



# NATASHA'S UKRAINE

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*To Olga*



# *Natasha's Ukraine*

A NOVEL

**ROB OTTESEN**



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## One

IT WAS TEN MINUTES AFTER TWO O’CLOCK and Natasha could smell the cinnamon bagel the man next to her was eating, which only made her hunger pangs worse. She had not eaten for hours and was famished, but she only had a few kopeks and couldn’t even afford a stick of gum. The world seemed surreal to her because only a week ago she’d been planning a honeymoon to Dubai, a new life in Odessa, and maybe having a baby. Now she was broke, frightened, and headed home to her village of Slavne—a place too small to appear on any map, but perfect to hide from the man who had threatened to kill her.

She remembered his last words to her as she’d left his apartment for the last time: “You are a slut. You are a whore. You are a stupid bitch and you will never find a man as good as me.”

All the gifts he’d given, he’d demanded she return. He took her underwear so she’d never look sexy for another man. He took her perfume so she’d never smell good for another man. And he took most of her clothes, which made for a very cold October in Ukraine. Now she was left with nothing more than her old sweatpants, a cheap warm-up jacket, and a bus ticket back to her childhood home.

She discreetly scanned the waiting area to make sure she hadn’t been followed. The bus station in Nikolaev was a small, dated

structure with stray dogs, pigeons, and beggars scattered about. It smelled of cigarettes and hot dogs, and was painted dark green and white, a color scheme that had not changed since the USSR had been in charge of the city more than two decades ago. The new Ukrainian government had never upgraded the building and it looked like a place that had been frozen in time. Fortunately, the man she feared was nowhere to be seen.

Over the loudspeaker, the bored voice of an underpaid attendant announced that Natasha's bus was ready to depart. She walked over to the platform, climbed the steps into the bus, and chose a seat by the left window near the front. She always chose a window seat to avoid the odor of men who stood in the aisle; her sense of smell had always been so very sensitive. As the bus pulled out of the station, she breathed a sigh of relief. Natasha had escaped from Hasan.

Hasan was a jeweler from Ankora who not only owned a store in Ukraine but also dated there. Ukraine was an excellent hunting ground for him. For his age group, a five-to-one ratio of women to men gave him an advantage he didn't have in Turkey. And since Ukrainian men were notoriously unreliable and poor, many Ukrainian women were obsessed with finding a foreigner to marry so they might have a chance for a better life, making them vulnerable to his advances. Hasan's playbook was a simple one. Pay a girl's bills, compliment her, and give her attention, and an unattractive jeweler from Turkey could date a woman who might be a supermodel in any other country. Someone like Natasha Dubrova, for example.

When Natasha met Hasan at a friend's office party, she could clearly see that he was much older than she was. He was Turkish and thin with a well-trimmed, black beard and a dark tan, and he had a large nose that was not in proportion to his face. There was a scar on his left cheek he'd earned in a knife fight, and he wore



it like a badge of honor because the other man had died in the altercation. He smelled of fine cologne and was wearing smooth, black slacks and a white button-down shirt, and he carried himself with the manner and confidence of a billionaire.

He'd been married once before to a Turkish lady of high status and reputation, but the marriage hadn't lasted long. His wife had been a beautiful woman with flowing black hair that felt like fine silk. Her large brown eyes captivated everyone who met her, but he'd fallen out of love with her because she'd been too good to him. She'd been madly in love with him, cooked for him, protected him. In short, she'd been a perfect spouse, but he'd found life with her to be mundane. Hasan's mother had imbued him with the idea that there were "good women" and "bad women" and he'd decided, quite incorrectly, that the bad ones were good in bed and the good ones made good wives. It was this strange notion that had prevented him from becoming aroused by his wife and had caused him to seek out a woman who could truly excite him. A woman that was, in his simple mind, "bad" in private but still presentable in public as "good."

Natasha stepped into his "bad girl" fantasy as soon as he met her. After several dinners, he told her that he considered her to be a good friend, which pleased her. He started to call her every evening and he always seemed to have something interesting to talk about. Her boyfriend had never given her such regular attention, and Natasha was starting to feel good about herself for the first time since she'd graduated from college. Hasan was available whenever she needed his advice or consolation, and she appreciated his ability to speak Russian, albeit with a slight accent.

Her feelings for him were growing stronger with every passing day, and she soon found herself visiting his apartment. It was a decent rental on the fifth floor of an old *stalinka*, a refurbished structure that had been built originally to house residents of the

former Soviet Union, and was in one of the nicer areas of town. There was only one bedroom, one bathroom, and a small kitchen, but the lack of space was not a problem because she and Hasan were seldom there; they took long walks, visited cafes, and talked on park benches for hours on end.

Although she was initially embarrassed to be seen with a man who wasn't as handsome as she'd like, his smile and warm eyes eventually melted her heart and she found that she no longer cared about his appearance. Their many long conversations were leading to something more for Natasha. She was feeling something that she thought might be love, if such a thing could exist in her country. So she was warming to the idea of having a relationship with him when they returned to his apartment after a long night of bowling, shopping, and drinking at Stepanek's Pub near the central park. They watched television for a while, and he put his arm around her while she watched Ukrainian game shows and nestled comfortably by his side.

Then, during one of the commercials, he kissed her. Not tenderly, not soulfully, but abruptly, roughly, and without her permission. It was more like an assault than a kiss—quick, unexpected, and without context. Natasha pulled away and was visibly upset. Hasan had caught her completely by surprise, and she felt betrayed because their friendship had seemed so secure.

“What's wrong?” he asked.

“I don't like it when you kiss me that way,” she said.

“But that's how a grown man kisses,” he asserted. “With passion and strength.”

Natasha was embarrassed and confused. Although she hadn't expected to be kissed that evening, it was also true that she'd enjoyed his company for weeks and was curious to see where their relationship might lead. So she decided to return his affection. She matched the pressure of his lips and tongue, taking

in the scent of his aftershave, and soon his hands were all over her. He teased and aroused her but did not try to undress her. This excited her even more; she could feel his experience with every move he made, and could sense his confidence and strength. She decided at that very moment that no matter how the night might end, she would not regret it.

They didn't have condoms and she didn't care. Natasha begged him to make love to her. As he obliged, she discovered that his skills outmatched his appearance. She never thought such an unattractive man could be so good in bed, but she climaxed as never before and felt the stress of a thousand concerns leave her body as if by magic. There was no doubt in her mind that she had made the right choice. The line between friend and lover had been crossed, and she was happy with her decision.

Natasha decided to stay overnight and rested her head on Hasan's chest as he gently stroked her hair. He sensed her contentment and basked in the glory of the moment as he lit a cigarette. In Hasan's mind, his latest conquest had been one of his best. Natasha had moaned and touched him like a sexy woman from an American movie, and yet she seemed so sweet and innocent. He wondered if he could trust her. So many Ukrainian women were just after his money. Yet, somehow, Natasha seemed different.

"Well, how was it?" he asked. "Did you like it?"

She smiled. "Of course. I had no idea you were such a good lover."

Hasan grinned like a little boy who had just received a passing grade on a school exam, but what Natasha hadn't told him was that she was feeling guilt as well as contentment. Natasha still had a boyfriend named Sergei. She hadn't seen him for weeks because he was working on a construction job in Kiev, but she was sure his interest had been waning because he hadn't been

keeping in touch. As far as she knew, their relationship was over, but the fact that they hadn't officially broken up made her feel like she was cheating on him. She pushed these thoughts aside and took pleasure in Hasan's warm embrace and the fine, silk sheets of his soft bed. It felt good to enjoy such simple comforts for a change.

The next morning, Hasan made Natasha a cup of fresh coffee and heated up a cranberry-walnut muffin for her. He had an Italian espresso machine that he loaded with regular coffee grounds to make a delicious *cafe crema*, and it was the finest cup of coffee she'd ever tasted. Hasan served it in a bone china cup with a silver spoon. As she sipped the coffee and thought about the coming day, she realized that she had nothing to wear.

"Hasan, I have to go back to my apartment to do some laundry. I need some fresh clothes. Would you mind walking with me?"

"You need fresh clothes?" Hasan thought for a moment. Natasha had a great figure, and he decided that he would enjoy seeing her in a silk blouse and a miniskirt. "We don't need to go to your apartment to get clothes," he said. "Let's go to City Center. This sounds like an opportunity to do some shopping!"

She gave him an incredulous look. "You are joking, right?" No man had ever offered to take her shopping before and Natasha certainly hadn't expected it.

He shook his head. "A woman needs to have an extensive selection of outfits to be presentable. One pair of sweatpants isn't enough." He leaned forward. "Let's buy you some dresses and get you some nice things. Come on, it will be fun!"

Natasha clapped her hands in excitement. She'd always admired the nice outfits worn by the wealthy women of Nikolaev and always wondered what it would be like to visit one of the finer department stores. Hasan's generosity touched her deeply. "Well, thank you," she said. "I can't wait to see what we find!"

City Center in Nikolaev was a contemporary indoor shopping

complex, painted red and white with round windows on the outside. It had a cinema, a bowling alley, restaurants, and several department stores. Locals found it a favorite place to visit because it offered a taste of Western glamor and glitz in an otherwise depressing, impoverished city. Natasha and Hasan visited two of the finer department stores and enjoyed looking through the racks for something that might fit her. As they searched, Natasha learned more about Hasan's taste. For one thing, he seemed to prefer form-fitting clothing that showed off her figure and was less interested in color than style. Whenever she held up a dress that was girly or fluffy, he shook his head and walked away. After an hour of searching, they finally came across a classic black dress that met his approval. It was tight, and when she looked in the mirror, she couldn't deny that she looked sexy and sophisticated. He also bought her a sheer white dress with a set of platform sandals to match, a miniskirt, and a few new blouses. Natasha was delighted. She could never have afforded to buy such fine clothes herself, but as soon as the outfits were put into a shopping bag, she found herself feeling guilty.

"You shouldn't have done this," she said as they left the shopping center. "These clothes are too expensive!"

Hasan took her hand and kissed it. "Don't worry about the money. It's my pleasure. You spend all of your time with me, so it's the least I can do."

"Well, I enjoy our time together too, but I don't expect any reward."

"I know. That's exactly why I'm kind to you. Plus, I wanted to show you how a real man treats a woman. I doubt any of your ex-boyfriends took you shopping for dresses." He cradled her in his arms. "Look, I'm your friend, and I don't mind helping you out. I don't know where this is all going, but I do know that I like you. You're good company and you're very attractive. I just don't think that you've ever been properly appreciated."

When she heard these words, Natasha couldn't help but compare Hasan to Sergei. Sergei was a typical Ukrainian man who never seemed willing to commit to her. He'd been a good lover and a great friend, but he'd never provided for her or offered any hope of marriage. And someday, Natasha wanted to be married. She'd always loved Sergei, and she was sure he loved her back, but Ukraine was a harsh country and survival was constantly on her mind. For most Ukrainian women, survival meant marriage. Making ends meet was simply too difficult to do alone.

"You're right," she finally said. "Ukrainian men are oblivious. They just don't take their women seriously."

Hasan studied her for a moment. "It sounds like you have someone in mind when you say that."

She nodded. "Yes. Sergei," she confessed, deciding to be honest with him. "His name is Sergei. We've been together for more than two years, but he ignores me most of the time."

"You mean, he doesn't call you? He doesn't stay in touch to see how you're doing?"

"No, not lately."

"Well, that's bullshit. If a man is in love and is serious about a woman, he'll call or text no matter how busy he is."

Natasha sighed. It was difficult to admit, but the writing was on the wall, clear for her to see. She'd made all sorts of excuses for Sergei. Now, it was finally time for her to move on. She felt melancholy as she realized this, and Hasan sensed her mood.

"Let's get some coffee," he offered. "That's the best way to end a day of shopping." He took her for a walk down Sovietskaya Street, past the McDonald's and the old townhomes that had been built a century ago during the time of the Romanovs, and found a cozy alcove in a cafe where they could just sit and enjoy the afternoon. They talked about Sergei and about how Ukrainian men were usually drunk and non-committal, and how frustrating

it was to be a single woman in a country where there was so little hope. Natasha appreciated Hasan's attention to her story. He seemed interested in every detail.

Later that evening, he took her back to Stepanek's Pub for a nice steak dinner. She wore her new black dress and high heels, and Hasan couldn't take his eyes off her. Natasha felt beautiful and special and was having a wonderful time, but as the waitress brought them their meals, her cell phone vibrated. She immediately felt uncomfortable because she hadn't been expecting a call, and she knew who the caller probably was. She glanced down at the screen and confirmed the worst. It was a text from Sergei: *Hi sweetie. How are you?*

She ignored the text, placed the phone in her purse, and cut into the juicy tenderloin in front of her. Then her phone vibrated again: *I miss you. Can we meet?*

Hasan frowned and his eyes flashed in the candlelight. "Who's texting you?" he asked. "You look upset."

"Just a friend...my flatmate. It's nothing important. I can call her tomorrow."

Natasha felt guilty for lying, but she didn't want to ruin their dinner. Her phone vibrated again and she excused herself, went to the restroom, and texted Sergei a reply with trembling fingers: *It's late now, and I am already in bed. Let's talk tomorrow.* Then she turned off the phone and placed it deep into her purse before returning to the table.

After their meal, she and Hasan took a slow walk through Nikolaev's central park, which was called "Skazka" and translates as "fairy tale." The park had pretty trees and flower gardens, swings for children, wooden benches, and a fountain. It was usually safe to walk through at night despite the many streetlights that were burned out, and the walk was a nice way to end the evening.

“You know, I really enjoyed dinner,” Natasha said, putting her arm around him. “Thank you for taking me.”

“Yes,” Hasan said. “The food was delicious. Do you want to go to my place for some private time?”

Natasha hesitated. “I don’t know, it’s rather late…”

“What time is it?”

She reached into her purse for her phone. “Let me see,” she said. She found the phone nestled between a package of tissues and a tube of lipstick and turned it on.

“Why was your phone off?” Hasan asked. “You usually keep it on all the time.”

Natasha was flustered. “I might have accidentally pushed the wrong button,” she said. It was hard for her to lie to Hasan. She felt as though he could see through her. As soon as the phone lit up, she noticed that there were five new text messages from Sergei. She told Hasan the time, but he knew she was hiding something.

“Tell me the truth,” he demanded. “Who was texting you while we were at dinner?”

Natasha looked down at the gravel of the path they’d been walking on. She felt ashamed, as if she’d been cornered, and decided to tell him the truth immediately.

“Sergei,” she said. “It was Sergei.”

Hasan focused his eyes on her. The fact that the call had been from Sergei did not surprise him, but he found her attempt to hide this information disturbing.

“What did he want?” he asked. “Did he want to see you again? Does he want to sleep with you?”

“No, heavens no. He just wanted to tell me he misses me.”

Hasan put his hand on her shoulder. “Clearly, he thinks that the two of you are still together. This is unacceptable, Natasha. Don’t you see how he just uses you when it’s convenient for him,



and that you're getting nothing in return? And how am I supposed to feel about this man calling you just as we're starting a new relationship?" Hasan's supportive, kind face had vanished, and in its place was the face of a stern man she'd never seen before.

"Do you still want to be with him?" he probed. "Do you still love him?"

"No," she said, although, in her heart, she wondered if this were true.

"Do you miss him?"

She was silent now, holding back tears.

"Well, do you?" Hasan insisted.

"No, I don't," she said, knowing it was a lie. "Sergei and I are over, Hasan. I want to be with you."

"Then call him now and tell him. You and I can't be together if you're still thinking of him. It's as simple as that."

She sighed. "I understand," she said. "I will call him tomorrow."

Hasan grabbed her arm. "No, you'll either do it now or we're through." He led her back to his apartment, closed the door behind them, and took her into the bedroom. She sat at the edge of the bed while he stood in front of her. This wasn't Hasan's first love triangle. He knew that if he and Natasha were to have a relationship, he'd have to eliminate his competition.

"I want you to deal with this now," he said. "Call him."

Natasha's mind was reeling. She understood why Hasan wanted her to break up with Sergei, but she wasn't emotionally prepared to do it right then. And despite Sergei's shortcomings, he'd never been ugly to her, so she'd been hoping to end their relationship on a more civil note. She certainly hadn't planned on breaking up with him while Hasan listened in.

"What do you want me to say?" she asked.

"I want you to break up with him officially. I want to hear you tell him it's over, and I want you to mean it. If you aren't firm

with him, he'll never stop calling you. You need to make it clear that you're serious."

Natasha had never been firm with Sergei. It had never been necessary because he was so understanding and would always find something sweet to say to calm her down. But she dialed his number anyway, knowing she didn't have a choice.

"Hey, how are you doing?" Sergei asked when he answered the phone. His voice was warm and kind, just as it always had been. "It's good to hear from you."

Natasha fought back tears. "I'm doing well, Sergei, and it's good to hear from you, too, but we haven't spoken in a while. You've been out of town for a month and I have to tell you that I just can't do this anymore. I'm sorry, Sergei, but it's time for me to move on."

"What are you talking about?" Sergei asked. "I thought we were getting along just fine. You know I take jobs in Kiev now and then to make ends meet. That's nothing new. What's going on, Natasha?"

Natasha looked up at Hasan. He was glaring at her, and she didn't dare back down now. "I'm sorry, Sergei, but I've moved on, and I think you should too. So please stop texting me and stop dialing my number. We had a wonderful time together, but I have to get on with my life."

"Whoa, whoa...this doesn't make any sense! We've been together for two years, and I didn't do anything to anger you. You can't just call me out of the blue and break up over the phone! Is this some kind of joke?"

"No. I'm not joking," she said, feeling her heart break as she said the words. Tears were running down her face, not just for breaking up with Sergei, but also because she knew what she was doing was wrong. "As usual, Sergei, you're not taking me seriously. I'm sorry, but it's over," she said, and hung up the

phone. Her pulse was racing and she felt as if she'd just committed a crime. She looked up at Hasan, expecting him to be satisfied, but he just walked away from her and turned on the television in the other room. She swallowed hard, switched off her phone, and started to cry.

Hasan and Natasha would not have sex that evening. They wouldn't even cuddle. He was emotionally distant and she felt sick to her stomach. The next morning, while he was taking a shower, she switched on her phone to see if there were any texts or missed calls from Sergei. There were more than ten missed texts and twenty missed calls, and she could see from the times of the messages that Sergei had not slept all night. One of the last texts was from Sergei's friend Vladimir, who was working with him in Kiev: *Natasha, I need to let you know that I am taking Sergei to the clinic. He's been awake all night throwing up and is very upset. Don't treat people like that, you heartless bitch.*

Natasha heard Hasan getting out of the shower, so she switched off her phone and shoved it back into her purse as he walked into the bedroom. Hasan noticed that she was holding her stomach and asked what was wrong. She told him she wasn't feeling well.

He shrugged. "It must be my karma to date sick women. My ex-wife had back pain, my last girlfriend had diabetes, now this." He turned and walked out of the room to log on to his computer. Natasha took a deep breath and pulled her phone out of her purse to call her flatmate, Anna, who'd been Natasha's best friend since they'd been roommates at Black Sea State University.

Anna had lustrous long hair and an oval face, and she worked for a travel agency in Nikolaev. She enjoyed dancing the salsa and dating, but her heart had been broken by a man who hadn't returned her love, and even after a year of mourning she hadn't been able to move on. She was a loyal friend and had always been supportive of Natasha. When she answered the phone, she sounded concerned.

“Natasha, what’s going on?” she asked. “Sergei called me early this morning. Are you OK?”

Natasha took a deep breath. “Well, I’ve been better, I guess.”

“What happened between you and Sergei? He was mumbling something about losing you, and I couldn’t really understand what he was saying because he was slurring his words. I think he may have been hungover. Did you two have a fight?”

“Well, I guess you could say that. My new boyfriend, Hasan, asked me to break up with Sergei. So I did.”

Anna paused for a moment. “Natasha, Sergei loves you. You know that. How could you be so stupid?”

Natasha didn’t want to answer that question; the truth was, she was having second thoughts herself. “Listen, we can talk about this later, but right now I need your help. I know you carry stomach medicine in your purse, and I’m feeling nauseous. Could you bring me some pills, please?”

“Of course. Where are you?”

“I am in the tall apartment building across from the downtown trolley stop. I’ll meet you in the lobby downstairs.”

Anna was there within five minutes and handed her the pills at the door. She’d known Natasha for years, but she’d never seen her look the way she did today.

“Natasha, you look terrible,” she said. Natasha’s face was pale and she was still holding her stomach. “I think you need to come home with me. This new man you’re seeing may not be right for you.”

Natasha shook her head. “No, Hasan takes good care of me. I’m just upset because I had to break up with Sergei.”

“You should be upset. You love Sergei! He wants to marry you someday. He just doesn’t have enough money to do it right now. I thought he told you that already.”

“This has nothing to do with money, Anna. I was willing to move

in with his family if need be, but he wouldn't even consider the idea. At least Hasan is willing to commit to me and take care of me.”

Anna shook her head. “I don't know much about Hasan, but I know how you look right now, and you don't look good. What do I tell Sergei when he calls me again?”

Natasha sighed. She looked down at the cold, hard sidewalk. “Tell him I got tired of waiting,” she said, and turned to go inside. “Thank you for the pills, Anna.”

When she got back upstairs, Hasan was making coffee. She got a glass from the cabinet, took a few pills, and told him it was time for her to get dressed.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“I have to get ready for work. I have to earn some money for rent, and I thought maybe you'd like to have a little space for a while.”

Hasan shook his head and walked over to her. He was a merchant at heart and saw an opportunity to close a deal. In his mind, getting Natasha to break off her relationship with Sergei was a victory; now he just had to make her dependent on him and she would be his. And experience told him the best way to do that was to support her financially.

“Natasha, no woman of mine should have to worry about money for rent,” he said. “Stay here today. We'll get you better and have a nice lunch, and I'll pay you what you would have made so you won't have to work anymore. You know, if we were to get married someday, you wouldn't have to worry about money at all. You should consider that. I know that Sergei never offered that kind of life to you, but I can.”

Natasha wasn't sure she could believe what she was hearing, and her emotions were roiling within her. She couldn't decide whether Hasan was a villain or a savior. “What do you mean, married?” she asked. “I mean, you bought me some beautiful

clothes and we've enjoyed some delicious dinners, but you never mentioned anything about marriage before."

He gave her a shrewd look. "I don't want to ever have to worry about losers like Sergei again. If we are to be together, I want you to be mine, and mine alone. I want to be the only man in your life, the one you love more than any other man in the world. Is that too much to ask? If a man takes care of you and meets your needs, shouldn't you love him and be loyal to him?"

Natasha nodded. "Of course."

"OK, then. Right now, marriage is just an idea, a dream that might happen, or maybe not. But perhaps the idea isn't unrealistic. Perhaps it is a dream we could think about and work toward. We could honeymoon in Dubai, perhaps. I've always wanted to go there. And we could live in Odessa where I could open up another store. We could get a nice car, a Mercedes ML 270 maybe, and have a family. What do you think? We make each other happy, don't we? And now that Sergei is out of the picture, what's stopping us?"

Natasha was breathless. Everything Hasan was talking about was what she'd been dreaming of for years. Freedom from want and need, and commitment from a man who loved her—it was almost too good to be true.

"You paint a pretty picture," she said.

Hasan smiled. "Because I am a real man. Because I know how to treat a lady." He walked over to her and kissed her. "I'll be going out of town next week to buy jewels in Antwerp. Why don't you stay here while I'm gone? I'll give you money for food, and you can go to the movies with your friends. You might like being a pampered princess."

"Are you asking me to move in with you?"

He laughed. "Sure, why not? You're already here! You sleep in my bed, you drink my coffee, you give me love. Yes, of course you should stay here with a man who can take care of you. All I

ask is that you wear the finest clothes...I will buy them for you, of course...and keep the place clean for me while I am gone. Does that sound reasonable?"

"Sure," she said. "Of course it does."

"Then we have a deal," he said, as if he'd just signed a contract to buy a bag of uncut diamonds. Hasan was pleased with himself. He was good at reading body language, and Natasha was leaning forward and biting her lip. She was like a little fish that had been caught on a hook, and Hasan had played his hand masterfully.

The next week, as he was packing for his trip, he told her that he'd left eight hundred dollars on the kitchen counter along with a new smartphone.

"That will more than cover your rent for the next month, and you can entertain yourself while I'm gone. Use the smartphone to call me whenever you want, and keep your old phone turned off so Sergei can't contact you. You are allowed to do whatever you wish with the extra money. You are my woman now."

Natasha thanked him and that evening accompanied him on his cab ride to Odessa International Airport. The highway from Nikolaev to Odessa had been nicknamed "The Road of Death" because it was the scene of so many accidents. Speed limits were never enforced and there were no passing lanes, so the chance of crashing when overtaking another driver was very high.

"I will bring you a special gift from Antwerp," Hasan said, as their taxi careened toward Odessa. "Some perfume, I think. I like for my women to smell good. And maybe a dress or two. I'll see what they have there." The cab pulled up to the airport and they said goodbye. He gave her a quick kiss on the cheek and walked into the terminal, and Natasha told the driver to take her back to Nikolaev. She didn't want to be alone for dinner, so she called Anna on the way.

"You should join me for dinner at our apartment," Anna said. "I'm making spaghetti and I hate eating alone."

“OK, I’ll be there in an hour,” Natasha said.

Natasha loved the flat she shared with Anna, even though it was a cramped place. They lived on the fifth floor of a gray apartment building that had been a public housing complex years ago during the days of Stalin. The walls in the kitchen and bathroom were painted in the old Soviet style. The bottom half of the walls was dark green and the top half off-white, which made the girls feel as though they were living in an asylum. At least the bedrooms had cheap wallpaper. Natasha’s room had a small balcony that was cool in the summer and warm in the winter, which was nice because the building had no air conditioning. Since she’d never been able to afford a bed, she slept on an old, wooden sofa that creaked and smelled like old clothes. A wardrobe stood against the wall, and her desk was a dining-room table she’d rescued from a dumpster on Lenin Avenue. It wasn’t much, but the apartment was what she and Anna could afford. And it was close to the center of Nikolaev, so they could visit the supermarket, the drug store, the bank, and their favorite restaurants without having to hail a cab.

As Natasha walked up the steps of her apartment building, she realized that, for the first time in her life, there was no need to hurry. There was no need to worry about money or work; she was just going to have dinner with a friend and there was nothing else on the agenda for the evening, or even the next day for that matter. She felt a sense of freedom that she’d never experienced before, and it felt good. When she walked in the front door, she found Anna in the kitchen, cooking spaghetti and dancing to salsa music. She was wearing a white pencil skirt and a sleeveless blouse because she’d just returned home from work, and Natasha liked the look. “You look fabulous,” she told her as she walked in. “How was work today?”

“Great,” Anna said. “I helped a couple plan a honeymoon trip to Thailand, so it was a productive day. How about you?”



“I’m fine. Better than when you saw me last, I think. I took Hasan to the airport and he’ll be away for a few weeks, so I’ll have some time to myself.”

“Well, maybe you can use that time to think about what is best for you.” Anna handed her a glass of wine. “And I’m not sure it’s Hasan.”

“Anna, please, I don’t want to talk about Hasan. Can’t you just be happy for me?”

“Of course, but when I have to bring you stomach pills because you’re upset, I get worried. And I’ve known Sergei since you met him. He’s a good guy. He’s nice.”

Natasha thought for a moment. “I need more than nice, Anna. I need a man that I can build a life with.”

Anna handed her a plate of spaghetti. “Then be smart about how you find that man. You’ve only known Hasan for a few months. Give him a chance to show his true self before you consider walking down the aisle.”

Hasan returned to Nikolaev two weeks later. Natasha met him at the airport, wearing a new skirt and some platform sandals that matched her purse. Many of the men mulling about in the terminal noticed her and she thought she looked smashing, but when Hasan walked up, he didn’t even smile. He just gave her a quick hug and led her back to the cab for the drive home. The truth was, he’d been worried that Natasha might have spent some time with Sergei while he was away. He knew how unfaithful Ukrainian women could be, and he wondered if Natasha could actually be trusted.

That evening they went to Stepanek’s for dinner and he ordered his usual steak with wine while Natasha ordered grilled salmon with vegetables.

“So, how was the trip?” she asked.

He shrugged. “I went to Antwerp looking for some small yellow diamonds for one of my investor clients, but the pickings

were slim, so I only bought a few pieces. Did you have a good time while I was away?"

"Yes, of course. You take such good care of me. I went shopping at City Center. I bought this skirt and a surprise for you! And I spent some time with Anna. So I had a lot of fun, but I missed you, of course."

Hasan nodded. "I missed you too, my dear. Let's make the most of our time while I'm here because I'll be gone again soon. I have to check on my store in Turkey. The employees there keep trying to steal from me, so I have to watch them constantly."

When they got back to his apartment, he presented her with an expensive bottle of perfume and a new ankle bracelet. Natasha thanked him and was feeling very comfortable, grateful, and affectionate. She led him to the bedroom and slowly unbuttoned her top, showing off a new, lacy bra she'd bought while he was away.

"Is this the surprise you were talking about?" Hasan asked.

She smiled. "Yes. Do you like it?"

"It's not my taste," he said. "I think it is old fashioned, like something my grandmother would wear."

Natasha felt awkward and foolish. "What do you like, then?"

"I like smooth, shiny underwear on a woman. We'll go shopping tomorrow and get you something better."

He moved closer and kissed her. Natasha returned his advances, but when they made love, he showed little regard for her pleasure. This time, Hasan merely took what he wanted; the sex was hard, rough, and painful, and as he unceremoniously rose from the bed and pulled his pants back on, Natasha wondered if she deserved it that way. She couldn't seem to do anything right in his eyes despite her best efforts, which left her feeling worthless.

The truth was, because he'd been generous to Natasha, Hasan now expected her to please him on command. In his mind, he'd

made an investment and he wanted to see a return. Hasan had slept with many women. Making love to Natasha was exciting at first, but he was already getting bored with her and he wondered if she appreciated his patience and generosity.

“So, how was it?” he asked, standing at the foot of the bed. “Was it wonderful?”

“Yes, it was wonderful,” she said, deciding that a white lie would be easier to deal with than his temper if she told him the truth. She wondered if he’d always be so rough and insensitive with her, and she pulled a sheet over herself as she looked up at him.

“Why didn’t you compliment me, then?” he asked. “Don’t I deserve your compliments?”

“You do, of course. I’m just a little reserved about saying too much. I’m afraid I’ll say something you don’t like.”

“If I deserve your praise, you should be on your knees right now, praising me and making me feel special. Have you ever considered the possibility that a man wants to be complimented now and then?”

“I’m sorry, I’ll try to be more responsive, Hasan. You were wonderful, really.”

Hasan was pleased by her response, but he wanted to know more. “Was I better than your other lovers?”

She was shocked by the question. “Of course,” she said softly. “You are very good, dear.”

“The best?” he asked, placing his hands on his hips.

“Yes, the best.”

He wondered how many men she’d been with. “The best out of how many? Two? Three?”

She gave him an incredulous look and couldn’t believe he was making her think about men she didn’t even talk to anymore. “You’re asking me how many lovers I’ve had?”

“Absolutely. I think I should know this. After all, I don’t know much about your past. How do I know you’re not a whore?”

Natasha felt her heart sink deep into her chest and was sure it had missed a beat. The joy and hope of their relationship instantly descended into despair, and she couldn’t understand how he could make such a hurtful accusation.

“Hasan, I am not a whore,” she said curtly.

“Then tell me how many men you’ve been with.”

She looked down at the sheets on the bed. His question was rude and out of line, but she felt as though she had no choice but to respond. “Four. That is all. Two of them were my boyfriends,” she said. “And two of them were one-night stands. You are the fifth.”

Hasan thought for a moment. Ukrainian women were loose women, in his opinion, but good in bed. Natasha wasn’t that different from the others he’d known.

“You should be ashamed of yourself for those one-night stands. Only a slut does such things.” He walked over to the window. It was so hard to respect her, but he couldn’t help but desire her, and he enjoyed her companionship. What could he do?

“I’m disgusted right now,” he finally said. “I wish I hadn’t asked you those questions.”

Natasha felt a knot in her throat and was starting to cry. “Hasan, you must have known that neither of us were virgins. I could say the same things about you.”

He glared at her. “Get on your clothes,” he said. “I need some food and beer.”

As they walked down Makarov Avenue near the McDonald’s, Natasha’s eyes were red and she wasn’t wearing makeup. It was clear to many of the people walking the street that she’d been crying. An old woman selling flowers on the sidewalk showed visible concern as Natasha passed by, but she quickly turned away

when Hasan shot her a piercing glance. He led Natasha to a small cafe near one of her favorite shoe stores and they took a seat outside.

And that's when she saw Sergei. At first, he was just a muscular shape in the crowd. A familiar gait, maybe, is what made him stand out. He had a confident walk. Or perhaps it was the clothes. He was wearing a black V-neck that showed off his firm body, tight jeans that Natasha had picked for him a year before, and black sunglasses. He was walking with his friend Vladimir and they seemed to be having a good time. He looked as though he hadn't a care in the world.

Natasha turned her head, hoping he wouldn't recognize her and see her with Hasan. She knew that she looked terrible, and it would be humiliating to have left Sergei for a jealous man that insulted her. Sergei was radiating the usual cheerfulness that she'd loved about him. At that moment, she wanted to be back with him, safe and secure in his arms. She now understood how precious the little attention he'd given her had been compared to the constant observation, criticism, and control of Hasan, and she wished she'd never left him.

She prayed that Hasan would not see Sergei or know it was him because she was afraid that he'd start a fight. Fortunately, Sergei walked right past them and she breathed an audible sigh of relief. What she didn't know was that Hasan had been watching her the whole time. He said nothing but took an angry swig of his beer. This woman, he decided, would never be loyal to him. She was nothing more than another Ukrainian whore, like all the others. He couldn't believe he'd ever trusted her.

When they got back to his apartment that evening, he closed the door behind them and told Natasha to sit on the couch. She seemed indifferent and didn't want to talk.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "You look like something's bothering you."

“I’m alright. I just had a stressful day. That conversation about my ex-boyfriends was very upsetting to me, Hasan.”

“Tell me the truth,” he said, standing over her. “What’s bothering you?”

Natasha avoided his gaze. “I’m not sure our relationship is working,” she said. “You’re nice to me sometimes, but other times you can be so critical. It just ruins everything.”

Hasan shook his head. “Bullshit. This is about Sergei.” He pointed his finger at her. “I knew you still loved him.”

“What do you mean?”

“I saw him today and I know you did, too. Don’t pretend you didn’t. I was watching you the whole time. I watched your eyes follow him as he walked by with his friend, and I watched as you tried to hide from him in shame. I saw everything, Natasha.”

She pursed her lips. “OK, fine, I saw him, but how I feel right now has nothing to do with Sergei. I’m just realizing that I’m stressed and upset with you more than I’m happy.”

“Then tell me the truth. Do you want to go back to him?”

Her heart was racing, but it was too late to back down and Natasha could now see quite clearly that Hasan had two faces; he could be supportive and generous at times, but he could also be controlling and jealous. She decided that she’d had enough.

“Hasan, I don’t think he would take me back after the way I broke up with him, but I don’t think we should see each other, either. You frighten me sometimes and that wasn’t part of the deal. I think that we should take a break until things settle down.”

“Bullshit!” Hasan shouted. “This is about Sergei and you know it. Just admit the truth, Natasha.”

“No,” she said. “I am telling you, this has nothing to do with Sergei.”

“Do you still like him?”

“Maybe,” she responded quietly.

“Maybe!” he yelled. “You told me you were over him. Why are you changing your story? Do you like me?”

“Sometimes, when you aren’t being mean to me.”

“Do you like him more?”

She was shaking now. Hasan was fuming and looked like he might lose control. “Sometimes,” she said. “I don’t know. You’re scaring me right now and I don’t know what to think.”

Hasan grabbed a vase from the cocktail table and threw it to the floor. It shattered into a hundred pieces. “Selfish woman. You’ve lied to my face every day just to get me to pay your bills and buy you clothes.”

“That’s not true, I swear. There are times that I’ve been happy with you. You’ve been kind and attentive to me at times, and that part of you I adore.”

He turned and walked to the window, his shoes crunching the broken glass under his feet. “I don’t believe you. I think you secretly met with Sergei while I was away. I saw his arrogant face today; you were probably laughing together in secret because your plan was working. You get to have a relationship with him while you take my money, isn’t that right? Wasn’t that the plan all along? To have the best of both worlds?”

“Oh my God, what are you talking about?”

Hasan turned and glared at her. “You planned to get as much money from me as possible, and all the while you were still in a relationship with Sergei! I see that clearly now, but I’ll tell you this—the two of you can go to hell. I have friends in the police department and if you don’t return the gifts I bought you, I’m going to report you for stealing from me. I want your underwear, the cash in your purse, the dresses I bought you, everything returned. I’ll be damned before I let you profit at my expense.”

“OK. If that’s what you want, I’ll give the gifts back.”

“And just so you know, I have connections here, and money.

You can tell your precious boyfriend to watch out. Depending on my mood, I may report you both.”

“But we haven’t done anything,” she insisted. “You’re accusing us of terrible things, and we haven’t done anything wrong!”

Hasan clenched his fists in frustration. “I don’t believe you. Bring your gifts back to me by tomorrow or you and Sergei are as good as dead. To hell with the police. I’ll just have you both killed.”

Natasha took Hasan at his word. In Nikolaev, it was easy to hire a criminal to hurt or even kill someone. A few hundred dollars and the deed was done. She grabbed her purse, handed him the new smartphone he’d bought her, and started to walk out the door.

“The cash,” he said. “Give me my money. And remember what I am telling you now, because this is the truth: You are a slut. You are a whore. You are a stupid bitch and you will never find a man as good as me.”

She reached for her wallet, took out the money she had left, and handed it to him. He pushed her out the door and slammed it behind her. It was cold, raining, and the sun had set. Natasha wept as she made the five-minute walk back to her apartment. When she walked in the door, Anna was watching television. She looked up and was shocked by Natasha’s appearance.

“Natasha...what the hell? What happened to you?”

Natasha couldn’t talk. She was shaking and fell into Anna’s arms.

“It was Hasan,” she finally stammered. “We broke up.”

“You look like shit. Did he hurt you? Do you want me to call the police?”

Natasha shook her head. “No, no, but I have to leave Nikolaev. I have to go home for a while. Could you lend me enough for bus fare? I’ll pay you back as soon as I get to Slavne.”



“Of course,” she said. “Is there anything else I can do to help?”

Natasha thought for a moment. “Do you have a box, a bag... something I can use to carry clothes?”

Anna went to her room and returned with a cloth grocery bag. “How about this?”

Natasha nodded, took the bag, and went to her room. She went through her drawers and her wardrobe and pulled out everything Hasan had bought her. After the bag was full, she noticed that there wasn't much left for her to wear. She walked back out to the living room and handed the bag back to Anna.

“Please take this to Hasan for me. I can't bear to see him again. And don't tell him where I am. I'm afraid of him, Anna. I think he might try to hurt me.”

“Of course,” Anna said. “I won't tell him anything.”

Natasha thanked her and went back into her bedroom. She turned off the light and quietly watched as raindrops ran down the windowpane. She could still see Hasan's angry face in her mind, yelling at her and calling her horrible names. Natasha now had no money and no job and would have to return home to her village in disgrace; her life in Nikolaev had ended in total disaster. Her only consolation was that Hasan hadn't killed her while she was in his apartment.

The bus trip the next day took three and a half hours on roads that led through fields of wheat, sunflowers, and corn. Ukraine had been the breadbasket of the former Soviet Union. As an independent country, it had remained a major exporter of agricultural products, thanks to its rich, black soil. However, many of the villages that passed by Natasha's window were crumbling ruins with only a few residents. Ukraine's economy didn't benefit the common people. It served the oligarchs, a ruling class of bureaucrats who'd been party members of the former USSR. And sadly, her parents were not oligarchs.

When her village came into view, Natasha held back tears of joy and humiliation. She felt both fear and relief as her eyes fell upon the familiar fields, cows, and haystacks of Slavne; fear, because of the judgment she knew she would have to endure from the villagers, and relief, because she knew her family would protect and care for her.

Life in Slavne was a simple one. The cows were milked. The chickens were fed. The hay was harvested and stacked. And if she were lucky, Natasha thought, this might be a place where she could find some peace for a while. She wiped a bittersweet tear from her eye as she realized the truth.

Natasha Dubrova had come home.