

CHAPTER THREE:
THE HONEYMOONERS

The Black Sea, Odessa, Ukraine

“I do so love it here,” Lola declared, turning her gaze from Sidorio out to the frozen sea. “I knew you’d choose the perfect spot for our honeymoon.” It was so cold that the ocean waves were freezing as they hit the shore. It was a rare and magical sight, made yet more magical by the violet tint of the moonlight and the soft hush of the waves in the distance, sounding their final sighs before they transmuted from liquid into ice.

A fresh drift of snow began to cover the table between them. Lola turned to face her husband, reaching out her hand to him. “How clever you are,” she said.

Sidorio smiled. In his achingly long time roaming this world, he could pretty much count on the fingers of one hand the times he had been called clever. He shifted his gaze from his wife’s glowing face to the building behind them. A soft light emanated from the windows of the all but deserted hotel. In former times, the rococo building had been a royal palace and it clung onto a certain epic grandeur. The Lockwood Sidorios were the only guests at the hotel and had secured the suite of rooms once used by Peter the Great and his wife, the Empress Catherine. “How fitting,” Lola had said as she had snatched the key from the desk clerk, who doubled up as the maitre d’.

In the absence of business during the long, harsh winter, the hotel retained only a skeleton staff. This mattered little to the newly-weds. Their needs were quite simple.

Now, the maitre d' made his way towards the unconventional but unerringly generous couple, sitting at their table at the edge of the snow-covered beach. Tonight, the woman with the curious heart tattoo was dressed in a full-length sable; the man in a greatcoat, enhancing his somewhat militaristic air.

“Sir.” The elderly host cleared his throat, then announced, “the musicians have arrived. Just as you requested.” His message delivered, the elderly host began trudging back through the snow.

Lola clapped her hands in delight. Gazing lovingly at her husband, she exclaimed, “Musicians! Bravo!”

“You said you wanted music,” Sidorio’s eyes bored into hers. “Anything my wife desires, she gets.”

Lola smiled. “Anything?”

He winked. “Try me.”

“A new ship,” she said, not missing a beat. “One like Trofie Wrathe’s. *The Typhon*.” She paused, then smiled. “No, not *like The Typhon*. I want *The Typhon* itself.”

Sidorio looked amused. “Her golden hand wasn’t enough for you?”

Lola pouted momentarily. “Her rancid son stole that back. No matter, it served its purpose.” She smiled to remember how she had lately employed Trofie’s hand as the centrepiece of her unorthodox and unforgettable wedding bouquet.

“Fine,” Sidorio said. “So, I’ll get you her ship. What else? Anything I can get for you this very night?”

“Well,” said Lola, “I *am* quite thirsty, as it happens. How about you?”

Sidorio nodded, smiling. Then, he whistled to the maitre d’ who was still forging his way back through the snow to summon the musicians. As Sidorio’s

whistle whipped through the night air, the old man stopped dead in his tracks, turned and began to plod back, his snowshoes slow and none too steady.

“Bring us a magnum of your finest vintage,” Sidorio barked.

The old man raised a wild eyebrow - the wave of white hair encrusted with ice. “Our finest is expensive, sir – in a magnum, especially.”

Sidorio shrugged, losing no time in pulling gold from his pockets. “Don’t bother me with talk of money. You know perfectly well I have enough gold here to buy this fleapit hotel, if I choose to. Just fetch us the wine.” Noticing Lola watching him admiringly, he added, “My wife is a connoisseur. She has a very *sophisticated* palate.”

“Very good, sir!” The host gave a nod, then turned to embark on his latest epic journey through the thick falling snow.

Lola slipped off her shoes and let the bare flesh of her soles connect with the icy ground. It felt utterly delicious. Once more, she shivered with pleasure.

The musicians arrived. They were young and clad in coats, hats, scarves and fingerless gloves. They climbed onto the old iron bandstand. With minimal fuss, they took up their instruments and began to play. The music was entrancing, blending the innocent air of an old folk-song with the insistent rhythm of a tango.

Lola stood up, letting her sable coat slide down from her shoulders into the well of her chair. She reached out a hand. “Dance with me, husband!”

Sidorio rose to his feet and enfolded her tiny hand in his powerful grip. They walked across the snow-covered beach, a short distance from the bandstand. The lead singer - a young woman with wild, dark eyes and lashes reminiscent of thick spider’s legs - smiled, as the couple began to dance. Their style was unusual but full of flair.

Lola shrieked with delight as Sidorio dipped her low over the ice. She let her head fall backwards, exposing the fresh scars about her neck, while strands of her long, raven hair brushed the snow and her eyes gazed wildly up at the full moon.

After their dance, Sidorio led Lola back to their table. In their absence, the aged host had deposited the magnum of wine and a pair of glasses. Already, the bottle and glasses were dusted with fresh snowflakes.

“I’ll pour,” Lola said, brushing the dusting of snow from the wine bottle. Lifting it up to the light, she glanced at the bottle’s yellowed label. Then she upended it and poured its dark, glutinous contents out onto the moonlit snow.

Sidorio grinned.

The musicians began a new song – the violin and accordion building the rhythm. The singer slapped her tambourine and stomped her feet with increasing vigour, utterly caught up in the frenzied world of her song.

Lola extended the empty bottle to her husband, swinging it precariously between her elegant fingers. “Lola’s thirsty,” she declared, mimicking a young girl’s voice. Then, reverting to her normal timbre, she smiled prettily and asked, “Won’t you fetch me a *proper* drink, dearest?”

Nodding but saying nothing, Sidorio seized the empty bottle and set off through the snow. Lola glimpsed the fire in his eyes; the deep pits of flame which revealed that his own appetite was as strong and deep and demanding as her own.

Inside the warmth of the hotel restaurant, the maitre d’ noticed that the music had stopped. He squinted out through the window but a veil of fresh condensation impaired his view. He lifted a feeble hand to the glass, wincing as his old flesh made contact with the freezing pane. Rubbing his fist against it, he cleared a peephole.

Peering out, he saw that the bandstand stood empty. He adjusted his line of vision and corrected himself. The bandstand was not in fact empty but carpeted with bodies. The musicians were slumped on it, lifeless. A river of red, illuminated by the moon, flowed urgently into the virgin snow.

The man - the impossibly tall stranger with the impressively deep pockets – walked back across the snow. Rocking between the thick thumb and forefinger of his left hand was the wine bottle. As he strode on, some of the contents of the magnum spilled over the brim and spattered the ground.

Feeling waves of nausea, the old man frowned. He turned away from the window and sought comfort in the sight of the pile of gold coins. They gleamed in the candlelight, as bright as if they had been minted that very evening. He cupped the coins in his hands and cradled them carefully. This was more money than he had ever seen in his long life; certainly more money than he would ever see again.

Outside, Sidorio offered the bottle to his wife. Lola reached out her glass and Sidorio poured a tasting portion of the liquid inside. She had trained him well. Mouthing her thanks, she swirled the liquid around the glass and lifted it to her nose, the better to savour its distinctive aroma.

Glancing up, she caught her husband eschewing the other glass and, instead, lifting the bottle directly to his thick lips. He drank thirstily. She watched him; half-appalled, half-entranced.

Sidorio, growing conscious of his wife's glance, drew the bottle away from his mouth and smiled, guilelessly, at her. His lips were smeared with blood. Like a naughty lad, caught with a mouthful of chocolate, he extended his tongue to lick up the traces.

Lola laughed. “You’re such a brute, my darling,” she said, her words laced with affection. She reached out her glass once more. “A refill, please, if you’ve left anything for me! It’s a mixed blend, but rather tasty.”

“Plenty for us both,” he said. “And plenty more where this came from.”

Lola sipped her wine, thoughtfully. “You know, Sid, you’re the roughest of diamonds, but once I have finished with you, you will shine with all the light of Lucifer.”

Sidorio raised his glass. “A toast,” he said. “To you and me. Together always. Husband and wife.”

Lola raised her own glass. “To us, my brutish darling. Together through eternity.” She drank, then gazed at her husband, fresh fire in her eyes. “You asked me before what I wanted. Well, there is one more thing…”

Sidorio nodded. “Go on.”

“I want to grow an empire with you. Hand in hand.”

“I want that too,” Sidorio said. He paused. “And I want my children to be part of it.”

Lola hesitated. “Grace and Connor?”

Sidorio nodded. “I can’t pretend they don’t exist. Even if Connor *did* try to destroy you.”

Lola considered for a moment. “He did cast a certain pall over our wedding by stabbing me and then decapitating me. But,” she shrugged, “I’m sure we can forgive such waywardness in the young. Connor and Grace are *your* flesh and blood. And, by marriage, *my* stepchildren. It is only fitting that they should become part of our empire.” She smiled at Sidorio. “You should invite them to visit us, when we return. I’d so enjoy getting to know them.”

“Would you really?”

As Lola nodded, Sidorio thought his heart might break from happiness. In a short space of time, he had gone from feeling that he had lost everything to the sense now that he was being overloaded with gifts. The wheel of fate was certainly spinning fast.

“Nothing would make me happier,” he said, “than you and I building an empire, with Connor and Grace at our side.”

“Let’s not waste a moment,” Lola said, refilling her glass. “Let’s cut short our honeymoon and return to the ships this very night.”

Sidorio smiled. “Sometimes it’s as if you can read my every thought.”

Lola gave a little laugh. “There is no time to be wasted in the quest for world domination...” They clinked glasses. “Though there *is* a small supply of vintage still to be drained back at the hotel... Perhaps we could finish that first?”

“Indeed,” said Sidorio. “We should drink a toast to our family!”

Arms entwined, they turned and headed slowly back towards the hotel, their footsteps muffled by the snow.

The entrance door closed quietly behind them. And then all that could be heard was the tinkle of gold coins clattering to the floor.