a couple of days from Roman Khrustalev!"

"And then these men who always rub around you," Roma wrinkles, "these strange Polish guys with their wine... I first time in my life could not find a place when I imagined that you with them at that moment having a threesome!" He confesses.

"And that's why you decided to pick up that girl in Prague?" Another brilliant guess hits me.

"In general, yes," Roma nods. "But you know, it didn't work out with her," and I start laughing:

"Just like I couldn't with those assholes!" And we, having finally looked into each other's eyes for the first time, start laughing hysterically.

"I had to meet with Yulia to give her all the copyrights to the paintings," he explains to me. "But, of course, the marchioness had to come in person to look at you," Roma stretches out on the floor and throws his head up, as if admiring the magnificent starry sky on the ceiling.

"Why did you decide to give her all your paintings?" It's my turn to be outraged.

"I needed the money. When I decided I wanted to stay with you, I realized that for the first time in my life I would need a lot of money to take care of someone. To cure you," he explains to me simply. I feel my heart fill with hot, pounding blood again, and I ask:

"And she paid you off?"

"Of course she did! Countess Sheremetyeva must keep her face. Really, I didn't know that you would throw me down like a boy right in the middle of Rome," he looks at me.

"Believe me, I didn't know what I was losing," I lie down next to him on the floor, and suddenly I realize that the stars on the ceiling are actually slowly lighting up and going out. Here one of them comes off, and flies with the speed of an August comet somewhere down, beyond the horizon, and I make a wish....

"Have I ever told you how beautiful you are?" Roma turns his face to me, and his palm searches for my hand hidden in the folds of silk. He takes it and places it gently over my heart, and I can feel it beating beneath my fingers.

His lips slide along my neck, his tongue tasting my skin, and I catch him with my mouth as my hands explore his body, burning beneath the thin T-shirt.

"Wait," another question beats against my temple. "Where have you been all this time?"

"I've been painting," he answers simply, and I stare at his beautiful face as I feel my body finally begin to thaw from the thin crust of ice that's been covering it all these months.

Our lips come together again in a more tempestuous and moist union, our hands crawling under the thin fabric, snaking secret paths to the most tender and delicate spots on our bodies, as the door swung open noisily, and a crowd of drunken and clearly having a great time poured in.

"Shit! I completely forgot that I have a gallery presentation at eight-thirty!" I remember, as the guests flow around us like an island in a river of talkative, hot-breathing heat.

"Well, it's time to see how good your taste is," Roma rises from the floor and holds out his hand to help me to my feet.

"I always tell my clients that talking is the most important thing they can do for their relationships," Masha admonishes, coming toward us with a glass of champagne in her hand.

That night, happy and half-drunk from the evening, we go up to my small apartment, and, burning with desire, start undressing each other in the hallway: Roma's coat and then his T-shirt, my shoes and fur cape with a scarf, we stumble over the dining table in the middle of the room, and unable to even make it to the bed, Roma sits me down on the tabletop, digging his fingers into hundreds of thin layers of silk, trying to finally reach my living body. I undo the belt of his jeans, which jingles melodically as my fingers are already undoing the buttons like running down the trumpet of a saxophone.

"There's something you need to know," Roma whispers to me as his hands finally reach my panties and he gently pulls them off, sliding the fine lace along my trembling hips, knees, and ankles.

"What is it?" I ask, already losing my mind from the seemingly endless anticipation.

"I love you, Polly."

He pulls my knees wide apart, and I feel his soft, silky dick head resting against my cleft between my legs.

"Love me," is all I can say as his burning cock, hot as warm milk and honey, finally cuts me in half, thrusting inside me. "Love me forever," I mumble, barely parting my lips as his tongue fucks my mouth and his shaft fucks my pussy. I'm ready to swallow his crimson soft lips completely as my womb swallows every last loose bit of his phallus, sliding gently into me, slow and unhurried, until the jolts of orgasm begin to spread throughout my body, from my very core to the tips of my pinky toes. And I feel a stream of warm cum slapping against my inner walls, running down the inside of my thighs, and I can't and don't want to let him out of me, gripping his buttocks tightly with my legs.

Without getting out of me, Roma picks me up under my butt and carries me to the bed in the back of the room, carefully sitting me down on the bed.

"I remember this dress perfectly," his lips whisper as his fingers unravel the bow below my dimpled buttocks.

The dress finally slides off me, and I feel his tongue licking a thin trail down my back, traveling lower and lower, first to the tight hole of my anus, then to the thin slit of my vagina, making its way to my swollen clit, but right back up again, repeating over and over until the only thing I can think about at the moment is that he would soon fill my shuddering and oozing body, and Roma, tipping me on my back, presses me to the peak of pleasure, pressing me into the bed with the full weight of his strong taut body, under which I am suffocating with happiness and the mere thought: Love. Me. Tender. Till I die...

Aftertaste

Now I am Polina Khrustalyova — a successful gallerist and the wife of a famous artist. Many art salons around the world are fighting for his paintings, but he is only exhibited at Polina Sonis Gallery. It's a well-known brand, and I decided to leave it as it is: where it all started. We have a "*Ma Reine*" painting hanging in our house and it's not for sale. By the way, Julie has never been able to sell a single painting. Why not? You never know. The gallery world is so small, and gossip and rumors spread at the speed of light. Or rather, the speed of a social media post. No one wants to deal with unscrupulous sellers. Or stolen masterpieces.

Sonia continues to create more and more new projects: after the opening of our museum, an avalanche of orders fell on her. And, it seems, she has finally found the right man for her. He's only about twenty years older than her.

Masha is a famous psychotherapist who has a waiting list for years to come, while Sasha continues to climb to the top of the glossy magazine world.

I made up with my mom, and she's helping me at the museum now, because I can't do it myself. And I even pay her salary, and she proudly says to my father every time he disappears on his movie shootings, "Don't tell me how hard you work!" and rolls her eyes theatrically. Her blog is finally gaining traction, and she really doesn't have to worry about running out of money anymore. But my dad has no intention of leaving her.

I still love and want my husband. Every single day. After all, the most important thing is love. Or rather, love is the Holy Grail.

The only thing is that my husband is often annoyed by the way men react to me when I am out in public. But I think he exaggerates.

Moscow, November 2022 - January 2023