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MODERN
ORIENTAL TALE

PRINCESS OF
THE EAST



VIDA LAGODINA

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Аннотация

Every girl dreams of meeting a prince. But what if the prince is imposed by your family and under pressure from circumstances you are forced to marry him? A simple Russian girl, Irina, got into such a story, and was forced to marry a complete stranger in a foreign country. Will she be able to get out of the networks woven for her by the closest people? What tests will she face in an unfamiliar world on the way to happiness?

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*The future of a lazy bull is for sale to butchers.
(Arabic proverb)*

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PROLOGUE

– Ira, my dear, do not fidget! – For the hundredth time, the camera clicked in front of my face. – Keep your back straight and your chin slightly raised, in the end, through you I try to recreate the personification of the Russian aristocracy.

I laid aside a napkin, which a minute ago was lying peacefully on my lap, and burst into laughter.

– Oh, I can't! Dad, what should a Russian aristocrat do on an advertising sign of a Russian restaurant in the middle of an Arab city? Take some beautiful photos of the dishes you cook here and hang them all over the restaurant. For example, this wonderful culinary masterpiece. – I carnivore looked at the ruddy pie with berries, feeling the delicious aroma emanating from it. – Do not torture me all day. After all, I am not a model, and we are not aristocrats. In any institution, and even more so in a Russian restaurant, the main thing is soul and friendly attitude towards visitors and employees. – I tried to convey to my stubborn father.

– Well, what are you, Ira! – Mom left the kitchen in the restaurant hall, waving her hand. Her golden hair was neatly arranged in a bun, green eyes were framed by thickly colored eyelashes, and her lips were painted in bright scarlet lipstick. Despite the fact that now is still a day, she was wearing an evening gown. Her slightly plump figure did not spoil her at all, on the contrary, she was graceful. – Your father, from birth, believes

that life was unfair to him and that he deserves some kind of royal title. – Therefore, let him try to bring to you what he will never reach.

I laughed again, looked from mom to dad and saw in his blue eyes what my mom was talking about.

– You're not serious? – The answer was silence. – Okay. – I got to my feet. – I'm tired. And anyway, I have to go to collect things. I'm coming home tonight.

First I kissed my father on the cheek, and then my mother and went up to the second floor of the restaurant, where my parents and sister lived. A year ago, they left everything and decided to leave in search of a better life. Naive. They thought someone was waiting for them here. I pulled out my suitcase from under the small, worn-out bed that was allotted to me in my little sister's room for the holidays, and energetically began to pack my things in it, which I definitely would not need before leaving home. House. In Moscow, probably now everything is covered with snow or slush, and here even in winter the sun mercilessly fries.

I really want to go back to university. To my friends and lectures. No instructions from parents, worries about them and indulging their whims.

Just think... in five months everything will end and I will start a completely different life. I will become a graduate, find a job and live independently, independently of anyone and from nothing.

I love my family, but lately my love for them lasts only

a few days spent together. In the end, I am also human, and my responsiveness has a limit. I threw the last T-shirt in my suitcase and closed it, waiting for my return home.

CHAPTER 1

Three hours in traffic jams on the way to the airport, almost six hours by plane, and now two more to go in a cramped bus. I waded through the crowd to take my luggage, I feel out of place. This is not the first time I come here, but today some strange feeling does not leave me. Something is unclean here. The insistent offer of parents to visit them, paying for my trip to business class (it's good that I managed to exchange a ticket for a regular one, and I could save a little). The phone rang, and I decided that I would answer as soon as I received my luggage, which I managed to do in ten minutes. All this time my phone rang continuously. It turned out to be my father.

– Dad, the plane landed twenty minutes ago. I'll find now how to get to you and...

– Wait, dear, – he interrupted, not letting me finish the thought. – Get out of the airport and go to the main entrance. I'm waiting for you. – And disconnected.

Without understanding anything, I put the bag on my shoulder, took the suitcase by the handle and went to where my father was waiting for me. And he really was waiting for me with a wide smile on his swarthy face. His blue eyes shone today in a special way, and dark hair with gray hair on his temples developed in a warm, caressing wind. Over the past few months, he has gained a little weight (probably he was influenced by a calm,

measured life), he looked funny with a round face, and when he walked, he swayed from one side to the other.

Dad! Why did you come? I would calmly come myself! – I ended up in his strong hands and looked at him, raising his head up, as he was a little taller than me.

– I missed you too much for another two hours to think that you ride public transport. And in general, when there is such an opportunity, it must be used, – he winked, moved away, and examined me from head to toe. – Just think about it! With each visit you become more beautiful! A real Russian beauty! Do not be embarrassed. – He smiled and touched my cheek with his fingers.

– Thank you – I replied with an embarrassed smile to his compliment. – You can't argue with genes. – He smiled with satisfaction, and I looked behind him at the expensive car and the man standing next to her, arms crossed at hip level. – Who is this?

Father absentmindedly followed my gaze and smiled.

– Ah... this is our new driver Azat.

– Do you have a driver? I frowned incredulously at my father, and then at the swarthy driver who stubbornly avoided my gaze.

– Recently ... – his father began uncertainly.

– Welcome, Mrs. Irina! Let me? – In pure Russian, the driver met me and reached for my things.

– Thank you, yes, please. I answered distractedly and stood until my father led me to the car.

Once in the car, I tried to understand what was happening. My father gave vague, abstract answers to all my questions, saying that I need to be patient, and soon I will find out about everything. We drove for about an hour, first around the city, then through some small village, and finally stopped near a small stone two-story house with large windows and a balcony above the entrance.

– Well... we have arrived, – my father sighed. – Come in, dear, and now I'll settle something and come. Azat will bring your things, so don't worry.

– Where to go dad? Why did we come here and not to the restaurant?

– Go to the house, Ira, and I'll come and explain everything to you. – He answered in a soothing tone.

I got out of the car and looked around. Around the house was a small atypical garden for this area, surrounded by a low forged white fence. All this looked good, but for some reason I could not get rid of the feeling that something bad was hidden behind all this, perhaps even dangerous. Stopping in front of a beautiful white door with frosted glass and beautiful intricate patterns of colored glass, I wondered if I should knock or just go in, and I decided to knock first and then go in. Before I could close the door behind me, I immediately fell into the arms of my younger sister Alina.

– You finally arrived! How I missed you. So much has happened to us, you can't even imagine! Come on, I'll show you my cool bedroom!

– Alina, catch your breath. – Mom stopped my sister’s emotional speech, gracefully going down the wide marble staircase. – Let your sister bounce back after a long journey.

I opened my mouth to greet her, but could not say a word, shocked, looking at her elegant evening dress, embroidered with rhinestones. And this is despite the fact that now it’s only three in the afternoon! Her hair was trimmed in neat waves and emphasized her straight posture, graceful neck and high cheekbones. From her I had pale, almost transparent skin, an oval face and an hourglass-shaped figure, and from my father – my eyes and the ability to get out of any, even the most difficult situation. She kissed me on both cheeks and, like my father some time ago, examined from head to toe.

– Mom, you look ... – I tried to find the right word – great, but where did it all come from? – I once again looked expressively at her, and then looked around the house and looked out the window onto the street where my father walked to the house, giving some instructions to Azat, who was carrying my suitcase.

– Honey, let’s wait for my father, but for now... come in. But take off your shoes! she added and pointed a finger at my sandals. – I sighed heavily and obediently took off my shoes. – Alina will show your room. – Mom looked expressively at Alina, who nodded, took my hand and led me to the second floor.

On the floor were chic rugs with high fibers and intricate patterns of bright colors.

– Alina, well, at least you explain. – She smiled slyly and

I realized that I was right in my suspicions. They hit something.

– The parents themselves will tell you everything, but for now ... – She solemnly opened the wooden door and pointed her hands at the room. – She's yours!

It was difficult to call this room a bedroom. It was dark here, despite the windows and light walls. The bed was covered with a multi-colored plaid, and on the dresser stood a vase with freshly cut flowers. Trying to reassure myself that this is only a week.

– Thank you, – I looked at her and smiled weakly. At this moment, I felt a huge fatigue lying on my shoulders. Alina looked at me with her green eyes, framed by thick black eyelashes, after which she stepped towards the door. – Wait, – I called, and she stopped. I went to the dresser, where I got a vase of flowers and handed it to Alina. – Take them to yourself. I hate cut flowers.

She looked at me in bewilderment, but she took the vase.

– Good. She answered embarrassedly. – Come on, I'll show you my room. By the way, the bathroom is down the hall. I have my own bathroom in the bedroom, so we can say that this one will be your own, because the parents also have their own bathroom in the bedroom.

– Excellent ... – I muttered, following her along the long corridor, feeling a little prick of envy. Finally we stopped. Alina impatiently opened the door, and as if I got into the dollhouse. Everything was so pink and white that it caused nausea.

– Here! Design itself developed. And she chose the furniture herself. Everything is as I imagined since childhood. And what

a view from here! – she went to the opposite wall. – Look, one window overlooks the garden and the other overlooks the pool. – We have our own pool, can you imagine? At first glance, I fell in love with this house. The first few days I didn't go anywhere. I could not believe that I really live here. The school is almost across the road, but I still drive with Azat. – A smug smile appeared on her face, and I continued to try to understand what was happening here.

– When, you say, you moved here? I asked cautiously, taking a few uncertain steps toward the window. The view from it really opens beautiful.

– Uh... This... probably three months have passed. she answered embarrassedly and tried to pretend that she was interested in the pleats on her skirt.

– Three months! – I opened my eyes wide, feeling how everything in my head was throbbing with tension and indignation. – Why didn't you tell me anything?

I felt irritation, anger, resentment. I was overwhelmed with emotions, and I realized that I was ready to explode.

– Our parents wanted to surprise you. They pulled to the last. – She pouted her lips as a child and was offended as if I had been hiding a luxurious house from them for three months.

I closed my eyes, ran a hand over my face, and then abruptly turned around and quickly went to my parents, whom I found in the living room on the ground floor.

– Three months! I thundered, walked around the sofa and

stood in front of them, arms crossed over his chest. – You lived here for three months and didn't tell me anything! – Mom looked in panic at Dad, who slowly straightened up and calmly met my angry look. – When I was worried while studying, I thought about how hard it was for you, and was ready to give the last penny so that only you all would be fine, you... move to a luxurious home, hire a personal driver, buy expensive clothes! What's happening?

– Yura, I think you should tell her. – Mom put her hand on her father's hand, and he comfortably patted her hand, and then, grunting, got up from a huge soft sofa.

– You're right, Annushka. – He came to me, put his hands on his shoulders and looked into my eyes. – Honey, we haven't told you anything to make sure of everything. Our business has gone uphill. Do you know what business opportunities are here! he said with a broad smile on his face, and I narrowed my eyes. – Let's just say that we found a partner who became interested in our restaurant. He invested his money, and here we are. A dazzling smile appeared on his face, and a light lit in his eyes.

– And all this happened in a matter of months, – I concluded, arms crossed over my chest and not believing in such magic.

– Yes. – He nodded impatiently.

I sighed heavily, unable to get rid of the feeling of anxiety that gripped me.

– Good, – I was in no hurry to believe them, in any case, sooner or later I would find out the truth. – I will pretend that

I believe, but... if you are deceiving me, then know that I will be very offended.

– Well, what are you, dear! – Father squinted at mom, and then took my hands. – So! I suggest tonight to mark your graduation. You can't imagine how proud I am that I have a daughter like you! – I hugged my father, trying to suppress tears. Actually, I'm not a very emotional person, sometimes even a little callous and rude, but when you hear such words from relatives and loved ones, everything inside you turns upside down from an overabundance of feelings.

– I don't even know... is it worth the money. – Maybe we should stay home together? – I pulled away from my father and looked at my mother, who was still tense. – A simple family dinner.

– I do not accept any objections! – Father again drew my attention to himself. – More recently, a wonderful restaurant with a view of the bay has opened in the city.

My father was determined, and I had no choice but to give up.

Alina lent me one of her fashionable, expensive floor-length evening gowns (I'm afraid to imagine how much it costs), which was a little small for me, so all my (though not very) forms were covered. Despite the fact that it was closed, I felt as if I was wearing an open swimsuit.

– Honey, this color is very suitable for you. You need to buy more things in blue tones. – Mom looked at me and grunted approvingly.

– Who bought this? – She opened her eyes wide, and looked at me with an innocent look. It was evident that mom carefully selects the words.

– Please, just don't swear. Your sister and I hired a personal stylist. In fact, he helps us buy these stylish outfits.

I took a deep breath, swallowing a stream of new questions, which I am sure no one answered.

– Come on. – She took my hand and led me to the side of the restaurant, which simply shouted with all its appearance that it was very expensive.

Without further ado, we were led to a table from which we really saw a beautiful bay that had already begun to absorb the sun into its abyss.

– I ordered the best dishes! – Father proudly notified us.

– Are you sure we can afford it? – I asked, sinking into a luxurious chair upholstered in white velvet, and began to look around.

– Of course it's expensive! – He answered lightly.

The restaurant was not very many people. A waiter immediately approached us and brought a plate of fruit.

– This is a gift from the establishment, – he specified in Russian, – we wish you a wonderful evening.

– Thank you, – my father politely nodded to the young man

and fell into a businesslike manner in a chair. Just like a baron.

I looked around, amazed at the luxurious atmosphere. Never aspired to wealth, fame or greatness. I have always believed that rich people are vicious, overly powerful, do not recognize the framework and limitations. I do not understand how all this had fallen on my family. At that moment, the waiter came up and put a plate in front of me. At that moment I felt that he had knocked over a glass of water on me.

– Ah! – I blinked perplexedly and looked at my wet dress, which instantly absorbed all the water.

There was a fuss at the table, and the waiter looked at us anxiously, never ceasing to apologize. My mother ran up and handed me a napkin.

– Sorry, I do not understand how this happened. The glass slid from the tray and...

– It's okay, – I tried to smile, taking a short look at him, wiped the water from my dress and got to my feet – it's just water. I'll be back soon. – I turned to my family. – Where is the toilet? – I tried to distract the pale waiter from guilt.

– Please, – he pointed toward the bar, – I will accompany you. I nodded and turned my attention back to the family.

– Please have dinner without me. Nothing bad happened.

I smiled at the waiter, making it clear that I was ready to go.

– Once again, I'm sorry ... – along the way, the waiter tried for the hundredth time to apologize to me.

– In fact, nothing terrible happened ... – I continued to wipe

the dress on the way to the toilet, when I suddenly stumbled over my own leg and crashed into someone. – Oh, please forgive me – I looked up and saw a curious look directed at me.

– It's okay, – the man across from me was dressed in a white kandura, and despite the fact that he was certainly a purebred Arab, he spoke Russian very well. – Are you okay? – He politely asked and reluctantly looked from me to the waiter, whose pallor gave way to green. It seemed that a little more, and he would collapse unconscious.

– Yes. All is well. It will be even better if I can get into the toilet without incident. Sorry to bother you – I smiled and took a few steps to the side, breathing a sigh of relief when I saw a sign pointing to the women's toilet.

I put myself in order and returned to the hall. Neither the waiter nor the person I came across was anywhere, but my parents proved something to a man in an expensive formal suit.

– ... this is a real shame. You understand that you spoiled us an important evening! – My mother was very arrogant.

– Mrs., we apologize to you, – said the man with an Arabic accent. I think this is a manager, or possibly an owner. At least this can be judged by its impeccable appearance.

– What's going on here? – I asked frivolously, returning to my place and looking around all those present. – Mom, who dared ruin your evening?

She rolled her eyes, showing with her whole appearance that I did not notice the obvious.

– The waiter! He ruined the expensive dress, caused you inconvenience and in general, what kind of service?

I took a deep breath and looked at the man, who began to noticeably nervous.

– I beg you, do not pay attention. We have absolutely no complaints about you. All is well. Thank. – I smiled and looked at my family, watching with lateral vision, as a man, after some hesitation, still decided to eliminate himself before we changed our minds. – Why arrange this show?

– We deserve at least a drop of respect! – Mom looked at me offended.

– Mom, nobody owes you anything here! We are guests in this country.

– Actually the opposite ... – she stopped, and I raised my eyebrows inquiringly, waiting for the continuation. – Okay, let's have dinner already.

I exhaled exasperatedly, realizing that being here was starting to depress me.

CHAPTER 2

– Will someone explain to me where this all came from? – I was losing my patience as I looked around the huge hall of my parents' new restaurant, which was getting ready for opening three days later (which I only found out a few hours ago!). – Where did the old restaurant go? Where did the new come from? What's going on here? Did you get a loan? Contact the mafia? I do not know what to think.

My father stood opposite me and patiently waited for me to tell him all my questions. No replies were received. I took a deep breath and ran a hand over my face.

– Ira, sit down. You need to cool down a bit.

He tried to take my hand, but I lifted it up, looked at him angrily and ran out of the restaurant, hoping to recover, but there was unreal heat on the street and many passers-by. Inhaling the hot air, I closed my eyes, trying to understand what was happening. I do not understand what they are hiding from me. I felt that something was wrong with them, but now I am finally convinced of this.

I stood with my eyes closed, exposing my face to the sun, wanting it to burn all the questions in my head and energize me so that I could calmly understand what was happening. I will not be able to leave my family, knowing that they are hiding something important from me.

– Sorry? Are you okay? I sharply opened my eyes, meeting curious eyes the color of molten chocolate framed by thick black eyelashes.

– Yes, everything is fine – sharper than I wanted, I replied. – If you are in a restaurant, then it is still closed!

I defiantly turned around, not giving the stranger the opportunity to answer, and almost lost my balance, but still managed to confidently enter the restaurant. There was no one in the hall. I grabbed a towel, and, not understanding who I was specifically angry at, I began to wipe the glasses more than necessary. In less than a minute, the door opened, letting in a stream of hot air.

– Excuse me, can I see Yuri Sergeevich? – I turned to the sound of the voice, having the opportunity to see the visitor.

A young man in an expensive suit of dark blue is most likely sewn to order, since for such a height (two meters, no less) it is almost impossible to find at least something from the clothes in an ordinary store, and even so that she was sitting strictly in shape. Black hair, dark skin, which stands out against the background of a dazzling white shirt. The serious eyes that looked at me a minute ago on the street. A strict facial expression indicating that I am facing a person who occupies a high position in society.

– I can find out the reason why you are looking for Yuri Sergeevich? – the man smiled slightly, not taking his eyes off me.

– This is about our contract. Tell him that Mr. Ali has come. – an expression appeared in his eyes, as if his name should tell me something. – He will understand.

Without taking my eyes off him, I thundered the glass onto the table, and next to it I threw a rag, turned sharply, and headed for the kitchen.

– Mr. Ali, you see. I found an errand girl. – I continued to walk, gripped by incomprehensible anger. My father was not in the kitchen, and I had to go through all the rooms that I knew, fortunately, I found him in office.

– Dad? Are you here? – I stuck my head in the door.

Father adjusted his glasses on his nose and looked at me, and then returned to the papers on the table.

– Yes, come in. His eyes ran along the lines on paper, and his lips were pursed, which meant that he was thinking deeply about something.

– Some Mr. Ali is looking for you there, – I specifically emphasized the last two words.

Father froze, and then abruptly jumped up, dropping the papers onto the table, started rushing about the room and finally ran out of the office, as if they had burned him with boiling water. What, after all, is happening here? With every minute spent here, I notice more and more oddities. Following my father into the restaurant hall, I watched him rush to Mr. Ali to shake hands and begin to explain something energetically to him. I went to the table closest to them and began to straighten the tablecloth

to hear at least something from what they were talking about.

– ...of course! As you wish!

– I don't think that now is the right time for this, but tomorrow I'll think it's just right – Mr. Ali looked behind my father's back, meeting my gaze.

I was noticed, and I had to move away from them, but I saw how my father looked in panic at the interlocutor, who shook his head and began to say something. My father's ears turned red. It was noticeable that he was nervous, which happened to him extremely rarely. For some time they continued to speak, after which Mr. Ali left.

Despite the fact that I am completely unfamiliar with this person, he evokes in me not very pleasant feelings. Something is unclean here. I wonder if you can hate a person at first sight?

– Girls! My dear, beautiful girls! – Father literally sang every word. Seconds after Mr. Ali left, his panic and nervousness gave way to joyful excitement.

– What? What happened? – Mom left the kitchen and ran up (if you can call it that, given her narrow evening dress) to her father.

– Sit down! Where is Alina? Oh good! Then we'll tell her everything. Ira, come to us. – He sat us at the same table and began tapping his fingers on it. – In general, tomorrow the whole family is going to a royal reception!

There was silence, explained by numbness and shock, after which the mother cried out and threw herself on her father's

neck.

– Indeed? – father nodded vigorously. – Finally, I have a worthy occasion to demonstrate my evening dress! Oh, you need to call the salon to get us all tomorrow, otherwise Ira looks like she was plowed for a month without stopping.

– Royal what? – I stuttered from shock, I asked. You are crazy? Or are you kidding me?

– We are going to dinner with the king and his family. Tomorrow at seven in the evening. So get ready and behave yourself! Especially you, Ira. – Father poked me with his crooked short finger. – You don't live here, so you know little, but nothing... I'll get you up to speed, but now think about looking perfect.

– Dad, can you hear yourself? – I got to my feet, waving my arms. – Which king? What is the reception? Where are we and where is the royal family? – I took a deep breath, trying to calm my heartbeat. – I will not leave this place until you explain to me what is happening here, – I calmly but firmly told them.

Parents looked at each other and returned to their places, and I continued to stand in front of them, arms crossed on my chest.

– We asked for cash assistance from the government of the emirate, and His Majesty Sheikh Amir did not refuse us. – I slowly sat down on a chair, not taking my eyes off my parents. I knew that all this is not just, and, of course, there will be consequences.

– Why on earth should the king of this country help

foreigners? I said a little discouraged. “What should you give him in return?”

– We... will return them by installments. – Father answered as if he had borrowed from old friends. – He has a lot of money, so he does not mind. – He looked like nothing terrible had happened. There was silence, which the father first decided to break. – By the way, dear... this month the airport is crowded, so tickets are almost impossible to buy. That’s what I thought about ... – he hesitated, and I frowned, not understanding how he could change the subject so suddenly. – I will be near the airport today, so I can reserve you a place, only you... give me your documents.

– How is this related? – From the very first day when I arrived here, I did not stop being angry. – Reception, tickets, documents. – I got to my feet, rummaged in my bag, took out a folder with documents and handed it to my father, and then started looking for a bank card.

– No money needed! – He jumped to his feet, grabbed a purse of money from my hands to close it and return it back to the bag. – I can pay for my daughter’s ticket, so relax and enjoy your stay here.

“I doubt that I will succeed” – I thought, and returned to the table.

Royal welcome. As if I’m now in the 17th, and not in the 21st century. Who invented this and why should I go there? To these two questions, unlike hundreds of others, I received

a clear answer. The reception is held in honor of the prince, and I need to be there to "... at least somehow express my respect and gratitude for the invaluable help provided to my family." With these words, my father took me to sleep last night.

In the morning, my mother did not leave the room, trying to put herself in order (a hairdresser, make-up artist and stylist came to her) in order to prepare, according to her, "for the most important event in her life." And where did my normal life go? How I want to return to Moscow! There, probably, my faithful friend Romka is waiting for me, not to mention my roommate, and my best friend Lerka. Yes, and it's time to look for a job already, it's not in vain that I studied linguist for five years. Lera promised to speak with a friend at a language school and arrange an interview for me. Ah, Lerka! My dear friend. I wonder how are you there? I quickly type her message and go to the shower.

To: Lerusic

"My dear friend, how are you? What's new?"

In the shower under a stream of hot water I try to relax, but nothing works. Thoughts constantly swarm in my head, and tension and irritation do not leave me. The main thing is to survive this evening, in a few days I will return home, and everything will fall into place. I quickly wrap myself in a bath towel and go from the shower to my room and see a message from a friend that becomes a balm on my soul.

From: Lerusik

"Oh hello slippers! How are you? I'm doing fine, but without

you at home green longing!”

“Oh, beauty, not slippers. Stupid auto fix.” ²

I laugh and quickly type in an answer in which I say that I miss you too and will return home soon. The next two hours I spend on styling, and as a result: perfect curls, collected in a careless beam on the right side, restrained natural makeup and miniature silver earrings with transparent artificial stones that perfectly complement my evening long dress from flowing black satin with lace top and long sleeves. Take a deep breath and put my feet in plain leather ballet flats.

– Darling, we should already leave. – Dad knocked on my door several times, after which it became quiet. I took a deep breath, looked at myself in the mirror for the last time and left the room. My whole family was waiting for me in the living room. Dad was dressed in an expensive tuxedo (he even bothered to tie a bow tie, which is strange, given how he always reacted negatively to such things), mom was dressed in a milk-colored silk evening dress, floor-length, and Alina looked amazing in an emerald dress, emphasizing her green eyes and blond hair, burnt out in the sun.

– My gorgeous girls. Real diamonds! – exclaimed the father.

Together we went out into the street where Azat was waiting for us, got into a car and drove in an unknown direction to me.

CHAPTER 3

Royal residence. Just two words, but they cover several hectares of vast expanses with many security guards in civilian clothes, policemen and people in uniform, whose appointment I do not know, as well as hundreds of workers in the fields and plantations.

After two hours spent on an endless road, we finally drove up to a huge, though not not huge, but a gigantic house, which was made of yellow building material, which looked like neither brick nor stone, but in at the same time it looked amazing. Large wooden windows, tall dark wood doors with golden handles and a chic garden, divided into several levels in front of the house. Everything just screamed that His Majesty the Emir of the Emirate lives here.

Hundreds of steps led to the main entrance. When we approached the large double door, a young man appeared in front of us, who politely invited us to go inside, turning to my father and avoiding looking at us. First came father, and then mom and my sister. I was not left with the idea that I would be disgraced, would do something wrong or say something wrong. We walked along a long hall, paved with marble, to a huge hall, where there was a laid dark oak table with a light expensive tablecloth. The chandelier majestically occupied the central part on the high ceiling... a huge crystal chandelier, and the floor was covered

with a chic colored carpet. Seeing all this luxury, I realized what exactly my parents are involved in. They really collaborate with the king. My stomach clenched nervously, and I felt nauseous. I need to do something urgently.

An elderly, bearded man of medium height and strong physique, as far as could be judged from under his white candura, was approaching us with smooth, unhurried steps. He radiated confidence, strength and something else, why he liked him at first sight, perhaps reliability or it was just an illusion. He and my father greeted each other with a strong handshake, and then my father began to introduce us one by one. And then I noticed behind the king the same stranger who I did not like at first sight. What was his name? La... Ma... Ah... Ali! Next to him was a woman dressed in a traditional colored dress with long sleeves, and her head was covered with a thin scarf.

– His Majesty Sheikh Amir, – the father solemnly began, – let me introduce you to my family. My wife Anna Arkadyevna, – they greeted each other with a simple nod and a slight smile – my eldest daughter Irina, – I tried to squeeze out at least some kind of smile, because I was on the verge of fainting – and my youngest daughter Alina.

– Welcome! – Almost in perfect Russian, the Arab sheikh greeted us, looking at my parents, my sister, and then longer than necessary, he looked at me intently. – Let me introduce you to my eldest son. He turned back a little, and his expression instantly softened. – Crown Prince of the Emirate Sheikh Ali Ibn Amir

Al Azar.

I blinked several times, feeling all the air instantly evaporate from my lungs. It can't be!

– I am very pleased to meet your wonderful family, – a smile appeared on his face. Our views met, and when I got out of the stupor a little, I felt that I was blushing with my whole body, remembering how rude I had behaved with him.

– My youngest son, unfortunately, could not join us today, but I am sure that next time you will definitely meet. – The Ruler of Emir intervened in my thoughts.

Next? Oh, no... no way in the world.

We were invited to the table, and I managed to get a little distracted from gloomy thoughts. On the way here, I thought that besides us there would still be invited people, but we were the only guests in this house. I sat between my mother and Alina, directly opposite the prince, who had been shamelessly looking at me for the past few minutes.

– Tell me, Irina, how do you like our city? Does everything suit you? – I blinked in confusion and did not immediately realize that the question of the Arab prince was addressed to me.

– Hmm... everything is fine, at least as far as I can tell. I do not spend much time in the city. In the end, I came here to spend time with my family. – I restrained smiled at Mr. Ali.

– Our Ira is a homebody. From home to teach and vice versa – dad looked at me either with chagrin or sadness.

I took a deep breath, swallowed nervously, and looked at

Sheikh Amir.

– So far I have been given such an opportunity ... – I straightened up, meeting my eyes with the king. – I would like to thank you for helping my family. This is very ... – I tried to find the words – generously on your part.

– Do not mention it! – Amir smiled. – We are always happy to help with what we can. – I smiled back at him. – True, in return we expect the same responsiveness.

He looked expressively at me with his dark eyes, and his lips curved in a grin that I could not figure out.

The rest of the evening we spent on a light conversation. Amir dedicated us a little to the history of his family, asked me about the latest weather changes in Moscow, and I shared my opinion about their house, which was terribly chic.

– I think we will meet again soon. – Amir looked expressively at me, holding out a hand, which I willingly accepted.

– With pleasure, but... after the opening of the restaurant I will be forced to return to Moscow. Ali, standing behind his father, grinned, raising his eyebrows in surprise.

– Ah! I almost forgot. It's good that Ira said about the restaurant. – Dad reached into the inside pocket of his jacket. – Here is an invitation to open.

He handed a few envelopes, and then we said goodbye and drove home.

– Well, how do you like the royal family? my father asked me as soon as we were in the car. I took a deep breath and thought.

– I don't know... at first I was scared, then I was surprised that talking with them can be so easy and maybe even enjoyable, but who is this woman? She sat at the table with us, but did not say a word, and she was not introduced to us at all.

– This is the king's wife. She is not allowed to communicate with strangers, and we are strangers for them so far.

What an unfamiliar, strange life, far from my understanding. I looked out the window and lost in thought.

CHAPTER 4

I do not know how, but today I became the central person of the day. Opening a restaurant in just a couple of hours, and I still have so much to do.

– Ira, let me help you, – Alina took a vase with white peonies from my hands. – You spend all day today on your feet.

I walked past her, kissing the top of my head.

– What would I do without you, my flower?

She smiled shyly, and I went to the next table to check the availability of cutlery when my phone rang. I rushed to the bar to answer.

– Romka! Hello! – I felt boundless joy at the fact that he decided to call me.

– Hi, a splinter! Where are you lost? – His voice was cheerful as always.

– Please forgive me. So much has happened here. I will come tomorrow and tell you everything!

– Are you on vacation or are they always working for you there? – He asked mockingly.

– Almost, – I laughed nervously, – but I'm pleased. Everything is getting better, Romka! Till tomorrow. Love you!

We say goodbye, I put the phone on the counter, turn to the entrance and freeze in horror.

– Good evening! – Sheikh Ali stood in front of me in person.

Yes, not just standing, but holding a huge basket with white roses.

– G... good evening, – I answered stuttering, which made him grin. He came up to me with a confident step and solemnly handed the basket.

– Congratulations on the opening of the restaurant. I hope he brings you happiness.

His voice was pleasant, but something in his words alarmed me. They sounded somehow ambiguous.

– Thank! I thanked, accepting the flowers. Something came from this prince, which made me nervous. – We are not open yet, but if you want, I will make you coffee. – For some reason, it seemed to me that my question sounds stupid. – Are the princes drinking coffee? – He raised his eyebrows in surprise and with a slight smile on his face nodded his head. – By the way, which one?

– Black without sugar. – He sat on the bar stool and watched me very carefully. – I do not think that I am different from other people.

I filled the coffee machine and looked at him point blank. It seems that he seriously does not understand how our position differs from each other.

– You know very well that you are different. – I put a cup in front of him and slowly poured coffee into it. – Do you want a cake?

– No thanks. Today I will take only coffee, but ... – now he looked at me point blank – I want to use my right to cake in the

future. – a smile appeared on his face, and an incomprehensible brilliance in his eyes.

– I think this should not be a problem. – We crossed eyes, and again I felt something close to irritation. An inner voice told me to stay away from him.

Ira, where are you? The guests will come any minute, but here we have... Ali – there was a real surprise on the face of my mother – that is, Hello, Your Highness. She reached out and smiled at him with the friendliest smile. I got to my feet to continue working, but my mother stopped me, grabbing my arm. – Stay with Mr. Ali, and I will do the business myself.

– You? Herself? – I looked at her suspiciously. Mom was one of those people who could only give orders and monitor their implementation.

– Yes. – Once again, honoring our guest with a smile, she retired from the hall. All this time, Ali looked at us with undisguised interest. I ran a hand over my face and returned to the bar.

– More coffee? – I asked him without looking up.

– Not. – He got to his feet. “I think you have enough worries without me,” he examined me from head to toe (as far as the bar between us allowed). He held his gaze before my eyes, and then turned and headed for the exit.

– Your Highness! – He raised an eyebrow in surprise, turning to face me. “I don’t know how appropriate my question is, but... when my parents and I were going to see you, my father said that

he would be arranged in your honor, but... there was nobody else besides us.” Can I find out the reason you personally invited my family?

He pondered something for a while, and then looked at me point blank. He seemed somewhat excited, but tried his best to hide it.

– This technique was as yours as mine. See you later. – He turned sharply and went out, completely confusing me in everything that is happening here.

CHAPTER 5

– Honey, where are you in such a hurry? Stay a few more days. Your training is finished, you have not found a job, just enjoy the freedom.

Mom dreamily watched as I collect my things.

– No thanks. Such a life is not for me. – I sighed heavily, unable to stay here longer than necessary. This place depresses me. – I want to work. Perhaps I will continue to study. In general, I want to go home... – I closed the suitcase and not without difficulty lowered it from the bed to the floor. – I'm not comfortable here. As if something is about to happen. – I walked closer to her and put my palms on her shoulders. – Please be careful and take care of each other, okay? – She nodded. – I know that now you are in euphoria from all the changes that have occurred, but... remember that sooner or later you will have to pay for everything that you now have. Try not to put off and pay off your debt as quickly as possible. It is not known what the consequences may be. She averted her eyes and pursed her lips, trying to hold back her tears.

– Don't worry about us. – The main thing, be careful, okay? And forgive us for everything. – She hugged me around the waist and tightly pressed me to her.

An hour later, I stood in line at the airport reception. It was my turn, and I handed the passport to a cute petite girl at the

counter. She began to actively print something on her computer, but I could only wait.

– Sorry, but your passport isn't valid. – I don't immediately understand that they are turning to me. ³

– Pardon? It can't be. ⁴

– I'm afraid you'll have to wait.– She took my passport and went off somewhere. I do not understand anything. How is this even possible? Now I am in such an absurd situation. My passport is valid for two more years. I check everything before every trip abroad. The girl returned to me with frightened eyes. – Are there any problems? The last time everything was in order, I ... ^{5 5}

– Please, come with me. ⁶

At that moment, two men in uniform approached me. I looked at them, not understanding what was happening.

– Allow me to take your luggage. – In imperfect, but still Russian, one of them turned to me.

– Sorry, but will someone explain to me what is going on here?

– They will tell you everything, but for this you need to come with us. – He took my suitcase and pointed to the reception desk, behind which was a service door.

They put me in one of the offices and made me wait. There were long minutes of waiting, but I still did not know what was happening. No one said anything, they just looked at me with alarm, thinking that I did not notice it. I do not know how much time has passed, but one of the men who accompanied me here

entered. The receptionist girl who started it all looked at me uncertainly.

– A car came for you, – the man began, looking away to the side, – our employee will guide you. Your suitcase is already there.

– What car? I have a flight to Moscow!

– I'm afraid this is impossible, because you are forbidden to leave the Emirate. – I looked at them in shock, feeling how my legs gave way, my head was spinning, and I slowly lowered myself into a chair.

– How is it... how is it forbidden? Who forbade?

I do not understand anything. It just can't be.

– Sorry, but I'm not allowed to talk about this. – He shifted from foot to foot, nervously fingering his fingers. – You just need to get to the car, and then you will know everything.

On numb legs, I slowly got up from my seat and followed the girl to the service exit, where a black minibus shone in the merciless sun.

– Good afternoon, Miss Mironova. Please come in. – A man of about thirty-five with a thick beard on a dark face pointed to the open car door.

– Who you are? – I crossed my arms over my chest, trying not to lose my temper. I was scared. – What do you want from me?

– You can trust me. You have nothing to fear. – a slight smile appeared on his face.

– Why should I believe you?

– You simply have no other election, – he declared, and my shoulders dropped.

I looked around, noticing that I had little chance of escaping. Behind two guards, and my interlocutor is not from frail. This person seems to be right, and I really have no other choice.

I climbed into the car and collapsed powerlessly into a leather chair. I think I'm sleeping and I can't wake up.

– The mini fridge has chilled water and some food.

I closed my eyes, taking a deep breath. Opening the refrigerator, I took out a bottle of water. I need to somehow come to my senses, start thinking rationally. This is the only thing I did well until recently. I take a few sips of refreshing water (even simple water tastes different here) and feel the coolness flowing through my body, bringing peace and relaxation. I hope that soon everything will become clear, and I will be able to return home.

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CHAPTER 6

Haze... it's everywhere. I swim in soft warm water, a light sea wind blows on me, and above me is a starry sky that fascinates with its beauty, unknown and boundless. How long I have not been so easy and good.

– Are you sure she will be fine?

– Yes, it is a harmless remedy.

– I know, but... six hours have passed, and she still hasn't woken up.

– Don't worry, sir. The dose was small. Perhaps due to the stress experienced, she cannot wake up. The body also needs rest.

– Yes... let her rest; she has too many shocks ahead.

I slowly open my eyes and don't understand where I am. Around it is dark and quiet. Parents, airport, reception, office, car and... I don't remember anything. Where am I and what is happening? I close my eyes and fall asleep again.

The next time I wake up, the sun is shining on the street, and a headache, panic, fear and powerlessness fall upon me immediately. How did I get here? Where and with whom am I? I sit in bed and slowly inspect the room. A large bed of dark

wood, on the opposite wall there is a sofa covered with a beautiful oriental-style bedspread, in front of which there is a small coffee table, matching the style of the bed. A double glass door to the balcony is open, which makes the thick dark curtains move.

The door lock came to life, and I scaredly covered myself with a blanket, despite the fact that I was wearing my own clothes. A moment later, a very young girl appeared in front of me in a scarf and dress covering her entire body except her face, with a tray in her hands.

– Good morning, miss, – she greeted me, although not in perfect, but in Russian, deliberately avoiding looking at me.

– Who are you? Where I am?

She carefully lowered the tray onto the nightstand next to me and glanced briefly at me, hiding her smile.

– I am your personal assistant in all matters related to you and this house. I was instructed to help you prepare and take you to the owner of this house.

My heart was beating in my chest. Did I get to the local mafia? Have I been taken into slavery?

– Ho... how will you cook me? – I asked in dismay, clearing my throat and trying to keep my voice as even as possible.

– Calm down first, miss. No one will harm you. – She went around the bed and went into the next room, and after a moment she pulled out my chiffon dress in a small flower, which I bought before I went to my parents. My parents! I hope that everything is fine with them, and they are looking for me. – I think it will be

just right. Moderately open and at the same time modest. – She laid the dress on the bed, and returned to me. – I didn't know what you prefer for breakfast, so I brought only a little.

I looked suspiciously at the tray from which the delicious smells came, and then looked at my “assistant”.

– I need to wash my face.

– Oh yeah! Of course. Sorry. The bathroom is here. – She went to the opposite end of the room and opened the door. – It has everything you might need, but if you want something, you just need to let me know. – She went to the next door, which she had entered a few minutes ago. – I will come after you in 20 minutes.

She went out, leaving me looking perplexed at the dress lying on the second half of the bed. And again, I have no choice but to obey the circumstances. I got to my feet, struggling with dizziness and feeling dry in my mouth. Looking at the tray, I realized that I was hungry, but I was not going to eat anything, since it was not known from whose hands they were offering me food. Gradually I got to the door, from which my dress was taken out for several minutes and exhaled in shock. In several rows, various dresses, skirts, blouses and suits were having fun. Downstairs, on the shelves, there were a huge amount of different shoes, and my suitcase was in the corner. I ran my eyes through the hangers and stumbled upon a small island on which my things were fun. How is this possible?

I looked around for my handbag, but it was nowhere to be

found. It seems that everything is planned in advance and thought out to the smallest detail. When I reached the bathroom, I breathed a sigh of relief. There was nothing golden or screaming, otherwise I would have thought that I was in the house of an Arab sheikh. A small mirror above the sink, a large white bathtub covered with the same white and brown mosaic as the floor and walls, a transparent glass shower and toilet in the far corner of the room.

Looking at myself in the mirror, I could not resist a groan. Tangled hair, puffy and reddened eyes, an unhealthy flush on the cheeks. Several times I sprayed water on my face, opened the closet next to the sink and took out one of the many towels, found a new toothbrush and comb. Opening the second door, I found a huge number of cans of different colors, among which were shower gels, conditioners, shampoos, lotions and other body care products.

I washed, combed my hair and returned to the room to put on the dress chosen by my “assistant”. Looking at myself in a large mirror, I saw fear and loss on my face. To feel the light breeze from the balcony, I opened the curtains, closed my eyes from the bright sunlight and hesitantly stepped onto the granite balcony, from which a beautiful view of the green garden with a large round fountain in the center and a smooth lawn opened. He was perfect, but something was missing in him, maybe they looked after him, but they did not put his soul into him.

– Miss, please come with me. – I flinched in surprise, turning

to the sound of my voice.

The girl hesitantly shifted from foot to foot. I took a deep breath, squared my shoulders and followed her to the door of the room. Well, the time has come for truth. It's time to find out everything that happens here. We walked along a wide, long corridor that looked more like an art gallery. We turned left, climbed the stairs one more floor, then went through several doors, and with every step my heart beat faster. Finally we stopped in front of a massive dark door. My assistant knocked, a few moments later opened the door and, with her head bowed, indicated to me that I could enter.

CHAPTER 7

He stood with his back to me with his hands behind his back. Still not seeing his face, I knew who he was (not often in life you meet such people).

– Good morning, – he addressed me with a benevolent smile on his face and wariness in his eyes, – I hope you had a good night’s sleep.

– Why am I here now? And by the way, where exactly am I? – I crossed my arms over my chest to feel confident.

– Have a seat. – He pointed me to one of the soft black armchairs facing the massive table and separated by a small dark coffee table. “I think our conversation will drag on.”

Without taking my eyes off him, I slowly sank down to the place that was offered to me.

– You did not answer my question. How did I get here? – He grinned, walked around the table and sat across from me.

– My driver brought you. You are in my house.

I closed my eyes, dimly recalling how it all began.

– I wanted to fly home, but... at the airport they said that I was forbidden to leave your country. What does it mean? – I looked at him demandingly, noting what expressive eyes he had and how impudently he was looking at me with them.

– Right. You will have to stay with us for a while. – I froze in shock, not knowing how to react to his words.

– I don't understand anything... can you explain to me why I am here with you, and not with my parents, for example? And anyway, for what reason have I been banned from crossing the border? I have done nothing to facilitate this.

– You are my guest. – He openly laughed at me. Interestingly, according to their laws, what punishment will they give me if I beat the Crown Prince of the Emirate?

– It turns out interesting ... – I sat comfortably in an armchair and slowly put my hands on the armrests – do you first euthanize all your guests and then steal them? Does the standard prompt no longer work? Or are you still using barbaric methods here?

He smiled broadly at me and licked his lips, looking into my eyes.

– And it turns out that you have a sharp tongue.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

– You are laughing at me? – With each inhalation and exhalation, the tension in the room increased, but, despite this, the prince continued to smile. “Why are you smiling all the time?” I threw up in exasperation, to which he pursed his lips and thought about something.

– For a few days you will be a guest in this house.

– How long will these few days be?

– Until I solve some issues.

– Saying that I will be your guest, you mean – I will be your captive?

– No, – he shook his head, running his fingers over his plump

lips, trying to suppress a smile and continuing to study me with a thoughtful look, – I said what I wanted to say.

– And how do you think the guest differs from the captive?

He sighed heavily, reflecting on my question.

– The house is completely at your disposal. If you need anything, you can tell Samira.

– Samira? – He nodded, continuing to look at me, which was terribly annoying.

– To your assistant, who accompanied you here. You can look around the house, take a walk in the garden, read or watch TV in the relaxation room, but there is one invariable rule – I raised an eyebrow inquiringly – you should go downstairs for dinner at seven o'clock. Samira kindly guides you to the dining room

Wow, like a monster from a fairy tale. I got to my feet, restraining myself with all my might so as not to pounce on this annoyingly calm prince. After taking a few steps toward the door, I turned around and looked at him point blank.

– Have I broken the law in your country?

My question surprised him.

– As far as I know, no. – He answered with a shrug.

– Then why can't I go home? – Is a short pause during which our eye contact did not interrupt.

– Because I want so. – I blinked in confusion, and he pretended to say nothing unusual. – Have a nice day, Miss Mironova.

I left the office, leaning back against the wall and feeling how

all the cells of my body relax.

– Miss, is everything all right with you? – Samira quickly approached me, who, as it turned out, had been waiting all this time for me under the door.

– Yes, just ... – I looked into her frightened face – everything is fine. – This look. She looks at me as frightened as the airport staff when they found out who I was. – I need to go to the bedroom.

– Yes, well, miss, I will accompany you. – I nodded and tried to take a few steps, but then I felt dizzy, because of which I had to stop, leaning again on the wall.

– Miss?

– I'm fine, – I tried to focus my eyes on her. – Do not worry.

– If you will allow? She reached out to hold me under her elbow, and I nodded in agreement. “Have you already had breakfast?” I shook my head. “I knew that at first it was necessary to clarify what exactly you want.”

– No, – I tried to smile. – This has nothing to do with it.

– As soon as we get to the room, I will bring you lunch.

The thought of food made me sick. And how did it happen that I participated in all this? We got to the room, and Samira helped me to bed, and then disappeared. I lay for a long time and could not recover. My brain was seething with a huge number of questions, none of which I had an answer or, at least, guesses. I was distracted by a short knock on the door, and then Samira appeared with a tray in his hands.

– I was instructed to make sure you at least eat something.

– Samira, I suggest you stop talking to me on “You”, okay?

Just call me by name. You are not much younger than me. How old are you?

– Eighteen ... – she answered uncertainly.

– Well, I’m twenty-four years old, so just call me Irina, okay?

– What are you, miss! – The fright in her eyes was sincere. –

I cant. It’s impossible!

She put the tray on the stand and lowered her head.

– Look, – I sat, inviting her to sit next to me. She furtively looked at me. Her embarrassment was clearly written on her face, but she could not refuse me – it seems that I was stuck here for a while, so... it would be better if we did not complicate anything, okay? She nodded, staring at the floor. – By the way, you don’t know what I’m doing here?

– No, – she shook her head vigorously, – this is known only to Allah and... to our master.

– Your master... if he is not good, does not tell me anything, – I said with irritation, which made Samira smile. – Or do you know something?

The smile instantly disappeared from her face, and she shook her head again.

– It’s just... nobody ever talked about Mr. Ali like you did – she tried unsuccessfully to suppress a smile.

– Yes, I’ll see you have strange laws here.

– But not for us, – she reached for the tray and laid it on my

lap, opening the lid, under which there was a plate, presumably with soup, from which an unreal tasty aroma came. My stomach rumbled.

– By the way, Samira, why don't you look at me? – I took a spoon and started to eat. Spicy, but no less tasty.

– It's so customary with us. The position you occupy ... – she stopped, – in general, I have no right to look at you for longer than a few seconds.

I put down the spoon, chewing on what I had already managed to put in my mouth, and looked at it, touching her hand.

– Listen... I understand. Traditions, customs, customs, but... I am different, and you can behave with me freely, I will not run to inform the prince, king or anyone else. – I started eating again. – Be my friend here, otherwise I will go crazy, waiting for departure home. Oh, how I want to go home if you only knew! Do you happen to know where my bag is?

– No, – she answered quickly, – I don't know anything. I was only told to help you adapt here.

During the conversation, I did not notice how I ate everything that was on the tray.

– Thank you very much! It was wonderful.

Samira took the tray from my lap and put it on the stand.

– I will convey your gratitude to the cook. – He will be glad. – I nodded. – You should rest a bit, otherwise you would look tired.

– Thanks for the compliment. – I smiled when she saw how frightened she was.

– I'm not... sorry.

– You have nothing to ask for forgiveness for. I joked this unsuccessfully.

An embarrassed girl went out the door, and I lay on soft comfortable pillows, covering my chin with a light blanket. Delicious, satisfying food did its job, and I fell asleep again.

CHAPTER 8

I woke up from a demanding knock on the door. It turned out that I overslept for more than four hours, and now Samira came for me to have dinner.

– How are you feeling? – She went out onto the balcony with a businesslike look to open the curtains.

– All is well, – I replied, trying to stifle a yawn and straighten my shaggy hair. My face was wrinkled after sleep, and I tried to put it in order, but considering that my bag with a makeup bag and other important things disappeared without a trace, I had a hard time.

– Lunch is unofficial, so... what would you like to wear?

– Unofficially? – I looked out of the bathroom to clarify.

– Yes, that means no one will be present except you and Mr. Ali.

– Well ... – I thought, – then choose the worst outfit for me. – She looked at me in bewilderment, and I returned to the bathroom. Having finished all the water procedures, I went into the wardrobe and looked appraisingly at the clothes chosen by my assistant. A linen milk dress of a closed type and a free cut that hides absolutely the whole body. Exactly what is needed! Now, of course, he will not look at me! I pulled on my dress, leaving my hair hanging loose. – By the way, I wanted to ask. Whose things are these?

Samira hesitated a little, buttoning buttons on my back, and when I turned to face her, she first looked into my eyes and clearly said:

– All this belongs to you.

– Funny. – I laughed soundlessly. – Hundreds of outfits and pairs of shoes, own room, personal assistant. I might think I'm going to live here.

I took a deep breath, adjusting the dress at the waist. It seems that on vacation I relaxed and gained a couple of pounds. You will need to go to the gym again as soon as I get home.

Samira took me to the dining room, which turned out to be a large spacious hall with a high ceiling. The abundance of dark and brown pieces of furniture and interior made me a little uneasy. Everything looked too gloomy. A large massive dining table was covered with a huge number of plates and other utensils. Almost simultaneously, Mr. Ali himself entered.

– Good evening! – He slowly came so close to me that through the dress I felt the heat of his body. This tall, formidable man with a serious appearance, but with a completely frivolous look, right now rose above me in every sense.

– Good ... – I held his gaze, feeling the weight in my chest. I and this stranger in a huge house under the impregnable guard and staff of domestic servants, who unconditionally obey him.

– You look wonderful.

I almost laughed. Is he joking or what? Although it can be said in his eyes that he is not lying. But... for me his opinion means

absolutely nothing.

Thank you. You look good too. – I said it casually, examining him. A snow-white shirt, light trousers and bare feet. His appearance was hooligan. The shirt shaded his swarthy skin and dark eyes.

– Thank you. – He reduced the distance between us by one more step. – Good ... – he pointed to the seat at the table, while his eyes were fixed on me. – Please sit down. It's time for lunch.

He led me to my place and pulled my chair, then went around the table and sat opposite me. I felt my heart beating. Taking a deep breath, I decided to focus on what was on the table, namely, a lot of plates with olives, herbs, various cakes, vegetable stew, some kind of porridge and many other dishes that I did not know.

We looked at each other, and Ali gestured that I can start eating.

– I was told that you eat badly. – I took a brief look at the unflappable prince, who took the cutlery and answered my opinion with questioningly raised eyebrows, waiting for my excuses.

– No appetite. – I pointedly pushed the plate away, looking anywhere, but not at him.

– You will not deny me the pleasure of watching how you eat? Perhaps you do not know, but it is not customary for us to refuse the offered food. – He paused, waiting for my reaction, and when he realized that it would not follow, he continued. –

This is regarded as disrespect for the owner of the house.

I smiled and crossed my arms over my chest.

– Forcing, restricting, forcing, and then euthanizing people you dislike, – I said clearly, – what is considered in your country as respect for the “guests”? – I drew air quotes in the air.

The prince stopped chewing and looked at me at point blank range, putting the appliances aside and hung his head in his hands, laid on the table.

– Listen, Miss Mironova...

– Irina, – I corrected him, to which he only smiled.

– Good. As you wish. So, Irina, I know that you are now confused, but all that is required of you is to have patience, and everything will work out. – He spoke to me like a little scared child. – And for the fact that I used a not entirely humane method... I officially apologize to you, okay? And I am ready to fix it in any way.

– Let me go home.

– Anyone but this. – I exhaled exasperatedly and got to my feet.

– Thank you for a wonderful dinner, – I heard poison in my voice.

– You haven't eaten anything, – the prince said calmly.

– I'm fed up ... – I added, hardly audible.

– Sorry... I did not hear. I squared my shoulders and looked at him belligerently. How I want to wipe his annoying smirk off his face.

– I say good night.

– Good night, too. – I gave him the most fake smile.

Samira quietly joined me as soon as I took a couple of steps to leave the dining room. I will show you what it means to mess with me, Mr. Ali!

The next two days I did not leave my room. Samira spent most of her time with me, disappearing briefly to bring me food or a little rest herself. During this time, I finally convinced her to contact me simply by name. The house was so big that I still did not intersect with any of its inhabitants, and no one even went out into the garden. Only a few guards around the perimeter of the garden came into motion from time to time.

I stood on the balcony in a light home dress and enjoyed the sun, which by local standards in the morning was not so merciless.

– Irina, – I turned to the sound of Samira's voice and found that she was standing in her arms with another long dress from the huge wardrobe provided by the royal family – Mr. Ali is waiting for you.

– He said what he needed? – She shook her head, as always lowering her eyes to the floor every time she tried to hide something.

– We are not allowed to interfere in the affairs of our master.

– What are you allowed at all? – I gasped wearily, looking sympathetically at her. – Well, let’s go and find out what His Highness Ali Amirovich wants from us.

She giggled, escorting me to the locker room.

– I have prepared a dress for you.

– Thank you, but I will put on my things – I tried to mitigate my refusal with a smile. The girl tried to please me, but I wanted to put on my things.

I pulled on loose cotton shorts and a plain white t-shirt. Samira got me all the possible hair accessories, and now I was able to calmly collect my hair in a high tail, which I did before leaving.

– You look very ... – horror reflected on her face.

– ... convenient, – I finished for her. – These are comfortable clothes. You need to try this too. She stared at me in amazement, opening her mouth.

– Not! It’s impossible! This is a shame for a girl. I raised my eyebrows in surprise. – I wanted to say...

I smiled, stopping her attempts to apologize.

– I understand what you mean. Another country, different morality, but ... – I sighed heavily – I’m not going to change while I’m here. Your master will have to put up with it. God, when will I get home? – Samira looked away and shrugged uncertainly.

– If you are ready, then we can go.

For two days I did not see the prince, and I really hope that during this time my problems have been resolved, and I will soon

be able to go home. Samira escorted me to the office and waited for me to hide behind his doors. The office was empty. I walked over and decided to sit on a chair when I suddenly noticed some movement on the balcony. It turned out that Mr. Ali was sitting in one of the wicker chairs, thinking about something and did not even notice me. His face took on a tense expression, long dark eyelashes sometimes moved, and it seemed that they created this light breeze that was caressing my skin right now. As if I see a person from another planet, we are so different from each other. A person who is known about the whole world, who is respected and afraid of everyone who lives in his country, and I am an ordinary student whose head was clogged with the final exam and defending a dissertation a couple of weeks ago. I wonder what's in the head of kings and princes?

I tapped the doorway with my fingers, attracting his attention. Today he was wearing a blue shirt and white trousers. I involuntarily wondered if everyone was sitting on it so perfectly.

– Irina? Good morning! – He got to his feet, towering above me and making me feel insignificant.

– Good morning. Samira said you wanted to see me.

He slowly looked at me from head to toe and nodded thoughtfully.

– Sit down – with a gesture he pointed to a chair, separated from it by a small wicker table. I tried to gracefully go down to the place that I was offered, wishing I had put on such short shorts. Now my legs were in all their helplessness before the Arab

prince. You do not need to know local customs to understand that I made the wrong decision. It was necessary to wear the dress proposed by Samira. He returned to his place and looked at me, as it seemed to me, with a tense smile on his face. – I was gone a couple of days. How are you?

– Everything depends on you. – I looked expressively at him, dropping my hands on my knees. – Did you manage to solve my problem? Can I go home? – I hope the hopelessness in my voice was not so obvious.

– You want to get home so badly. Even amazing. Is it so bad with us?

– Honestly, – I hesitated, – for the first time in many years, I was able to truly rest. I have not been so calm for a long time.

– Then what's the problem? – It seems he was glad I liked it here.

– Is it so hard to understand? I am alone. In an unfamiliar country, in a house of strangers to me. Something strange is happening around and no one is telling me anything, and you ask, what is my problem? – I jumped to my feet, panting, unable to stop. – You are sitting here in your house, not a man, but peace itself! And inside me, everything burns out due to the unknown. Tell me what you need from me! – I started to tremble. Everything that I have accumulated in myself over the past few days is now pouring out on this stranger. You forcibly brought me here, took my phone... by the way, where is he? – I asked demandingly, which only amused him. – But with all this, you

gave me a huge room with a dressing room, where all the clothes of my size, and even its stocks, cannot be worn out in ten years! Isn't that strange? What's happening? Is this related to my parents? What did you do with them?

He calmly listened to everything that I told him, studying my face, and after a pause he gave an answer.

– As far as I know, your family is fine. Their restaurant is working fine and brings a good income.

– Do you think they are not looking for me? Someone will definitely lose me... sooner or later. I added more restrainedly.

– Right. he answered calmly, rising to his feet and coming so close to me that I could feel its slightly harsh spicy aroma, which filled all the space between us. – You're right ... – he began cautiously, taking a step towards me, which made me feel uneasy – they will look for you, but now... your family knows that you are safe and your friends are sure that you decided to stay with parents a little longer.

– Did you dig into my phone? – All the air disappeared from my lungs, but he calmly stood opposite me. – How can you? This is an invasion of privacy! – I closed my eyes. An urgent need to calm down, otherwise nothing good will come of it.

– I just saved you from having to lie to your loved ones.

– Well, you know ... – I viciously flashed my eyes in his direction. – I'm over it!

I turned and quickly headed for the exit.

– Irina! – I stopped, not turning to face him, but feeling him

approaching me. – I want to warn you that you cannot even go beyond this house without my permission.

– We'll see! – I glanced over his shoulder and left the office, closing the door behind me with a roar.

CHAPTER 9

– Well, there must be at least one loophole! – I’ve been asking Samir for how many hours how I can leave this house, bypassing the guards.

– No, – she shook her head, – this never happened. The house is located a few dozen kilometers from the nearest village. Even if you go beyond the fence, which is impossible, you will not know where to go. Therefore, I advise you to abandon this idea.

With a groan, I covered my face with my hands, trying to figure out what to do.

– Your prince... – is the last word, I said through clenched teeth, – said that there is a rest room in the house, and I can watch TV there at any time.

– Yes. Oh! I didn’t even suggest you take a house tour.

– It is not necessary. Just take me to the rest room. I need at least a little distraction. – I took a deep breath. – No, not today. I want to go out into the garden, I need fresh air.

This place had a strange effect on me. I was tormented not only by headaches, but right after I eat, I feel like sleeping. Perhaps acclimatization or stress affects me in this way. In any case, fresh air will do me good.

– Do not be angry, – Samira began uncertainly, – but I would advise you to change your clothes. – Apparently, the puzzled expression on my face did not escape her, because she

immediately rushed to explain her proposal to me. – Your body is too open, and because of this you ... – she tried to find the words – confuse all the servants of this house.

I sat down on the bed and could not stop the hysterical laughter.

– God, why do I need all this? – Samira sat next to me and hesitantly put her hand on my shoulder.

– Irina, everything will be fine. I looked at her incredulously. Will it? – The main thing is to be patient.

Taking another deep breath, I got to my feet and went to the wardrobe to change into my long cotton sundress with bare shoulders and took sandals with me.

– I'm ready, we can go. – Samira looked me up and down, but said nothing.

She led me through the whole house and led me out into the garden, which from the balcony did not seem so big. Smooth lawn, hedge, which was located on the cuts of a stone path leading to all sides of the garden. I went to the fountain, from which I felt freshness and coolness, and sat on its edge to run my fingers through the water, revealing my face to the bright sun. Samira quietly disappeared somewhere, and now I am left alone with myself. It's time to admit – I fell into slavery, otherwise it can not be called. Although... I do not feel danger from anyone. But what if... Exactly! I jumped to my feet, feeling excitement and fear. They want to sell me! I heard somewhere that this is still practiced here. I looked around and, finding no one, decided

to act. I urgently need to get out of here.

I took a quick step along the path to the stairs leading to the gate, but there were at least ten guards along their perimeter. Then I decided to walk along the fence at a safe distance from them, but all to no avail. A deaf high stone fence surrounding the house. Nothing I could hold on to. I need to find out somehow whether there are neighbors behind the fence or at least something that can help me get out of here. Looking around, I did not find anything better than a tree standing about fifteen meters from the fence.

– I will find a way to get out of here – I lifted the hem of the dress, took off my shoes and quickly went to the tree. – Well, with God!

Throwing my foot on the lower branch, I climbed to the very top of this powerful tree. Having hooked my leg over the edge of the dress, I almost fell, managing to catch the next branch in time and maintain balance. Finally, having reached my goal, I turned to look beyond the fence, and could not contain a groan of disappointment. Not only was there a limitless plantation behind the fence that erased my already illusive plans for salvation, but now I realized that I could not get off this terrible tree.

I do not know how much time I spent in this position, but all my limbs were numb, and from fear of local insects I was on the verge of jumping to the ground. So what? One step and all my problems will be solved immediately. Not. This is not an option.

– Irina! Irin, where are you? Answer me. – It was Samira, I had no doubt about it. I saw her approaching a tree, bend over to pick up my shoes, and then look around. “Miss, where are you?” Irina!

– Samira, – she began to turn her head, trying to find me. – Samira, I’m here! – I said to her in a low voice. – Lift your head. She found me with a look and burst out with a loud, rolling laugh. – Not funny, Samira! – I continued to hiss.

– Sorry, miss, – she tried unsuccessfully to stifle laughter. – I’ll call someone for help now.

– Not! Samira, no need to call anyone. Can you bring me a ladder or a strong rope, only ... – I looked at her expressively – please, don’t tell anyone where I am, okay?

She ran away, and I remained to wait for salvation. It was not enough that one of the inhabitants of the house saw me in this position.

– Where is she? Drive on. – I barely had time to grab the branch, so as not to fall from the tree in a panic, when Ali was approaching the tree. – Irina, you do not cease to amaze me.

I let the upstart prince pass my ears, evil eyes flashing in the direction of Samira, and I felt that I was blushing.

– Since you came, take me out of here. – I eagerly turned to him.

– This is what I’m going to do right now. – At that moment, two guards came up and put a ladder near the tree, making sure that it could stand two people, and then quickly left.

– Can you come down yourself? – Ali asked mockingly.

– Not! I shook my head. – I’m afraid of heights.

Taking a deep breath, he began to climb the stairs, and when he was on a par with me, he looked into my eyes, from which a slight tremor ran through my body.

– Why are you doing what are you afraid of? – I turned away, not knowing how to make excuses, while he held out his hand to me. – Will you allow me to help?

I looked at him and hesitantly put my palm in his hand. He took a step back, helped me cross the branch and step onto the stairs. At that moment, I felt one of the hard, dry branches glide over the open area of my skin on my back. With a start, I tried not to pretend that my body was pierced by unbearable pain. Almost without distinguishing what I see, with the help of the prince I began to descend the stairs. When I felt the ground under my feet, adrenaline slowly flowed through my veins. I looked at my savior and was not without difficulty able to squeeze out words of gratitude.

“Thank you for helping me get down,” I swallowed nervously, feeling aching pain. It looks like the branch left a mark on my back.

– Always happy to help.

– But you did not need to help me yourself, you could send me one of your subjects. – He grinned and shook his head, catching my gaze.

– Mandatory. This can only be done by me. I looked at

him questioningly, waiting for an explanation. – Everything that concerns you, I can do only. he answered in a serious tone.

Such a statement discouraged me, and I did not immediately find what to answer.

– Speak as if I am your property.

– Well, why so rude? You are my guest, and that means a lot. Samira looked at us with curiosity.

I moved to the house when suddenly His Highness grabbed me in my arms.

– What are you doing? Put me on my feet! – I screamed and tried to escape from his hands.

– Do you want to hurt your legs? – He asked in a calm tone.

I clung to his neck, afraid that he would drop me, but it seems that he is in control. Crazy! He brought me into the gazebo, which was under the windows of his office (I saw her from the balcony this morning). I got to my feet, straightening my dress, when I was horrified to find that the sleeve of the prince's shirt was saturated with a small strip of blood, in the place where he had recently touched my back. Mr. Ali first looked at his shirt and then abruptly approached me and carefully followed me.

– Nothing... I began to defend myself.

– Samira, bring a first-aid kit immediately, – a stern voice pierced the silence of the street.

– Do not worry... I myself... in the room... can handle this, – I turned to face him, and from his gaze I began to get confused in words. In less than two minutes Samira returned to us and

handed the first-aid kit to her master.

– Thank you, – I smiled at Samira, realizing that she could not wait for gratitude from her master. She answered me with a modest smile, peering anxiously behind my back at Ali.

– How did you manage to get hurt? – began my interrogation, my “doctor”, who treated his hands with some kind of liquid.

– A branch ... – I swallowed nervously, feeling extremely awkward at that moment. I can’t imagine whether one can be disgraced more than I am now. The Prince sighed heavily and asked me to turn away from him so that he could clearly see the wound. – Why are you doing this? I can settle everything on my own or, in extreme cases, ask Samira.

He muttered something under his breath and began to heal my wound, which is why I frowned and bit my lower lip.

– So what did you do on the tree? – he decided to change the subject and distract me a little when he finished treating my wound. – Are you really looking for ways to escape? – I did not answer, and in the meantime he began to gently apply the ointment with his long warm fingers, which caused a slight trembling in my spine. – All is ready. – He barely audibly informed me, bending so close to my ear that I felt his hot breath with my neck.

– Th... thanks, – I said, stammering, and sat on a bench covered with soft pillows.

– Before going to bed, you will need to process it again. – I nodded, hiding my eyes from him. – So there with the tree. I’m

right? – He added cheerfully, and I broke out, evil eyes flashing in his direction. – Wow! I’m really right. You are an amazing girl! Warlike, although at first glance this cannot be said.

I took a deep breath and dropped my shoulders wearily.

– My name means “peace”, but... my mother always said that I was the exact opposite of my name. – I don’t know why I decided to talk about it, but Mr. Ali listened carefully to me.

– I brought iced tea and a sweet cake, – Samira told us. I didn’t notice how she came. – Anything else you want? – She put in front of us a carafe, glasses and a plate with a cake, and taking a tray, she stood in front of her master, her head down.

– Not. You can pick up the first-aid kit and go to rest. And further. Miss will need to wash the wound before going to bed. Help her. For the rest, I’ll let you know when you need it.

– As you order. – She bowed and left quietly, and Mr. Ali himself began pouring tea into glasses.

– Thank you – I thanked, taking the glass from my hands.

– The third “thank you” for the day. This is progress.

– Are you intentionally trying to piss me off? – I asked, looking at him point-blank from bottom to top.

– Not. – He smiled and sat across from me. – Everything happens on its own. Samira said that you eat almost nothing, should I follow these?

– Do you feed me for slaughter?

– Do you question every word of your interlocutor and are looking for a trick, or does this only apply to me?

– I generally trust very few people, and... in most cases it turns out that this is not in vain.

– Well ... – he hesitated, – that makes some sense, but ..., – he caught my eye and looked at me with a serious expression on his face – you can trust me.

For an instant, an innocent smile lit up his face.

– I doubt. – I took a sip of refreshing tea, which I really needed. – True, you have nothing to do but get me?

– Am I getting you? – He raised an eyebrow in surprise, assuming an offended look.

– Yes. And I know, now you will say that this happens on its own.

– Horrible! I'm still so predictable. – For the first time in all the time spent here, I wanted to sincerely laugh, which I did, and the prince smiled back. – Laughter is as good for you as growl.

There was something in his gaze that confused me.

– I think there are enough walks for today. – I finished the tea in one gulp and got to my feet. – Thanks again.

He nodded and followed me.

– I will take you to your room; you are still barefoot.

I followed his gaze and realized that it was really still without shoes.

– Don't try to pick me up again! – I looked at his bloodied shirt and felt uneasy. It's always like this. You try to deliver as little inconvenience as possible, but it turns out exactly the opposite.

– And there was no thought. He assumed an insulted look and

held out his hands in a defensive gesture. – After you. – Mr. Ali politely showed me the way out of the gazebo. – How do you like the house? Does everything suit you?

– To me? – I did not hide my surprise. We walked with him hand in hand.

– Yes, to you. Is the bed comfortable, is the room temperature comfortable?

– I think so, but... it would be better if I were now lying in my bed in my room.

He did not answer, but in the meantime we went to my room.

– See you at dinner. At seven. – I nodded my head, disappeared behind the door and, despite the aching pain, pressed my back to it.

It was a terrible day, and I urgently need to take a shower to wash off all the dirt from myself, and from my thoughts a nascent sympathy for the prince. We will not be friends until I find out what is happening here.

CHAPTER 10

Before our dinner ended, which we spent in almost complete silence, I immediately wanted to sleep. The next morning I decided to go to the rest room. I need to find out what is happening in the world. Inside me was the hope that they were looking for me. Samira explained how I could find the room I needed (fortunately, she was on the same floor as my bedroom), and I went to wander these cold, wide, soulless corridors when I suddenly saw that Ali was approaching me together with an elderly man in a strict business suit. I quickly looked around and came up with nothing but to hide behind one of the walls until they noticed me.

– ... on the one hand, I understand you, and on the other... in your place...

– With all due respect, but you are not in my place.

– But your traditions ... – the prince's interlocutor wanted to continue his thought, but the prince interrupted him again.

– I know our traditions very well.

– And your father...

– My father, of course, knows everything perfectly, of course, not without effort, but he accepted my choice or at least pretended to agree.

– What about the girl? Did she give her consent?

– It's a matter of time, – I heard the prince was somewhat

annoyed. – The main thing is that she does not know everything in advance. Maids must be warned.

They passed by, and, fortunately, I went unnoticed. I looked out into the corridor to make sure once again that nobody was there, and was able to calmly continue on my way. Finding the door I needed was not so difficult. Turning the handle, I easily opened it and went into a dark, cool room, looking at a large brown sofa and two armchairs matching it, a large transparent glass coffee table and a huge plasma TV on the wall, as well as many bookcases and bookshelves, various figures and other trinkets.

I sat on a soft leather sofa and allowed myself to enjoy its comfort for several minutes. Having reached the remote control lying on the lower tier of the table, I pressed a button and started flipping through the channels. One image replaced another, and so it went on for some time. The Arabic channel, the channel in English, the Arabic news with English subtitles and vice versa, a couple of Russian channels, but in general, nothing interesting until I accidentally stumbled upon the morning show, which was watched by the latest newspaper issues. The issue of impending sensation was discussed.

– Very soon, dear viewers ... – I began to translate English subtitles out loud when suddenly the hair on my hands stood on end and my thoughts became completely confused. Samira came in and looked at me in horror. – What does all of this mean? – With yelling, I attacked her, poking the remote control

into the TV.

– Madam...

– You knew everything and you didn't tell me! – She pursed her lips, looked down at the floor and cringed, as if expecting a blow from me. – Lead me to this immediately... I don't even know which word to choose!

I left the room, seething with anger. But how is that even possible! I went the usual long way to the prince's office in two minutes. Without bothering to knock, I burst inside and quickly went up to the surprised prince.

– Irina? – He got to his feet, and I looked at the man sitting opposite the prince, with whom they had recently talked in the corridor. At that moment Samira burst into the office.

– Mr. Ali, – she tried to catch her breath, – sorry... I didn't have time...

He nodded his head and motioned her to stop.

– You immediately explain to me what is happening here! – I demanded.

Ali looked at me and for the first time since I recognized him, she saw how nervous he was.

– Please leave Ms. Mironova and me alone.

The gray-haired man and Samira immediately left the office.

– Why are they discussing your upcoming wedding on your local television... with me! – With every word, my voice grew louder and toward the end of the sentence turned into a hysterical screech.

– Have a seat, – he pointed to the place where the old man was sitting a minute ago.

– Now explain everything to me! – I did not budge.

– I will explain, to begin with, calm down and sit down.

He went to the cabinet behind him, slowly opened it, dialed the code on the safe and took out a folder from there. I took a deep breath and sat in the place that I had been offered before.

– What is it? – I looked suspiciously at the papers offered to me.

– These are three copies of the contract with your father. One in Arabic, Russian and English. Check it out.

Without understanding anything, I looked at the prince and with a trembling hand opened the folder.

– What does this have to do with what I saw on TV a few minutes ago? – I looked at him, puzzled.

– The most direct, – he answered in a businesslike tone and sank too gracefully into a leather chair.

I cast another look at him and began to examine the papers. Having chosen a variant of the agreement drawn up in Russian, I quickly began to study it. Mr. Ali waited patiently while I read it.

– I do not understand anything. – So far it is talking about your rights and obligations, and not about my father. – I looked at him point blank, which caused a smile on his face.

– The last page of the contract, the highest point.

– In exchange for all the money provided to the borrower, he,

his wife and their youngest daughter undertake ... – I swallowed a lump in my throat – some kind of nonsense...

– Read to the end he ordered.

I blinked several times, seriously thinking if I had lost my mind in this house.

– ... he undertakes to give his eldest daughter Mironova Irina Yuryevna to marry the crown prince of the emirate Sheikh Ali ibn Amir al-Azar, that is, to ensure the stay and acquaintance of Mironova I. Yu in the UAE, not to interfere with their communication, cohabitation, and also Do not violate the rights to their privacy. Communication of the Mironov family and I. Yu. will be carried out with the permission and only under the personal control of the Crown Prince of the Emirate Sheikh Ali ibn Amir al-Azar or his authorized representative. – I put the papers aside and looked in shock at the calm prince, feeling a little dizzy. – This is a joke?

– Not. he answered calmly. – Since then, you are in the status of my bride. There are small formalities regarding documents, but we will solve them immediately after you come to your senses a bit.

– I'll come to my senses from what? This is real bullshit! You don't think that I will believe it and marry you? – I laughed nervously, realizing the absurdity of the situation.

– No, I do not think so. – I breathed a sigh of relief. – I'm sure of it.

I ran a hand over my face, convincing myself that all this does

not happen to me in real life. It just can't be.

– Yes, I have nothing to do with either your Emirate or you personally!

– You have a relationship with your family, and they, by a lucky chance, are connected both with our Emirate and with me personally. – He answered calmly. – You almost became a citizen of this country. You just have to sign these documents. He shook another folder in the air.

– I will never do it!

– Good, – he answered simply. – Then read the last paragraph of the contract.

I lowered my eyes and felt how everything inside me was chilled with shock. The bottom line was that in the event of my resistance to the fulfillment of all the provisions of the contract and my father's failure to fulfill his obligations, my family undertakes to pay money to Crown Sheikh Ali (be he not good) Ibn Amir al-Azar in the amount of one million dollars at a time, regardless, at what time this contract is valid (it is valid indefinitely), the parties will want to terminate it.

– Not. I refuse to believe it! My father could not sign it. He... he could not do this with me!

– I'm afraid you know your father very poorly. – He signed it, almost without hesitation. The prince looked at me sympathetically.

– What does it mean? Until someone from my family returns you a million dollars, will I be your property? He smiled a little,

rising to his feet.

– It's too rude. In addition, I do not need property, because I have so much of it – he looked around the room. – I need a wife, a life partner.

I closed my eyes and shook my head. It seems that at that moment my soul died.

“It would be better if you killed me right away.” I got to my feet and, staggering slightly, wandered off to the exit.

– The wedding will take place in a month. This time is enough for you to come to your senses and get used to this thought.

I did not answer, but only wandered powerlessly into my room, where Samira met me.

– Madam, I ... – remorse was read in her eyes, but at that moment everything was even to me.

– Samira, do not say anything – I entered the room, but she followed me. I stopped her with a gesture and pointed to the door. – I want to stay alone.”

– But... madam.

– Please, Samira, – I looked tiredly at her, waited for the door to close behind her and lay on the bed, allowing tears to slide on the pillow and emit emotions, devastating me.

CHAPTER 11

The next two days I spent in bed, sometimes getting up to drink water or wash. I still can't believe that all this is happening to me, but it seems that the time has come to accept my defeat. However, from the realization of my powerlessness in these circumstances, I want to howl, which I am doing right now. Hiding behind a blanket with my head, I closed my eyes and tried to fall asleep, but the same question "what should I do?"

– Madam? – I flinched in surprise when I heard Samira's voice. Pulling the blanket to the chin, I looked at her questioningly. "Mr. Ali wants to see you."

– He needs, let him come to me himself. I will not leave this bed until they let me go home. – I turned my back to her and climbed back under the covers.

The room became quiet, and this meant that Samira came out. I began to fall asleep when suddenly someone pulled a blanket from me. Opening my eyes in horror, I met the prince's evil gaze, whose only steam did not leave his ears. Fine! We will deal with everything without delay. I sat down slowly, taking on his mood.

– What do you think of yourself? I said I want to see you!

– Well, and I said that I did not want to see you. – Calmly, as if he did not understand the obvious things, I answered.

– You are in my house, therefore...

– I'm not at my own will in your house! You forcibly keep me

here! – I unconsciously began to raise my voice. This man not only annoys me, he upsets my balance in every sense.

– Whether you want it or not, but you must obey, – he pointed a finger at me, towering above me.

I will never marry you! I'd rather die in this bed from exhaustion than at least once again look in your direction!

I don't think that in all my life anyone ever spoke like that to a crown prince. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath while I tried to hide the treacherous tears. You can not show weakness in the eyes of this person.

– Put yourself in order and go down to the garden, I will be waiting for you there. he said more calmly, heading for the exit and turning around at the door itself. – If you don't go down in fifteen minutes, I will send for you servants who will forcefully bring you to me, okay? – Do not force to use force.

He went out and the door slammed behind him. I fell into the lair of a monster, and all this happens to me thanks to my parents. Is there a greater thirst for wealth than feelings for your child? Is it really so easy to give up native blood, literally selling it?

I washed, threw on the first dress that caught my eye, and ballet shoes and left the room, without even looking at myself in the mirror. The worse I look, the better. You need to let the prince know what he bought. His Highness was waiting for me on the porch. I walked past, ignoring him, deep into the garden to the gazebo, sitting on the edge of the bench. The prince followed me and sat across from me. I looked at the swaying trees, trying

to hold back the tears that had not stopped since the moment I learned the terrible truth.

– Why did you buy me? – I asked in a trembling voice, suppressing sobs. – Do you... do you have few of your girls? Why do you need a foreigner who does not know any traditions, customs, or even another religion? – I looked at him, unconsciously noticing that he looks tired.

– I did not buy you. – I raised my eyebrows in surprise.

– You and my father made this agreement, according to which my family received money for me, is this not a purchase?

– No, – he shook his head. – This is a good investment, – he looked into my eyes, his expression serious.

– That is, I am your property.

– Again this word! You are not property! You are a beautiful young girl who will marry me. – I jumped to my feet, preparing to defend myself. – You will marry me if you want everything to be in order with your loved ones.

I looked at him in surprise.

– You are threatening me?

– No, – he answered calmly, – I am just telling you everything as it is.

– I want to meet my father, – I returned to my place, burning my eyes through a hole in this vile person who considers me a thing.

– Not. Until I am sure that you will not do anything stupid, I cannot let you see your family. – My eyes were covered with

a veil of rage and hatred. “But... you can make one phone call in my presence.” – He took the phone from the inside pocket of his white jacket, dialed the number and handed it to me. Father answered after the second beep.

– Your Highness? The sound of his voice made my throat tighten.

– No, – I replied in a hoarse voice. – It’s me, dad.

For a moment, silence hung in the telephone.

– Ira. I did not expect you to contact us so soon. – I closed my eyes, holding back the tears. You must not show weakness, otherwise the prince can use it against me.

– Why dad? Why did you do this to me?

My voice faltered, and a few tears rolled from my eyes.

– This is necessary, daughter. For us. For you. Everything will be fine, believe in fate. You are very lucky, daughter. Happier than your father. It has always been that way.

– It cost you nothing to sell your own daughter! – Is this, in your opinion, luck? I will never forgive you, hear? Never! Until the end of my days, I will hate you. I wish you happiness with your millions!

I threw the phone on the table and ran to my room, barely recognizing the road through tears.

The next day I told Samira that I wanted to see her master.

On this my conversation with her ended. She tried several times to talk to me or apologize, but each time I interfered with her attempts. In any case, this will not change anything in my life. I sat on the balcony, wrapped in a coverlet, when the prince came to me after sunset.

– Irina? – I turned to the sound of my name, meeting his curious look directed at me. – Samira said you want to talk to me.

I nodded, wrapping myself tightly in the covers.

– I wanted to ... – I nodded to the chair. “If you want, sit down.”

– Are you okay? – He looked at me appraisingly, dropping into the chair that I proposed, to which I answered him with an annoyed look. Who is he to worry about me?

“Don’t pretend you’re interested in my condition.”

He sighed wearily, running a hand through his hair.

– Good. Your truth. If you want to swear again, now is not the best time for this.

– Not. – I shook my head. – I wanted to say that I thought about everything that happened, and... it seems that I have no choice but to give up and obey the circumstances, – he sat and listened carefully to me. – I will marry you, – I said, barely audible.

He jumped to his feet, smiling broadly and just not bouncing with joy.

– Well! Tomorrow we will solve all paper issues and...

– I agree, but only on one condition – he raised his eyebrows inquiringly, and I got to my feet, feeling trembling all over my

body. Do not be afraid. I should not be afraid of him. – This marriage will be fictitious.

I gathered my last strength into a fist and looked into his eyes, full of some strange feelings.

– And what is fictitious marriage in your understanding?

I turned away and went to the stone railing, pondering his question. Fictitious marriage? What does marriage mean to me? My parents lived together for many years, but I would not call them an ideal couple. Yes, they could always find a compromise, agree on most issues and absolutely did not know how to live together, but I did not see the love between them. Rather, a habit that only intensifies over time.

– This marriage will only be on paper. I do not know what you had in mind when concluding this crazy agreement, but... I am ready to give the impression that we are married, but you will not touch me with your finger without my consent. – I straightened the plaid that fell from my shoulders.

He came up to me and, putting his hands on the railing, looked at me over his shoulder.

– Good. But... I cannot touch you without your consent, and not a single person will be able to touch you, even if you agree, even if you yourself ask about it. You will accompany me on trips, receptions and dinners every evening. You will respect my father and our environment, as well as the people who live on our land, but at the same time not go beyond. As for family meetings...

– It's not obligatory. – He looked at me in surprise, and then continued his speech.

– Before the wedding, you will need to sign a marriage contract. And immediately after our marriage is concluded, I will give you a bank account on which there will be more than enough funds so that you can allow yourself to enjoy life.

– And this is not necessary, – I said in a lifeless voice.

– You are not a prisoner, you are my future wife, the future queen of this country. – I looked at him anxiously.

– Won't you let me go right after my father gives you the money back? – He grinned and shook his head.

– I doubt your father is going to get the money back. – He hesitated. – Do not be offended, but it creates the impression of a frivolous person.

I have to come up with something. I need to get out of here somehow.

– And more ... – He pursed his lips. – You will have to renounce your citizenship.

– What will happen if I do not refuse? I looked defiantly at him as he headed for the exit.

– Think of your family, – he said clearly at the door. – And yet ... – I turned around to see his face illuminated by the moonlight – you do not need to remind me and yourself about how exactly you got here at each of our meetings. I know everything perfectly and I hate myself for that. – At that moment, he looked so broken that I felt sorry for him, but remembering

what he was going to do with my life, this feeling instantly evaporated. – And the last... you don't have to change. Be yourself. – He sighed heavily and quickly went out, leaving me alone with his thoughts.

CHAPTER 12

Servants circled me for a week. I was forbidden to watch TV and go online (I got the phone back, but I still can't call anyone and honestly, I don't want to talk to anyone), but I learned from Samira that the whole country is discussing our upcoming wedding and about me there were a lot of rumors. For example, everyone said that I escaped from my country, hiding from the government, that they kept me here forcibly (if they knew how close to the truth) and a bunch of other different stories, because of which Mr. Ali decided that we were going today to the restaurant, after which we will have to communicate with reporters.

– Madame, what do you prefer to wear? – Samira circled over my head, twisting the last strand of hair on curling irons.

– To be honest, I'm fine, – I said as I exhale, casting a glance at myself in the mirror.

Lifeless eyes, small wrinkles in their corners from constant tension, pale, I would say, painful face. This place sucks life out of me.

– You probably worry? Mr. Ali will take you to one of the best places in our country! – In the mirror, I saw how she dreamily patted her eyes, which made me smile.

“Samira,” I caught her eye in the mirror. “Have you ever been outside this house?”

– Of course! Every week I go with Nur, well... this is the main servant of this house, I go with her to the local market, and also ... – she unwound my lock, repairing it with varnish – last year I was taken to a neighboring village to the wedding.

– And it's all? – I turned to face her. She lowered her eyes and nodded. I took her hand, which made her stiffen.

– I'll take you somewhere as soon as everyone settles down here, okay?

– Oh, what are you, madam! Mr. Ali will not allow this.

– What do I need your master? Will I be a princess? That is... I want to say that this will be my gratitude to you. – She wanted to say something, but I interrupted her. – And I do not accept any objections! Now come on help me choose a dress.

I abruptly got to my feet, which made me dizzy, and I had to grab the edge of the sink so as not to fall.

– Madam, are you all right? – She grabbed my elbow.

– Yes, – I took her hand, – do not worry, everything is fine.

– You look tired, – she led me to the bed and helped me sit down. – I will bring you several options for dresses. – She hid in the closet, and I tried to calm the trembling in the body. Samira came out with dresses on hangers in her hands and carefully laid them next to me. – I chose five different options for you, but ... – she took one of the hangers. – But I liked it the most. – She put on a black silk tight-fitting bell dress with large pink flowers.

– Did you really like it? – She nodded her head, delight was read in her eyes. – Then I give it to you.

She looked at me anxiously and shook her head.

– You can not! It is all yours. I can not accept it.

– It's mine, right? – I got to my feet, and she nodded. – So,

I give it to you, and you have no right to refuse it.

She laid the dress aside and rushed to hug me, which took me by surprise.

– You... You are the best... the best! – Tears rolled from her eyes.

– Samira... I don't want to upset you even more, but... I'm late. – She pulled away and looked at me anxiously, wiping the tears from her cheeks.

– Sorry, madam... I...

– It's all right, – I looked at the outfits Samira selected, picked up the hanger with a red trouser suit, pulled a simple white T-shirt from the dresser (the prince thought everything through, including the underwear and pantyhose that were in the dresser), and picked up the beige pumps colors. My image was very cute.

– Here's a clutch bag that fits with the shoes. – Samira handed me a small bag.

– Conservatively, but with taste, and most importantly – conveniently. And quite in my style. I smiled weakly and looked at Samira. – Thank. I don't know what I would do without your enthusiasm.

She smiled shyly, dropping her eyes to the floor.

– You are the best, and I will do everything to make you comfortable here.

I tried to smile, took off my shoes, picked them up and headed for the door. The weakness in the body was no longer so obvious, but the head continued to spin. My acclimatization seems to have dragged on.

– Madame ... – I turned around, laying my palm on the doorknob – our lord... he... is good. – She looked at me uncertainly. – You will understand this as soon as you know it better. Just... give him a chance.

For a moment I thought about her words.

– He may not be a bad person, but his methods suggest the opposite.

I left the room and headed down the empty corridor to the first floor. The fleecy carpet enveloping my bare feet distracted me a little from gloomy thoughts. The main thing is to survive this evening and not forget the legend invented for me. One of the young servants opened the door for me, and I went out onto the porch, where Mr. Ali was already waiting for me. He seemed to be thrilled with something, but only until he saw me.

– You look wonderful! – A slight smile appeared on his face.

– Thank you, – I answered quickly. – Let's go so that this evening ends soon. – He nodded, continuing to smile, which annoyed me, but I tried to control myself. In the end, I need to get used to this, if only so that I can safely be in his company for more than two minutes.

We went to the restaurant in the same minibus that drove me from the airport, only this time the driver was different, it seems

his name was Zakir. The prince sat opposite me, and from time to time I caught his eyes on me, which I could not understand. We were accompanied by two guarded cars, one in front and one in the back. Several guards also accompanied us to a restaurant in which our appearance aroused unprecedented interest and excitement. Of course, none of those present addressed us, here excessive attention to women and people occupying a high position in society is punishable.

– Do not forget, we are a couple in love, so relax and try to enjoy this evening, – the prince whispered in my ear at the entrance to the restaurant, to which I tried to smile, as if he had told me some romantic words.

– I doubt that I will succeed. – I answered with a sweet smile on my face. – It is good that your country does not welcome the public display of feelings.

A girl came up to us and greeted in Arabic, then Ali told her something that made her smile, after which she nodded her head and pointed us to our table. He was at the other end of the room behind a small breadth. Ali took me to my place, unzipped a button on his jacket and sat across from me. A waiter came up to us, greeted us, handed out a menu and informed that he would return as soon as we were ready to place an order.

– Do you have any special eating habits? he asked me as soon as we were left alone.

I thought, looking directly at him.

– I don't know. Perhaps Italian cuisine is closest to me.

– Pizza, pasta, various sauces? – I nodded.

– This is what makes me feel better even on the darkest days. – I returned to studying the menu. Wonderful! They have pasta bolognese.

– Have you had many such days?

– Quite a bit of. – I sighed heavily, prepared to voice my order.

I chose orange juice, vegetable salad and pasta bolognese. Ali also ordered beef tenderloin steak, grilled vegetables and some local drink. While we were waiting for the order, Ali began to get noticeably nervous, looking at my hands lying on the table.

– I understand that all this is strange, but ... – he put his hand in the inside pocket of his jacket – two weeks later we have a wedding, and... in modern society, it seems customary that there is an engagement before the wedding. – He took out a black velvet box and handed it to me. – Since our situation is not quite traditional, we will be guided by European standards.

I looked around, and making sure that no one was watching us with trembling hands, she took the box and carefully opened it, not believing my eyes. Elegant white gold ring with a small diamond in the middle. My throat was dry and I could not believe my eyes. Instead of delight and joy, I felt a panic and realized that everything that was happening to me was real.

– I ... – I swallowed, trying to level my voice. – Will I have to wear it? Is always?

– Yes. This is another rule. From this moment and all the time that we are married. – I looked in panic at Ali, who hesitantly

reached for the box. – If you will...

I handed him a box from which he carefully removed the ring and extended his hand to me. I hesitantly put my hand into her and looked at Ali, who was as excited as I was. He put a ring on my ring finger and covered my hand with his hot soft palm, while piercing me with the look of his dark eyes. I felt heat spreading all over my body, which made me feel uncomfortable. The ring went perfectly. Ali still held my hand in his hands for a while. Fortunately, at that moment they brought us food, and I was able to remove my hand, hiding it under the table. I took a big sip of juice to calm my nerves and looked around again. Nobody seems to have noticed anything. Ali started dinner, and I continued to sit, not knowing whether I should eat, because of the excitement I felt nauseous.

– Irina? Why aren't you eating anything?

– I'm almost not hungry, – I said uncertainly, looking towards the window, behind which there was an endless stream of cars and people hurrying somewhere. – They will photograph us secretly or ...?

– No, – he shook his head, chewing vigorously on the food he sent to his mouth a minute ago. – At the exit, we will be waiting for journalists who will ask questions that were given to them in advance.

– That is, they will not ask for anything superfluous? He shook his head.

– Do you want some coffee? – I looked at him suspiciously,

noting his ability to quickly change the subject.

– Isn't that a strong coffee?

– Then you need to eat something, – I raised my eyebrows in surprise. – Over the past few days, you have completely withered. Samira said that you eat very little, but ... – he looked straight into my eyes – you did not look worse.

From his remarks, I was embarrassed and looked at the plate with vegetable salad, while he took the fork and attacked the vegetables in my plate, ruthlessly sticking them on the fork.

– What are you doing? I asked in surprise, looking at him.

“Saving vegetables in your plate. They are not to blame for the fact that you do not want to eat them. He said with a serious expression on his face.

“And you decided to become the one who will save them from a painful death in the form of a slow decomposition in a bin?”

– Yes exactly. – I laughed soundlessly, not believing that we really talk about vegetables, when we have much more important topics for conversation.

– So that? Would you let these guys die? They were grown for a better life, long struggled to charge you with strength and vitamins. – He defiantly ate everything that was on his fork.

– Good good! – I could not stop smiling. – Just let's end this conversation, otherwise someone will think that we are crazy.

– I don't care what people think of me who don't know me at all.

– Well, yes... who else but me should know this, I said without

a word, lifting my fork. – You know, your food affects me badly, – he frowned, not understanding what I mean. – After I eat it, I constantly want to sleep, and even for my stomach it is too sharp. – I hesitantly looked at a piece of tomato attached to my fork, and then put it in my mouth and began to chew slowly.

– Why haven't you said this before? – He asked, it seemed to me, annoyed. I swallowed the food and looked at him point blank, not understanding his reaction.

– People in the kitchen, well... that is, your cooks are trying, they are cooking, but will I quibble with them? I do not think that I have a right to it.

– Now this is your home, and you can do whatever you want in it. Change ... – he looked around, lowering his voice and leaned towards me across the table, because the people at the neighboring tables began to pay attention to us – to change everything that does not suit you, or all that does not suit you.

– I don't think I have the right to do this – I started picking on a plate with already chilled pasta.

– Well, we will return to this topic. – I took a deep breath, putting a fork in my mouth with a paste wound around it, which turned out to be very tasty.

A feeling of full satiation came to me after I ate pasta, drank juice and a cup of coffee. When I finished eating, I noticed that Ali was looking at me with a smile on his face.

– What? – I asked, meeting his laughing gaze.

– The food affected you well, your complexion brightened

up. – I touched my flaming cheeks with my palms, feeling a slight clouding. – Order dessert?

I shook my head.

– I think I've already eaten, but I won't refuse a glass of water.

The prince called the waiter and handed him my request. I drank water slowly, and by the time I needed to portray the future princess of this country, in love with my fiancé, I felt surprisingly relaxed and calm.

Ali paid the bill, and we headed to the exit, where the journalists were already waiting for us. Ali smiled encouragingly at me, opened the door in front of me, and we went to the press, which was ready to tear us apart with our questions.

– Good afternoon, Your Highness, is that true? Are you really getting married? – A girl of Slavic appearance in pure Russian asked us a question. Ali had such a smile that no one would dare reproach him for insincerity.

– Yes it's true. In the very near future I am going to marry the most beautiful girl – he looked at me as if his words were true.

– There are rumors that your bride is forcibly held in the Emirate, how do you comment on this? Ali laughed with a light, laid-back laugh and shook his head.

– Well, you, my friends! We just protect our privacy, so we try not to spread any details, really, dear?

My turn has come. I tried to pull myself together and ignore the many microphones in front of me.

– I hasten to reassure everyone who, for whatever reason,

is worried about my presence here. – I swallowed, trying to convincingly squeeze out the following words. – I am here of my own free will. I ... – I looked at Ali. – Nobody forced me to say or do anything. Our romance ... – I straightened my hair, developing in the wind, trying not to miss the thought – we kept it a secret, and perhaps this would have continued if it were not for our mutual desire to legitimize our relationship, – the following words pierced my heart with millions of fragments – In this regard, I am making an official statement. I... voluntarily renounce the citizenship of my country and accept the citizenship of the emirate of my future husband. – the journalists gasped, and I looked at Ali with false admiration, to which he answered me the same. – My decision was made consciously, and I am not under any pressure.

– Friends, if you have no more questions, we would like to continue our evening. Thanks for attention.

We took one official joint photo, and the security service asked the journalists to leave us, and we quickly climbed into our minibus and drove home. Once in the car, I felt that my hands were numb and my legs were trembling slightly.

– It seems that everything went well, – the prince smiled, and I looked at him in dismay.

– I don't understand why you need it, – I looked at him point blank.

– I have my own reasons for this. – He turned to the window, making it clear that our conversation was over.

CHAPTER 13

– Here, here... and here – it seemed, I put the hundredth signature on the documents, statements, agreements and marriage agreements. – Good. And the last one. – I run through my eyes on what is written on paper and feel nauseous. Just one signature connects me with my past life. I deliberately drag out time, but there is no way out, and I put the last signature. – Congratulations! From now on, you are officially a citizen of the UAE.

I nod slowly, trying to smile. I seem to have sold my homeland, but actually it was my parents who sold me. Of course, I can not agree with everything that Ali does to me (which still does not fit into my head), but then my family will suffer, and I love them, no matter what. I look at the ring on my finger and understand that no wealth in the world can fill the void in my heart and soften the pain of betrayal.

– If nothing else is required of me, then I will go. – I looked around everyone in the office.

– No-no. I will settle the rest myself. – Lawyer Ali, who deals with all issues related to my citizenship and stay in the UAE, spoke with an Arabic accent. I got to my feet and cast a lifeless glance at Ali, who was deeply thinking about something, and then turned my attention to the lawyer. – All the best.

He bowed to me, rising to his feet.

– Always at your service, Madame Mironova.

And this one there! I tried not to react at all to his appeal to me and hastened to leave the office.

More than a week has passed since our conversation with the press, but the passions around us never subside. They write about me in newspapers, make programs, there are various rumors at all levels, but I don't react to anything. I just go with the flow. I surrendered to circumstances and occasions and admitted that my fate is in the hands of the prince of this country, who, apart from indifference, does not cause me any emotions.

Ten days later, our wedding will take place, and I am going to spend these remaining days of my freedom alone with myself, but it seemed that the groom (it's strange to even think of him like that) had other plans. That evening I sat in the gazebo and read a book from the library of this house. There was one of those rare days when the heat gives way to heavy rain, bringing purity and freshness of nature. Samira fled to the house to help prepare for tomorrow's dinner, which Ali is arranging for his father. Another test for me.

– And I think, where did you go? – I put the bookmark into the book and looked defiantly at Mr. Ali.

– Do not worry, I will not run beyond the borders of your country. – He smiled sadly, sinking down on the bench next to me. “Why were you looking for me?”

For the first time, I allowed myself to examine him with my eyes, being so close to him. At dusk, his appearance produced

an impressive effect. Big hazel, I would say, black eyes framed by long black eyelashes were now examining my face, and the bangs, lying as if he had met a strong wind a minute ago, gave the impression that there was a carefree young man in front of me. A person who is about to do something childishly harmless, but... the same person threatens my family and keeps me captive.

– Honestly, I thought you had lost your capacity for audacity, – he began, looking at me.

– You can take my family, country, life, but not that. – I was ready to defend myself.

– I was not going to do this. I told you to remain yourself. – For a moment there was silence. – It seems you liked this place, – He looked around from the inside.

– I like that she stands a little away from home. Almost no one passes here, and I can safely enjoy the weather. Only here... too dark, and this disposes to gloomy thoughts. – He looked at me in surprise, passing his hair through his fingers.

– I never thought of it that way.

I smiled faintly, exposing my face to a stream of soft, refreshing wind, so necessary for my skin.

– Did you want to talk to me about something, Mr. Ali? – I asked, looking defiantly at him.

– I think we can safely contact each other simply by name, – I looked at him in surprise, – in the end, we will get married in ten days.

“As you wish,” I shrugged indifferently.

– What do you want? – with pressure he asked.

– Does my opinion matter?

– It has. And very big. More than you think – our eyes crossed again, and it seemed to me that he was talking seriously.

– Good... only, is it possible to somehow make sure that “Madame” does not contact me? I am not their mistress, and they are not my subjects. – From my words he grinned, continuing to look at me.

– I’m afraid to disappoint you, but it’s impossible. Traditions. – He answered my unspoken question. – Despite the fact that you are not from this country, your position is high since you are the bride of the crown prince. For the citizens of our country, you are a commoner. – I rounded my eyes in surprise. I didn’t think it sounds so insulting. – But you are respected simply, because the prince considered you worthy to make you his lawful wife.”

– In short, they like me because you “loved me”? – I portrayed air quotes.

– Yeah. “Loved.” – He repeated my gesture.

– And I just can’t get rid of these formalities?

– Never. He shook his head, trying to suppress a smile.

– But I do not want this to be so! All the inhabitants of this house are the same as you, I, your father. Everyone has rights and obligations from birth, of course, also has them, but they are not slaves! – I jumped to my feet. – And I refuse to behave with them as if they belong to me. No one deserves such an attitude! —

I finished my fiery speech and fell silent.

– You are right, – he began cautiously, – but historically everything turned out this way and not otherwise. – He hesitated, choosing words. – You can go and tell them: “You are not slaves. You are free citizens, you can go wherever you want and do what you want, but they will not go anywhere.

– Right! – I crossed my arms over my chest to feel confident. – Because they are afraid to be punished.

– No, – he smiled sadly, – all because they themselves want it. – This is not slavery, it is such a form of life, a little strange for you or any other foreigner, but... people get good money for their work, they are sincerely happy to help, and not serve. This is what they do. – I got up and looked at him embarrassedly, not understanding what he was trying to convey to me. – I want to say that the laws of our society are different from the European ones, but only because they are based on the Quran. I hope you know what it is? – I nodded, fingering a simple pendant of ordinary inexpensive metal around my neck – Lerka’s gift for a housewarming party with her. Ali looked at my neck, got to his feet, went to the railing and leaned on his hands. Now he stood with his back to me. – Something got us wrong. – He said thoughtfully. – I was looking for you to discuss the wedding.

I was a little puzzled by such a statement.

– In my opinion there is nothing to discuss here? I will fulfill my promise, in return for this you will not allow yourself anything bad or dangerous in the direction of my family.

– I didn't mean it – over his shoulder he shot me an annoyed look, as if I didn't understand obvious things, and then turned away again. – It is necessary to discuss the holiday itself. Even if it does not matter for you, then for my country, I would say this is a historical event.

– Then you better know how to behave. I guarantee my presence at the wedding, so don't worry.

– I'm not worried about that! You just need to say what you want! – Wow! The prince got angry and right now burned me with a fierce look. – I don't know... what do you women want on such days? A fabulous dress from a fashion designer, expensive shoes, a bunch of guests, a huge cake, decorations? What would you like?

– I don't need all this, – I said indifferently, noting that the street had become completely dark. – I just want no one to pay attention to me, and that all this will be over soon. – Choose a dress of your choice. In the end, all this is done for you and for your sake. I do not need anything. – I swallowed a lump in my throat. – Just let the wedding be in a narrow circle. No big cakes, luxurious dresses and other tinsel.

At this moment, Samira came to us. She stopped at a safe distance with a tray in her hands and stood there until Ali noticed her.

– Samira, you can get through.

She bowed slightly and looked at me worriedly.

– I brought herbal tea and berry pies. With wild berry. – She

added with satisfaction.

– Where are the wild berries from? She cast a short glance at Ali, and then looked at me again.

– I'll bring them here. Especially for you. – I raised an eyebrow in surprise and looked at Ali. He seemed a little embarrassed. Blimey! The prince decided to feed the captive himself.

– Well then, thanks.” – I smiled faintly, taking from her hands a cup of fragrant tea.

Samira bowed once more and left. I looked at the cake, evaluating the degree of my desire to eat it.

– There is one more question. – Ali sat opposite me and tried to catch my eye, which I stubbornly hid in a cup of tea. – What to do with your family? After talking with your father... do you want to see him among other guests? – I stopped the cake halfway to my mouth and returned it to the plate and shook off my hands, pondering his question.

– Not. I do not want to see him or my mother. But Alina... I think she deserves to know that I still love her. – I felt a lump growing in my throat, and hastened to take a sip of tea, burning my tongue, because of which tears appeared in my eyes.

– Are you okay? – I closed my eyes, nodding my head and not understanding what saddens me more: the fact that I got burned or that my family continues a carefree life while I spend time locked up in this huge house. – I'm sure there shouldn't be a problem with your sister. Tomorrow I will send someone to her to be warned and prepared. If you need anything, just tell Samira.

He got to his feet and left without a word.

CHAPTER 14

This “family” dinner of preparation went more than a day. There were many people in the house who moved, rearranged, decorated and shouted at each other. Today, for the first time since I am here, I voluntarily decided to look irresistible. This whole story that happens to me has a rather negative effect not only on my moral state, but also on my appearance. The skin became pale, almost transparent and very dry, under the eyes lay huge shadows. Someone seemed to be slowly taking my life.

– Irina, this dress is hanging on you. If you continue to torment yourself in this way, it will not lead to anything good – Samira scolded me, fastening my Greek-style dress with a long floor in black chiffon with a small neckline on the chest and sleeves that reached the elbows.

– To be honest, I myself do not understand what is happening to me, probably all of this from excitement. I hope that everything will work out soon. So do not worry. – She tied my waist with a black belt and, bowing, ran out of the room.

I looked at myself in the mirror, which Samira pulled from the wardrobe into the bedroom and started. Against the background of the black dress, my skin seemed terribly white, and the eyes on the emaciated face were large and scared. I flinched at a sudden knock on the door, cleared my throat and confidently answered for the visitor to enter. To my surprise, it was Ali in a white

kandura and a scarf attached to his head with a black stripe. The traditional Arabian men's outfit matched perfectly with the Arabian prince, who looked slightly excited.

– I decided to personally come after you, – he cleared his throat, and then I noticed a flat, long velvet box in his hands – and give it. I think, just for your today's outfit.

He carefully opened the box and took a couple of steps in my direction. It was a pendant on a chain of white gold.

– I can't accept this, – I said decisively, looking from the beautiful contents of the box to Ali, who nervously swallowed and pursed his lips.

– Only for one evening. After dinner, you can throw him away, hide him in the farthest corner or ... – he pierced me with his expressive look – leave him and put it on my neck. In general, you will do whatever you want with him. I nodded carefully, pondering his words. In the end, it's only for one evening. Ali took the pendant out of the box and hesitantly approached me, unfastening the lock on the go. – If you will...

I looked at his outstretched hands, assessing the situation. Is it worth it to let this person into their personal space? I turned my back to him, threw my hair to the side, took off Lera's gift and squeezed it in my hand, feeling unbearable homesickness. Ali came so close to me that I felt the heat of his body and the smell of perfume on my back. A bit pungent but refreshing. I swallowed nervously, aware of the tension of the moment. He carefully laid the chain on my neck, touching it with the fingers

of my hand holding my hair, which made me sharply pull it back, feeling the strong beat of his heart. Probably the animals, cornered, feel the way I feel now. He fastened the chain and ran his fingers lightly over the open area on my neck, causing a slight trembling in my spine.

Trying to pretend that his proximity does not bother me at all, I met his gaze in the mirror. Now his excitement gave way to satisfaction, and a faint smile appeared on his face. For a while we stood in complete silence, dissolving in each other's eyes, until we were interrupted by a knock on the door. I shook my head, trying to get rid of the instant turbidity, and stepped back a few steps from Ali.

– Sir, – came a dull voice from behind the door, – our Lord has come for supper.

I was overcome by a panic and looked at Ali, who was thinking about something.

– May I ask you a favor?

I took a deep breath and wary.

– It depends on what exactly you want to ask.

– We can pretend that all this is real, that is ... – he hesitantly looked into my eyes. – That we are really in love?

For a moment I was in a stupor, but then understanding came.

– Your father does not know that you bought me as a thing in the market! – He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

– He knows that you are not here of your own free will, but... I did not tell him the rest, so as not to put you and your family

in a difficult position.

– Wow! How noble of you. – I could not hide the poison that was in my words, and ran a hand over his face. – Well... there is absolutely no turning back.

– Thank you.

I did not answer, and together we left my bedroom. I felt a slight excitement. Sheikh Amir, like last time, showed his joy at the meeting. Today he was accompanied by his second wife, Malika, and the youngest son, Damir. Ali introduced me to his family one by one, and then we exchanged greetings, questions about health and progress in business, after which Ali invited everyone to the part of the house reserved for receiving guests (it turns out that there is one). Around the laid round table lay a low red mattress with a huge number of different pillows, and on the walls were chic massive rugs in oriental style.

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