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LILY ALEX



Fate

&

Love



Lily Alex  
**Fate and Love**

«Издательские решения»

**Lily Alex**

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When the young athletic orphan meets a successful businessman, she can't even imagine him being the Son of the Devil, and that he murdered her parents. One of his guards finds himself under her charm too. But all events that seem to be standard at first become bizarre and unexpected! And the real tribulation and challenges only begin when a new girl, Brenda, gets hired...

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Other books by Lily Alex: The Creatures  
The Russians Are Coming  
Lost on Earth Or Fateful Love

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# Fate and Love

**Lily Alex**

*NOTE: All scripture quotations are from the New King James Version*

*Illustrator* Tatiana Polivanova

*Translator* L. Alekseeva-Kozlova

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Illustrations by Tatiana Dmitrovsky,

Member of International Union of Artists and Graphics Professionals

## Part One

A bolt of lighting flashed from the highest sky, exploding the dusk for a moment. The thunderstorm brought all its wild rage upon a small gray sedan, moving along an empty city street.

*What a night!* a man, driving his family home, thought, worried. *Dark as in the Devil's stomach.*

He glanced at his wife, sitting next to him, then – in the rearview mirror, checking out his baby daughter, in the back, fastened into her child's seat.

"Momma... tired!" Yawned the little girl, trying to stay awake. She craned her neck in order to look out the window. She adored thunderstorms and never liked to miss them.

"Awww, did you enjoy your birthday party, lil' Mary?" The mother asked, turning back.

She smiled as her child nodded and slowly drifted off to sleep. Her husband wasn't so calm. The streams of heavy rain limited his view, and the wipers were almost useless.

*Driving under the sea would be easier,* he mused, concentrating all his attention on the road. His wife touched his arm. "You're doing fine, honey."

\*\*\*

A luxurious black car, dark as midnight, was moving in the opposite direction. Wearing posh clothes, a slim man in his twenties was driving it recklessly.

"Mister Noirson, sir," sitting on the front seat, his companion, who looked visibly older, warned him. "Even humans know the rule – don't drink and drive!"

"You're right, Roger!" The younger man laughed. "*Humans.*"

"Oh dear me!" Roger rolled his eyes. "But your human body is under the influence now! Shit! We almost hit the bus! Let me drive for Satan's sake!"

"Don't use the name of my Father in the same breath as a swear word!" The driver guffawed again. "The Third Commandment – let me remind you!"

"'Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord in vain', you mean, eh?" Roger's attractive lips curved into a weird, blood-chilling smirk. "And let me remind *you*, My Lord, that Your Father arranged *me* to watch after you, and in the situation, like this, you have to listen to me!"

"Come on, Roger, I'm fine!"

"Don't mind him, Robert, honey!" A pretty young woman in a tiny black cocktail dress reached out to the driver from the back seat. She massaged his slender shoulders, and he tilted his head back, enjoying her gloved touch. He was looking forward to arriving and watching her lace hands work their magic elsewhere.

The lights of the closing vehicles crossed, blinding the man in the family sedan.

In both cars, the women screamed, and the drivers hit the brake pedals at once.

Too late...

Slipping on the wet surface, the cars had no time even to slow down. The impact threw the young woman from the back seat, and she smashed her face against the front window. It was a sickening thud, but that was just the beginning of her fate. The rest of her body followed it, twisting like a rag doll. Bulletproofed for an outside attack, the windshield had been designed for easy access from inside, and the woman fell out onto the hood in a fountain of fragments of broken glass. She rolled down and the car slightly jumped, running over her body.

Like a killer whale, gnawing on a dolphin, the black car hit the unfortunate sedan, pushing into it with its huge mass, squashing it almost in half.

The roof of the family car was lower than another one had, and now it thrust inside the vehicle, and the cross, dangling on the rearview mirror, was swinging between Robert and his companion.

The vehicles finally stopped, and, swearing, the men rushed out as if someone splashed boiling water all over them.

Outside they looked at each other, and Robert managed a confused smile.

His companion cast a few quick glances around.

“No witnesses and no police at least,” he said coldly. He pointed the dead woman. “Go ahead!”

“If I do it, I won’t have any power for everything else!” The young man tried to argue.

His companion did not avert his eyes, Robert did.

Quietly cursing, he closed to the woman, and touched her. She sat up at once, and looked about with horror. “What happened?”

“Shut up, and do what I’ll tell you,” Robert told her gloomily. He helped her up, and led to the cars.

“Get it off,” he ordered, pointing the cross. The woman obeyed. Robert glared at her so she hurled the cross away as far as she could.

Roger smiled. “Nice job, sir.”

Not answering the mock, Robert returned to the car, and drove back a little bit. Clenched together, the vehicles didn’t separate.

“Damn you, Roger!” Robert shouted. “Hold this fucking car!”

“I can’t,” his companion replied calmly. “There are two more crucifixes inside.”

Robert spat, and got out again. He was thinking for a while. The rain stopped, and clouds were gone, showing the moon, spying at the scene with indifference.

“I liked this car,” Robert said with a sigh. “Oh well, let’s just set it in fire, and go home.”

“There’s a child inside.” His companion pointed at the family sedan.

“Alive?” Robert wondered. “Roger, I’m not human, I can’t kill an innocent one.”

“Me either.” Came the cold response.

Robert drew closer, and peeked in. The little girl was still sitting in her seat. The head of her parents were next at each side of her, but the child couldn’t understand the meaning of that.

She tagged at her mother’s ringlets then stroked her father’s blond hair. Robert and his companion watched in unbelieving, as she reached out to him, and took a cross that her father was wearing around his neck then put it onto herself.

“Mom, looky me!” she said happily.

“Very impressive,” Robert dropped coldly. He addressed to his woman; “Get the girl out!”

“Come here, little one!” The woman tried to fulfill the order. She unfastened the child, but when she took the girl into her arms, the baby started to wail, scratch and even bite.

*What a monster!* The woman thought, struggling to hold the girl. She felt as if she was handling a wild porky-pine.

Vexed, Robert looked around; on the empty street, the child’s voice sounded louder than any siren could.

“Do something!” he shouted, stomping his foot.

“I know!” Roger said and with a smile, quickly took the child’s safety seat out and the woman strapped the baby in. “That way, we’ll be safe from her,” he added, half-joking.

Mary still cried, but now, it was slightly easier to carry her even if she shook from side to side, trying to make them let go.

The woman and Robert ran away, leaving Roger to finish his task.

“Mama! Dada!” the child called, looking back at the car.

Soon after, an explosion was heard. The blazing flames from behind lit the dark street for a little while.

“All done.” Roger joined them again.

“Look, that sound woke someone up in that church over there! I see lights!” the woman, carrying Mary, said panting, “Let’s leave her here.”

“Can’t we get her to the police station or something?” Robert asked, grimacing.

“No, this church is the only option we have...” Roger sighed, frowning. “It’s pretty far from anything else! We’ve got no choice.”

“Oh well... Hurry up or the people in the church will see us!” Robert commanded.

The woman placed the seat on the steps and all three adults disappeared in the darkness of the passage between the buildings.

\*\*\*

Robert had breakfast, when Roger threw a newspaper in front of him, and pointed an article.

“The only survivor... Maria Jablonskaia...” Robert read aloud, his look ran over the text. “Blah-blah-blah... You see, not a word about us!”

“Oh dear me,” Roger replied, rolling his eyes. “But nobody can predict how our actions can affect the future.”

“Uh-uh,” Robert answered, not listening. Another news column took his attention.

## Again

It was the usual charity fundraiser and Robert Noirson was bored.

Forty-two-year old now, a respectable businessman, not for the first time had Robert been involved in a benevolent arrangement in his capacity as sponsor, so he knew the entire event thoroughly. Some speeches, some performances and he would write a check. Reporters would then take some pictures. It was easy, typical and terribly boring. Robert tried not to yawn.

He totally forgot about the car accident that he caused almost eighteen years ago. He was watching the gymnastic performance with indifference, not knowing that the leading gymnast was the very same girl, which they left all alone on the steps of the church in the middle of the night.

Now her personality attracted his attention. He liked her stern self-confidence that so corresponded with his own attitude. She was not the girl of his dreams, but her spectacular head of platinum blonde hair atop an elfin, and quite curvy frame amazed him.

Robert felt a warm, tingly feeling emanate from his stomach. Moving with hidden energy, the girl was like a genie in a bottle, and it peaked Robert's curiosity.

"Who's the girl in the green track-suit?" he casually asked a priest, sitting next to him.

"It's Maria Jablonskaia, Mary J." Father Frank smiled. "Our pride and joy. She could be a professional gymnast, but the poor girl has no ambition!"

"Everybody has ambitions," Robert retorted derisively. "Just in different walks of life."

Looking at her breasts profiled perfectly by her tight fitting leotard, Robert could see that it was her more mature figure that would probably dictate why she would not be a professional. Even if she had been the most dedicated athlete on Earth, she was not quite petite enough.

*Damn, he was thinking hard. Why does her name sound familiar to me?*

Suddenly he recalled.

*Oh My Father! he screamed inside himself, ashamed. It's her! Well, I suppose I ought to take care of her. I didn't think her parents were her only relatives. Poor young thing... Who could expect – she was so alone.*

"Could you introduce me to her?" he addressed to Father Frank again.

"Sure, Mister Noirson!" Sister Augusta joined them. "Mary is a good, obedient girl."

"Obedient, eh?" Robert's eyes narrowed. "How obedient?"

"Well," Father Frank laughed nervously. "A little." He looked knowingly at the Sister, who bit her lip with the thought of just how disobedient Mary could be.

"Don't worry, Mister Noirson," she said, sounding assured, but with diametrically different feelings.

\*\*\*

Mary finished her part and looked across at her tutors, talking and casting glances at her. She caught the dapper forty something executive type sponsor propping his chin up with his fist, gazing at her like a snake, hypnotizing a bird for his prey.

*Another rich bastard looking for a young toy, Mary thought with irritation, Last month that tarty hag, now – him... Well, he's male, so at least it's understandable. But anyway, why is it that when people have money they think they can just hit on anyone they like – don't they have any moral bases?*

She caught a glimpse of Father Frank waving her over. She pretended not to notice, and went off to the changing room.

"Mary!" she heard, but the girl didn't look back.

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Mary emerged from the shower only bothering to tie the towel around her waist. Her extremely long blonde hair was dripping wet over her eyes and she was vigorously rubbing her bangs dry as she

walked elegantly across the tiled floor towards her cubicle. She jumped surprised, when she looked up, to see Sister Augusta, waiting for her.

“Mary,” the nun started with a reproach.

“Na-ah,” Mary interrupted, rebellion flowing through veins once paralyzed with fear.

“Mary,” the nun continued, “Don’t be ridiculous. I’m here to straighten a few things out with you. When you were a child, you had a lot of chances to be adopted by wealthy and caring people. You could have had a perfect family...”

“And I repeat for the zillionth time,” interrupted Mary, “I already have God as my Father, and Saint-Mary as my mother.”

“Your stubbornness is ridiculous!”

“You are a nun, aren’t you?” the girl practically screamed.

“It’s not the same!”

“Look, Sister, you know the score. I only wait for the next two years to take a veil. I’m managing our team! I’m giving the kids gymnastic lessons! I’m taking part in all the orphanage’s events!”

“And yes, that is the least you could do. We give you an apartment on the campus. Have you any idea how much it costs to raise a child? When your parents died, you were only three! Our orphanage raised you and you have lacked of nothing! But now it’s time to pay us back!”

“If you think I’ll become a prostitute to pay off my debts, you are deadly wrong!”

Augusta snorted in contempt. “That is not the point of this conversation!”

“So what is this all about then? As if it is normal to walk in on girls coming out the shower? Forget it,” She made to walk past the nun, but her way was blocked. She felt a strong spiteful hand grip her upper arm.

“This not open for discussion, my child! Mister Noirson is rich enough to buy our whole orphanage and he has enough power to close it forever. You’re not a selfish girl, are you?”

“And?”

The nun continued, “You have to think about the other poor kids that we take care of.”

“So?” Mary was breathing hard.

“I’ll take this sin on myself, Mary... The sense of duty will force you to lay with Mister Noirson if he so wishes, not lust! As you accept your penance now, think about the other girls and boys. Their future depends on you!”

“I have nothing to repent for,” trembling all over, Mary mumbled.

She dressed quick, and dashed out. She collided with Father Frank.

“Mary, guess what?” He smiled nervously. “Mister Noirson paid for you to live in building #7. Lucky you! You’ll have security, free room service...”

The girl just stared at him.

“You should thank Mister Noirson,” sister Augusta said, trying to take Mary’s hand, but the girl gasped, side stepped both adults and ran out and along the corridor, haring downstairs into the basement.

Her thoughts were mixed, her mind confused, in a panic.

*Get away! Get away!* was beating like a drum inside her head. *What should I do? What should I do?* was the chorus.

She knew one secret window in the basement. Nobody, unless they wanted to break their necks, dared enter through it, but she often used it as a means of escape.

She reached the wall, routinely spat on her hands, and, like a lizard, climbed up the brick wall to the window. She slid through it effortlessly.

The window frame was at ground level. Mary crawled out into the dusk, and once away from the building got to her feet.

The darkness of the summer night helped her calm down. She looked up at the sky.

In the middle of the city, surrounded by tall gloomy buildings, the girl felt as if she were stranded at the bottom of a well.

One or two stars were visibly twinkling from far above, and not for the first time in her life, Mary wept and cried out, “Oh, dear God! Please help me be strong!”

“Wow! What a passionate plea!” somebody said in a deep gentle voice.

Flabbergasted, the girl literally jumped in surprise. She glanced around, and her hair stood on end. Usually this street was empty but not today. A few cars were parked nearby, and a group of rough, hefty men, accompanied by their matching playmate girlfriends were getting out and gradually making their way towards her.

Mary had grown up in this part of the city; she knew all the local gangs and went to great lengths to avoid any and all contact with them. She was perturbed, not so much that she was in gangland, but that she had never laid eyes on such people before. It was not just the menace of their appearance; it was the military-like orderliness that made Mary’s blood curdle.

*Oh my God,* she thought looking about her, having shivers. *Whoever they are, I’m not a welcome guest here, that’s for sure.*

“What a nice prayer,” continued the same bizarre voice; tender and soft, yet threatening in a very obvious way.

Mary licked her dry lips.

*There is no way I am going to survive this little party,* she mused, grimly. She casually slipped her hands into her jacket pockets and prepared her trusted brass knuckles and switchblade for battle. Self-defense classes are an obligatory part of monastic training, and the congregation that Mary had attended was no exception. *But they’ve got it dead wrong if they think they are going to have it easy.*

Taking the initiative, she tried to buy herself some time.

“Guys,” she pronounced as peacefully as she could in the direction of the dozen ferocious night stalkers. “I’m a local, okay, a real nobody. I am so much a nobody it is sad.” Her declaration was met with disinterest, but she persevered. “Look, I didn’t see you, and I don’t know you. I live just along from here, so please, I only want to go home.”

“But it was a strange way to leave the church gym,” the man, invisible in the shadow, said, mocking her. “If you wanted to say a prayer, why didn’t you go to the chapel?”

Mary gazed through the dark in the direction of the voice.

*He’s the boss here...* she understood. *He’s my only hope.*

“Look,” she addressed the shadow. “Nobody wants trouble. It seems you know me, and I am begging you, just let me go.”

“Maybe I will. But only if you answer honestly why you left like you did.”

Mary swallowed hard and said quietly yet audibly, “I wanted to keep my purity. But now I see, I’m in shit up to my eyeballs!”

Everybody laughed, even Mary in her nervousness. She had lost all hope, but one bonus to her advantage was that her sense of fear had also evaporated into the night air.

“Oh, girl,” the man said, shaking his head. “That is rather improper language for a nun.”

“A nun?” an angry whisper ran through the ranks of the gang members surrounding her. Mary’s heart throbbed again, not expecting the reaction she was getting.

“Do you think God will protect you if I allow my men to do whatever they want to you?”

“No,” she answered at once.

“Why not?”

“God doesn’t rule this world.”

“Good. Who then?”

“Satan, the Devil,” Mary said calmly. “Would you like to hear quotations from the Bible to prove it?”

“No, it’s okay,” the man replied. “We have already wasted a lot of time. Look, Mary, let’s get to the point. I’m a really busy man, but I want to talk to you. Could you give me two hours a day, maybe more, I’m not sure? But two hours is what I have in mind. I promise, we’ll meet only in public places. Is it okay with you?”

“You mean, all this scary shit was just to ask me out for a date? Neat!”

“I suppose it is a bit over the top, but that is exactly how it is. So, assuming you aren’t intending to smash my teeth in with that knuckleduster in your pocket, are you in agreement to meet me – for friendly conversation?”

Mary was unnerved by his remark about her weapon hidden from view, but nodded anyway.

“Great! Tomorrow, wait for me in the ‘Green Streets’ cafe, it’s just across your street, between McDonalds and the book-shop.”

“I know where you mean. Fine.” She hoped he would let her go before arranging a time. No such luck.

“Wait for me until 1:00 p.m. if I’m able to make it, I’ll come. By the way, I’m going to pay you for your time: thirty dollars an hour. Is that okay with you?”

“What, you mean sixty dollars a day?” she had never earned that amount of money before.

“Some day, there may be more, if I’m able...” He misinterpreted her look of amazement. “Ah, you want more? I’ll pay you cash so you won’t have to pay any tax... What a Scroogette! Out of interest, before you go, Mary J, do you remember, I’m paying for your campus apartment?”

“You?” she yelled angrily. She rushed toward him, but the man also stepped forward out of the shadows. In the ghostly streetlight the girl recognized Robert Noirson.

He was smiling smugly, but when their eyes met, his grin faded, and a worry washed out his self-confident expression.

“Are you okay?” he asked, uncertain.

“Y... yes. I think so.” She puffed her mouth out and exhaled, as if in the middle of a breathing exercise, taking herself under control again. “I just realized that there is no running from fate. I honestly tried.”

“Mary, dear, I beg you, don’t think about me this way! Wait a second!” A thought had struck him. “What did your tutors say to you?”

“Nothing much. Only that you are paying for my apartment in the most fancy building in the campus. So I have to be an obedient girl in any way that you decide. And we all know what that means.”

Mary regretted saying what she had said. Robert’s eyes flashed yellow and all-consuming anger distorted his beautiful face to such an extent that Mary stepped back in fear.

But he instantly calmed down, and smiled. “Sorry for that.”

He turned to the man and the girl standing closest to him, said something very quietly, then walked back to Mary. “Let’s go.”

Robert walked her to her old apartment.

“Pack your stuff, dear,” he told her. “I’ll be back.”

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Moving into her new apartment took less than an hour. Mary was unpacking, when she heard a bell, and when she opened the door, there was Robert.

He looked tired, upset and gloomy.

*Oh poor man*, Mary thought. She involuntarily reached out her arm to touch his cheek, but dared not. She was deeply surprised with herself at the strong attraction to a man twenty years her senior. “What happened?”

“I have just talked with your tutors. Don’t worry – they’ll never disturb you again. Can I hug you or do you think I’m going to abuse you?”

“No, it’s okay. I’m thankful towards you.”

It was a father-like hug. Mary finally calmed down; she melted with a feeling of security and peace. Robert unclasped his arms, and Mary J. felt a loss.

“Mary, I’m no ordinary man.”

The statement drew a smile from Mary’s stern face.

“Right, you’re my guardian angel,” she joked.

“Well,” Robert faltered. “Sort of. Look, Mary, it’s going to be a very long talk, I really have to go. See you tomorrow, I hope.”

“Good night,” she whispered.

He left, and Mary locked the door.

Not bothering to finish her unpacking, she jumped onto her new bed, drowning in “the honey-heavy dew of slumber” even before her head touched the pillow. And in her dreams, she relived the hug that she had shared with Robert but in a much different way.



## The First Date

That morning Mary woke up in her new apartment. She opened her eyes and could not determine for a moment if she was dreaming or if it was real. Her entire bedroom was decorated with flowers.

She got up, ran to the living room, to the kitchen... Flowers, flowers everywhere... Even in the bathroom.

Mary called the security service: "It's 7—26. Who sent me the flowers, and at what time were they delivered to me?"

"Sorry, Miss, what do you mean? Nobody has called in here with a delivery since I started my shift."

"When was that?"

"Unfortunately for me, I had to start at 9 o'clock last night."

With her face flashing, Mary smashed down the receiver. She hated not knowing.

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Mary sat down in front of her mirror, and did her make-up, then pinned her hair up, as usual. She twirled from side to side checking herself out from all angles. The ponytail bundled on top of her head seemed like a magical golden snake, bathing in the sunlight.

For the longest time, Mary rummaged through her pitiful wardrobe.

"Darn," she mumbled, biting her bottom lip. "The first date in my life, and I have nothing to wear!"

Finally, she chose simple black pants and a matching figure-hugging shirt. It was her favorite emerald green color, flattering and turned her mood on as she looked intensely at herself in the mirror.

For the first time, she noticed that the fabric emphasized perfectly the curvy shape of her upper body. Her cheeks blushed.

In amazement, because this was not her normal way, she watched her hand move slowly up, and her tiny fingers, acting of their own free will, undid the first two buttons. In an effort at modesty, she patted down the edges of her almost plunging blouse.

"Mustn't tempt themselves or others," she mumbled. A tint of shame flashed green across her kaleidoscopic eyes. "So our clothing should be decent and chaste..."

She tried to compel herself to close her shirt as usual. She couldn't!

"Come on, stupid!" she snapped at herself. "As if a man like him would fall for a little flash of skin. What, is he a virgin or a monk? Give me a break!"

She noticed that the cross she was wearing around her neck accentuated the crevice between her breasts, and she took the necklace off.

"Don't overdo it, girl," she mumbled, looking at her reflection again.

In the corner of her eye she caught the flowers next to the mirror, and she grew angry again.

*Neat, she thought. Her lips parted slightly, revealing her pearly teeth, like a tigress displaying her fangs. While I was sleeping... A man or maybe even MEN were walking around! Thank Goodness I didn't sleep naked!*

She checked the time, took her purse and left. The café wasn't too far away, so she arrived within a few minutes.

The table had been reserved. Mary sat by the window and took a menu. But when she saw the prices, she nearly fell off her chair. Mary had never visited a luxury restaurant before and she was astonished.

*Okay, she mused. Let's hope if he invited me here, he's going to be the perfect gentleman and pay for my meal as well.*

Mary ordered an orange juice and a chef's salad, and waited. She was still very angry about the flowers and was preparing a few harsh words for the suspected culprit.

But Robert was late and Mary had plenty of time to calm down, people watching through the window, entranced by the endless stream of pedestrians and traffic rushing to who knew where.

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It was already 1:00 p.m., and Mary was growing impatient, but decided to wait a few minutes longer.

Almost as if on cue, a limousine stopped out front of the cafe at 1:03 p.m. A heavily built but smartly dressed man opened the door and Robert quickly got out.

Mary J's eyes flashed with joy. For the first time in her lonely life somebody stood up for her like he did last night and she felt more than just gratitude for Robert.

Mary observed Robert speaking on his cell-phone. At about five feet eight, with dark brown hair, Robert was very slender and elegant. He moved with masculine grace. When he was turning, his refined body curved like a snake, and his stylish business suit emphasized this serpentine likeness.

Mary involuntarily recalled the Bible: The Serpent, the Tempter, the First Snake. And she smiled. Robert impressed her, but unlike most women, she was not afraid of snakes, and she was also a strong believer in God, and plenty strong enough to fight Satan.

Robert looked at his watch and entered the cafe. Mary waved, and a smiling Robert came to her. The driver plus an equally hefty man followed him in and sat at the next table. She gazed at them with curiosity then playfully glanced at Robert.

"Did you send one of those guys to bring me the flowers?" She asked. There was no reaction, so she persisted. "You did grease the palm of the security guard in my building. Didn't you?"

"No, birdie, I'll explain." Robert ordered his meal to the waitress and turned to Mary again. "I wanted your first morning in the new apartment to be special. So, I just did this!" He snapped his fingers, and Mary gasped, when she saw a cute tiny corsage of lilies of the valley appear on her plate.

"Wow! Neat trick. You must have clicked your fingers quite a few times to fill my apartment," joked Mary J. She liked that she had made him smile then looked back down to admire the flowers. She continued to chat Robert up. "Are you always with bodyguards?" nodding her head in the direction of the men at the next table.

"I have to be." Robert's face was serious. "I have too many enemies."

"They are both so gorgeous, I thought all bodyguards looked like gorillas."

"I prefer them to be as strong as gorillas, but not necessarily quite so facially challenged, kitten..." Robert did not finish. He wanted to say: *I only surround myself with things of the highest quality.* But he was afraid she would misunderstand this.

"Especially, that left one," Mary continued. "And his face is so intelligent, he looks like a senator, or some kind of professor..."

"His name is Roger Ahrman, and he's more than just my bodyguard. He's my most trusted companion, my valet and commander-in-chief."

"What a name your valet has!" Mary laughed. "Did you say Ahriman or something?"

"Something." Robert smiled.

"The Chief of Darkness Forces, eh?" Mary's eyes were iridescent with interest.

"Look, little lamb, I have an awfully tense life. Sometimes it's just vitally necessary to have a guy like him by my side."

"Wow..." A nervous grimace replaced Mary's smile as she felt a deep worry stirring up her heart. *Please, she thought. Don't let anything happen to him. Don't let him disappear from my life so soon!*

"So, how did you like your new apartment?" Robert asked.

"It's great," Mary said, sighing. "I've never even dreamed about such comfort. Especially the air conditioner! I like it. You know, when the night is so hot..."

She stopped short, seeing Robert's eyes flashed, and he bent toward her. She blushed.

"I see, Mary, and plead, tell me, what did you do in the heat of the night?" Robert asked with his deep tempting voice.

"Nothing romantic, if that's what you were inferring." Mary's lips flinched with a bitter grin. "I cried a lot, actually. Sad thoughts..."

"Feeling all alone?"

"No. I never felt alone. Just sad thoughts, that's all. I prayed." Mary saw Robert leaned back, slightly frowning, and now her own eyes grew narrow. "Do you have a problem with that, Mister Noirson?"

"My name is Robert."

"I'm sorry, mist... *Robert*," Mary voiced slowly, and liked the rumbling sound of his name. "But, you know, I'm a novice, so why are you surprised that I'm praising God?"

"No. It's just a shame that a beautiful girl in the middle of the night dreams about being buried alive instead of how she meets her true love, for example."

"How did you know I dreamt that?" she asked, taken aback.

"Maybe I just clicked my fingers." He winked at her.

"Neat! You just guessed, didn't you?"

"Call me lucky! Except I am sorry it wasn't such a lucky dream for you."

Mary was growing to like this compelling man, but pursued her defense of her chosen course in life. "I never thought about my decision to become a nun as about ending my life."

"So what's it all about then? A way of helping people?" He did not look convinced.

"You mean – there are many other ways to be helpful? You're right. But in my situation, when I have no other family, and no one supports me..."

"I will."

Mary gazed at Robert, melting under such a protective comment. She tried to overcome her softening attitude and went on the attack.

"It was mean to scare me half to death the other night," she said with a reproach.

"I'm really sorry. But I needed to talk to you, and I knew that unless I went with any less back-up, you would start fighting and not listening. I know all about you being a bit of a feisty one when it comes to beating up people. Quite the warrior so Father Frank tells me."

Mary felt her cheeks redden again.

"Don't take me as a punk-girl," she said, gasping. "But you have to understand – it's one part of my education at the orphanage I am actually really grateful for."

"So you can look after yourself, hey? You don't need anyone looking out for you."

"Please don't say that." Mary looked Robert straight in the eyes. "No one ever protected or defended me... before... quite like you... Thank you."

"Oh I do understand you, my flower." Robert carefully took her hands. "When I saw you in that green track-suit you resembled a drop of morning dew on an emerald leaf, when the sun beams touch it and wash over."

Mary swallowed hard, her mind clouded, and a hot wave rose into her chest. Her breath stopped for a second.

"Wow." She didn't know how to react. "Sounds wonderful to me," she blurted, "but please don't pretend you didn't have rather less romantic intentions... You know..."

"If I did, which I'm not going to say either way, but if I did, would you think it was unnatural?" Robert laughed. And Mary smiled.

"Look," he continued. "You're of age. I can ask you openly. When a healthy man meets a beautiful girl, it is natural if he has sexual desire for her. Am I right?"

Mary nodded. "Apparently, judging by that guy over there." She winked at him as he turned to see an empty space where she was looking.

“Funny kitten!” He shook his head.

“Just saying, maybe there are lots of people who find the same person attractive, and maybe she should take the pick of the bunch!” Mary winked at him again and freed her hands from his. She didn’t want to offend him, however, and pretended to check her hair.

Mary felt that some tresses were not quite in the right place, but instead of rearranging them correctly, she slowly pulled them down. Her fingers ran through the blonde locks, and the gold cascade touched the tablecloth. She glanced at Robert, and leant on the table, propping her chin up with the gracious curve of her other hand.

She had never played with her hair in front of a man before. Mary was surprised at how pleasant she felt, looking at Robert’s intrigued stare when she wrapped a lock over her finger, let it uncurl, then touched her lower lip with her fingertip. Had she known how she was affecting him in public, maybe she would not have been quite so naively sensuous.

Resembling a noble senator, Robert’s valet, Roger, walked up to their table.

“I’m terribly sorry, sir,” he said quietly. “But we have to go. We’ve been here longer than planned.”

Robert looked at his watch, whistled and his face showed his dismay at being called away so soon. Mary felt pity for him and gently stroked his arm.

“It’s okay, Robert. I have a lesson pretty soon – I have to go too. I’ll see you tomorrow, I hope?” She looked at him intensely, then averted her gaze when she realized she felt drawn to him – and her feelings were far too intimate for such a public place.

Robert took her hand and she understood: he wanted to kiss it, but did not dare.

Mary took a deep breath, resolutely stretched her arm out and her reward? – a smile of pleasure when Robert’s lips touched her fingers so lightly, but with so much meaning.

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After her lesson Mary went to the campus library, and worked on a computer for a while. She printed off the schedule of events for her team, then checked out the team’s account balance.

It was an unpleasant surprise to discover much less money than expected.

*Hmm*, she thought, frowning slightly, *I thought Robert had donated more...* Out of nowhere, at the slightest thought of his name, she was struck by a wave of passion. She savored so many pleasant sensations as her breathing grew short, and her body temperature rose. Involuntarily she stroked her chest, and was almost in a swoon, feeling her heart running wild and her head growing light. She smiled dreamily. *What the heck, he would be so rich if he wasted all his money on charity...*

Regaining her composure, a new thought came to Mary. She picked up the report, and went along to the office of good old Father Frank. She had to wait a while until the stragglers of a regular stream of visitors left, at which time she entered and approached his desk.

The priest looked at her with open displeasure in his eyes, but, nonetheless, he managed a wide all-sugar-and-honey smile.

Mary’s heart fluttered as a bolt of hot emotion struck triumphant.

*Yes, you shrimp!* flashed into her head. *Look at you! Finally I’ve got you! And you know it. After all the suffering and tears you have caused me, oh, thank you, Lord, I’ve got you, you!*

*Wake up!* her inner voice whispered. *It’s only because of Robert’s patronage he has tripped up.*

But it did not decrease her feelings of exultation. She bathed in the good feeling, and actually forgot momentarily what had brought her to his office in the first place.

“Is something wrong, Mary?” The syrupy voice of Father Frank brought her back to her senses.

*It’s only because of Robert’s patronage*, she reminded herself, trying to control her feelings.

She laid the report out on the priest’s desk right in front of him.

“Where is the rest of the money?” she asked casually. She was deriving great joy from the view she had of an ever more vexed Father Frank.

“Mary,” the priest said, trying to talk politely. “You have to understand. Your team...”

“*Our* team,” Mary corrected him coldly.

“Okay, okay, *our* team is not the only expense at our orphanage.”

“Fine. I agree, but for the next event you will be renting a bus,” she told him. “No way can we go to this place by public transport. First off, it’s a bad neighborhood. I’m responsible for the girls’ safety. Second, it’s much too far away. The girls would be tired by the time they got there. They have been training really hard and to get to the competition half exhausted. It just wouldn’t be fair.”

“Mary, I understand your concern,” the priest said as peacefully as he could. “Don’t worry, you’ll have this ride, be assured of that.”

Somehow the humble behavior of Father Frank lessened Mary’s sense of victory in getting a proper coach trip organized. Her heart, softened with love, could not hold a grudge against anyone. She looked at the priest with pity.

“Forgive and you shall be forgiven,” she cited, kneeling. “Forgive me, Father!”

“I bless you, my child, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Father Frank crossed the girl. “Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.”

Feeling happy, Mary got up and headed out the office. She was smiling, imagining the faces of her trainees, when she told them finally that they were all going to travel to the competition in some sort of style. She was just about to leave when she was struck by a thought. *Oh, the missing funds!* She stopped by the door, thinking.

*Ah, whatever, she decided at last. I won’t let anything get in the way of the team. As long as Father Frank agrees to my suggestions, it’ll be fine. A compromise has to be better than a lawsuit, surely? At the end of the day, he does do a great job. And he’s not a bad person, I have to admit. All right, he is a leech, but he is responsible for the whole orphanage, for God’s sake! The Bible says “thou shall not judge” and I don’t want to judge him either.*

Mary left, feeling like a huge weight had been dragged off her back.

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In the evening, Mary was taking a shower. She turned the faucet until the water was so hot she could barely stand. The lukewarm mist filled the cabin, clouded her mind, relaxed her muscles. Mary felt herself dissolving in the murky fog that enveloped her like a thick blanket.

She slowly stroked her wet skin, so silky with shower gel. Her glorious hair was hidden under a shower cap, and she positioned herself so that her back was directly in line with the whipping stream of scalding water. She curled her upper body up, stretching with giddy dreams.

The torrent of water tickled her perfect skin, and when the physical pleasure of near pain mixed with some inappropriate thoughts of her and Robert together, Mary moaned audibly, shivering under the combined effect of such pleasant feelings.

*What if Robert is watching me right now? she suddenly thought in a guilty panic. He gave me this apartment; maybe he placed some video cameras around?*

She went on a thorough search of the bathroom.

Finally she got bored of that.

“If he wants to,” she mumbled. “Let him watch!” She made a few more suggestive stretching exercises, like a tigress preparing for a manhunt. She pulled the cap from her head and laughed at herself in the mirror as she ruffled her hair and posed. Mary finally left the bathroom, intensely rubbing her tingling, excited body with a huge green terry towel.

In contrast to the steamy bathroom, her bedroom was positively ice-cold.

“Oh my, what an empty head!” Mary scolded herself. *Why did I set the air conditioner on maximum?*

She turned off the offending cooler, and practically dived into her silky pajamas, a stunning emerald color that complemented her skin tone perfectly.

Finally she sat on the edge of her bed, and played some more with her hair. She shook her head, taking enormous pleasure in the feeling of freedom it gave her, and the gold cascade flowed extravagantly down onto the bed sheets. She stared at the phone on the bedside table.

*Why hasn't Robert called?* she thought, annoyed. *I hope it's not too late for me to call him?*

Hesitant, she lifted the receiver and dialed the number.

"Yes!" Mary heard Robert answer, and her heart stopped beating for a second.

"Mary, my birdie, is everything all right?"

"Hah... How did you know, it was me?" she asked, puzzled.

"The caller ID, honey?" Robert said with a smile in his voice. Mary felt stupid.

"Agh... I just want to be sure that your plans are unchanged for tomorrow."

"Don't worry, sweetheart. If there was anything different, I'd call you."

"Thanks. Well, good night then."

"Before you go, tell me, my dear, what are you going to dream about tonight?" he asked with his tender yet alluring voice.

Mary's eyes widened with excitement and she brushed her fingertip over an excited breast.

"I don't know!" she teased him. "Good night!"

She quickly hung up, crossed her arms to hug herself tight, and smirked. She did not know that the same self-satisfied grin was on Robert's lips too, as he looked at his own now silent phone.



## Jerry

Nineteen years old, Jerry was simply an awesome specimen. Well over six feet, he was every woman's dream and a jealous nightmare for quite a few men. He had such a great body for his age, already gaining the hard solidity of full manhood, whilst in contrast his clean-shaven face was tender and girl-like.

When his thick wavy mane, the color of fallen leaves, was loose and flowed down below his shoulders, it gave him the appearance of a Viking, or some kind of deity from a Scandinavian saga. The big dark blue eyes shaded with long eyelashes, and his plum, refined lips made him even more attractive, and his natural, wild masculine beauty impressed all he encountered.

But this angelic-looking guy had a police record unlike that of even the most unpleasant and experienced criminal elements out there. His rap would have included robberies and burglaries; gun- and drug-running; suspicion of aggravated rapes and even a few murders thrown in. The cold-blooded, cruel demeanor Jerry showed when fulfilling the orders of his boss was legendary, even among his most hardened peers.

His luck couldn't last for much longer, however. The police finally tracked his gang down, and despite determined resistance, a policeman shot him point-blank in the ensuing skirmish.

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He was Beyond. And he saw numerous awful things that living human beings could not even imagine. Many, many times he went close to those horrifying events and felt intolerable despair and terror.

The worst aspect of this experience was that just as he seemed to win the fight to return to goodness, just as he felt a sense of peace at getting over the horror, a strong hand would guide him back forcibly towards new and boundless nightmares.

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Jerry opened his eyes, and in his groggy state did not understand at first where he was. Suddenly he sensed pain again. He felt bandages and catheters and realized he was in a hospital.

An unknown man was sitting close to him and looking at him very attentively.

"My name is Robert Noirson, Jerry," the man introduced himself in a deep low voice. "How do you like the place that you just visited?"

"Which place?" Jerry asked. It took a lot of effort.

The man smiled. "It was Hell, Jerry. And you're going to that place. And all those events are waiting for you. You're dying, poor boy."

"No!" Jerry licked his lips and looked around the ward. "Where are the doctors? Why aren't they trying to heal me?"

"They tried their best." The man snorted. "But they are just humans. Besides, why do you want them to cure you? You're going to have a lethal injection or get the chair. Which do you prefer?"

Jerry wept. He cried like a child. He did not want to die.

"Oh, come on, Jerry, what did you expect? Did you think you would go to Heaven? Did the Devil force you to do such things?" Robert waited for Jerry's answer with curiosity. And he was pleasantly surprised.

"You're right." The teenager sighed. "Nobody forced me. I chose this path myself. Shit, it's funny, you know, but I have never thought that everything has an end. But it does, doesn't it!"

“I like your way of thinking.” Robert smiled. “So, how do you like the place that you’ve seen? How do you like Hell?”

“How the fuck do you know, what I saw?”

“Tsk, tsk, tsk...” Robert shook his head. “I’m a respectable creature, boy! Don’t use such vile language when you’re talking to me!”

The room was filled with the menace in the voice.

“Okay, *sir*,” the teenager replied derisively. “Could you explain, how do you know, what I saw in my delirium?”

“Because, I’m the manager of that place,” came a reply in a casual air.

The teenager stared at him. “Are you the Devil?”

“No, I’m just His Son. I did not say I’m the owner of that place. I said, I’m just the manager here, on Earth and there in Hell.”

“And you wanna get my soul?”

“Don’t be so naive!” Robert laughed. “I already have it! With my abilities, I don’t need servants at all, but I don’t like to waste the Power. So, if something can be done without using that, I prefer that way. And, well, I must follow some rules. One of them is that before I ‘hire’ someone, I have to tell him this: you can release yourself from me if you sincerely repent or commit something ‘noble’, and...” Robert stopped for a second and said with visible effort and spite. “And I *must* tell you, unbelievable as it seems, it happens sometimes! But I don’t think you’re such a person.”

The teenager double-checked his feelings. He really was not sorry. Reading his thoughts, Robert smirked and continued: “Here is one warning: if you die in fire, voluntary or accidentally, you’ll not go to Hell, you’ll just not exist until the Day of Judgment, when we *all* will answer for our actions.”

The gloomy anxiety in Robert’s voice made the teenager smile.

“Well,” he said, “everything you do you have to pay for, right?”

“Oh, you’re such a brave boy, eh?” Robert’s eyes glinted. “I like the way you think, Jerry! I like your sense of responsibility! Here is my offer: I promise you my patronage and caring as long as you are faithful to me. I know, you aren’t suited to being a leader, however, you’re smart enough to be a good soldier. All that I ask for is your submission. So, what will it be?”

“I’m hurting.” Jerry responded dismally. “I don’t know when I’ll be back on form.”

Robert sighed. He touched Jerry and the teenager gasped. The pain was gone and the bandages and catheters fell off instantly.

Unbelieving, Jerry sprang up, raced to the mirror and threw off his gown. He stared at his beautiful, youthful body, his strong shoulders, smooth tanned chest and washboard stomach, all looking in top form. Overall, his body was healthy again and felt as rejuvenated as a blunt knife after a long session at the cutlers. And best of all, despite everything, he had no scars. That was enough for Jerry. Very, very slowly, the teenager walked to Robert and knelt: “My Lord! My life is in Your hands!”

And Robert smiled with self-satisfaction.

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In a suite in the apartment block reserved for Noirson’s associates, Jerry laid on his bed, smoking. He was waiting for Ron, his head partner. He had not even taken off his shoes, and was lying on top of bedclothes that matched perfectly with every other fabric accessory in the bedroom. He observed the chambermaid – a curvy brunette, very tall and slender, in an indigo figure-hugging classic French maid outfit, embroidered with gold thread.

She was doing the room, and Jerry’s eyes moving from her rippling cleavage to her defined stockinged calves, back up to her strong, beautifully made-up face, before dwelling longingly on her

white lace headpiece. Despite the vibes he was giving off as his gaze penetrated her clothing, the woman continued working, as if he were invisible.

Jerry hated to be ignored. He got up and moved in closer, focusing on her neck. He breathed in deeply through his nose.

“Mmmmm, señorita, cool perfume you have on it today.”

“Probably,” she grunted back, not even turning to face him, just getting on with her dusting.

“No need to be like that when a person is only trying to be friendly.”

She didn't reply, and Jerry carefully placed his palm on her lower back, then slid his hand down and gently squeezed her buttock. He could feel the fabric of her panties move beneath the typical chambermaid issue dress. There was no reaction.

Determined to have his way, Jerry continued with the charm. “Nice rump you got there, girl!” He smiled and squeezed again, awaiting her response.

She calmly put down her duster, turned to him and looked right into his eyes.

“Maybe I have a nice ass, maybe I don't. Maybe I would like you to do something with it – in fact looking at you now, yes, I would definitely like to fuck you too, pretty boy – but you know what?”

“What?” he teased her.

“While me and you are in the employ of Mister Noirson, fuck off!” She yelled, and stepped back, rearranging her skirt. Then she hissed, “Keep your hands to yourself, big boy. If you wanna boink someone, go to building C, fourth floor, and ask for any of the girls there.”

Jerry was smirking. He liked her spirit and thought he was on to something with her.

“Boink? Oh please, do me a favor, Miss Prissy. For a start this is about you, not some tart in C block. Besides, boinking you babe, is not quite what I had in mind.”

“Oh, I see. So what do you have in mind? Where you come from, does ‘boink’ mean buy flowers and treat me like a lady?”

“Not exactly.” His eyes flashed to her breasts and back to her eyes, “it means, I wanna bend you over that couch and screw you!” he replied standing back and making no secret of what he was eyeing up with no good intentions.

“I'd like to see you try!” She snorted.

“Oh, yeah? Are you fucking superwoman, or something?” Jerry felt as if an electric shock ran over his body, making his muscles tense. “Forget fucking you, I'll just fuck you up – with one hand!” He was shouting, but something told him he should not touch her.

“Go ahead, big eyes!” She challenged. “I won't even try to resist you, you gorgeous but awfully dim muscle head! No prizes for guessing I'm not a virgin, so screw me, and hey, what do you know, I'll lose nothing! But you? You, honey, will be in deep, deep shit, like you would not believe! Forgotten, have you, that Mister Noirson protects all his servants, not just you, you stupid ape!”

Jerry choked with rage, and who knows, what could have happened next, but in that moment Ron breezed into the room; “Let's go, partner!”

“Okay, okay, I'm coming.” He glared at the chambermaid on the way out and blurted, “Fuck you, bitch!”

“In your dreams, baby!” She burst out laughing.

Mad, Jerry spun on her, but Ron pushed him outside. “Control yourself, for fuck's sake! You can be such a dickhead!”



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Jerry's senior by twenty years, he was a little shorter than his youthful partner but was built more solidly. Swarthy, with black hair, Ron had a thick, carefully trimmed mustache and piercing brown eyes with a golden tint in them. He was a demon in human form, and Robert had chosen him to mentor Jerry. It was quite a job at times.

"Look, pal!" Ron twirled his mustache, shaking his head with reproach. "Behaving like that will get you in big trouble one day!"

"Where are we going?" Jerry wanted to change the subject.

"Did you hear me, Jerry? I said you *will* get in the shit with the boss if you don't get more respectful of people around here. We are all on the same side, get it? You fuck up outsiders who cause us trouble, and you do not, I repeat, do not fuck, or fuck over your own. If you want it any clearer, I will write the rules on the chambermaid's ass." He winked at his colleague, lesson over.

"I'm cool, Ron. Thanks. I know I tend to fly off the deep end when things don't go my way, but I'm getting better. Anyway, where are we heading?"

Ron smiled at the empty words of an optimistic but immature and headstrong nineteen-year-old walking time bomb. He said quietly through his thick black moustache; "We are going wherever the Master sends us."

"Yes? And?" quizzed Jerry.

"He's going on a date."

"Not with that little nun chick, Mary, or whatever her name is?" Jerry giggled. "I can picture such a girl." He put his hands together, as for prayer, and rolled his eyes.

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To Jerry's disbelief, Mary was wearing tight fitting shorts and a rather plunging sports top. *Look how small she is!* he thought surprised. *I bet she isn't even five feet tall.*

He leered at her legs as was his habit. *No, too muscular,* he adjudged. *Now her waist, that isn't bad... But looky here. Mmmmm, what great tits, lady! What a lucky guy My Master is,* Jerry thought.

"Nice to meet you!" the girl said to him, shaking his hand, and he finally looked at her face.

Her succulent lips and golden fluffy hair instantly made Jerry crazy. The world around him disappeared. To him, she was a goddess, the deity of all things carnal, and he was rewriting the rulebooks to favor his lust for her particularly heavenly body. The intimate thoughts he had for Mary froze his tongue. Mute, Jerry just gaped at the girl, not noticing that Robert was observing him intensely.

“Are you okay?” Mary asked, amazed, thinking; *Why is this teen moron staring at me like this?*

Mary didn't understand what was going on with Jerry, and she got angry. She never did like blonde guys or athletic men either, added to which his perplexing look and awkward silence annoyed her.

She looked at Robert, but misunderstood why his sensual, refined lips curved into a self-confident smile.

*Is something wrong with my makeup?* she thought irritated. *Am I still sweating from the workout at the gym? Gosh, I know I didn't have time to change into anything fancy, but I look okay don't I? Maybe I have got some dirt on my skin?*

She carefully tried to free her hand from Jerry's grasp, but nothing doing.

She raised her left hand. Enchanted, Jerry watched her tiny fingers wandering across her chest and throat.

*Thumbelina!* Jerry was unable to compel himself to let go of her hand. *Is it a human being or just a sun streak?*

*Come on, you dumb angel face, at least say something!* Mary barely fought off her desire to yank her hand away with all her might. She felt trapped. *Can this socially challenged thing talk at all?* Mary thought. She hated the embarrassment of the situation she found herself in, and despised the teenager who was causing it. *Is he just a little slow, perhaps? There must be some logical explanation! I've read somewhere that, when men use steroids, it affects their brains. Well, here's the living proof holding my hand like a twit.*

Mary couldn't even imagine how she lucky was living under Robert's protection. She would have been in grave danger, had the volatile Jerry met her alone just one week earlier.

But for all his tongue-tied handshaking under the influence of lust and puppy love, Jerry knew perfectly well that as the girlfriend of his boss, the desirable Mary was now taboo.

Robert understood that Jerry knew that too, and when he saw Mary's less than stellar reaction to Jerry's introduction he had been unable to contain that sly and content grin playing on his own thin lips.

Ron spotted the awkward silence immediately and gently poked his young partner in the back.

Jarred into action, Jerry mechanically said, “Sorry, Miss Jablonsky! Too much sun today. I'm at your service!” He flashed her his best smile and hoped he had made amends. What a roller coaster day it was turning into with the girlies!

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Mary and Robert sat on the bench in the alley. Ron and Jerry placed themselves a short distance away from them in order to watch all the approaches.

“That's not fair!” Jerry was talking as if he was in a delirium. “I have been living in this damn city for the last four months. I could have met her first!”

“Stop it, Jerry!” Horrified that the conversation was even happening, Ron chewed a corner of his moustache. Golden lighting flashed into his dark brown eyes, swiveling quickly around before he continued. “She's His girl! Remember what I said back at the suite? Well, this is the ultimate example of what I was telling you about. Don't even think about messing where your nose definitely does not belong. Unless of course you like the idea of crossing the Master.”

“I know...” Jerry moaned. “But if she was even the President's girlfriend, it wouldn't stop me! But she's His girl... I know what you are saying, Ron, but me wanting her won't affect how I deal

with things for Mister Noirson. If he ordered me to, I'd kill her, and I wouldn't hesitate one second to execute her, I swear! But nobody can forbid me to dream or wait. How long have they been dating?"

"Just a few days!" Ron sensed he had a lot more pep talks to give Jerry before he saw sense and grew up where women were concerned. He ran his fingers over his black thick moustache, and asked casually; "See the game last night?"

"Yeah," Jerry answered. His huge expressive blue eyes shone with an almost insane tint. "Anyway, maybe He'll change His mind..."

"What are you talking about, you fucking basketcase!" snapped Ron; his moustaches bristling above his dizzily white sharp teeth. "It's like talking to my teenage puppy love nephew. Up and down in and out of love like a dick on head. Wise up, buddy boy. The Master changing his mind isn't going to happen. Really, Jerry, do yourself a favor and don't count on such a convenient scenario to keep your dick happy. I know the Master too well. He is in it with her for the long haul."

"It's not just physical with her, you know," Jerry drawled dreamily. "She is special."

"Oh, please, give me strength!" Ron was exasperated.

"Maybe they will break up! I'll be waiting... While there is life, there is hope..."

"Yeah, correct. While *there is* life..." Ron sighed, chewing his moustache.

*What a damn situation it is!* he mused gloomily. *Oh, just what I needed.*

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In the servant's bar Jerry took a beer and a snack and stared at the TV. He did not take in one single word of the national news blaring out the screen at him. All he could think about was his exquisite Mary and his beloved boss who he would also die for.

"Hey, Jerry!" one servant called him. "What are you so concerned about?"

"Go to Hell!" Jerry snarled. He was imagining what kind of fun he could have with his dream untouchable girl. Some moves on the bar, nobody around, no holds barred. He took a long swig to calm himself down.

"Look, buddy, it's not good for your health. You're too young for that stuff."

"What?"

"To be chucking back beer every day!"

"Oh, too young for beer? Fuck off." Jerry quipped, regaining his composure after thinking at first that he was being advised that he was too young for Mary. "According to my ID it just so happens that I'm twenty three!"

*I wonder what she'll look like when she's twenty-three?* he pondered. *Will she pack on the pounds, (mmmmm, she'd have fucking great tits mind you!) or will she still be a good girl for the Master and keep improving with age. Fucking Hell,* he gulped down the rest of his beer in anger, *Why does the Boss have to have the hots for her? Over six billion people in the world and He has to go for her.*

Three security guards not far from Jerry were whispering to each other, plotting to wind up the young man and hopefully get a reaction out of him; some sort of reaction bad enough to necessitate an enforced "calming down thump".

"You're kidding, Max! Impossible!"

"It's true. I'll show you. Let's go, guys, you'll see!"

They moved to the next table, so that Jerry would be able to hear them.

"You know, Fred," Max started loudly. "Mary Jablonskaia has a walk around her building every night..."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah. In her little rara skirt. And you wanna know why? I tell you, this'll kill you. Or I mean, it'll kill Jerry boy."

Jerry could not resist the bait, and turned to them. "Why's it going to kill me, Max?"

"Because she wants to meet you, and flash you her little tush!" the servant impudently laughed right in Jerry's face.

Realizing that he had been tricked, the youthful security guard flushed with anger, yet he was not drunk enough to lose control of himself and start a fight. He was new to the organization and knew those guys were professionals just dying for him to react, a chance to test out the reportedly tough new kid on the block.

Deigning not to take on more trouble than he could handle without roughing up his ponytail, he did the right thing and drained his glass in silence.

## In the Park

Two months passed by. During them Jerry did not have much time to dream about Mary. There was a lot of learning to be done, and not just army training. Jerry spoke Spanish, but he also had to take crash courses in Italian and German. To his surprise all the servants had to study the Bible in addition.

“Know your enemies,” Ron explained to him. “We have to be prepared for debate as well as for a real fight.”

Ron also taught his young friend a couple of social skills: how to impress a girl with some easy magic tricks, and how to shake off the police, by simply making the car or himself momentarily invisible. This demon in a human body was growing genuinely attached to his human partner. The naïve delight that Jerry showed when studying, and his sincere thankfulness touched Ron to the bottom of his heart.

But when it came to discipline, Ron was inflexible.

Once, Jerry found a girl. Blonde, elegant and attractive, with good-shaped figure, she resembled Mary, slightly – from behind, at least. He threw himself so wholeheartedly into the task of pleasuring her that the teenager forgot about the time.

He was so close to that magic line when nothing exists, save pure enjoyment, when something clutched his manhood. At the same horrific moment, the girl disappeared, and wrenching from the unbearable pain, Jerry found himself hanging face down above an abyss that was swarming with hideous and creepy monsters and snakes, all eager to get him.

The invisible force gripping Jerry’s testicles released its hold, and screaming with agony and horror, the youth fell on the ground hard – landing right at the feet of his head partner.

“You are two minutes late!” Ron said sternly, demonstratively pointing at his watch. “Give thanks that it’s your time to work out, not be on a shift following the Master.”

“Have I just been on a ‘Ride to Hell’?” mumbled the shocked Jerry.

“No. Not yet. And, buddy, please, make every possible effort so you don’t ever have to go on that trip!”

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The partners escorted Robert to many places, and when Ron stopped the limousine next to a park, Jerry calmly got out and opened the door for his Master.

Robert got out as well. He waved with a bright smile and Jerry’s eyes followed the direction of his Master’s greeting. He froze, seeing Mary walking gracefully towards them.

She was wearing ultra-modern sports pants, bright green. Three black-and-white “General” stripes on each leg just added that something extra to her classy outfit, which was topped off by a slinky, tight-fitting black blouse with see-through long sleeves. The whole set of clothes showed her sensual body from the best point of view.

Mary had her magnificent blonde hair arranged like a Greek goddess – a curly pony tail streaming down her neck, contrasting with an exquisite plait pulled up and coiled three or four times, pinned to the top of her head like a golden crown. Her bangs brushed forward framed her strong face and all in all she looked every bit a deity worthy of Robert.

And for Jerry, her hair wrapped around him as part of her sexiest foreplay was sometimes too strong a fantasy to ignore!

He wished with all his juvenile heart that she would approach him, but not even he was that deluded. He still cringed inwardly when Mary offered her delicate hand to Robert who kissed it extravagantly.

The two lovers had barely exchanged greetings, when Robert’s phone rang.

He looked at the call display with concern.

“It’s an important call,” he explained to Mary. “Excuse me, bunny.”

He stepped out of earshot, and the bodyguards, like well-trained shadows, changed position to accommodate the change in circumstances. Jerry drew closer to Mary.

For the first time ever, he got an opportunity to talk to her, but it made him so excited that he forgot all the phrases that he had prepared for such an occasion. He saw Mary was keeping her eyes trained on Robert, who was talking ardently a few paces away from them.

*Will the Master get angry if I talk to her?* Jerry thought, worried about Robert’s reaction. But he could not resist the temptation tugging at his heart. *Go on, just a little chat...* his inner voice was crying out. *Just a straightforward, polite conversation, for Satan’s sake!* Convinced he could pull off a simple exchange with Mary, without blurting out he wanted to take her where she stood, he started uncertainly; “So? How, er, how was your day?”

“Uh?” Mary looked at him, startled. In her surprise at being talked to by someone she considered to be about as communicative as a tree, she did not actually register what he had said.

“I beg your pardon?” she addressed Jerry, suppressing the urge to address him as “you thick oaf”.

The astonishment that she showed clearly confused the youth, and he lost the string of badly prepared words. Unable to think clearly, Jerry forced himself to break his stare and look around to check the security situation.

In the soft summer twilight, everything seemed calm and peaceful. The hot daytime hours had already melted away, and the fresh wind was bringing forth special early evening aromas.

There in the park, in the middle of the city, the scent of moist soil, odors from the neighborhood pizzeria, and the fragrance of late summer flowers bordering the path, all mixed effortlessly into an enchanting bouquet that not even the stench of exhaust fumes could spoil.

A few kids played nearby. An elderly couple were sitting a few benches away, doing the old person thing of looking around, never exchanging a word, but completely content to be together in their shared silence. Not a leaf was moving on the distant shrubbery. Nobody was hiding behind any trees. Jerry’s eyes met Ron’s stare, but he misunderstood the look, and he flashed his partner a secret signal that meant ‘the situation is under control.’

But Ron was not frowning in concern for the safety of their employer and his girl. *Oh buddy, be careful, with her. I can read you like a book, and if you ask me, you’re a frigging menace.* Ever the professional, he surveyed the area, but still observed his young protégé out the corner of a very vigilant eye.

Trying to re-establish a friendly, harmless dialogue, Jerry uttered enthusiastically, “It’s so sunny today.”

“It’s evening right now, Jerry.” Mary sighed, thinking; *Robert, probably told him to keep me entertained, while he’s busy. Well, finally, it’s not Robert’s fault that that teen is so clumsy.*

“The sun is already down, Jerry.”

“Oh, I meant to say, it was a sunny day, wasn’t it?”

“Do I look like the weather man?” Mary snapped, losing her patience.

“Huh?” Jerry was taken aback. How could his sweet sensuous love talk to him like that?

Mary saw his expressive, blue puppy dog eyes looking at her rather too closely, questioning her. This caused her to feel even more ticked off at the way the little chat was taking shape.

*My God, doesn’t he see that I’m not interested in talking! If he wasn’t Robert’s man, I’d tell him to shut up and push off.* She grimaced slightly at him, trying to be polite while fighting the annoyance he was causing her.

Jerry saw her succulent lips draw together, but when he winced, it was due to another misinterpretation of body language. He felt a strong surge in his stomach as he followed the path of her tongue, its dark pink tip flashing out from between her lips, then, like a magic serpent, slithering slowly, provocatively, leaving a translucent wet trail on the tender scarlet skin of her upper lip.

The young bodyguard glanced around to control not the situation, but rather himself.

He wanted her so badly, and not in a nice way, because she was not playing the innocent sweet girl he wanted her to be with him. *Fuck her, literally*, he yelled inside himself, and counted to ten in a pointless exercise in self-control.

Robert finished his talk, and smiling, went back.

Open-eyed, Jerry watched Mary in amazement. She beamed at Robert, her stern dull face lighting up with a happy smile, her eyes flashing like emeralds. She shook all over, her breasts hove, and she hugged herself in an extremely excitable state of body and mind.

*Oh looky!* Jerry wanted to cry. *She is buzzing because of Him!* The feeling that struck and then engulfed Jerry was neither envy nor jealousy. It was agony. He summoned all his strengths, and managed to maintain an indifferent attitude.

Robert glanced at Jerry, then addressed Mary; “I’m terribly sorry, my little bird! It’s getting late, would you like me to walk you home?”

Mary nodded, too happy to answer. She was indeed afraid that if she talked, her trembling voice would show her inner excitement that threatened to turn her heart into a sexy, romantic, lovey-dovey jelly.

According to the rules, Ron was to have followed Robert, and Jerry should have returned to the car. But, quite unexpectedly, Robert said to the guards; “Jerry, with me. Ron, stay.”

The bodyguards were surprised, but well-disciplined enough not to ask a thing.

The opportunity to follow Mary comforted the youth.

*At least I can see her for a while longer*, he thought, delighted.

Ron tried to say something, but a quick cold glance from Robert froze his tongue. Full of worry for his protégé, he pulled at a corner of his moustache with his teeth, watching his Master with his girl and his escort until all three dissolved into the tense darkness.

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If Robert wanted to have the trust-worthiest escort possible, he was right in choosing Jerry. The young bodyguard was all attention.

*The Master will see, how good I am*, Jerry thought. *And SHE will see I can protect her...*

Much to his disappointment, however, it was quite a peaceful walk.

The lovely cloudless night was mythically exquisite. The deep dark sky showed no moon. In the middle of the city the stars were invisible. The lights from the buildings and cars, colored rays beaming from commercial signs and streetlights lit up the paths in the park.

Moving lightly the leaves of the many trees featured in the park, the tender humid wind was playing its own enchanting role. In Jerry’s mind, the enigmatic shades, and the storming, dancing shadows turned Mary into some exquisite fantasy creature.

Her blond hair appeared luminous in the darkness just like a nimbus cloud appears in moonlight, and her black blouse, invisible in the dusk, hid her body; it seemed as if only her head was gliding through the air.

*Firefly!* Jerry thought adoring her. *Come on!* He looked hard all about, checking every shadow, every moving leaf. *It’s dangerous to walk after dark, isn’t it? Where, in the name of Hell, are all the damned crooks, maniacs, gangsters and druggies? Not even a noisy paparazzi. Why can’t one of Mister Noirson’s competitors send an assassin along to give me something to do?*

Alas! Mary was not aware in the slightest of his efforts to protect her from the perils of his imaginary world where, at a stretch, he would transform into a knight in shining armor and ride in to save the girl from danger. She had forgotten about him the instant Robert had offered her the walk.

They moved slowly, without saying a word at first. When Robert asked with a smile;

“Are you cold, dear?” Mary looked at him questioning, and he specified; “You are hugging yourself.”

“Oh! No.” The girl felt a hot wave instantly wash away her chill. She dropped her arms. “I’m fine, thanks.”

“Don’t catch a cold,” Robert said very serious, casually hugging her shoulder. “Next week, you are going in for a very serious competition, if I remember correctly?”

Mary was taken aback by his comforting gesture. *Should I ask him to remove his arm?* the girl thought, confused. *But why? It would be hypocritical to pretend that I don’t like it! It’s not like he’s gonna rape me...* She flushed momentarily at the thought of him actually imposing himself on her in a more romantic sense, but brought herself back to earth. *Loosen up, girl, she scolded herself, I’m so paranoid at times! He’s just trying to be nice to me, I feel good in his arms, and all I’m doing is walking like a stupid frigid doll!*

“I’m sorry, Robert, what did you say about the competition?”

“Just that you have one next week!”

“How do you know?” she replied.

He gave her a look that insinuated he knew everything about her. Again she flushed, wondering if he knew how warm it made her feel that he took such an interest in her simple life.

“Nah, it’s just a usual event; a Gymnaestrada for the five local schools. Some charity activities as well...” she gazed at him with a fleeting hope. “Will you attend it as well?”

“I’m afraid not,” Robert replied, sounding sad. Mary nodded.

“I understand...”

They crossed the road, and Jerry noticed almost with despair. *Oh, no, the campus is here already! Please, cue the mad dog or a raccoon, sick with rabies! a snake...*

*Perhaps an anaconda, eh?* an inner voice mocked him. *Maybe a t-rex, a mammoth? Lions, and tigers, and bears, oh my! Not your day to be in a fairytale, buddy. Let’s face it, whichever way you look at it, it’s not your lucky day!*

He gloomily glanced at Robert and Mary – they walked hugging each other – and Jerry again looked around trying to find a reason to show off his abilities. In vain!

They entered the campus area. The modern buildings contrasted sharply with the aging structures all covered with moss and ivy. The usual noises from the city were muffled, and occasionally the light chirping from birds falling asleep up in the trees could be heard. The breeze was light, yet gave the atmosphere a soft and warm feeling as if being cradled by Mother Nature.

Mary rubbed her head against Robert’s shoulder, and smiled with happiness.

How many times she had paced along the same alleyway. How different it was with Robert! Usually she almost ran through the darkness, clutching her brass-knuckles, ready to defend herself. She was always cautious, always on the lookout for possible sources of dangers.

And now she felt so safe and comfortable, enjoying the feeling of her beloved man next to her. They walked in silence until they reached Mary’s building.

*Mary, you are such an impolite fool!* suddenly flashed in her head. *You have been dating two months already, but have you ever asked Robert about HIS plans and events?*

“You never told me about your life,” she started, carefully choosing the words. “I don’t want to worm myself into your confidence. But I’d like to know you better.”

“Wasn’t there enough about me from the searches you did in the library?” Robert asked, smiling.

They stopped by the building entrance.

“How did you know?” Mary sighed. “Well, I asked that question so many times that it has lost all its meaning. I suppose I should just accept that you know everything about me. I guess I feel a little bit guilty. Yes, I did check some newspapers and Internet sites. You have done a lot, haven’t you? But besides all the boring facts, what kind of things do you like? What do you do for fun? What are your beliefs?”

“Ow-ow, slow down, girl!” Robert laughed. “It’s not easy to reveal everything at once. Okay, let’s see. I expect you’ll find this funny after reading about my business life, but away from the madness,

I am quite a romantic person. If you ever come to my house, don't be surprised. It has Renaissance décor in every room."

"Renaissance? That is interesting," she chirped, nodding.

"How I miss that time. If it was up to me, I'd prefer to wear a French aristocrat's wig, and see you dressed in a crinoline!"

Mary gaped at Robert, who paused, then continued; "By the way, I've never seen you in a skirt. Why?"

*It's because of my short legs, Mary thought, embarrassed. I believe I look like a turtle, when I'm wearing a dress. But I'd rather die than admit to that aloud.*

"Don't you have one?" Robert insisted. "I think you have very shapely legs, if you don't mind me saying."

Mary went scarlet at his compliment then quickly regained her composure.

"I do have a dress," the girl replied slowly. "The one I wear for going to church. But the rest of the time, I wear pants or shorts, because I need to do a lot of exercises."

"What, for your gymnastics?"

"Yes." His positive comment on a part of her figure that Mary hated had struck a cord in her and opened her heart to him more than she hoped he could tell. "Look!" Mary gabbled in a wave of excitement. "Can you imagine if I did this, toggged up in a dress?"

She stepped aside, onto the grass, and performed a few leaps and gymnastic jumps.

Jerry did not hear their talk, and now, seeing Mary prancing and pirouetting, he was astonished, and slowly went close.

*What the hell is she doing? Wow! He couldn't believe his eyes. Did the Master ask her or is she doing it to show off and make him even crazier for her? Damn, for me, at least, it works. Look, she can bend in every direction known to man! I forgot she was a gymnast. Wow, what a girl, what an amazing body, just look at her go. He licked his lips and felt a surge of butterflies in his stomach. I bet not even Kama-Sutra has got enough moves to push the capabilities of her lithe little body... But I'd love the chance to try and find her limits.*

Mary finished her performance with the splits, and all giggling and eyes bright, she got up elegantly in one movement. Suddenly realizing that she had done her routine unasked, the girl blushed again, as she approached Robert.

"Impressive," he said calmly. "But don't you remember I've seen you in action before?" He saw a sheepish look flash across her young face and tried to banish it immediately. "But it was fabulous." He hit the jackpot and then went on with his principal line of thought. "Mary, we see each other so rarely, is it at all possible for you to wear a dress for me?"

*How could he demand something from her! Jerry felt himself going insane. Oh well, he paid for it, I suppose.*

"I feel more comfortable wearing pants!" Mary argued.

"But you make the effort to wear a dress in front of God. Why don't you want to do me that favor too?"

That request struck Jerry, his head full of biblical lessons, and he stood rigid.

Instantly Mary's face became stern, and she stepped back.

"Never try to compare yourself with God," she retorted almost inaudibly.

"Why not?" Robert asked arrogantly. He resembled a proud Roman patrician, and Mary involuntarily adored his look. Caught on the back foot she made an effort, and answered; "Because it won't work with me."

Robert's eyes narrowed, when he searched the girl for signs of her seriousness over religion. "So, you don't like meeting with me?"

"Eh? I do like it, and you know that," Mary said, barely holding back her tears.

*If she cries, I'll hit him*, Jerry thought resolutely. *To see her suffering is worse than a "Ride to Hell!"*

"I was hoping you'd respect my feelings and faith. Of course I can wear a skirt to please you. I do want to please you, really, and if you don't like me in these shorts and pants, I won't wear them again when I'm with you, but you turned this subject into a religious issue, and don't count on me giving up my beliefs. I'd rather die on the street, starving, than take 30 pieces of silver."

"I didn't ask you to do that, honey," Robert uttered it so tenderly that the girl forgave him at once. Amazed, Jerry looked at his Master.

Robert opened his arms to Mary, and the girl drew close, gazing up at him like a wounded gazelle. He embraced her, and after a brief hesitation Mary hugged him as well.

Jerry's spirits plummeted, and he looked around, checking the security of the situation, as he was assuring himself, not because he envied his Master, who held his loved one in his arms.

"I didn't mean to offend you, my honey-drop," Robert said. His soft tempting voice percolated Mary's soul. "And I will not force you to change your style either! You are a beautiful girl, and your blouse is very flattering. But you can't wear sports pants everywhere. That was my point."

"I don't get it." Mary looked at him.

"I want you to attend a party. But you have to wear a dress. A posh dress."

"I don't have anything like that, and you know it," Mary mumbled, confused and embarrassed.

"Tomorrow I'll send one to you." He paused, and specified, "As a gift for your birthday."

"You didn't forget!" Mary beamed.

"How could I?" He squeezed her affectionately.

"Cool! But what party, and why am I going with you?"

"It's a charity party, of course." Robert winked. "You'll present your gymnastic team. I'll send a car for you. You'll receive the invitation along with the dress, and a special card so you can borrow some jewelry. The address of the store is on the back. I know you'll refuse if I try to give you the jewels as a gift, but if you keep them – I'll be happy. But if you feel uncomfortable with that idea, just return everything to the store."

"What about shoes?" she asked, excited.

"You can rent evening pumps in the same store too."

"I can easily walk and even dance like a butterfly on high heels," Mary said proudly. "I won't look like a tottering sow, you know."

"I know that only too well, sweetheart."

"How..." Mary stopped short and laughed. "I feel like a Cinderella!"

"You are..." Robert whispered, bringing his face close to her. Mary opened her lips, and their breathing intermingled. He felt her youthful energy swamp his body and she felt his power overwhelm hers.

Both instinctively released their intense hold so as to not give an inappropriate impression. The girl slid off Robert's arms like mercury, and ran to her building.

Turning, her excited body highlighted in the lighted doorway, she shouted "Good night!" blew a kiss, and closed the door behind her.

Robert laughed, tapped Jerry's shoulder, and took out a pack of cigarettes.

Jerry helped his Master with the lighter. Robert inhaled deeply, and sighed.

"Call Ron to drive to the campus," he told the guard, and when the youth had fulfilled his order, added with a sly grin on his sardonic lips. "Let's take a little walk, Jerry."

They had only walked side-by-side for a few yards when Robert broke the silence.

"You know what, Jerry, I envy you, my boy."

Amazed, the youth gazed at his Master, who continued; "You are young and handsome. Your entire life is in front of you. No girl can resist you and your boyish charm."

Jerry's expressive face clouded with that comment. Robert inhaled, hiding his smile. "You can smoke, Jerry."

The youth nodded, and he dived into his pocket, but Robert offered his own pack, a cigarette magically poking out. Robert noticed Jerry's hands were shaking as he took it, and he seemed nervous as he gulped down a lungful of smoke.

The charming nighttime breeze was gently rustling in the leaves of the trees above them. The usual sounds of the big city sounded so far away, as if from another dimension.

"Did you see the new girl in the Building C?" Robert asked suddenly.

"Which one?" Jerry grinned, relaxing.

"Fresh strawberry. Cute little blonde. She's very petite, I suppose, tiny. But a great butt and big tits for her size. Very nice." He puffed his cheeks out and blew out some fake hot air. "Looking at her angel face, it is hard to imagine she was killing innocent old people for their money! But life can change," he added with a grin. "Now my soldiers take advantage of her lovely little body, whether she likes it or not."

"I think I saw her..." Jerry thought hard. "Sorry." He smirked again. "I like shrimps on my plate, though, not in my bed."

Robert laughed, and tapped Jerry's shoulder, then they continued his walk.

*Damn*, Robert thought. *The situation is worse than I expected. I thought he liked Mary for her looks, but it seems she's not his usual type.* The following monologue confirmed his guess.

"Leggy girls are much better!" The young guard said with naïve sincerity. He paused, ashamed for a second. "Maybe it's because of my height. But when, you know, you're behind a girl, playing with her sturdy tits... And when she bends over, shapely ass, and those cute bones above her hips. Thin legs, long like streams of a waterfall..."

"Wow, Jerry!" Robert shook his head. "You're such a romantic for a bodyguard. You'll get a raise. I need to make sure that I'm keeping someone like you on board with all these extra talents."

That comment confused the youth for a second, but when he recalled Robert saying to Mary: *I am quite a romantic person*, he took this phrase as a compliment from the Master that he adored as a god. The gladdened youth felt a sweet wave of pride fill his soul, and Robert's next comments added even more fuel to the fire of his devotion.

"You are very special to me, Jerry." Robert was saying with his deep alluring voice. "For the first time someone has gone from being nobody to one of the closest of my servants in one step. I believe in you, Jerry."

"You can count on me, My Lord!" Touched to the bottom of his soul, Jerry knelt.

Robert helped him up. "I know, Jerry. I know – I can trust you."

After a mind-numbing pause, he continued to play Jerry. Sounding uncertain, he said; "You know, Jerry, all these years I've led such a tense life. Short of relaxing with whores, studying and struggling, I've had almost had no time for fun. And the weird thing is, I've never had either the time or the chance to court a girl. Then I met Mary..."

Robert saw Jerry freeze at her name.

*Ah you stupid puppy!* the proud Son of the Devil thought, making an effort to suppress his anger. *Fucking babe magnet. How dare you, you miserable youngster, even think that Mary could prefer you over me!* But when he started talking again, his voice was still soft and intimate, as befitted a heart-to-heart talk. "But for all the good that has come along with spending so much time with her, you know, Jerry, it is far from ideal. My business life is the only cover for my real activities, and I have to attend these worthless events, pointless conferences, and stupid presentations! I'm fagged out."

*Oh Master*, Jerry thought, trembling all over. *How I so understand what you are saying!*

"And now my partners are worried and angry. Last night the President of the Corporation even dared to try and threaten me!"

Jerry's mind clouded with rage. "Just say the word, My Lord," he started resolutely.

“It’s okay, Jerry, never mind!” Robert shook Jerry’s hand. “As you know, Roger, my valet, is a demon in human form. He literally kicked that stupid old man out of my apartment, but it’s not the solution to the problem!”

They almost reached the campus parking lot, and they could see Ron waiting for them next to the limousine. Robert stopped again.

“You see, what I mean?” he said forlornly. “I have no time for anything important – not even to ask your advice about how to get into Mary’s panties without ruining my official business life.”

Totally confused, the youth gazed at his Master, but Robert did not look at him, and Jerry realized that the talk was over.

“Let’s go home, guys,” Robert murmured, getting in the limousine, and a light smile was still on his serpentine lips.

## The Dress

Robert kept his word.

When she opened her eyes the next morning, the first thing that Mary noticed was a large box, wrapped beautifully in blue shiny paper, on the table beside the bed.

*Just clicked my fingers!* Mary remembered the line from the first date with Robert.

She yawned, stretched, and in an effort to prolong the pleasant feelings of surprise just a little longer, she wandered into the bathroom in readiness for a shower.

In quiet excitement, since it was her birthday, she sat in front of her mirror, and opened the box. A greeting card was on top, the invitation and the voucher for the jewelry shop – next to it. First she took the card.

The birthday card displayed a hand-drawn picture. Flying above the flame-like red digits ‘twenty-one’, a white dove held a banner with her name. Mary smiled, and looked inside. She read: “*Dear Mary, you are a big girl now. Hugs, best wishes, Robert N.*”

She adored his handwriting – so clear, legible and definitely recognizable, showing his ability and self-confidence. She kissed the birthday card, and hid it in her jewelry box.

Afterward, Mary took the invitation, looking for the date of the event.

“So I have three days to get ready,” the girl mumbled to herself.

She put the invitation into a drawer, the coupon – into her wallet, and carefully took the garment out the box. It appeared to be a light brown dress.

She had never seen a designer dress up close before. The brand name meant nothing to her, and the girl still wouldn’t have liked the color. Beige? Yuk!

Naively, she tried to find labels with the size and type of fabric, but in vain.

She shrugged her shoulders and tried to put the dress on. The design seemed very simple, and she had no problem putting it on. Mary stood up straight, tried to straighten her hair out as best she could, posing elegantly. She looked intensely at herself in the mirror.

The sight before her eyes affected her deeply. For one, she could not recognize herself, because, for two, she was admiring a princess, a fairy, a goddess! For a long time, she was only able to gaze at her reflection, feasting her eyes on this miracle.

Gradually, though, her excitement subsided.

“Not bad,” she murmured, turning around to study herself from all angles. It hugged her shapely breasts and tight tummy, and she loved the way her hips and buttocks appeared. “Fabulous! But coffee-and-cream... Hmmm.”

*It makes my skin look kind of dull,* she thought. *Better if it were green.*

She had some free time to spare, so she carefully folded the dress up, and left the campus.

From her schoolmates she had learned of an actual good dry-cleaner. Very expensive, Jewish or Italian, Mary did not remember which, for sure, but she had heard they provided an excellent service.

She found the store, a simple building with a basic all-glass facade completely out of tune with the rest of the neighborhood, and laid the dress carefully on the counter.

The venerable cleaner perched a pair of horn-rimmed glasses on the end of his long hooked nose. His eyes bored into the gown, searching, assessing.

His hands were trembling when he lifted the dress, treating it as if it were an ancient fragile vase. Mary watched with amazement how delicately he held the fabric and how hard he studied it, inch by inch. He even took out a magnifying glass, and checked the stitches.

“Wow,” he said finally. “What seems to be the problem, miss?”

“I would like to dye this dress a different color,” Mary said uncertainly.

“What?” His mad howl startled the girl.

“I... I...” Mary stuttered, carefully taking the dress and walking back towards the exit.

“Get out, you blasphemous monster!” the wild-eyed man screamed at her. “Don’t ever, EVER come here again!”

Scared to death, Mary shot outside and ran down a few blocks before she regained her senses. She looked at the gown in amazement.

*What’s the big deal?* she wondered. She looked around. *Well, it’s not the only cleaning service in town.*

Not fifty yards from where she had been somewhat brusquely evicted, she saw another cleaner, and went in.

The clerk, obviously of Chinese origin, took the dress from her, and checked it out.

“What you would like to do with it, Miss?” he asked politely.

Mary sighed with relief. A friendly face.

“I’d like to dye it bright green. Emerald-green to be precise.”

The clerk nodded. “Tomorrow after 10,” he said.

A worrying pang squeezed Mary’s heart. “Are you sure you won’t ruin it?”

The clerk nodded again. “You’ll pay nothing unless you are completely satisfied with the results.”

*That’s not exactly what I wanted to hear,* she thought, hesitant.

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She was on her way back to campus, when her cell-phone rang.

She answered, and smiled on hearing Robert’s voice.

“Happy birthday honey!” he said. “Have you received the dress?”

“Oh!” Mary’s cheeks blushed in embarrassment. “Yes. Sorry, I didn’t call!”

“How do you like it?”

“It’s magnificent!” Mary admitted. “How did you deliver it? ‘Click of the fingers’?”

“Exactly, sweetheart! I did not want anyone disturbing your beauty sleep.”

“Agh, you are considerate. What time will I see you?”

There was a pause.

“Hi Robert? Are you still there?”

“Yes, I’m still here. Look, this is why I called you, my little lamb. I have a lot of things to finish. I’m afraid until the party, I won’t be able to get any time off to see you.”

“Oh,” Mary mumbled, feeling a bitter taste into her mouth.

“But I’ll keep in touch with you, my heart.”

“Okay,” she smiled, thinking; *Maybe it’s for the best. What would have I done if he had asked me to show him the dress?*

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...Mary went to the dry-cleaning store, and handed over the receipt.

The clerk with an expression of indifference took out something green, and put it on the counter.

Mary looked down and froze with shock; it was a ghastly verdant rag, which didn’t even appear as a dress.

“You can have your money back,” the worker said calmly.

Choking, like a fish without water, Mary tried to inhale in vain; her legs went weak.

“I said, get out, you blasphemous monster!” The mighty voice thundered.

She looked at the clerk again, but to her horror, it was Robert.

He stared at her as he had before, a few times. This gaze always made her blood curdle, as if she faced a tiger, preparing to make his mortal attack.

“Thanks for ruining my gift,” he uttered with such menace that Mary fell to the floor as if she had roped down dead.

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... Covered from head to toe in a cold sweat, she sat up in bed, startled, and pressed her hand to her chest, trying to get her palpitations under control.

“My God,” she almost cried. “What have I done? What was I thinking about?”

She looked at her clock.

“It’s five in the morning,” she mumbled, falling back on the pillow. “Just a nightmare, thank God! Oh, dear Lord, don’t let it happen!” She pressed her palms to her cheeks.

Mary was not able to go back to sleep, the images of a disfigured gown were implanted in her subconscious and she could not rid herself of the flashing nightmare scenario.

She knew, what could help her to regain her self-control.

Reverting to type, she went to the gym, and worked out until the time arrived to go and cope with her dress-related Fate.

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Moving like a somnambulist, she neared the counter, and passed the receipt over. With her teeth chattering, Mary stared at the rack full of plastic bags with clothes. Her eyes ran over everything on display, but she didn’t spot a green one. Her legs couldn’t hold her up properly, and the girl leaned on the counter almost fainting with the terror of waiting.

The clerk put something in front of her. In her state of mind, Mary didn’t understand at first. She gasped, made an effort, and took the gown.

Dizzily bright green, the dress looked like it was made with real emeralds!

Mary carefully checked the whole garment. Not even the tiniest imperfection could be found! The shiny fabric shimmered brilliantly, and all Mary’s worries had immediately disappeared. She laughed with happiness, and pressed the gown to her chest.

“Do you like it?” the clerk asked, smiling at her reaction.

“It’s wonderful!” Mary mumbled, hastily taking out her wallet. Usually thrifty, that day she left generous tips, and rushed home.

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When she dashed out the elevator, she collided with Father Frank.

“Sorry,” she murmured, showing a drunk smile.

“Mister Noirson called me about the party you are going to attend,” the priest said, and the girl gazed at him. “It’s a very important event. For the first time you’ll present our team all by yourself. Come to my office, I’ll give you the promotional material.”

“Right now?” Mary wanted to try on the dress first.

“No, dear, when you have time, of course.” The priest nodded.

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In the apartment, Mary literally jumped out of her clothes, and with a broad smile, hastily put the dress on.

She sucked in a deep breath, patted the fabric against her thighs and tummy and looked in the mirror.

“Hah!” she said, satisfied. “It’s much better!”

She noticed that her color of choice showed her as less the innocent one and more the sexy young woman. It affected her likewise.

When she turned, she resembled a magic lizard. She was a goddess, but a goddess of lust. She loosened her hair and the gold mane made her look like a Nereid or mermaid.

She twirled and pirouetted enjoying the feel of her wonderful frock, so smooth and swishy against her body, so complimentary to her figure, so reflective of her joie de vivre as a young woman in love with a rich powerful sweet man like Robert. She was flushed, blushing and extremely sensitive when she finally took a breather.

“Wow!” Mary enjoyed the result of her experiment. “Watch out, party! Here I come!”

Keeping her eyes on her reflection, she took the phone, and dialed the number.

“Yes?” She heard Robert’s reserved voice and hazarded a guess.

“Are you busy?” Mary closed her eyes, desperate for her instincts to be completely wrong.

“I’m in the middle of a conference,” he answered. “Is everything all right?”

“Yes, sorry! Take care!” Mary quickly hang up, disappointed not to be able to share her excitement.

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In the accessories store another wonder was waiting for Mary.

This time she surprised herself.

She could not choose the pumps! She liked them all. Never in her life had she experienced the choice of such fabulous footwear; so comfortable, light and soft!

“I can’t even feel them,” Mary mumbled, trying on the next pair. “My Goodness! It’s like I’m barefoot! I bet I could even prance wearing them! But which ones should I take? I’m not a centipede, for God’s sake!”

The pile of the shoes on the floor became bigger, and bigger. Mary wanted to cry.

“You can take a few pairs,” the worker finally offered.

This phrase sobered Mary up. Ashamed and amazed about herself, she chose the three pairs that she liked the most, and left the store.

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As Farther Frank requested, Mary went to his office, and over the course of two hours, they discussed and browsed the orphanage’s promotional material.

Mary took a pack of brochures, and leafed through them. She adored the design.

The second page made her smile. There was an article about Noirson’s Corporation, and hot wave of excitement washed her all over when she saw the photo of her beloved Robert.

But then, with her heart in her mouth, she carefully read, and re-read a section of text.

Frowning, Mary pointed her slender well-manicured finger at a line that had grabbed her attention for rather less warming reasons than she expected from studying a brochure about good works in the community. She addressed the priest. “Look, Father.”

Frank obliged and read out loud; “I, the LORD, do all these things. Isaiah 45:7. So, Mary, what’s your point?”

“Out of context this phrase sounds as if Mister Noirson is the Lord, and it is his Corporation that the rules the world!”

Father Frank was surprised with her words.

“Mary, you did study marketing, didn’t you? The designer just abbreviated the passage to save some place. They pay by the word, you know, and every penny counts!”

He frowned at the irony of his words, picturing the sorry state of affairs with the orphanage budget. He continued, “And, anyway, it sounds okay to me.”

“Read it again,” insisted Mary. Frank sighed, shook his head and repeated it slowly. He looked at her again. “Mary, when I read it, I do *not* detect any connection between Mister Noirson...” He paused, and added, unable to hold back a smile. “However, I do understand why *you* did.”

Mary blushed, ashamed, *Oh My God, is my crush on Robert so noticeable?*

She grabbed a mouse-pad with combined logos of Noirson’s Corporation and her team, and subtly used it as a fan to try and disperse the warm feelings that had made her mouth dry and her fingers tingle.

Making a complete hash of staying cool after Father Frank’s throwaway comment, she stuttered, “Nice work!” and treated the mat like an antique dealer would a delicate Etruscan vase, studying it all over, practically holding it up to the light. “Who designed this?”

The priest was enchanted by her naive reaction.

*Not all the youth of today have lost their innocence*, he mused. “You probably know this girl. Last month she won the award in the art contest for the best sports sketch.”

“Oh, yes!” Mary beamed. “Sure, I know her! She’s a gifted girl all right. We should send her to design classes.”

“I don’t know,” Father Frank drawled, thinking. “I’m not sure we have that sort of spare money on hand at the moment.”

Drawing on another aspect of her charm, a quiet but clever line in persuasion, Mary persisted, “Father, you paid for *my* management training. Isn’t that investment paying off?”

“Yes, my child, of course it is. We are a non-profit organization with limited resources, but thanks to your skilful management we now enjoy the luxury of a successful gymnastics’ team.”

Flattered by his appreciation, Mary’s heart again pounded in her chest. Unable to press Father Frank further, in an attempt to calm herself down, she lowered her eyes, placed the mouse mat back on the desk and took a bookmark instead.

But what she observed did quite the opposite of reduce her body temperature. On one side was the information presenting the orphanage, and on the other, smiling young soldiers and the quotation from the Bible; “‘I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.’ Matthew 10:34”

*Oh, dear, here’s another example, Mary thought. This phrase has been torn from the text and now it is conveying a completely different message to the one intended originally!*

An awful suspicion struck her like a lightening bolt from the highest heavens. Her hands were trembling. Unable to breath properly, she browsed through the promotional material again.

“Oh, my!” Mary blurted. “Look at this, Father, all of this stuff contains Biblical quotations, but the context is so...”

Without looking up from an article he was speed reading, Frank sighed, “So what, Mary?”

“It is so strange, Father. What is this all about, do you think? Editorial errors or blasphemy?”

She looked intensely at the priest, who seemed totally unmoved by her concerns.

After a brief hesitation, she decided not to continue with her argument. *He obviously thinks I am being stupid and picky, maybe even paranoid. Father did read them, after all, and if he didn’t find anything strange, it’s probably only my imagination.*

She took a deep breath and exhaled gently through her nose. It was an effective trick and instantly she pacified the thought processes that were upsetting her, a good catholic girl.

However, despite her peace of mind, an unwelcome concern had quietly settled on the very bottom of her sensitive soul.

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The day had come.

From early morning Mary bustled, getting ready for the first ball of her life.

She did her make-up and hair thoroughly, as never before. Then checked the invitation, and the pack with promotional materials.

She laid down on her bed, still, relaxing in a state of meditation.

The doorbell rang at her door, which made her jump, and her heart ran fast, like a horse under starters orders. She took her purse, and opened the door.

It was Ron. He showed a polite wide smile, but when he saw Mary, his jaw dropped and his black thick moustache went up. His dark brown eyes glinted yellow like bear’s before an attack. The girl involuntarily stepped back under his gaze.

“That’s not the dress that Mister Noirson sent you?” he asked, frowning.

It was a brusque greeting, and Mary responded, shooting from the hip.

“It’s none of your business,” she answered with the same haughty voice that she liked hearing Robert use. Like an arrogant sensual queen she stalked passed by Ron. The guard had to follow her, stroking his moustache in confusion.

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Mary left the building feeling very upbeat. She was a beautiful young woman in love, dressed to kill. She enjoyed the almost fairytale opportunity to show herself off. It made her feel rather sexy

to know so many people were gazing at her, as she was regally walking toward the limousine. Jerry was there to welcome her, and he could do nothing but smile with adoration.

In fact, he couldn't tear his eyes from her décolletage. He forgot about everything except the scented vision before him. He even forgot to open the car door for her. It was a nudge in the ribs from Ron that alerted him to his negligent behavior and the young guard quickly came back to his senses.

Mary got into the car, and was struck with disappointment.

She expected to see Robert sitting patiently, smiling serenely at her, but all she had for company was the oafish Jerry. She felt him leering at her with a cheesy grin from the other side of the plush stretch limo.

"Where is Robert?" Mary asked, upset.

"He's late," answered Jerry in a great burst of energy. "Would you like to call him?"

Mary shook her head "no"; she felt offended at being stood up.

"Cool dress, señorita!" The young bodyguard winked.

"Er..." Suddenly feeling there was nothing to be gained by being miserable, she smiled and said, "Thanks!"

"Really, it's very fetching. Mister Noirson is a lucky guy."

Mary beamed with pride. Like a purring feline in heat, she stretched her leg out, showing him her pump. "How do you like it?"

He could only stare at her well-defined leg, moving from her ankle to her knee and on up. *Careful, buddy, keep it polite!* Jerry brought himself down a notch. *What a foot!* he thought. *Cinderella! What I'd give to suck these little toes!* But unable to resist looking past her knee, and physically salivating at the shape of things to come as her dress rode upwards, a little voice piped up, *Hey buddy, come on, don't even go there!*

"It's great..." Jerry mumbled. "Just fantastic."

He did not realize that her showing off was not aimed at him, he just happened to be there. He didn't even understand her next question.

"You like it?" Mary turned her foot presenting it from different sides. She was so elated to finally be able to show her luxuriant shoes off to someone. She bent forward, not thinking that Jerry could see down her décolleté and could clearly make out the full shape of her breast, almost as if they were fully exposed.

"I'm so worried that they might break," Mary said, concerned.

"What?" Jerry almost screamed. For one horrible moment he imagined her breasts were about to fall off.

"But I took another pair with me." Mary smiled. "Better safe than sorry."

*What the hell is she talking about?* Jerry thought perplexed.

Mary ran her hands over hips, rearranging her dress, which had shifted rather too far north for modesty. "What do you think, are they sturdy enough?" she continued.

Jerry only stared at her.

Mary carefully raised her leg and placed her foot on her knee. She tugged at the heel of her pump, and Jerry finally guessed that she was talking about her shoes.

Jerry's phone rang, and he answered. "Yes sir," he said into the receiver.

"Is it Robert?" Mary whispered to him. Jerry nodded and passed the phone over to her.

"Where are you?" the girl drawled with pitiful voice.

"I'm terribly sorry, my little bunny!" Robert answered. "Don't worry, I've checked, everything is ready. Just do your routine, as usual."

"I never have done it all by myself. I'm scared."

"Don't be! I believe in you, honey. You are a powerful girl, you can do it."

"But you will show up for sure?"

"Yes, I promise! I have to run, my sweetheart! See you soon!" He hung up.

Mary sighed. The limousine stopped, and Jerry helped Mary out.

She saw some reporters and they came swarming around her, taking pictures, asking for details. The bright young girl in full bloom felt like a superstar.

Her nervousness disappeared and as far as she was concerned her guards no longer existed. It was her stage only. As per instructions, she said a few sentences about the orphanage and her gymnastics team, and finished; “For more information, please visit our website.” The preliminaries dealt with, she glided up to the entrance.

Inside the building, a hostess courteously greeted Mary, and a servant showed her to a desk, where she placed her brochures along with the others. He accompanied her to the reserved place, then left.

Thoroughly, she arranged the promotional material on the table, and pinned her posters on the display stand.

A few curious guests moved in for a closer look.

Mary routinely answered all the usual questions about the team, and the orphanage and its gymnastic activities and how it benefited the kids and the community. All the while, she was distributing the promotional cards with a lovely warm smile radiating from her inspired face.

“Oh, look how adorable this rosary is!” Praised a middle-aged lady, wearing a billowing golden yellow dress. She took one of the hand-made artifacts for a closer look.

On seeing an oncoming reporter, so as not to miss a trick, she struck an elegant pose and wrote a cheque. Now the camera was forthcoming, so she showed the evidence of a generous contribution to the reporter, who then decided it was worth taking her picture before she put the cheque in the donation box.

“God Bless you!” said Mary. “Our girls are making these as part of our campaign,” she explained. “Each rosary is unique.”

“Nice, very nice.” The lady nodded. She bent toward the girl and added almost inaudibly; “Let me tell you, dear, your dress is also unique.”

“I know!” Mary smiled with pleasure, taking it as a compliment, not seeing the woman’s eyes rolling when she turned and looked disapproving at her husband. Mary’s heart was singing. Choking on the euphoria of such a positive comment, the girl slowly sucked in a deep lungful of air to regain her composure.

Soon the attention of everybody was drawn away from her to other newcomers.

“Now I can relax,” Mary mumbled, sitting down, elegantly posed on the chair.

She looked around with a burning, youthful curiosity. She had attended such parties before, but only as a performer.

*How the other half lives*, she mused, taking in the luxuriant scene.

It all seemed busier than it really was. Decorated with various plants and assorted flowers, all a differing shade of yellow, the reception area in which she was seated was surprisingly small.

Numerous sponsors’ logos were on display everywhere. Spokesmen and women gushed eloquently about what their companies were and weren’t doing to change the lot of the world’s less fortunate. It was a good advert for the organizers; everybody was winning that night.

Aside from the displays, Mary adored a small orchestra, playing soft romantic background music. The tender sounds flowed over the highbrow proceedings, adding to the impression of a fairytale.

Men in tuxedos, and women in evening dresses in assorted restrained colors were walking around, stopping at tables, sounding interested before moving on to mingle and pose. The groups of guests were flitting around like figures in a golden light brown kaleidoscope.

Suddenly, Mary noticed a thirty-something brunette in a figure-hugging neutral colored gown, staring at her, and Mary wondered; *Why such an unfriendly look?*

A man, in his sixties, stubby yet imposing and dignified came to her table. Mary stood up, and smiled friendly.

A reporter had followed him and was hovering, expectant.

The elderly man glanced at him with visible displeasure, sighed and shoved some bills into the donation box. Feeling that something was awry, Mary kept silent, holding her welcoming expression.

The reporter moved on to another group of circulating guests, and the man turned to Mary.

“Miss Jablonskaia, if I’m not mistaken?” he asked the perplexed girl, who nodded, unsure how else to reply.

“Do you know that your dating Mister Noirson could cause some trouble?” he said unexpectedly. Mary’s heart stopped for a second.

“I.. I don’t understand...” she managed to squeeze out finally.

“Too bad.” Not bothering to explain a thing, he left, and Mary’s shoulders visibly drooped under the weight of such a shock.

*What did he mean?* she was thinking, panicking. *Who is he? How does he know about us? What kind of trouble? For Robert? Oh dear God, no! Or for me? I don’t care about that. I’m not afraid.* She hesitated. *Or am I? Oh Robert, where are you? I so need your support right now...*

“Nice dress.” Mary heard an irritated female voice, and lifted her head. It was the same “gazing” lady that Mary had spotted before. Now she was standing next to the table, still drilling into the girl’s heart with obvious anger in her eyes.

“I thought it was the only one,” the lady said. “But as I remember it was taupe.”

*How does she know about the dress?* Mary wondered.

“You are right,” she answered calmly. “But you know, I can’t actually afford to buy a collection dress.”

“But your lover surely can,” the lady said, smiling. She saw Mary’s eyes widen. “So, he ordered a copy, didn’t he? Who chose that ugly color? It matches your mane about as well as an omelet goes with green onion!”

“I would never have imagined that a respectable woman like you could have such bad manners.” Mary replied, puzzled.

“Oh, cute, and while we are talking manners, look who’s talking!” The lady quietly laughed. “You’re the sophisticated one who dressed up in screaming-green on the pastel themed party! In all the invitations it said clearly about the dress code!”

Now Mary was stricken. She looked around, and to her horror she realized that the lady was absolutely right. It was like beige heaven for as far as the eye could see, and only she, Maria Jablonskaia, debutante elect, was wearing a brightly colored outfit.

“Why?” the lady continued scornfully. “Is it a rebellious streak in you, or are you just plain illiterate? If you didn’t know the meaning the word ‘pastel’, why didn’t you ask your lover? By the way, where is Robert?” Her smile remained but the tone of her voice was changing. “I guess, he’s probably ashamed to show up with such brilliant under age baby gem like you. How much are you charging him per hour for your services, by the way?”

Mary was unable to say a thing with spasm seizing her throat.

“I’m here on my own,” she barely managed to utter. “I’m not an escort, either, if that’s what you are insinuating. I am twenty-one already, and I’m here to present my team.”

“And you have done a pretty bad job of that, you poor incompetent thing,” the lady said, moving away.

Mary almost fell onto her chair. A passing waiter offered her a cocktail, and she mechanically took it.

“Are you all right?” The hostess of the event approached Mary. “Did Laura offend you? She’s a little cranky today. She badly wanted to buy a dress, the very same designer dress that you’re

wearing, in fact. But someone had already bought it. She was even ready to order a copy, just so she could be the first one to show up in it. But you trumped her plans.”

“I’m sorry, it seems to have upset her so much,” Mary mumbled, thinking; *I can only imagine their shock if they knew that it IS the original dress!*

Mary got up and smiled. “I’m okay, thank you.”

The hostess nodded and headed off to mingle and mix with some of the other guests.

“Why is such a sweet girl looking so upset?” Mary looked up and studied the speaker, a male, middle aged, not very tall, (which is what she liked in a man) thin and slender, clean-shaven, with brown hair and light blue eyes.

He browsed the orphanage’s promotional material, then looked at her with a friendly smile.

“Never mind, sorry,” Mary said politely, at the same time thinking in a less respectful way, *He’s not a wealthy person for sure. Look at his tux! I bet he rented it.*

“If I visit you on campus,” the man continued shyly. “Can I cheer you up, or is it prohibited?”  
*Oh no, poor man! Mary thought with tender pity. He likes me!*

“It’s not prohibited,” she answered softly. “But it’s pointless.”

“I’m taking that as a ‘no’. Your heart is otherwise occupied, am I right?”

“You are.”

“So, these rumors are true, I suppose,” he said, ready to leave, but Mary clutched his hand.

“Look, please! I beg you, tell me, what do you mean? I have already had a few hints blasted at me, but I want to know what’s going on!”

“Don’t you read the press?” he wondered. He took out his wallet, and blushing like a girl, showed Mary a picture. It had obviously been cut from some magazine or newspaper. Mary saw a snapshot of herself, smiling broadly. Her pose looked a little bit strange. Suddenly she guessed it was because her head was resting on Robert’s shoulder, but the man had cut him off at the neck so as to focus on her.

“Thank you,” she mumbled, returning the picture. Deep in thought she did not notice that, when the man left, another woman had descended and was standing at her table.

Redheaded, wearing a soft-orange dress, the woman resembled a vixen.

“The color suits you...” she dropped casually.

“Really?” Mary mechanically replied.

“Yeah, you look like a crocodile,” the woman hissed, keeping her polite smile fixed in position. “And as for your skin... Never heard of lotion? It works wonders. I use it on my leather handbag.”

“Say what you want,” Mary snapped back. “At least men like my skin natural.”

“Says who? Robert, or all your other clients? It’s actually funny how you think you can mean anything to him. You should see the line of poor beauties he left behind before he bagged you.”

“Perhaps, you are one of them, eh?” Mary said with nice demonstratively naïve smile.

“Do you have a problem with that?” the woman asked haughtily.

“Nope, it’s your problem, I suppose,” Mary threw the reply back in the same manner as it had been delivered.

“Stupid frog!” mumbled the redheaded as she strode away.

*What a day!* Mary thought, puffing out her cheeks. *Now I’m actually rather glad that Robert is not here at the moment. At least I get to figure out the situation for myself.*

“Oh, I expected a cat fight!” A young man, tall and athletic drew closer, and leered at Mary. “I would never have expected a monastery to be hiding such a gem. You are a real emerald. I’m simply charmed.”

“It’s not what you said the last time,” Mary retorted, catching him on the back foot. “I know you,” the girl explained, moving in for the kill. “Last month you attended an event where our team performed a show. I am the leading girl.”

“Oh, so that insignificant gymnast was you?”

His disparaging comment pulled Mary up short, temporarily. But when he made his next remark, she blushed, shocked at his words.

“Right, that explains why I didn’t recognize you now all tarted up to the nines! How lucky Mister Noirson is having such a beautiful courtesan. I can only imagine all these different ways that you’ve done the splits with Mister Noirson to get such a pretty party dress out of him.”

Despite her red cheeks, he did not intimidate Mary; she knew what he was like.

“I suggest you keep your smutty thoughts to yourself and go take a hike to the bathroom to relieve your tensions.”

“It’s not wise to talk with a potential sponsor like that,” the young man replied, frowning.

“Sponsor! Give me a break!” Mary chuckled. “Your cheque has been returned due to insufficient funds. If you don’t have money, why pretend that you do? To impress people?”

The man scurried off in silence. Mary called a waiter over and took another cocktail.

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