

Rizk Lily

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The Exposure

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18+

Lily Rizk

**Damir. The Exposure**

«АВТОР»

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## **Rizk L.**

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What could be better for a guy who's spent his whole life handling things on his own, than suddenly being handed a perfect life on a silver platter? A fancy house. A car. Money, business, family. A dream come true. But that sweet slice of life had a poisoned core. And one day, he realized—it would've been better if it had never happened at all.

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# Lily Rizk

## Damir. The Exposure

### Part I

#### Chapter 1

1980

The young man knocked on the door of a roadside motel room.

A minute later, a rather beautiful girl with long, blonde curls and a light, short dress appeared on the threshold, her face filled with surprise.

«Why are you here? Where's your brother?» she asked, glancing around.

«He's not coming.» The tall, dark-haired man narrowed his eyes and, without waiting for an invitation, stepped inside.

Startled by his audacity, the girl instinctively moved to the side. Meanwhile, the visitor stopped in the middle of the room, noticing an open suitcase on the bed, filled with neatly folded clothes. His gaze swept over the surroundings before he spoke in a commanding tone:

«You need to go back home and forget about him forever.»

Looking at him in confusion, the girl immediately responded, «That will never happen!»

«If you truly love him, you'll listen to me.»

He turned to face her, his black eyes locking onto her large, blue ones.

His gaze made her take a step back. Yet, in a quiet but firm voice, she said, «That's not for you to decide.»

«You don't understand. Family bonds mean everything to us. If he stays with you, he will suffer. He's going against our father because of you,» he growled, his brows furrowing as his voice took on a harsher edge. «This won't end well. Disaster will follow. Leave and forget about him!»

He was trying to make her see the seriousness of the situation. But she was stubborn, snapping back at him with a defiant «No!»

Yet at that moment, a shiver ran through her body. A strange, unsettling feeling washed over her—an anxious fear, as if something terrible was about to happen.

She kept backing away until she felt the cold press of the wall against her back, right next to the window. Her wide eyes never left him.

Noticing her distress, the man was momentarily puzzled. He hadn't moved from his spot—his hands were casually tucked into his pockets, and he was simply talking. And yet, she was trembling.

With bated breath, she cast a desperate glance out the window, as if hoping for salvation. The day had dragged into the evening in endless waiting for her beloved. Until the very last moment, she had clung to hope, listening intently for his footsteps. But they never came.

Meanwhile, the man stood still, analyzing the situation. Leaving things as they were and walking away now seemed impossible. Since he had come this far, he had to at least try to change something. He saw it as his duty to save his brother from the looming threat—no matter the cost.

As he studied her closely, an unsettling realization formed in his mind. His brother's chosen woman was undeniably alluring—her porcelain-white skin, full lips tinged with the soft pink of a newborn, framed by a halo of golden hair. Her body was already that of a mature woman, with a

graceful, feminine shape and long, slender legs. She was a sight to admire... and a temptation strong enough to make a man lose his senses.

But his brother had to be stopped.

And so, he made a decision—he would go to the extreme.

The fear in her eyes deepened as she noticed the man, who had so suddenly appeared in their love nest, start moving toward her—slowly, deliberately. And the look in his eyes promised nothing good.

## Chapter 2

### More Than Thirty Years Later

Damir sat on a bench along the alley leading to the business centre, where he had just met with the Saidi family's lawyer. He lowered his head into his hands and closed his eyes. He couldn't wrap his mind around the news he had just received.

In a single day, his entire life had been turned upside down. And he had no idea what to do with it now. Seeking advice or telling anyone about what he had just learned wasn't something he was rushing to do. But making a decision in this situation didn't seem to make much sense either. All that was expected of him was to accept the reality placed before him and simply go with the flow.

For some time, he paced back and forth, then sat down again, lost in thought. Emotions were tearing him apart from the inside. He couldn't even decide whether to feel happy or devastated. But for some reason, his soul was in turmoil, feeling more pain than joy.

Rationally, he understood that there was no one to blame. And yet, he felt deceived by fate—like a defective toy, discarded into a pile of trash. Just when his identity had already been shaped, when he had learned to survive alone without anyone's help, after enduring all the hardships, he was suddenly presented with an entirely new version of his life.

It turned out that he hadn't needed to struggle so much to survive. That even his poor mother hadn't needed to work herself to exhaustion just so he could get an education. And now, when he had already fought his way up from the ground, he learned that things could have been much simpler. That his life could have been entirely different.

The thought of his mother tore at his heart.

Still, after some time spent in painful turmoil, he finally returned to the university dormitory, where he had been living for the past five years since his first year in law school.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah... yeah," Damir muttered absentmindedly, lying on his bed with his boots still on.

His roommate and best friend, Vadim, had just come back from the shower. He glanced at him in surprise. Damir was usually obsessively meticulous about cleanliness, yet here he was, sprawled on the bed in his jacket, fully dressed, with his arms thrown behind his head. Shrugging, Vadim turned to the wardrobe in the corner and started changing, deciding not to press the conversation. He must have understood that his friend needed to be alone. Without another word, he quickly left the room, giving Damir the solitude he seemed to need.

Two days later, Damir headed to Bolgar, his hometown. The last time he had been there was almost five years ago. So much had changed since then...

He sat in the airplane, staring out the window, but his mind was flipping through different images. His memory replayed scenes from a carefree childhood spent in the suburbs of Bolgar. Then came the years of growing up, filled with struggles and thorns he had to endure alone. His father had died in a car accident before he was even born, and he had no siblings. He had been forced to grow tough—perhaps from the cradle.

For as long as he could remember, his mother had always been working. He had largely been left to his own devices, facing every victory and every failure alone.

Recalling the reckless moments of his youth, he he grinned. I wonder how Marat is doing... a bold guy.

Marat had left a special mark in his memory, a label reading "different." Damir chuckled as he remembered their fight. Though, in truth, there had been nothing pleasant about it—none at all.

"You'll be whining like a beaten dog on your knees soon!" Marat had snarled, swinging a massive chain in the air, drawing figure eights with it.

Damir silently watched the chain's arc, calculating when to dodge the deadly weapon heading his way. He let his opponent attack freely, never once hindering him. On the contrary, taking advantage of the moment, he deliberately taunted him—stepping closer, gesturing for him to continue, only to retreat again at the last second.

The chase continued across the entire lot where their brawl had broken out. Marat pursued him relentlessly, attacking with a furious yell, trying to land a hit. But each time, Damir managed to slip away.

Finally, his opponent began to weaken. His voice grew strained, his swings less powerful.

Sensing the shift, Damir knew it was time. The next time the chain came flying, he seized its end and yanked it toward him. Marat barely had time to react before he found himself ensnared in his enemy's grasp.

In an instant, Damir wrapped the chain around his neck like a scarf and pulled.

Marat choked, his legs giving out beneath him.

"Who was it that was supposed to end up on their knees?" Damir asked mockingly, prying the brass knuckles off his barely conscious rival's hand.

Marat looked up at his "executioner" in horror, expecting the worst. But Damir ignored his frightened stare, pressing his lips into a thin line as he fitted the brass knuckles onto his own fingers.

A split second later, with a crushing blow to the face, Marat felt a flash of searing pain—then blissful silence.

Satisfied, Damir let the bleeding gang leader collapse to the ground. He whistled to his men, signaling them to halt the ongoing fight.

While he had been dealing with Marat, his ten or so guys had been engaged in their own battles.

"Boys, leave them be!" he shouted, waving them off.

Seeing their leader unconscious in a pool of blood, the opposing gang also reached a grim conclusion and had no choice but to surrender.

That was how the two criminal groups "signed" their agreement on territorial control. From that moment on, Damir and his crew could operate freely, without threats.

Marat and his gang, on the other hand, were forced to keep their heads down and stay out of the way. There were no more clashes between them, and Marat faded into the background.

But similar fights continued to break out with others. Somehow, Damir always emerged victorious. His reputation as a leader of his still-small criminal group grew rapidly. The neighborhood boys were turning into hardened criminals.

Their operations expanded along with their limits, though they never quite crossed into heavy crime. Still, the gang made money however they could—usually illegally. Robberies, car thefts, and more became part of their daily business. The more they did, the more connections they gained. The network grew, along with influence and protection.

And things might have gone on like that indefinitely—until Damir made a mistake.

### **Chapter 3**

His mother greeted her son with joy. After standing in an embrace for about half an hour on the doorstep, she wiped away her sudden tears and began to chatter.

She told him how she had eagerly waited for this moment, how she had baked his favorite pastries, and about all the other treats he had missed during his student life.

Damir smiled warmly and nodded.

"Mom is in her element," he thought.

She also mentioned the neighbor's daughter, who had been helping and supporting her.

«She's become such a grown young woman, a real bride already. A good girl, a beauty,» his mother said warmly.

Damir managed to listen to all of it while taking off his coat and shoes in the small hallway of their three-room house. He was touched by his mother's attention and care.

«Thank you, Mom, but you really didn't have to go to all that trouble,» he said, bending nearly in half to hug his petite mother again.

She began kissing both of his cheeks and crying once more. She stroked his thick black curls and looked into his large dark eyes with deep love and pride.

«How handsome you've become, my son...»

Damir pressed his lips together and didn't say anything—he just looked into her kind, light eyes with gratitude.

After dinner, the praised neighbor girl came over with her mother.

He had known them since childhood.

They came to greet him and to congratulate him on finishing university soon.

After dinner, they all sat at the table, drinking tea. The conversation was about Moscow, the challenges and joys of student life, his successes and future hopes. In short—everything about him.

Damir understood what this little feast was about and what they were hoping for from him, but he didn't rush into anything. He preferred to sneak away from the “party” as quickly as possible.

“I'm going out for a walk,» he said after coming back from the bathroom and quickly grabbing his jacket on the way to the door.

“Maybe Aaliya can go with you, son?» his mother suggested, her eyes full of pleading.

Damir stopped and looked around at the guests.

The women sat there with hopeful eyes, watching him in anticipation of his answer.

He nodded in agreement. There was no escaping it.

He and his mother still had a serious and difficult conversation ahead, so he decided not to upset her now. In fact, he never intended to hurt or disappoint her—she was and would always be the dearest and most important person in his life.

Well... Aaliya had helped his mother with everything while he was away. She had become like a daughter to her.

She would probably continue to stay by her side now.

Damir glanced at the modest girl walking beside him.

Almond-shaped gray eyes, just like his mother's, a round face, long light-brown hair braided neatly, a modest outfit, no makeup at all.

A complete contrast to the glamorous Moscow girls he was used to seeing.

The girl smiled shyly, and a blush lit up her plump cheeks, revealing faint dimples.

Damir liked her reaction to his studying gaze.

He smiled back with his dazzling smile and winked at her.

He didn't rush to ask her out, but the thought had crossed his mind. He liked her.

They walked for about an hour, maybe even an hour and a half, chatted and laughed.

Then he walked her home, thanked her, and promised to call.

The girl walked away full of hope and dreams.

Meanwhile, he headed home, caught up in entirely different thoughts.

The next morning during breakfast, his mother said she had taken a few days off to spend more time with him.

That made him happy, and he decided not to put off the serious conversation any longer.

Sitting down on the couch, he asked her to sit next to him.

«Mom, why am I dark-skinned and don't look like you?» Damir asked directly, looking into her smiling eyes.

She looked a little confused, and her smile began to fade.

«Am I?» she shrugged, puzzled.

«Yes. I'm different.»

Damir's voice was calm but confident. He didn't look away.

«Well, maybe it's your father's genes...» she said, trying to reason, not understanding what her son was getting at.

«But I don't look Tatar. He was Tatar too, wasn't he?»

«We don't know who his parents were... they died young...»

Damir watched her with a half-smile, answering her assumptions with silence.

“I don't understand, son,” the woman said in frustration, turning her whole body toward him. “What are you trying to say?! I've never been with anyone except my husband, and I know exactly who your father is!”

“Mom, calm down, come on. I never meant to suggest anything like that,” Damir assured her, gently patting her on the shoulder. But feeling her tension, he sighed and, after a pause, continued.

“I love you endlessly, and I always will. You're my mother – and nothing will ever change that.”

She blinked quickly, and her fear only grew with every word he spoke.

He sighed again and turned away. His tongue wouldn't move.

She sat there, waiting for him to finish.

What terrified her most was the thought of losing him.

He knew that – and that made it even harder to speak.

After a short pause, Damir finally gathered his courage.

He took her small hand into his large palms and held it gently.

With warmth in his voice, he tried to continue.

“I recently found out that...”

“What??”

“That... we were accidentally switched.”

“Switched? Who was switched?”

“Me and him.”

“Him who?” The woman was turning pale, her mouth slightly open as she struggled for breath.

The thought that was forming in her head terrified her.

“Your real son. He lives in Canada. His name is Samad Saidi.”

## Chapter 4

«Her blood pressure spiked, but she's stable now, don't worry,» the doctor said as she walked out of the ICU.

Damir stood there holding his breath, waiting for the verdict. He scolded himself for telling his mother everything so directly, without preparation. He had no idea how to act now or what to do next. But thank God—it wasn't a heart attack. The fainting had been caused by a sudden spike in blood pressure. By the evening, he brought his mother home.

«Are you going to Canada?» she asked weakly from her bed when Damir approached.

«My place is by your side,» he replied.

But three months later, a plane carried Damir to Montreal—toward his biological parents, and the young man who had unknowingly gifted him such a wonderful mother. He had decided to grant her wish and marry the neighbor girl—not only to ease her worries, but also because he genuinely liked Aaliya. Besides, none of the local guys had a bad word to say about her when he discreetly asked about her reputation. That settled it for him. A month after the hospital incident, they got engaged. Aaliya put on the headscarf and the ring—she became his official fiancée.

Soon after, Damir returned to Moscow, completed his studies, and applied for a visa. He refused to communicate with his real parents over the internet, preferring to save everything for a face-to-face meeting. All legal matters were handled through their lawyer—he was the one who informed Damir of everything.

It turned out Damir was the son of Mr. Omer Saidi, a 65-year-old Iranian businessman. Omer was a prominent entrepreneur, the owner and CEO of an agricultural corporation, along with a chain of supermarkets across Canadian provinces and several U.S. states. Damir also learned he had a biological mother—Emine Saidi, age 62—and a 23-year-old sister, Saher, a student at the University of Montreal majoring in Management and Marketing. The family also included Samad Saidi, who, as it turned out, was their adopted son. Like Damir, Samad had studied law and worked in their father's corporation. Damir had started university much later than his peers, while Samad had already gained at least eight years of professional experience and legal expertise. The twelve-hour flight gave Damir's imagination plenty of space to wander. He couldn't wait to meet his real parents—especially his father, whom he had dreamed of all his life. He kept telling himself that they weren't at fault for his growing up far from them. They hadn't even known their son wasn't biologically theirs—until Samad was in an accident and a blood test revealed the truth. That's when the long, difficult search began, leading them all the way to Bolgar.

Yes, back in distant 1982, his parents had traveled to Russia. Business had taken them to Kazan. Later, a drive to Bolgar and an unexpected labor. It had been a reckless decision by young Omer Saidi—he took his beloved wife everywhere, and she never wanted to leave his side, even while pregnant. Their passionate love had led to that moment. Damir sighed and pulled a small envelope from his chest pocket.

Inside were a few worn-out photos of his Tatar mother, Zulfiya Palatova. Her in youth, in middle age, and now at 63. He gently stroked the surface of the latest photo, warmth flooding his veins. Surely Samad would tear up seeing the face of his real mother and rush to meet her, Damir thought. Well, she would have two sons now—just like Mrs. Emine Saidi. By dawn, the noisy Montreal airport welcomed an Aeroflot flight from Russia. Damir's luggage was modest—just a small suitcase with the essentials. He wasn't planning to stay long. Meet them, maybe make a decision at a family meeting, and go back home. He wasn't about to abandon his mother Zulfiya. Maybe his life would now be split between two countries, he thought. His blood was pulling him—it already had—and there was no

fighting it. He would want to see his real parents and younger sister again, and they wouldn't let him go easily either—he was sure of it. It wasn't about status or money anymore. None of it mattered.

Damir shook his head. Amazing—just when the long-awaited dream finally appeared on the horizon, it immediately lost its meaning. He wanted to know and feel his real family—even if they lived in a slum in some forgotten corner of Calcutta.

At the airport, he was met by Mr. Saidi's driver. Damir took the back seat of the black, tinted Land Rover and closed his eyes. The air inside carried the scent of high society—a world that had felt as distant as the stars just a few months ago. His memory jumped to the recent past—well-furnished offices, luxurious homes, guards, expensive cars. All of it had once felt untouchable, like a museum display. His own attempts to rise to that level had failed, and for a time, he had buried the dream deep inside and focused on studying. Sometimes he worked as a courier, delivering documents on a company scooter or carrying a backpack on foot—then disappearing just as quietly. He never imagined he'd be sitting in the back seat of such a car, being driven like a guest of honor.

Damir sighed and looked out the window. He didn't feel joy. He couldn't feel happiness or the thrill of something fateful and grand. On the contrary—he was full of pain and regret. And that feeling hadn't left him since the moment he sat across from a man in a gray suit holding a folder.

“Mr. Damir Palatov,” the lawyer said in fluent English—Damir had learned it well—

“I must inform you that you are the biological son of Mr. Omer and Mrs. Emine Saidi. You were switched at birth due to a tragic mistake. A private investigation has been ongoing for two years, and it is now complete. We also conducted a secret DNA test. You weren't informed earlier—” the man coughed lightly, “—because we needed to confirm the results and didn't want to disturb or traumatize you unnecessarily. We can perform another test officially, if you'd like, but rest assured—your real parents have found their son.”

Damir would never forget a single word the lawyer said. Even the sound of his voice had been burned into memory. They hadn't wanted to “traumatize” him? Really?

He had nearly lost his mind from the shock. Though by now, Damir had slowly begun to recover.

Trying to distract himself, he focused on the streets outside. Beautiful scenery with European charm blended with Western modernity—it inspired him to dream again, to explore this new and unfamiliar world.

“This isn't mine. Not my life. I'm just a guest. I'll appear and disappear,” he told himself. A man who had never known luxury, who had fought for every small slice of life, simply couldn't allow himself to believe in miracles. Anything but that. Miracles didn't happen to him—not even obvious ones. He was convinced something would go wrong, and he'd be sent back where he came from. Meanwhile, the car rolled toward one of the elite neighborhoods—it was obvious by the roads and the view. One mansion replaced another, each with its own garden and pool. They stopped near one such house. The gates parted.

Another 50 meters through a landscaped park, and the car pulled up to the grand residence. Damir got out and looked up at the four-story building towering before him. The driver removed his suitcase from the trunk and gestured toward the door. As it opened, Damir tensed, expecting to see his biological parents. Instead, a middle-aged woman in uniform appeared—clearly the housekeeper—and he let out a small breath of relief. She greeted him politely and led him further inside. The luxury of the home struck him immediately. Even though he had prepared himself—dressing in brand-name clothes, grooming himself carefully—he now felt the invisible weight of the delivery backpack from his past. He felt completely out of place. All he wanted was to leave and vanish.

“Salam alaikum, son. How was your flight?” a man's voice said in English with a slight accent.

Damir turned to see a tall, imposing man descending the staircase. He instantly recognized him—his father. The resemblance was undeniable. Like looking at himself, only older. Damir’s heart pounded in his chest.

“Wa alaikum assalam,” he answered with a shaky voice, and froze.

Mr. Saidi approached and extended his hand. Damir shook it, eyes locked on his father’s face. Then the man pulled him into a strong embrace. Damir didn’t speak Persian, but he understood his father was whispering a prayer of thanks. His voice trembled. Damir squeezed his eyes shut. A wave of overwhelming emotion swept over him, and he struggled to hold back the tears. But they broke through anyway.

A few minutes later, two women ran toward them. One was crying loudly; the other tried to calm her. The men turned. In a flash, Damir caught his mother in his arms. She didn’t even get the chance to hug him—she fainted. He had grown up a man who didn’t easily give in to sentiment. He could fight to the death, stare an enemy in the eye without flinching. He had endured cold, hunger, hardship—and never broken. But now, sitting on the floor, holding the woman he had just met for the first time in his 32 years, he cried like he was six again. His younger sister hugged him too. He stroked her shoulder, kissed her cheeks and hair. Meeting his real family shattered every doubt and fear inside him. He felt the overwhelming pull of blood—as if this had always been his true home. This was the air his lungs needed, the moments and faces his eyes longed to see, the scents his soul craved. Everything was here—among these people.

And no words could describe how a soul feels when it’s surrounded by love—wrapped in warmth like a soft blanket. That was exactly how Damir’s soul felt in those minutes. When he felt his father’s strong embrace, his mother’s tearful kisses, his sister’s hands around him... All the doubts that had plagued him before seemed like utter nonsense.

What could matter more than family?

It felt like he finally had answers to all the unspoken questions—and his heart found peace.

## Chapter 5

Damir asked for a cigarette, and the driver handed him his own pack. Without looking, Damir struck the lighter and took a long drag.

Standing on the balcony of his bedroom, he gazed up at the cloudy sky and smoked. It was the first time in over five years that he'd held a cigarette in his hands. It was around 4 a.m. After an emotionally exhausting day that smoothly turned into night, everyone had finally gone to their rooms, though likely, no one had actually fallen asleep. Everyone except Samad—he hadn't shown up at all. They said he had to go out of town for urgent business. Well, there would be time to meet. Plenty of time.

Damir thought about his Tatar mother. Of course he wouldn't leave her. She would stay close to him—wherever he lived. Here? Then here. And then there was Aaliya... he had a fiancée. He stubbed out the cigarette and went back inside.

The next two days, he stayed close to his birth mother, Emine. She practically didn't let him out of her sight. And he didn't resist her wishes. He had always been soft when it came to women—especially mothers. His Iranian mother spoke poor English, and they still communicated through a translator—his younger sister, Saher, who was more than happy to fill that role. Damir studied them when they weren't looking. His mother turned out to be an exceptionally beautiful woman—just like his sister. Large eyes framed by long lashes, arched brows, luxurious black hair. His mother had a soft, curvy figure that made him want to lay his head on her chest and fall asleep like a baby.

Saher, meanwhile, was tall and slender—clearly, they both inherited their height from their father. He was overwhelmed with emotion. He had no idea something like this could happen to him—love, pride, a hunger to make up for lost years. Even he couldn't fully grasp what was going on in his soul. But one thing he knew for certain—he didn't want to leave them anymore. His only real concern now was to bring over his mother Zulfiya. She was waiting for him, missing him, loving him. He couldn't leave her alone for long, knowing she was at home counting the days. So he decided to stay one more week and then bring up the subject—either of going back or having her come here. Oh yes, his fiancée was waiting too.

Damir knew they wouldn't deny him anything, and everything would work out. Especially since Samad—whom he still hadn't met—also needed time with his birth mother. And the best option, Damir concluded, would be for all of them to live together.

The next day, his father decided to introduce Damir to the family business. First stop: the main facility. They owned several thousand acres of land used for plantations. They grew strawberries, vegetables, and a variety of fruits. The produce was sold to different factories and local markets. They also ran a chain of supermarkets across Canadian provinces and three nearby U.S. cities.

“Samad's barely managing everything. Your brain and hands will be a huge help, son,” Omer said with a light chuckle, patting Damir's shoulder.

Damir was stunned by the scale of the operation. On the way to the office, his father gave him a brief overview of the business and its structure. It was clear he'd need months to learn everything thoroughly.

“I don't even know what to say, I...”

“Everything will come in time, my son. The main thing is—you're here with us. You'll succeed, I'm sure of it. Especially since, according to our information, you graduated university with top marks and studied very diligently. You're smart—and you're no coward.”

Omer emphasized those last words, looking straight into his son's eyes. Damir met his gaze and saw a warm smile. Omer closed his eyes briefly and nodded, silently answering the questions he saw in his son's face. Of course they had done their homework on him. Damir had no doubt—they

knew everything about his past. Who he hung out with, the trouble he'd been in. And yet, they hadn't hesitated to accept him into the family. Even with his rough, borderline criminal past. Sure, he had left all that behind and put on a tie—but the past didn't change. Yes, his skills might come in handy, but still—objectively, he had been a dangerous man. The thought made him feel ashamed of himself. His throat tightened. He covered his mouth with a fist and started to cough. Omer laughed.

"I was the same," he said, putting a firm hand on Damir's shoulder again. "You're my son—through and through."

In the days that followed, Damir spent every morning to evening working with his father. He was being groomed to lead the contracts department, a role Omer had handled himself until recently. And from evening until late at night—he was in his mother's embrace, turning back into a boy. Only once did he manage to slip away and take a walk around the city with Saher. One question kept nagging at him—where was Samad? But everyone seemed so calm about his absence that Damir decided to wait and not press the issue.

"Damir, wait here for a bit, okay? I need to talk to someone quickly and I'll be right back," Saher said.

"With who?"

Big Brother mode kicked in instantly, and she laughed out loud. Touching his hand on the table, she assured him everything was fine. She was just stepping out of the café for fifteen minutes. He smiled and nodded in agreement. It was only 11 a.m., after all. Sipping his coffee slowly, Damir watched the people around him. People of different nationalities, skin colors, and religions passed by or sat at tables, each busy with their own life. Most spoke French—which he didn't yet understand. Some talked loudly, laughed, and gestured animatedly. Life unfolded in all its color and joy.

«Hi, how are you?»

Damir looked up and saw a young man—pleasant-looking, about his age, maybe a bit shorter than his own six-foot-three frame. Light brown hair, warm hazel eyes. Without asking, the guy sat across from him, called the waiter, and placed an order in French. Damir frowned slightly, watching this bold behavior. Maybe it was normal here to join strangers at cafés—he wasn't sure yet. But the fact that the guy had addressed him in English meant one thing—he either had been watching Damir and Saher... or he knew exactly who he was approaching.

Montreal was, after all, a mostly French-speaking city. Maybe he was Saher's boyfriend, and that's why she ran off so quickly?

Adjusting his watch, the young man across from him introduced himself.

"I'm Samad Saidi."

Damir was stunned. He studied the man's face, searching for any resemblance to his Tatar mother.

"So that's what you look like..." Damir said in a hoarse voice, lips pressed together as he leaned forward slightly. "Mother would be proud to have a son like you."

"She already is. As is our father," Samad replied quickly.

He thanked the waiter and picked up his coffee.

"Shall we talk?"

Damir laced his fingers on the table.

After a short pause, he said:

"This is a strange way to meet, don't you think?"

"Maybe. But I figured we should talk alone first, before staging a happy brotherly scene for the family."

Samad took a sip of coffee, leaned back, and paused before continuing. "Let me get straight to the point. I'll give you as much money as you want—just disappear quietly, the way you came."

Damir's eyebrows shot up in disbelief. "Are you out of your mind?"

Samad chuckled and looked away. "Seems fair to me."

“You shouldn’t measure everything in money,” Damir replied, his expression darkening. His brows drew closer, and a spark of anger lit in his eyes. He was hurt. Hurt for his mother back in Bolgar. She had cared about Samad too—she would have held him to her heart. He was, after all, the boy she had given birth to thirty-two years ago. But this guy had no intention of becoming part of that family.

“Empty words,” Samad said.

“You should’ve been home last week, the night I arrived. Then you wouldn’t be feeding me these empty lines now.”

Samad pressed his lips into a thin line. They sat in silence, staring each other down—ready to go head-to-head.

“Think carefully,” Samad said quietly. “You won’t get another chance. This is my family. All of it is mine. And though you may be their son by blood—you’re still a stranger. You know nothing. You’ve lived nothing.”

Damir almost laughed at his bravado. “I know nothing? I’ve lived nothing?”

Samad made a dismissive hand gesture as if Damir didn’t understand the point.

Damir continued. “You think it’s harder to live on daddy’s money than to fight for a piece of bread? To get beaten by thugs who steal your last penny—and then become like them just to survive? To risk your freedom—your life?”

He leaned back slightly, then added after a pause:

“I won’t go on. You might not be able to handle it.”

“Looks like you Russians love action movies,” Samad scoffed sarcastically.

Damir sighed deeply. “If only...”

“Damir, just know—you don’t have much time,” Samad warned, ignoring his words.

“Then what?”

Samad stayed silent.

At that moment, Saher returned, beaming. “Brothers! So, did you talk?”

Damir instantly switched from hostile to warm, answering first. “Yes, sweetheart. Samad kindly offered to share all the family joys and troubles with me.”

Samad’s jaw clenched, and he slapped the table lightly, then looked at his sister and gestured for her to sit.

“Everything okay, brother?” Saher asked hesitantly, looking at Samad.

“Of course. Don’t worry—everything’s great,” he replied and kissed her on the temple.

## Chapter 6

That evening, Damir carefully put the photos of his mother Zulfiya back into his suitcase. Samad clearly had no interest in them. Damir sat on the bed and dropped his head into his hands. So that meant she would suffer if she came here. By morning, his head ached from a sleepless night. He got up early and, trying not to wake anyone, quietly went down to the kitchen. He sat at the table and made himself some coffee. Looking at his wristwatch, he saw the first light of dawn creeping through the window. It was ten to six. His mind was tormented with thoughts of his mother. He called her every evening before bed, each time making up a story—telling her that her real son was away on a business trip and that he very much wanted to meet her. He promised that as soon as he returned, they would call her together. She waited, and feared, and hoped for a joyful reunion all at once. He knew that. He knew his mother's heart—what her boundless love was capable of. And he had no idea what to do next. At the same time, Emine—his other mother—also loved Samad. She had raised him as her own. If she found out about what he had done, she would be deeply hurt. And Damir couldn't allow that to happen. He didn't know what to do, caught in a whirlpool of thoughts. Sighing, running his fingers through his hair, he kept thinking and thinking. His father had turned out exactly as he had imagined—strong, intelligent, reliable. Damir smiled at the thought. A good gift from God. Now he had two mothers and the father he had dreamed of as a child. But he was no longer young either, and it wouldn't be wise to risk his emotional health. Damir had once witnessed something that stuck with him forever—he was about eleven when a middle-aged neighbor, Uncle Rafik, suddenly collapsed and died on the spot from stress. That man had lost his son, who had died in the army, and the shock had taken his life. Damir and his mother had been in their house at the time and witnessed the sudden death. Since then, Damir had etched it into his memory: No risks with older people's nerves—especially not mothers.

He heard a rustle and soft mumbling in Farsi. Turning around, he saw the housemaid—it must've been time to prepare breakfast. Damir stood up, wished her good morning, and quietly slipped away.

That day, Omer gave him a brand-new luxury Mercedes crossover and handed him a credit card for personal use. He also opened a bank account in Damir's name.

Damir didn't know how to react—he wasn't used to such luxury. It felt awkward to accept, but he did, thanked his father, and said he wanted to earn everything himself. «This is all rightfully yours, son,» Omer said, nodding. «You shouldn't be shy. And you'll have more than enough time to earn—for yourself, and for all of us. Once I'm sure the business is in good hands, I'll step away. And you'll take over the corporation.»

«Me? Why me?»

«Because you're my son.»

«Don't push Samad aside, Father.»

«Of course not—he's my son too. It's not just about blood. But Samad won't handle that kind of responsibility. I've seen what kind of intellect you have just in these few days—and I've got your full dossier, as you've probably guessed. I know Samad's capabilities too. He'll help you in everything. And the inheritance will be split evenly. But one percent more will go to you—to make you the official head of the company.»

Then, patting him on the shoulder, he added:

«But let's not get ahead of ourselves. I'm only saying this so you can prepare—and work hard to meet my expectations.»

Omer stood for a moment, watching his son's reaction, then smiled with his eyes and walked back inside the house. Damir remained standing by the open door of his new car, spinning the plastic

card between his fingers. He thought about Samad—who most likely saw this coming. What now? Surely he wouldn't go as far as murder?

Getting behind the wheel, Damir started the engine and drove off slowly. He needed a bit of fresh air—those thoughts were getting too dark. Driving around the outskirts of Montreal helped distract him. He enjoyed the view of the unique old city. The scenery struck him with its mix of dominant French style and touches of American modernism. Historical landmarks and architecture stood peacefully alongside glass-and-concrete buildings. It was stunning. As he looked at the narrow streets of this Canadian Paris, with its little cafés and sparkling shop windows, he found himself dreaming that maybe, one day, he would walk here with his family—his beloved wife and children.

## Chapter 7

A general meeting was held at the corporation, where Omer Saidi introduced his son Damir and announced that from now on, he would serve as his deputy—on equal footing with Samad. He also warned that for any major decisions, both deputies would need to be in agreement. If their opinions differed—which, he said, was normal—the final decision would remain with him. Damir instantly made a good impression with his simplicity and politeness. He was given a large, spacious office on the same floor as the senior management, and an assistant—a woman named Diana, ambitious, smart, and beautiful, around 35 years old. She had previously assisted Omer himself, but now she was assigned to his son with full authority to be his right hand and watchful eye.

«I'll do everything I can,» she promised.

After introductions and settling into her new role, she sat comfortably in the chair across from Damir and offered, «To start with, ask whatever you'd like to know. I'll provide more detailed information as we go.»

Damir sat at his desk, studying her for a moment. He liked her confident demeanor. It was clear she was a professional, experienced woman.

«Tell me about Samad,» he suddenly asked.

Diana raised her eyebrows slightly and looked at Damir with clear eyes. «He's not very well liked.»

«Why not?»

«Well... how do I put it... he's a bit arrogant. Not strong in business, but constantly puts people in their place.»

«What does he mainly do?»

«He collects debts.»

«What do you mean, collects?»

«In different ways,» she replied simply, shrugging.

«Legally, and sometimes not. Depends on who he's dealing with.»

Damir picked up a pen and spun it between his fingers, recalling the veiled threats Samad had made during their first meeting. It wasn't that he feared him—he just didn't want the unnecessary headache Samad might cause.

«Does Father know about all this?»

«Of course not.»

«Then why don't you tell him? You're his right hand, as I understand.»

«I'm just an assistant,» she corrected him.

«And what proof could I possibly provide?» she answered his question with one of her own.

«He's not just an employee—he's the owner's son, which makes him a boss too. Why would I dig into him? The father would take his side anyway.»

Damir stood and slowly walked toward the large window. Stopping beside her, he said quietly, «It's your responsibility to report all information to your boss—regardless of who or what it concerns.» He held her gaze for another moment, then turned and walked away. «I hope that won't be the case with me.»

«Yes, Mr. Damir,» the new assistant replied, biting her lip.

Omer Saidi had bought Diana a small house in the center of Montreal for her loyal service, and she didn't want to lose it. At the same time, making enemies with the other son of the owner wasn't in her plans either. She preferred to stay neutral.

The next day, Samad himself stopped by. Damir gestured toward the chair, then sat across from him. A small table separated them. The secretary asked if they wanted anything, and after she left, Samad spoke.

«Congratulations! From nobody to deputy of a major company!» he said, clapping his hands as he looked around the luxurious office of his so-called brother.

«Thanks. And this is just the beginning,» Damir replied coolly.

«Sometimes the beginning turns out to be the beginning of the end,» Samad said, leaning forward slightly.

Enough.

Damir stood up, walked around the table, grabbed Samad by the collar, and yanked him to his feet. Looking him dead in the eye, he growled,

«If you have something to say—say it openly. Don't drop threats like some rat in the shadows.»

Samad shoved him back, his face red with anger. Raising a finger, he said under his breath, «Don't ever do that again.»

«Then don't ever threaten me again.»

When Samad left, Damir cursed and slammed his fist on the table. The situation was getting more and more complicated.

And tonight—at the family dinner, where that damn bastard would also be present—he had planned to announce his departure. That is, his trip back home. To bring his mother and his fiancée. And now what?

## Chapter 8

“I have a suggestion,” Damir began as dinner was winding down. Everyone was full and content.

“What is it, son?” his mother asked with a smile, sitting beside him.

All eyes turned toward Damir, including Samad, who sat directly across the table.

“Father, if things at work aren’t too overwhelming right now, maybe you and my brother could take a week or two off?” Damir said, squeezing his mother’s hand beneath the table.

“All right,” Omer replied immediately, raising his brows as if to ask, Why?

“We’ll all go to Russia—to my home. Visit for a bit.” With those words, he looked directly at Samad, who nearly choked. “There lives another mother of ours—the one who raised me and gave birth to Samad. We should pay her our respects and honor her with our visit.”

Samad turned pale. He hadn’t seen that coming. Damir looked at his father, then at his mother, who immediately agreed.

“I would be happy to meet her. I want to thank her for raising you, for giving you all her strength, all she could,” she said, gently squeezing her son’s hand beneath the table. She spoke in Farsi, but judging by Samad’s expression, no translation was needed. Still, Saher translated it into English, then into Russian.

“It’s settled—we’re going,” the head of the family declared, reaching across the table to gently touch his adoptive son’s shoulder.

“It’s your turn now, son, to show strength and gratitude. We’ll all be by your side to support you.”

Samad looked at his father, pressed his lips together, gave a tight smile, and nodded obediently. Then he turned to Damir with all the bitterness he could muster. Damir leaned back in his chair, returning a satisfied, triumphant look.

Almost a month was spent processing documents, and then two more days of airport layovers, before the Saidi family finally reached the outskirts of Bolgar. Omer and Emine were swept up in nostalgia—riding together in a taxi, arms wrapped around each other, whispering lovingly despite their exhaustion. Damir, Samad, and Saher rode in another cab, half-dozing. For their arrival, a small rental home with all the necessities was arranged near Damir’s childhood home so the guests could stay comfortably. He had warned them: the living conditions here were a far cry from what they were used to—no luxury, no modern comfort.

“Don’t worry—we have no spoiled princes or princesses among us,” the father assured them, glancing at his children.

Samad had accepted his fate. He knew there would be no avoiding the discomfort—and the shame—and he simply surrendered to the flow. He hadn’t even met his poor, biological mother yet, and already, he hated her. He was sure Damir had brought him here just to show him exactly where he intended to throw him away someday. But of course, Samad wasn’t as naive as Damir might think. Things wouldn’t be that easy. What felt like an eternity passed before they finally arrived, just before dawn.

Poor Zulfiya, thinner from worry, stood at the gate of the rental home, anxiously twisting her headscarf in her hands, awaiting her important guests. When Damir saw her, he nearly jumped out of the car. She looked like a lost child abandoned in the street.

“My son, you’re back,” she said, reaching out to him as tears rolled down her cheeks.

“I was so afraid you wouldn’t return.”

“Come on, Mom. How could I ever leave you? Don’t think that way. How’s your health?”

“All right, all right...”

One by one, the rest of the family got out of the cars and approached to greet her. They were tired but kind—even Samad. He looked genuinely humbled as he hugged his birth mother, closing his eyes and pressing his cheek to hers. Everyone watching the scene felt it in their hearts. Then Emine stepped forward, embraced Zulfiya, and sincerely thanked her for raising Damir—in her own language. The words were translated first to English, then Russian. Damir was overwhelmed with emotion—barely holding it in. Zulfiya, in turn, thanked them for raising Samad and for all they had done—and continued to do—for both boys.

By the next evening, after some rest, everyone gathered around a festive table that was nearly bursting with food—like a true celebration. Zulfiya and Aaliya, fluttering with love and excitement, bustled around serving the guests. That night, Damir returned to sleep at his family home. He invited Samad to come with him, and Samad, unable to refuse, followed him to their biological mother's house. He returned to the guest house just before bedtime. The three of them spent the evening wrapped in a warm embrace, sipping green tea. Zulfiya stroked one son, then the other, unable to stop gazing at them. She kept crying and smiling through her tears, mumbling apologies. Damir observed Samad—clearly overwhelmed. He blushed and paled, stumbled over his words, repeatedly asking about her health and needs. His arrogance had completely melted away. It was as if Samad had finally woken up—felt the truth of who he was. He looked around: the poor but spotless little house, painfully humble. It frightened his imagination. This was supposed to have been his life. This home, this bed, this table and spoon—all meant for him. He was afraid to look Damir in the eyes. Now he truly understood how foolish he had been.

In truth, he should be thanking Damir for switching places—not resenting him. Damir read all this in his eyes—and his heart softened. Before parting, he placed a hand on Samad's shoulder, gave him a brotherly pat, and wished him goodnight—as if he really were his younger brother.

The next morning, Aaliya quietly slipped into Damir's room, eager for just a glimpse of her beloved. He heard her voice as she chatted with his mother, and soon the scent of her perfume announced that she was standing at the door. Without opening his eyes, he reached out a hand toward her. Aaliya hesitated, then sat down on the edge of the bed. He was covered with only a sheet down to his bare chest—more tempting than anyone she had ever seen, even in pictures. But her upbringing didn't allow her to stare, even though he had been her fiancé for almost six months.

She sat silently, hands folded, smiling shyly.

"I'm covered," Damir said with a husky voice, pulling the sheet higher up to his neck. Though from the knees down, his muscular legs were exposed. He took her hand.

"How are you, my baby?"

"I'm fine, thank you. And you?" she murmured, still not turning her head.

"Look at me," he asked gently.

She couldn't disobey her future husband and turned her eyes toward him, her cheeks burning with blush.

Damir laughed—he adored her modesty, such a rare quality these days.

"Today I plan to ask your parents to let you come with me to Canada. Maybe we'll even get married in a hurry."

Her eyes widened, and she flushed even deeper. Damir couldn't resist anymore. He sat up and pulled her close. His lips found hers, and with a firm motion, he parted them with his tongue, kissing her deeply. Waves of sweetness shot through her body.

She missed him terribly. Damir knew she had been madly in love with him since childhood. Now, at twenty-five, she longed for his kisses and touches just as much as he did for hers. They had kissed before, but always carefully. Now his passion overflowed.

His hands caressed her back and hips, slowly driving her into ecstasy. His lips moved from her mouth to her neck—and when she moaned, he returned to her lips, whispering, "Shhh." He smiled at her closed eyes and kissed her again. What felt like an eternity later, he finally released her. Her

lips were swollen, her head spinning. She stood and adjusted her scarf and hair, nearly stumbling. He watched her, barely holding himself back from pulling her into his arms again. The sheet had slipped completely off, baring his muscular torso. When she noticed, she turned away and covered her face. He laughed quietly, leaning his head back. Then he stood, wrapped himself in the sheet again, and approached her from behind. He kissed her softly on the neck and whispered in her ear, “Soon you’ll be my wife... and I’ll be your husband. Do you know what that means?”

Over a late breakfast, Damir officially introduced his fiancée to the new family.

They decided that tomorrow they would all go to her home to ask for her hand in marriage and discuss the wedding and details. Emine, while still in Canada, had already anticipated this and discussed it with the family. Zulfiya, on the other hand, was embarrassed—she didn’t have the financial means for such an event and bit her lip anxiously.

After the meal, Damir took his Tatar mother aside and said:

“Mom, now that I’ve returned to my blood family, Father has opened a bank account for me. I have money—don’t worry. It’s enough to take care of everything right now.” She looked at him nervously, then over his shoulder at the others. He sighed, searching for the right words to reassure her.

“Mommy, please—don’t worry about anything. I’m going to work. All the hard times are behind us. From now on, you’ll be a lady of the house.”

“What do you mean...?” she said, recalling bitter memories—how he had once promised her the same thing, and how it had ended.

“Exactly that. Samad and I are taking on all your burdens now. You’ll focus only on yourself—and maybe our kids someday.”

“God willing,” she whispered, glowing with joy as he embraced her. Damir understood what she feared.

“From now on, everything will be different, Mom. I’m not alone anymore,” he said quietly.

Everyone loved Aaliya—even Samad. Surely it was the blood connection—she was Tatar too. From his warm gaze and smile, it was clear he admired her—her modest appearance, her attentive manner. She constantly poured tea, asked if anyone needed anything. The Iranian mother kept murmuring in Farsi, stroking the girl’s hair and shoulders, and Aaliya responded with shy smiles, eyes lowered. Damir was beyond pleased. He was bursting with pride. Good choice, he thought, silently thanking God—and his mother, who had insisted on it.

## Chapter 9

The following night, dinner was held again—but this time at Aaliya’s home. The Saidi family met her parents, and through two translators—Saher and Damir—Mrs. Emine, smiling conspiratorially at Zulfiya, once again formally asked for Aaliya’s hand. She presented the girl with a beautiful set of jewelry: a necklace, earrings, and bracelets—from both herself and Omer. She had shown the gift to Zulfiya in advance, making her blush with embarrassment. She couldn’t afford even a quarter of such a present, but they quickly reassured her, insisting she had already repaid everything many times over. Zulfiya eventually agreed to play her part in the engagement.

Aaliya’s parents were also modest, ordinary people. They accepted the proposal, thanked them for the gifts, and gave their blessing for their only daughter to move to another country. But they made Damir promise that he would cherish their daughter and take good care of her—and allow her to visit them whenever she wished. Everything moved quickly, just as Damir had planned.

Within two weeks, they had secured a wedding date at the civil registry, booked a banquet hall, bought everything they needed, and on July 18, 2015, Damir and Aaliya officially became husband and wife.

The wedding banquet was modest—just a few relatives, a couple of close family friends, and a handful of the bride and groom’s childhood companions. Damir danced the wedding waltz with his new wife, unable to take his eyes off her beauty. She had flawless makeup, her hair styled like royalty, and the jewelry she’d received the night before added a glowing aura to her look. When it was Samad’s turn to give his blessing—having agreed on it with his parents—he presented an original gift: the keys to a small truck for Aaliya’s father.

On their first visit to her home, Samad had noticed an old delivery truck in the yard. Later, he learned her father used it for work to support the family. Now, they had decided to replace it. After the heartfelt congratulations and cheers, Samad joked,

“Now I’ll have to marry a girl from Iran—just to keep up with Damir.”

Everyone laughed and cheered the idea. Tatar indeed! He said. And proud of my blood!

“I never thought I’d be celebrating my son’s wedding in the very town where I gave birth to him,” Emine whispered to her husband as they stood together watching the couple walk away.

“It was a beautiful wedding,” Omer added. “Simple, in a Russian style we’re not used to—but I liked it. And you, darling?”

“Oh yes, me too. May Allah grant them happiness—that’s the most important.”

“May Allah grant it,” he echoed.

“And our Saher danced so much—did you see the way the local boys were staring at her?”

“No, I didn’t. But don’t worry. With Damir’s reputation, no one’s getting near her,” he said with a proud laugh, pulling his wife into a hug.

Damir’s childhood friends pitched in and booked the couple the best suite in the city’s top hotel as a wedding gift. They decorated it with flowers and rose petals on the bed, and the hotel staff set up a small table with sweets and drinks.

Following tradition, at the entrance of the banquet hall, Aaliya threw her bouquet. Girls—and even some boys—scrambled for it in a chaotic scuffle. In the end, the bouquet landed in the hands of the strongest guy there. The whole scene was hilarious. On their way to the hotel in a limo decked out in white flowers and wedding rings, Damir couldn’t stop laughing.

“The girls wanted your bouquet so bad, it almost turned into a wrestling match!” he joked. Aaliya laughed too.

“And that clever one who caught it—‘also a girl,’ apparently. Wants to get married just as much!”

They kept joking the whole ride until, red-faced from laughter, they arrived at the hotel. Moments later, standing in front of their suite, Damir turned serious. He bent down, lifted his bride into his arms, and carried her inside. Then he stopped.

The room was dimly lit, glowing with candlelight. Soft romantic music played in the background. Aaliya gasped. Damir smiled at her reaction and asked gently, “Do you like it?”

But without waiting for a reply, he leaned in and kissed her, pressing his lips to hers in a long, passionate kiss. Still kissing, he carried her toward the bed, gently laid her down, and leaned over her, his lips never leaving hers. Then he paused, looked into her eyes, smiled, and said, “You’re so beautiful... You drive me crazy.”

“I’m thirsty,” Aaliya blurted out.

Maybe she really was thirsty—or maybe she was nervous. Damir froze for a second, then pulled her into his arms, sat down beside her, and reached for the juice. She sipped slowly, sometimes looking at him, then lowering her eyes, drinking and drinking. Something wasn’t right. He stood up and gently helped her to her feet. Taking the glass from her hand and setting it on the table, he pulled her close. Placing one hand on her waist and the other in her palm, he led her in a slow, romantic dance to the soft music playing from the speakers. Aaliya lit up. Seeing the joy in her eyes, Damir felt deeply happy.

The entire next day, they didn’t leave the suite—just basked in each other’s presence. Damir extended their stay for five more days and told the family they had gone on an impromptu honeymoon. Samad later brought them a bag packed by their mother with clothes and necessities. When he knocked, Damir answered the door—his hair tousled, wearing only a loosely tied bathrobe. Samad burst out laughing.

“Shhh,” Damir said, stepping outside and closing the door behind him.

“Sorry—I can’t invite you in.”

“It’s fine, I get it.”

Samad handed him the bag, then asked with a grin,

“So... how’s married life treating you?”

Instead of answering, Damir just rolled his eyes and shook his head.

Samad laughed again. They stood there like real brothers—as if no bad blood had ever passed between them. Damir took the bag, thanked him, and slipped back inside.

“Why was he laughing?” Aaliya asked suspiciously, standing by the window in her own plush robe.

Damir set the bag down and walked over. In one smooth move, he let the robe slip from his shoulders and kissed her on the neck.

“He laughed at my messy, happy face,” he whispered. Aaliya relaxed and hugged her husband.

On the morning of the fifth day, after breakfast, Damir said with a hint of sadness in his voice,

“In about...” —he checked his watch— “two hours, we need to head out.”

Aaliya smiled and gently stroked his cheek.

“But we’re going together, right? You won’t leave me behind?”

She meant their trip to Canada. He kissed her hand tenderly, ignored her fear—which he understood—and sighed.

“What upsets me,” he said, “is that I won’t be able to enjoy being close to you every hour. I’ll have to wait for nightfall. And I’ll go mad until then.”

This time, Aaliya rolled her eyes and laughed, “You’re crazy, sweetheart.”

“I can’t help it. You’re delicious—and I can’t stop wanting you.”

## Chapter 10

Six months had passed.

“We’d like to discuss the terms of payment, if you’re satisfied with the delivery conditions,” Damir addressed the potential clients from the UK. During another business meeting, representatives from a small ice cream factory were present. Diana handed him an open folder with the necessary documents. Damir took it and began reviewing the points. The authorized representatives listened carefully and nodded in agreement.

“That’s your fifth contract this week, Mr. Damir. You’re doing an outstanding job,” praised his assistant, Diana. They exited the conference room, having just signed another long-term supply contract. Today, their monthly delivery volume increased by five tons. Damir, proud and confident, lifted his chin and headed toward his office. When he entered, his secretary informed him that Mr. Omer was expecting him.

Without hesitation, he turned around and made his way to his father’s office. Inside the CEO’s office, the other deputy, Samad, was already there, seated with a few documents in front of him. He held a pen and was watching Damir with a gloomy, unreadable gaze. After a brief greeting, Omer spoke.

“How did it go, Damir? Were the contracts signed?”

“Yes,” Damir replied, handing him the folder. Omer sat down and flipped through it slowly. Damir remained standing.

“Sit,” Omer said without looking up. Damir sat, feeling tension in the air. He glanced at Samad, silently asking with his eyes what was going on—but received no response. Samad simply lowered his head, then looked toward their father.

“Everything’s correct. No errors,” Omer finally said, closing the folder and looking at his son with no trace of enthusiasm. Then he turned to Samad and stretched out his hand.

“Give me the list of the companies we’re currently working with.”

Samad handed over two printed pages. Omer reviewed them, circling certain names with a pen. After what felt like an eternity, he called Damir closer.

“Take a look at this.”

Damir furrowed his brow, stood, and leaned in over his father’s desk. There were 23 companies listed—partners he had secured in the past five months. Twelve of them were marked in red.

“What does this mean?”

Omer turned to look at him.

“How did you find these companies? How did you connect with them?” Damir felt a chill creeping beneath his clothes, wrapping around him.

“Each one differently,” he said quietly.

“For example, the one from today?”

“Through the internet. I sent commercial proposals, and one of them responded.”

Omer pursed his lips and folded his hands together on the desk.

“Would someone explain what’s going on?” Damir demanded, looking from his father to Samad.

“The thing is,” Omer said, “these companies weren’t properly vetted. The ones marked in red, including today’s, turned out to be fraudulent. They were apprehended as they were leaving the building—they’re on their way to the police now.”

Damir turned pale. He didn’t know what to say. He barely even grasped the meaning of what had just been said.

“So... twelve companies received our goods and...”

“...had no intention of paying for them,” Samad finished the sentence.

“Samad, start gathering all the documentation and file lawsuits tomorrow,” Omer ordered.

“You’re telling me I’ve bankrupted the company?” Damir asked, unable to believe his ears.

“You’re not to blame. I am,” Omer replied, mostly to himself.

“I acted too hastily. You weren’t ready for such a huge responsibility. I placed too much faith in you. I handed over the future of this company to an intern straight out of college!”

He slammed the desk with his palm. Samad remained silent, lowering his head like he was the one being scolded. But for Damir, it was a knockout. Not physically—but morally. He had fallen into a pit, a black hole. Damir sat on a bench in an alley near some building, just like almost a year ago, once again unsure of what to do next. His Tatar mother had moved in with him to his biological father’s house—his dream father. His wife, four months pregnant, also lived under the roof of the man who had just expressed his disappointment in him. He felt like screaming from hopelessness and rage—but nothing would help. He had no legal path to defend himself. No one would even listen. He was still a citizen of another country, living in Canada on a visa. Yes, he had changed his surname from Palatov to Saidi—but now he regretted it. He had no one to call, no one to seek advice from. He trusted no one in Canada. To them, he was a stranger.

Twisting a small twig in his fingers, he realized how deeply and helplessly stuck he was. A cocky lion caught in a well-set trap. Now, it was useless to thrash and chew at the steel jaws cutting into his flesh. A lion? What lion?

“What a joke,” Damir chuckled bitterly to himself.

“More like a complete idiot.”

The twig snapped in his hand, crumbling into pieces. With no idea what else to do, he got into his car and drove aimlessly. His phone, left in the car earlier when he stepped out to smoke, started ringing. It was Diana—18 missed calls, all from her. He accepted the call via Bluetooth.

“Hello, Mr. Damir? Where are you?”

“In town,” he said calmly. The world had already collapsed. No news could shock him now.

“It’s chaos here. I don’t even know what to do...”

Damir stayed silent. What could he possibly do? He didn’t even have the money to cover a tenth of the damage. The car, the bank account—none of it was truly his. Lighting a cigarette, he said, “Can you sneak out of the office and meet me?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll drive up to the parking lot.”

“Okay.”

Fifteen minutes later, she was sitting in his car.

“I don’t understand everything yet, but I need copies of all the contracts we’ve signed over the past six months. Can you get them?”

“I think so, Mr. Damir. But... there are rumors going around the company that you’ve swindled your own father for a huge sum of money.”

That did shock him. He turned to her with a glare, as if she were the one spreading those rumors.

“What?!”

She looked startled and shrugged. Damir gave a bitter smirk and looked straight ahead, tightening his lips. Now he was starting to understand who was behind all this. His jaw clenched, cheek muscles twitching. No way. It can’t be. We became close—back there in Russia, in Bolgar! He apologized. I forgave him! Damn it. DAMN IT!

Damir slammed the steering wheel with his fists.

“Please, calm down, Mr. Damir. This won’t help.”

He covered his face with both hands and sat in silence. Eventually, he exhaled and told her he needed to think. He'd call her back.

An hour later, Damir returned home—only to find even more chaos than at work. Loud voices filled the house—heated arguments in Persian. He saw his father—furious like a wild beast—arguing with his wife. She was defending her biological son. They were yelling at each other. Zulfiya and Aaliya sat huddled on the couch, frightened and confused.

“I didn't take your money,” Damir said from the doorway. His father's furious gaze met his—but Damir didn't look away.

“It's not about the money!” Omer said in a low but firm voice.

“I would've given it all to you.”

“I never took a single cent without your knowledge—believe it or not.”

“Come with me,” Omer ordered, heading into his office. Damir followed him. Omer grabbed a piece of paper from his desk and tossed it at him. It didn't land properly—falling to the floor at Damir's feet.

He looked at his father, then silently bent down and picked it up.

“Recognize it?” Omer asked, on the verge of shouting.

“I recognize my name. What is it?”

“What kind of lawyer are you if you don't know what this is?!”

“I understand—it's a bank statement...”

The words hit him like a knife. He looked again at the document. The final balance, along with regular deposits—\$1,457,880.

“What the...?”

“Not a bad sum, huh?”

“Trace it—find out how the account was opened and where the funds came from!”

Damir shouted, waving the document. “I've never opened any account like this in my life!”

“Samad handles those things,” Omer said, turning to the window.

“Samad?!” Damir scoffed bitterly.

This time, Omer spun around and stormed back toward him. Pointing a finger at his chest, he growled, “Don't you dare accuse him! He may not be my blood, but he has never done anything that would make us ashamed—not once! And as for my real son—well, we both know exactly what he's capable of!”

## Chapter 11

That was it.

The feeling of happiness from reuniting with his biological family, from having his father back in his life—it all began to shatter like fragile crystal. He hadn't even fully processed what he'd become, hadn't yet tasted the new life—and once again, he was being pushed away. From the very start, he felt it would all end like this. So why had he tried so hard to convince himself otherwise?

It doesn't matter who you were born as. What matters is your purpose in this life. Those born to crawl may never fly... or maybe they can. And those who once soared high can end up at the bottom of a pit—so deep, their past flights feel like nothing but illusions.

And reality?

Reality is right here.

Early in the morning, Damir received a call from Russia. It was his former classmate and once-best friend, Vadim. The surprise thrilled him. Vadim was the only person Damir truly trusted in this entire world—and now, during the worst moment of his life, Vadim had called him.

“Hey, brother! I finally found you! I heard you got married and ran off to Canada?” Vadim said, laughing.

“Sorry, bro, it all happened so fast,” Damir rubbed his forehead, feeling genuinely uncomfortable.

“When I explain everything, you'll understand why I didn't tell you.”

“It's all good. So, when are you coming back?”

“Soon. Vadim, I'm in a really messed-up situation right now, and your call came at the perfect time. I need advice—or even legal help.”

“You're a lawyer yourself.”

“Apparently, not a very good one,” Damir replied bitterly.

“Do you need someone who specializes in Canadian immigration law, or did you get yourself into some kind of criminal mess?”

“Looks like the second one.”

There was a long pause. Then Vadim spoke again.

“Tell me it's not prison time.”

“I don't think so. I could come back, but... that's probably not an option for me right now. Let me explain the situation briefly, and maybe you can recommend someone in Moscow I could talk to.”

“Alright, brother. Go ahead.”

For the time being, Damir rented an apartment in a more populated area and moved in with his mother, Zulfiya, and his wife. Emine wanted to come too. She didn't believe a single word her husband had said and was deeply hurt by the accusations he had thrown at their biological son. She kicked him out of their bedroom and stopped speaking to him. Saher didn't believe the story either. Samad had left on a business trip. Despite everything, Omer didn't freeze Damir's bank account. In fact, he added more money to it. He no longer blamed or scolded him either, and when he heard that Damir was moving into a rental place until he could prove his innocence, he accepted it. Meanwhile, Damir was waiting impatiently for a call from his Moscow friend while preparing to move.

Diana had found a small, furnished apartment on the outskirts of the city in just a few hours. When they met, she handed him all the document copies he had asked for. Damir, his mother, and his wife packed their belongings and left.

Soon after, Emine and Saher arrived. Damir tried to comfort both of his mothers—who fully believed in him. They were devastated, unable to understand who could have betrayed their boy like

this. They also hoped the other son, as a brave and loving brother, would uncover the truth and save him.

Three days later, Vadim finally called back and gave him an address in Montreal.

“Call this guy and explain everything in person. He’ll help you find the right people over there.

Trying to handle it from Moscow is useless—they told me that.”

“Who is this?” Damir asked, reading the name he had just written: Alexander.

“He’s... a good friend of a very influential person living in Canada.

He’s Russian. When he heard about you, he agreed to help—once he found out you were also from Russia and who your father is. I think he’ll be useful. Damir, I don’t know what else I can do for you, brother.”

“Thank you, man. I owe you big time. And I’m sorry I didn’t call you sooner.”

“No worries. We’ll settle up later. Just let me know how the meeting goes. Call or text me.”

“Absolutely.”

## Chapter 12

By half past twelve, Damir arrived at the restaurant where the meeting was scheduled. He walked inside and asked the host where Mr. Alexander was seated. The host politely led him to the table. Alexander turned out to be a man in his mid-fifties, tall and lean, with sharp facial features and a cold, steely gaze of icy blue eyes.

“Good afternoon,” Damir greeted him and sat down.

“I’m listening, young man,” Alexander replied, his voice tight and oddly restrained. Damir cleared his throat, unsure of where to begin.

“Just the essentials, briefly,” the man offered, helping him gather his thoughts.

“I suspect my stepbrother of setting me up,” Damir began, “but I have no idea how to prove it to my father. I need someone who can dig into this.”

Just then, a waiter arrived and began placing dishes on the table.

“I took the liberty of ordering for you before you arrived. I hope you’ll enjoy it,” Alexander said, gesturing to the food.

Damir glanced at the plate in front of him, then at him. He hadn’t eaten properly since that day in his father’s office—his appetite had vanished completely. But right now, food was the last thing on his mind.

“As for your case,” Alexander started in a monotonous tone, sipping soup between words, “I believe it can be resolved.” Then, turning the subject back to the food, he insisted, “Your brain works better on a full stomach, young man. Don’t be stubborn.”

Damir sighed and picked up his fork.

“Give me until tomorrow,” Alexander continued. “I need to talk to a few people, and then I’ll tell you the next steps.”

“I brought copies of the contracts with me,” Damir said, nodding at the briefcase resting on the chair beside him.

“That’s for later, Mr. Damir. First, we need to arrange for the right people to handle your situation. You’ll give them everything they ask for.”

Damir nodded, exhaling with slight relief. There was a light at the end of the tunnel. He was barely home these days. His pregnant wife had become a shadow of herself, just like his mother. He didn’t want to burden them with his turmoil, and he didn’t have the strength to pretend everything was fine. So every morning, he’d leave as if he had errands, and return only in the evening.

At their next meeting, Diana told him his office had been locked, and staff were told he was on a leave of absence until further notice. But she also said no one at the company actually believed he was involved in any shady dealings.

That made him smile. At least something good. In the six months he’d worked alongside his father, he had built good relationships with many of the staff, even the field workers he’d visited frequently with clients or his father to show the operations and discuss product quality. He had really done his job with integrity. Rubbing his eyes, he let out a long sigh.

“You look absolutely exhausted,” Diana said, giving him a sympathetic look.

“I know. I barely sleep.”

“Is there anything else I can do?”

He looked at her, eyes heavy with fatigue.

“What else could you possibly do?”

“I’m willing to do anything,” she said softly.

His eyebrows arched slightly in surprise. He leaned back, closed his eyes, and murmured, “Thanks. But unless you’ve got a magic wand, I don’t think you can help.”

“What if I did?”

He looked at her again. Her persistence was becoming almost puzzling. But he didn't have the mental bandwidth to analyze it.

“I'd ask to go back one year.”

“What happened a year ago?”

He turned to look at her. Her insistence was starting to wear on him. But as he studied her face, it dawned on him—she was actually very beautiful. How had he never noticed before?

“Do you have a husband?” he asked suddenly, not even sure why.

“No. And no boyfriend either,” she replied, her gaze steady and direct.

He held her eyes, then glanced at her lips before returning to her eyes. But as if shaking himself free of something, he straightened and said, “I think I'll go home. Try to get some sleep. Might go back out later.”

“Can we meet tonight?” Diana suddenly asked.

Her behavior caught him off guard. He had never noticed her being this forward or flirty before. After a pause, he replied, “I have a business meeting tonight.”

At eight, Alexander finally called. Damir had been counting the minutes, checking his phone and the clock over and over. He had showered, lay down to rest, and asked his family not to disturb him for a few hours. AAliya tucked him in with a blanket and quietly left the room.

When the phone rang, he jumped up and answered immediately.

“Good evening, Damir. Can you come now?”

About twenty minutes later, he was at the hotel.

“Have a seat,” Alexander said, pointing to the chair across the table. Two men were sitting with him—one, a young stylish guy with a sharp haircut and a fashionable look, the other, around fifty, with an athletic build and piercing dark eyes. They looked at Damir with interest, and he returned the look. He shook hands with both and sat down.

“Mr. Gregory and Mr. Edmond,” Alexander introduced them. Damir nodded with a slight smile.

“These men have the connections and skills to untangle your case,” Alexander explained. “They're also familiar with the Saidi family—especially Mr. Samad.”

“Really?”

“Yes, but that's irrelevant. They worked briefly on a joint project. Nothing more.”

“I'd be grateful if they could help me,” Damir said, his voice full of hope.

“That's what we need to discuss,” Alexander said.

“What do I have to do?” Damir asked.

Alexander pulled out a pen and scribbled something on a napkin. Then he turned it toward Damir.

“If they succeed—and they will—you'll need to pay this amount for their services.”

Damir looked at the napkin. “Five hundred thousand US dollars?” he said, his voice hoarse.

“It's not a large sum in your situation,” Alexander replied calmly. “Given that you're new to the family and your resources are limited, this was deemed sufficient. I suspect this won't be the last time you'll need our help. We'll settle the rest later.”

Damir was stunned. Just a guy from Bolgar who once risked prison for a lousy grand, now discussing a half-a-million-dollar job with the mafia?

“I agree. If I can raise the money, I'll pay every cent.”

“You're the son of a very wealthy man. You'll find the means. Just don't double-cross us,” Alexander said flatly. “You'll pay one way or another. Better to know what kind of game you're in, than to guess while you're already losing.”

His strange voice, like some ghost from the 18th century, made Damir shiver. He understood now—he was dealing with some kind of crime syndicate. He had no choice but to say yes.

Fear and hope now churned inside him, cracking a hole in the wall that had trapped him for weeks. Damir started smoking again—two packs in a week. Once he had sworn off all vices. Now here he was, with gangsters and cigarettes again. What next? Damn Samad!

The next day, Emine's mother and sister visited. She begged them to come home, saying the house felt lifeless without them. Omer and Samad barely showed up either.

"It's just Saher and me now!" she lamented, crossing her arms like a child who had lost her toy.

Saher, too, looked heartbroken. She and AAliya were sitting together, hands clasped like inseparable twins. Over the last few months, they had become close friends. AAliya's kindness made it easy. Zulfiya silently wiped away tears, her head bowed. Damir stood in the middle of them, unsure how to stop the emotional whirlwind.

"Alright!" he said loudly. Eight teary eyes looked up. "We're going out. All of us."

They hesitated in shock, but his firm tone had them moving quickly. Fifteen minutes later, AAliya sat in the front seat beside him, the two mothers and Saher in the back.

They went to a restaurant first. Omer hadn't cut off Damir's credit card, not wanting to upset his wife. For now, Damir still had access to enough money to support the whole family.

He hated depending on Omer, but what choice did he have? So he told himself he'd pay it all back one day, even if he had to join the mafia to do it. At the restaurant, Emine began reminiscing about Iran. Zulfiya joined in, and soon the women were deep in conversation. AAliya, though, remained quiet. Damir felt guilty—he had been neglecting her. He reached over and took her hand, making her jump a little.

"Sweetheart?"

"Yes, my love?"

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