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Saints of Little Odessa

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Excerpt from *Saints of Little Odessa*

By Jamie Hudalla

About 2,500 words

P R E F A C E

Tarasy, Ukraine, 1981

In the beginning, Pasha Kurev rammed a drainpipe through another man's stomach. Tarasy authorities bended easier than the drainpipe's galvanized steel. They nodded to him in passing and prayed October rain would wash the bloodstains from the village's main street. They asked him to eliminate their enemies and borrow sugar when they baked. They drank his family's home-distilled Horilka and sang next to him in the pews on Sunday.

Tarasians paid Pasha for protection because they needed him. But Pasha did not need them. He felt trapped by their presence, roadblocked by their adoration. They wore earth tones and yellowed smiles. One time when Pasha travelled to Kiev on business, he saw a photograph of an American street cluttered with billboards. The people in the ads had teeth whiter than eggshells. He knew he could fit in, if he brushed a little more.

Valentina suggested baking soda. Many times he considered bringing her in his escape to America, but he could not assimilate her image among the cloud-scraping buildings and windows bathed in neon. She had frumpy dresses and frizzy hair, though her eyes looked like the sky. They had been what drew him in, he supposed. But they could not make him stay. Pasha wanted an American woman with hair down to her hip bones. He wanted a city he could own and call it an accomplishment. Having Tarasy in his pocket was like nibbling on cabbage leaves and expecting to get protein. The village could not sustain his curiosity.

He planned to take four men with him. Uncle Feliks could handle finances, brother Evgeni knew everything about the world that needed knowing, and nephew Oleg could kill any man that needed killing. He didn't know whether he could rip Nikoli away from the hem of Valentina's dress to bring him. At thirteen, his son wasn't quite a man. Nikoli had only murdered a few rabbits and a family of mice, but Pasha had faith he would be useful one day. God had

armed him with a powerful lineage and he did not intend to let his blessings slide past. He could hear his mother's voice now, clogged with emotion.

The Lord is good, she said before every meal. He has given me a family of saints.

CHAPTER ONE

Brighton Beach, 1993

Nikoli Kurev had a fake-sounding name. He sounded like an ex-husband in a soap opera, or a politician who had once signed an important document. August Bell compared it to his own name. His would only be heard in an osteoporosis ad or read in the obituaries. Though he wished to make the front page of the *New York Times* like Nikoli had, he preferred it to be for best-selling nonfiction rather than a bullet to the spinal cord.

August tossed the newspaper with its blaring headline—*Nikoli Kurev, killed at 25*—into the trash. Well, technically it was a recycled cardboard box in a sea of many. He slit a sealed one open, excited over what he might find. He and Daphne had agreed not to label them, so when they opened one it would be a tiny surprise. This time, dusty mugs wrapped in dishrags cluttered the bottom. He took two out, blew off the dust. They were eye roll-worthy, with *Mr. and Mrs.* written in scripty font. August knew they should have made a registry rather than leave it up to their families to buy them wedding gifts. Still, he filled them each halfway with water and slid them in the microwave that sat on the floor. As he waited for the timer, he rifled through the crates to find their food storage.

“Daph!” he called. “Where are the teabags?”

His wife—August loved the sound of that title—slid into the kitchen in her wool socks like a kid sliding past a *wet floor* sign.

“I didn’t grab the food bin,” she scrunched her nose. “Did you?”

No, as a matter of fact, August had not. He now recalled leaving it back in Queens in his parents’ garage.

“We might have to survive off Chinese take-out,” he said.

“Fine,” Daphne hopped up on the counter, drew August closer by hooking her legs around his waist. “Just remember you promised to love me in sickness and in health, and if I eat a dozen cream cheese wontons I’ll be sleeping in the bathroom tonight.”

“Deal,” August smiled. “But if you vomit on our new carpet this whole thing is off.”

Daphne’s mouth dropped into an endearing O-shape. He slid in for a kiss. She always tasted like lavender and mouthwash, even after eating garlic bread. That’s how August knew he wanted to marry her.

The microwave dinged and August begrudgingly tore away. He took out the steaming mugs of water and assessed them. After a moment Daphne joined him. She took the *Mr.* mug, and they spent the rest of the morning drinking hot water and unpacking furniture. That’s how August knew he had made the right decision marrying her.

They ordered shrimp fried rice at 12:15, and around 1:30 August began to worry he’d given Wo Hop’s delivery boy his Queens address rather than his new one. Daphne’s stomach growled, and August knew from experience if he didn’t feed her soon, the irritability would set in. Luckily, the food made it before they could start arguing over whether Jerry Seinfeld or Will Smith is funnier.

“Ugh,” his wife groaned after wolfing down two bowls. “I might have to call in sick tomorrow.”

“It’s your first day.”

“They don’t need me.”

“Clearly they do, or they wouldn’t have offered such a high salary.”

Daphne didn’t respond. She didn’t talk about her job often, especially her success that had come of it. August had thought it would simply take time, but after five years of dating, Daphne only uttered a word here and there. He tried not to take it personally—he knew they pounded confidentiality into home health aids. But when his wife had been deemed *The Miracle Worker*, how could he resist a peek behind the curtain?

“Are you nervous?” August murmured. “That it won’t be the same?”

“I don’t know,” Daphne said. “If I have a gift, why should Queens be the only place it functions?”

“You’re right,” August rubbed the spot where her neck connected to her shoulder.

“You’ll be great.”

She leaned her head on his cushy chest. “It’s not about me. It’s about those who are suffering.”

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Brighton Beach, May 11th, 2018

Wilma Kurev poked at her cheese-drenched enchilada and stared at the foam stuffing popping out of the flamingo pink booth. Both were unsalvageable—the former had grown soggy and the latter hadn’t been renovated since *The Spicy Diablo* was built in 1990. A waiter walked past with a sizzling tray of artificially orange food. Wil caught her father’s look of distaste as she returned to the conversation. This run-down joint wasn’t Babushka’s—their favorite Russian restaurant—but Nikoli had been willing to sacrifice for the greater good. Her father would sell his heavenly lease for amicable relations with the Colombian cartel.

Matias appraised her over his glass of horchata. His eyes looked like Hershey syrup or maybe burnt wood. Wilma didn't know—she was lousy with poetics. Either way, they darkened to black when he found her returning his gaze.

Wil sighed, stared out at the sidewalk crammed with news kiosks, Sonic wrappers, and the seagulls' leftover breadcrumbs. She wasn't particularly interested in this meeting, but at least it had freed her from Eden Apartments. The air had felt stuffier than usual and the wallpaper started to look yellow. She longed to join the flow of traffic outside—hop on a bike or in the back of a taxi—go somewhere unknown. But that would worry her father, and Wil didn't want to add another wrinkle on his crowded forehead.

“We've been looking for ways to mend the past,” Ochoa, Matias's father, murmured.

His low tone drew her into the conversation. She mentally rejoined their booth nestled in the corner. Tiki torches and festive masks fringed the edges of her vision until she focused on the peppered-haired Colombian man. A man who had attempted to kill her father with his Smith & Wesson pistol.

“Nonsense,” Nikoli waved a hand. “It's been fifteen years.”

Wil detected anger under the straight line of Nikoli's lips and curl of his fingers in the booth's stuffing. His porcelain exterior only cracked when someone conjured the past.

“Either way, we offer proof of good faith,” Ochoa cleared his throat, patted his upper lip with a napkin. “I offer my son as a symbol of our union.”

Matias' chest inflated. Wil stayed slouched, uninterested in her father recruiting another lost sheep. She returned her attention to the window.

“Age?” Nikoli asked.

“Twenty-one,” Matias answered.

“College education?”

“IDI Tech for machine repair.”

“Aspirations?”

“Inheriting the family business.”

Wil frowned. Nikoli didn't typically ask pointed questions—in fact, he rarely asked questions. The Saints welcomed all of the unwanted and wandering. They didn't care who slithered into Eden, as long as he returned unrecognizable. Her father massaged his stubbled jaw, stared down his nose at Matias despite being several inches shorter.

“Matias stays at Eden. His only job will be protection.”

Ochoa and Matias nodded at each other. Ochoa stuck out his cigar-pocked hand. Nikoli shook it once, firmly, and a wide smile split Ochoa's face in two. The waitress brushed past and Ochoa hooked his finger in her elbow.

“A round of Cuervo,” he told her. “We have an engagement to celebrate.”

An engagement? Something slid up Wil's leg under the table. Matias' booted foot played with her limp one. Ochoa grinned expectantly. Nikoli stared sternly.

“Congrats,” the waitress told her.

Oh my God. She tasted the bite of enchilada she'd taken, started to stand before everyone saw its unnatural orange color all over the table. The mariachi music echoed in her ears so loud she couldn't hear what her father was saying.

Before she could respond, the Spicy Diablo's door flung open. A stream of light washed over their table and Wil inhaled the fresh air. But then it slammed shut and a different kind of light assaulted her. Flashes, sparks, repeated over and over again.

“There he is,” someone said. “That's Nikoli Kurev!”

A mass of people swarmed their booth, toting cameras and extending microphones. They yelled her father's name as he sunk lower in the booth, using his Yankees cap as a shield. The reporters shouted hungry questions. *Nikoli, where have you been? Nikoli Kurev, how did you raise yourself from the dead?*

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Miami, Florida, May 28th, 2018

Roman Novakoff lowered until his perfectly-sloped nose aligned with the rearview mirror. He watched the rich kid pull out of his driveway, wondering if his cross necklace and Prada sunglasses cost more than his cherry red Charger piled with enough stuff to last him a lifetime. Judging by his museum-sized house, he would be shipping the rest of his belongings to Brighton Beach. Roman tailed behind, eager to leave the neighborhood before its golden gates trapped him.

Prada turned into a Sunoco to fill up and buy a stick of beef jerky. Roman idled at the curb, impatient. He checked the time on the dash of his black Hellcat, released a sigh as Prada picked up one of the window cleaners no one used. He was going to make Roman late.

Five minutes and thirty-eight seconds later, they were back on the sun-bleached road. Roman fiddled with his radio to distract his mind, switching between an Eagles song and Johnny Cash. *Sooner or later, God's gonna cut you down*, the lyrics crackled through the old car's speakers. Roman's associates had supplied him with a fitting wardrobe, but when he'd asked for a car newer than 1980 they sealed their wallets.

Roman had planned to let the target at least cross state lines, but he was feeling too antsy. He needed to get this over with before he shaved twenty years off his life from anxiety. Then

again, with his habits, he'd be lucky to have twenty more years. Roman checked his GPS. Only eighteen more hours to go.

A semi infringed on his lane and he briefly lost sight of Prada. His heart rate spiked and he sped up until he could see the Charger's familiar blue taillights. Roman wanted to run him off the road, but practiced soothing breathing. *Georgia*, he told himself. *At least wait until Georgia.*

Prada pulled into another gas station thirty minutes later, this time to take a leak. Roman hit his head on the steering wheel. *Fuck it.* He hopped out of his car and slid his glock in the waistband of his jeans. The greenish fluorescent lights assaulted him as he walked through the door, ignoring the cheerful bell. A middle-aged woman with box-dyed hair stood behind the counter, her wary gaze following him. Roman flashed his megawatt smile until her neck got splotchy and she feigned interest in her glued-on Walmart nails. He'd been taught long ago that his face was more of an asset than his fists.

Roman strode for the bathroom. Prada had his back turned at the urinal, whistling *Hotel California*. They'd been listening to the same station. Roman hesitated. Could he take advantage of a man with his pants down? Prada finished and Roman lunged at him. Their eyes connected fleetingly in the mirror – long enough for his target to whip around. Roman clipped him in the jaw. Prada retaliated, landing a punch to Roman's gut. He was clearly trained, but so was Roman.

He deflected the next blow and hit the same spot. This time, blood trickled out of Prada's mouth and Roman's knuckles bruised from his teeth. He let the target crack his nose, hoping it would reset crooked. Roman was tired of being pretty. He welcomed black eyes and split lips, if it would dissuade his coworkers from calling him *Little Hollywood*.

Though Roman couldn't feel it, he saw his nose swell. He almost wanted to let Prada hit him a few more times, but someone would walk in eventually. Almost with regret, he took Prada's head and slammed it into the porcelain urinal, mourning the expensive glasses that bent at an awkward angle. His target slumped onto the floor like a load of laundry. Black blood puddled on the beige tile. Or maybe it was taupe. Roman was mostly color blind.

He sighed and tried to wrap his jacket around Prada's head, but his hands shook from adrenaline. He thought of the cashier and felt guilty about the mess he had left her. *It's fine. It's over. Soon you'll be on a different coast.* But as Roman checked the tattoo behind Prada's ear to ensure it matched the one he now bore, he knew it wasn't over. It had just begun.