



She will protect her hero at any cost

VARVARA

SAM MICHAELS

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WATCH THE BOOKSTREAMZ PRESENTATION OF RIVALS FEATURING:

SOPHIE HOPKINS as GEORGINA GARRETT

NICCI BRIGHTEN as MOLLY MIPPLE

HARVEY QUINN as DAVID MAYNARD

JOAN HODGES as DULCIE GARRETT

CHRISTOPHER LAKEWOOD as BENJAMIN

LAINY SHAW as FANNY MIPPLE

JORDAN EL-BALAWI as MICKEY THE MATCHSTICK

DANIEL KOBINA as KNUCKLES

TOM KAY as LASH

AND

CARYS BOWKETT as VARVARA

Varvara's Story

My Name is Varvara Kovar. I am told that my papa was a Bolshevik, an agitator concerned with overthrowing the Russian Tsar. His political views led to the exile of my family from Russia. In 1902 they settled in London, England.

I do not know what happened to them from this time, but my story begins in 1915. I was two years old and I lived above my papa's bakery shop. It was said that Kovar's made the best bread in Battersea – this is something I have *always* been proud of. It is probably the only thing I have ever taken any pride in. I certainly do not have any pride for myself.

The Great War between Britain and Germany had been raging for a year. There was much fear and hatred towards the Germans and one day, that loathing was directed at my papa. It seemed he had been mistaken for a German and his baker's shop was set upon by an angry mob. In their ignorance, they destroyed Papa's shop and dragged him into the street. I'm told he screamed for mercy and in his last breaths, he begged for my life to be spared - It was.

Of course, I have no memory of the tragic event. No-one can tell me what became of my mama. I assume she was also killed.

A woman took me to another Russian family and asked that they care for me. That woman must have been very kind. Had she'd known of how my life was to be, I doubt she would have left me there with that family.

The new family were very poor and my new mama was a mean woman. I do not think she ever liked me. I was to her nothing but an inconvenience. An extra mouth to feed. I would get the scraps of remnants left from the family meals and if I did not show my gratitude, she would beat me. My papa would turn a blind eye to his wife's fierce lashings but I do not think he liked her to do it. I once heard him asking her to be sweeter to me. She did not take well to being told what to do! She shouted at him and I think she swore. I cannot be sure. She spoke in Russian and I had never heard cuss words before.

Papa was much nicer than my mama. He was funny and would tickle my ribs. It would make me giggle but Mama would throw him a stern look and that would be the end of our laughter.

They had a daughter, Dina, two years older than me. We became like sisters. At first, Dina would look out for me but as we grew, I became the strong one and it was I who watched over her. I still do. Dina is the only love I have known in my life. I consider her to be my *real* family.

Their son, Bogdan, was six years older than me. I think we got on well but my

recollections are vague, though I clearly remember his coffin. Scarlet fever stole his young life. He did not live past the age of nine.

After Bogdan's death, life became darker for us all. For a time, Dina rarely spoke and cried more. My papa lost his joy. My mama was left distraught. She took her pain out on me, usually with a wooden stick. I think maybe this is how I grew strong. My strength is, at least, one thing to thank her for.

Four years passed and on Mama's orders, Bogdan's belongings remained untouched. I was seven, Dina was nine. We were playing *hide and seek* though in the small house with little furniture, good hiding places were hard to come by. As Dina closed her eyes and counted to twenty, I squirreled myself into a large wooden box at the foot of mama and papa's bed. Mama kept her clean sheets in there and papa's handkerchiefs. I was unaware that Bogdan's clothes were also in that box.

I held my breath and listened for Dina's footsteps. Surely she wouldn't find me. We had never played in our parent's room before today, but I was feeling brave, determined to out-smart my older sister. I heard her calling my name. 'Not behind the curtains,' she'd say, then, 'You're not in the cupboard under the stairs. Where are you, Varvara?'

Dina was looking in all our usual hide-outs. I thought she'd soon give up and I would be the victor of our game. But then I heard heavy footsteps approaching my secret place and instantly, I knew it was mama. My heart thumped as she opened the lid and glared at me with such disdain. She grabbed me by my hair and dragged me from the box. She pulled me with tremendous force. I thought she may scalp me!

I saw Dina trembling in the corner of the room and cowering as mama screeched at me. 'You're evil,' mama spat, 'and wicked.'

Mama took me to the cupboard under the stairs and threw me in. I dare not move. I sat in the darkness for hours, quivering with fear and shivering with cold. Papa would be home soon, he would rescue me.

I don't know how long I had been under the stairs, but papa never came to save me. He didn't come home that evening, or the next. We never saw him again.

Mama eventually released me from my imprisonment but she wasn't happy that I had soiled my clothes. It gave her another excuse to beat me. The agony of the stick whacking across my back was a perverse welcome relief. It distracted from the hunger that gnawed my famished belly.

Life continued dismally for five more years. I was twelve when mama brought

home a new man. Dina and I were instructed to call him papa and we were made to clean his boots and fetch and carry for him. He was a fat man with a leer in his dark eyes that left me feeling uncomfortable. He did not treat us well and I did not like him.

When I was thirteen, it was a hard winter and had snowed for days, possibly weeks. We were desperately cold. Fat Papa had lost his job. I think it was because he was lazy. We had no coal for the fire. Dina and I would sit huddled together under thin blankets for warmth. Mama had become very thin. Her cheekbones jutted through her pallid skin and her wrists looked as though they would snap under the weight of her tin mug of warm water. Lately, it was all she would allow to pass her cracked lips. Dark circles framed her sunken eyes and her voice had become raspy. It was a blessing that she no longer shouted at me and didn't have the strength to hit me. But I realised she was dying. She found her peace a week later when her soul left her diseased body and went to be with Bogdan.

Fat Papa didn't allow Dina or I to attend her funeral. This suited us as we had no tears to cry for mama. At last, we thought our lives would finally be free of corporal rule. But the hurt we'd suffered at mama's beatings were soon to be replaced with another sort of pain, much worse than either of us could have imagined. Dina would be the first of us to experience it. That night, just hours after mama had been put in the frozen ground, Fat Papa took my sister to his bed.

Dina didn't speak of what had happened to her in that room, but I had heard her pleading with Fat Papa to stop, then her whimpers and his disgusting grunts. The next day, I looked into Dina's eyes. They were filled with unshed tears and she was never the same again. She stopped playing and her beautiful smile was gone forever.

For the next month, Fat Papa half-heartedly looked for work but to no avail. Our cupboards were empty and the only food we had was scavenged or stolen. The table and chairs in our front room, along with mama's cherished display cabinet, were burned on the fire to keep us from freezing to death. I have to speak honestly – there were times when I imagined my death and often hoped it would be bestowed upon us. I wished for the grim reaper to visit our house and take Dina and I away. Death felt more appealing than this life. In death, there would be no more pain. No more suffering. No more looking at the tortured expression in Dina's eyes. But then I'd hear a voice from deep inside. It would tell me to fight on, to be strong and to believe in better things. I suppose that

voice was my own, and thankfully, I listened to it. All fantasies of mortality were dismissed and I tried to think of an escape from our horrid lives. That's when I suggested to Dina that we should run away. I couldn't stand to see her being used as a replacement wife to Fat Papa. But Dina was too fearful of the bastard. She was convinced he would find us and then her fate would be even worse than what she already endured. So, I stayed, for Dina's sake, though in reality, it was probably for my own. You see, I couldn't bear to be away from her. I knew my heart would break without her.

Following the bitter winter, we welcomed a gloriously warm summer. There were berries to pick and fruits to harvest. Our starved bodies gratefully gained some nourishment from nature's offerings.

At this time, Fat Papa's mood seemed to lift. He bounced around with joviality but I sensed it was more than the sun that had raised his spirits – Unfortunately, I was right.

It was a Friday evening and Fat Papa danced around our sparsely furnished front room. The bright July sunshine beamed through our dirty window and through the holes in our ragged curtains. I was dazzled by the light that reflected off Fat Papa's sweaty, bald head and intrigued, though wary, of his celebrations. He boasted about how he'd found a new source of income. An easy way to make money. He spoke about how clever he was, and told us our *real* papa had been a fool to run back to Russia. England was a country of opportunity and he was going to be a very wealthy man!

I remember exchanging a look with Dina. We had always thought that papa was dead. Not so, apparently. He was in our motherland. We spoke only in Russian. The country was a place that we called home though neither Dina or I had ever visited. But this new news offered hope. Papa was alive and once again, just like when I had been kept in the cupboard for days, I truly believed that he would come to our rescue.

I realise now how silly and childish that thought was. It was planted by ridiculous stories of princesses and castles, with handsome knights in shining armour. Real life doesn't have fairy tale endings. In fact, our lives were about to become a living nightmare.

Later that evening, Fat Papa made us wash our faces and take a brush to our heads. We'd both been blessed with golden locks and would often sit for hours plaiting each other's hair. It was a small comfort to us in our torturous world. He made us stand against the wall and ran his eyes over us. 'You'll do,' he said, then led us through the streets to a part of town we had never been before. The sun

had set and I knew it was past nine, possibly even ten. I'd never been out so late and though I was tired, it felt exciting to see the streets alive and vibrant at night. But my initial excitement soon turned to fear when I saw the sights that the dark brings out – Intimidating, menacing looking men, some drunk, some fighting, others begging. Dina held my hand and we walked closely together, following Fat Papa. For once, I was glad he was with us. Before long, we stopped outside of a house. I can't say that I took much notice of it as I was too busy looking over my shoulder. Fat Papa rapped on the door three times and when it opened, a man of short stature and spindly arms indicated for us to enter. The man's grey, wispy hair wafted in the draft as he closed the door behind us. I looked at Dina to gauge her thoughts. It was clear to see that she was petrified and I couldn't blame her. My mouth had become very dry and I struggled to swallow. The house was almost as dark as the street had been but I could see a light glowing from under a door next to a set of stairs. The short man took us through to that room, then left without saying a word.

'Be good and do as your told,' Fat Papa warned, 'Or else there'll be trouble.'

I squeezed Dina's hand but I think at this point, we were both too terrified to speak or even look at each other.

The door flew open again and a large middle-aged man sauntered in. He had thick grey hair, the same colour as the smoke that came from his cigar. He walked towards us and blew the rancid smelling smoke into my face. The putrid aroma made me want to heave. Fat Papa started to babble about how young and fresh we were and told the man we were both virgins. I did not know what a virgin was but later, when I was older, I realised that Fat Papa had lied that day – He'd taken Dina's virginity six months earlier.

The man came closer and leaned in towards us. He sniffed me and then Dina. He turned to Fat Papa and told him that he would take me. I did not understand for what use he wanted me. He was such a big man, I thought he might want me for food!

'Go with him,' Fat Papa instructed as he yanked me away from Dina. I tried to hold on to her hand and she pulled me back, but we were young girls, no match for Fat Papa.

Fat Papa's friend tightly gripped my arm. My feet almost lifted from the floor as roughly hauled me out of the room and up the staircase. I could hear Dina crying and calling for me, but as I was shoved into another room, Dina's voice faded.

I looked around. There was nothing but a mattress on a bed. No blankets, and

the window was boarded over. I heard the bullish man lock the door behind me and then I could feel his warm breath on the back of my neck. I froze. His hands reached up my top and round to my breasts. I felt sick to my stomach as he began to fondle me. Every nerve in my body was screaming at me to run, to flee the room and this sickening person, but fear rooted me to the spot.

He led me to the bed and as he pushed me onto it, I screamed out in terror. I couldn't allow this to happen and began to struggle but he stopped me with a swift slap across my face. When he climbed on top of me, he almost crushed me with his weight. I asked him to let me go, begged for him to get off, but he laughed and said he'd paid good money for me and was going to make sure he got every penny's worth. As he roughly pulled my clothes off, at that moment, I understood that this is what Fat Papa did to Dina.

For the next two years, Fat Papa made good money from selling our bodies. He didn't care if the men he found would hurt us. There were times when we would wear fat lips, blackened eyes or bruised ribs. As long as the men coughed up money, they would be allowed to treat Dina and I as they liked. There'd be occasions when two, three or four men, would take turns, using us like worthless bits of meat. The most awful and degrading things were inflicted upon us and I think we both retreated into ourselves. It was the only way we could cope. Especially when we were made to have sex with each other whilst men watched us. I've never felt so ashamed. I love Dina, but not in that way! We have never, ever spoken of it.

Fat Papa ruled over us. We were powerless and, by now, we had nothing left within us to fight back with. It was like living in a half-dead state. I knew what was going on but I'd blocked it out. Somehow, I'd made myself numb and functioned but didn't feel anything. I dare not allow myself to think. If I did, I think I would have gone crazy.

One day, two men came to our house. Fat Papa showed them through to the front room and told me to go upstairs. I sat on the stairs and listened to their conversation. The two men told Fat Papa that they were taking me and Dina. Fat Papa protested. The men offered him money. He still refused to hand us over. I couldn't see what happened next but I heard several thumps and Fat Papa cried out in pain. Then all went quiet. I heard them walk towards the front room door, their boots heavy on the floorboards. I quickly sprang to my feet before dashing up the stairs. But they followed and found Dina and I clinging to each other in the corner of our room. They told us that we had to come with them, so we did. As we passed the front room, I sneaked a look through the open door. Fat Papa

was sprawled on the floor, face down, and it looked as if all his blood had seeped from his blubbery body. I smiled. Yes, I feared these two men but they had rid us of Fat Papa. I've learnt to try and find the good in every bad situation – that strategy has helped me survive.

The men drove us in a black car. The journey was in silence and though I wondered what our fate would be, I was beyond feeling any distress. Whatever would happen to us could never be as bad as we had already experienced. I do not think Dina felt as comfortable. She stared straight ahead but I could see her eyes were as wide as the full moon! I wanted to reassure her, to tell her everything would be all right. But of course, I could not make this promise. I never make promises I can't keep.

We hadn't travelled very far when the car pulled up outside a large house in Queenstown Road. We were ordered to get out and one of the men walked in front as the other walked behind us. They led us inside. The house looked surprisingly clean and fresh and when we were taken into an office, I was shocked to see how well it was furnished.

A man with a pleasant face was sat behind a ridiculously large desk. Dina and I stood in front of him and he asked us our names. I spoke for us both. He scraped his leather chair back and came round the desk to survey us. We were used to men ogling us before they chose which of us to lay with. I expected him to drag either Dina or I to another room but he didn't. Instead, he sat back at his desk and introduced himself. He told us his name was Billy Wilcox and that we now worked for him. We would each be provided with our own furnished room and would be expected to keep it clean. I heard Dina let out a small gasp. I knew she felt the same as me – we didn't want to be separated. We wanted to stay together as we always had. But there was nothing we could do, we had no voice. He went on to tell us how we'd have new clothes, food and protection. We had to abide by *his* rules and he'd ensure our safety. Just to make sure we understood, Mr Wilcox instructed an enormous man to fetch Tattie. Moments later, a very scared but beautiful young woman was brought into the office. I knew instantly that she was Russian. It's funny how you recognise your own. Tattie was scantily dressed and I could see the outline of her perfectly shaped body through her silk slip. She began to try and pull away from the huge man. 'Please, no, not again. Please, Mr Wilcox,' she begged.

Her pleas were ignored and Mr Wilcox sneered as he said, 'Keep her still, Knuckles.'

A sob caught in my throat. I could feel Tatties distress and knew something

atrocious was about to happen. Again, I wanted to speak but I'd become accustomed to staying silent in the face of fear.

I did not see where Mr Wilcox got the bolt-crops from but they were in his hand as he approached Tattie. She was sobbing unashamedly now as Knuckles held out her hand.

Mr Wilcox looked over to us. I think he wanted to check if we were suitably horrified. We were. I could feel his cruel eyes boring into me as he told Tattie to show us her other hand. Tattie's hand was shaking as she held it up and I tried not to vomit when I saw the swollen, bloodied stump where her little finger should have been.

'You see,' he said, 'this is what will happen if you defy me.'

I do not know what Tattie had done wrong, if indeed she'd done anything at all. Mr Wilcox may have just been using her as an example, or maybe she'd tried to escape. Either way, as he placed the bolt-crops around the finger on her other hand, I looked away when Tattie screamed.

That was our introduction to the brothel at Queenstown Road. Our new home, under the rule of Billy Wilcox.

Fat Papa was gone but we were still prisoners to a man, there to line his pockets with money at the expense of our suffering and sanity. But would there be any improvement in our lives now that we were no longer in Fat Papa's clutches? What a stupid question! No, of course there wouldn't be. Fresh linen and clothes, food in our stomachs and a warm fire could never take away the feeling of powerlessness and hopelessness. I'd known it for most of my life. Depression lived with me, every second of every day. I longed for freedom. I wanted nothing more than to be in a position to make my own decisions and create my own destiny. Without this, I remained dead inside.

Dina and I soon settled into the routine at Queenstown Road. Men came and went. We opened our legs for them and allowed them to do the things to us that their wives' would refuse. I rarely saw Dina and my heart ached for her. We would be busy working all day, then at night, when the front door was locked, we were kept captive in our rooms. Our disgusting world was a normality to us though the desire to run away remained within me. But I had given up believing that we could escape. That was until one day, when I met a gentle man. Tom came to my room and was tender with me. The next week, he returned and instead of sex, we spoke. He told me about his life and how lonely he was since his wife had died. I held him when he poured out his heart and he cried in my arms. Week after week, Tom came to the brothel and always requested me.

Sometimes we gently kissed and he'd hold my hand, then sometime later, he declared his love for me. I couldn't say the love was reciprocated, but this gave me hope. It renewed my passion for liberty. Tom could help me and hide me away from Billy Wilcox. Tom could keep me safe. I'd never spoken of freedom but I gathered the courage and broached the subject. I explained everything, how Dina and I were held against our will and the threat to our lives if we tried to escape. I promised I'd love him and that I would do anything for him, if only he would take me away from this hell. He agreed and said he'd come back for me in five days. For the next three, I allowed myself to dream.

On the fourth day, the day before we'd planned my break-out, Mr Wilcox summoned me to his office. I saw the bolt-cutters on his desk and my heart sank. I wasn't afraid of losing my finger. It was not nearly as devastating as losing my only chance of living a normal life - I knew that opportunity had passed. Mr Wilcox took great pleasure in telling me how my saviour, the man who was supposed to love me, had come to him and disclosed our escape plan. I'd only ever know him as Tom, but Mr Wilcox referred to him as P.C. Burks. Through my despair, I was flabbergasted! Tom had never mentioned that he was a policeman. I should have been shocked at his betrayal but I suppose I had come to expect the worse from men. I would never, ever trust a man again.

Knuckles held out my hand to Mr Wilcox. I didn't resist. Mr Wilcox had taken everything else, my hopes and dreams, my life, he may as well take my finger. I surrendered all optimism of anything ever changing. This was my lot - a worthless whore. I would have killed myself if it wasn't for that little voice inside me, the one that kept on at me, reminding me of who I really am. That voice saved me. It reminded me that my *real* Papa, the only man who ever loved me, he made the *best* bread in Battersea. I wish I knew him. He sounded like a good man but I think this is a contradiction as I do not believe there are any good men in this vile world.

Men are my enemy and I hate Billy Wilcox.

This has been my story, the story of Varvara Kovak, the daughter of a Russian baker - It is not the end.

To find out more about Varvara and her story in the compelling Georgina Garrett series by Sam Michaels, click the link below and start your journey into the gangland underworld of 1930's Britain.

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