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**The
Smart
Girl**

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The Smart Girl

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The story of a young woman, her formation as a person in the turmoil of the present-day life. Nina Shuvalova is an extraordinary girl. Endowed with an analytical mind, she considered herself from her early youth as meant for professional growth and career. However, the woman that awoke in her laid claim to her destiny. Following the voice of her reason and the voice of her heart, Nina finds her path to happiness.

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Part I

Chapter 1

Sitting behind her computer, Nina was rummaging through endless stock market spreadsheets. *Gazprom* had been growing steadily for two months running, hauling the whole market along like a locomotive. Another week or so of such growth, and corrections would have to be made to the short-term and medium-term predictions which underlay many of *Gradbank's* projects. Still, Nina was certain that the growth of *Gazprom* was not going to last and corrections were not warranted. She could not put her finger on any logical reason for that certitude of hers – it was purely intuitive – but her intuition had never failed her before. The problem was that she could not put it just like that in her report – some rationalization was due. That was what Nina had been toiling at for more than a week now. The monitor of her computer was flooded with columns of figures and serrated graphs. Little by little, all of them were coming to life, telling her their separate stories, agreeing or arguing with each other. Finally, to her satisfaction, Nina did identify a few factors, seemingly insignificant in themselves but capable, when acting in a certain combination, of stopping *Gazprom*. It was time to write her report.

It was about eleven. Usually by that hour, Chief of the analytical department Ariadna Petrovna, a very fat and very shrewd woman, was coming back from the director's morning briefing. As she passed Nina's table, the woman would brush against it with her uncontrollable body, say, "Sorry, Shuvalova," and walk on to her office. This time it was different: as she came abreast of Nina, Ariadna Petrovna stopped.

"Shuvalova, grab your stuff and move up."

"Where?"

"Twelfth floor. Director's office."

Nina's heart sank. That was it, her five-month long intrigue was over. She had been exposed.

"Shall I... Shall I clear my table?" she stammered.

"Sure."

Ariadna Petrovna waddled on along the passage.

Nina started collecting her things. The analytical department was immersed in silence. Besides Nina, the department counted nine employees – four men and five women – all of whom were now absorbed in whatever they saw on their monitors.

All her belongings fitted into one copy paper box. Nina picked up the box and took a few steps toward the exit but then, after some hesitation, she made an about-turn and headed for the chief's office.

Ariadna Petrovna was standing in a little built-in kitchen, busy filling a coffee-maker with water. Nina took a resolute step in and closed the door after her.

"Excuse me, Ariadna Petrovna... Tell me – am I being fired?"

The woman had trouble turning her head on her fat neck.

"That's a real dumb question you're asking, Shuvalova. I thought you were smarter than that. There's no need to bother the director just to fire you – I would do it perfectly well myself... Cheer up, Shuvalova, you're getting a promotion! You owe me a cake and a bottle of cognac."

"But, Ariadna Petrovna..."

"Genuine French brand, mind you. Go now, don't keep the big people waiting!"

Dumbfounded, Nina stumbled out of the department. Her nine colleagues were smiling at her, their heads raised from their work. Although the walls in Ariadna Petrovna's office were supposed to be soundproof, important news somehow spread about immediately.

It seemed to take her an eternity to ascend from the fifth floor, where the analytical department was quartered, to the twelfth – the directorate floor. A large mirror on the wall of the elevator cabin reflected a face that seemed unfamiliar. Nina was not conventionally pretty, but her few friends had always argued that there was 'something special' about her. Trying to be fair to herself, Nina agreed with such a judgment. Her late mother used to say, "Ninusya, sweetheart, you're no film star, but you are intelligent and honest. You will meet a man who appreciates that." If only her mama could see Nina now! There was no trace of intellect on her face – it looked confused and stupid. And as for honesty... What claim for honesty could she have when for half a year already she had led a life of deception and was now going to see a man who did not suspect that she hated him and was set firmly on causing him as much damage as possible?

During her employment in *Gradbank*, she had only seen him a couple of times. One of the encounters took place in that same elevator. On the ground floor, as the doors were closing, the director got in accompanied by some other men. Nina found herself squeezed into a corner behind his broad back. Immediately she was attacked by his smells: of ironed shirt, healthy male body, tobacco. And – *gutalin*. Where, for heavens' sake, had he unearthed it? She remembered the stink from her childhood – men had used that horrible-smelling substance on their boots when she had been a little girl – but she believed that *gutalin* had long gone out of sale. Nina, who had always had a keen sense of smell, was close to fainting.

Suddenly she saw his face where the back of his head had just been. With his neck twisted painfully, he spoke to her, "Hey! Why aren't you getting out? It's the fifth already. You are in Analytics, aren't you? ... Yeah, right. I never mix up people's faces – I've got an excellent memory!"

He was smiling complacently. Nina murmured, "Thank you," and pushed her way to the door. To do so, she had to rub her breast against his granite elbow clad in expensive suit cloth. Her ears were burning. Boor! Brute! Excellent memory, huh? Wait till I show you!

Yet she was not able to show him anything, not for a long time. And now the elevator was taking her up, to the twelfth floor, right to her enemy's lair.

She had never before been here, at the top. Those admitted to that floor were the bank's high caste. They shared information that was available to them only, spoke their own language, and exchanged jokes that were incomprehensible to the laymen.

In the hall, by a table with a lamp on it, sat a young man of a powerful build wearing a suit and a tie. It was a guard for the directorate floor which had its own security. Nina fumbled in her pocket for her pass but was stopped by the guard.

He motioned towards an oak door, "That way."

Suddenly the door opened, and a man whom she knew came out. It was Sinitsin, the head of the bank's security. She had had an interview with him as she had been screened for a job with the bank. The interview was quite formal – Sinitsin asked some trivial questions and made some pointless comments – but there was something about the man that made Nina uneasy.

Now Sinitsin beamed a smile at her as an old acquaintance. "Nina Yevgenievna? Good to see you. Looking for Pavel Mikhailovich? This way, please. Come over to have a chat with me afterwards, will you? You know where my office is, don't you?"

He courteously held the door open for her.

Nina found herself in the reception room – a large, fine one, with a thick carpet on the floor and some good paintings on the walls. There were two tables in the room. One was occupied by a

woman dressed in a formal suit. Sitting behind a computer, she was pressing the keys at an incredible pace. At the other table was a beauty.

It is a mystery why Nature creates such beautiful women. The truth is, people can do without beauty in their life – they can work, get married, and raise children. Men find enough charm in their imperfect companions and love them. Still, about one woman in a thousand is given everything – bottomless eyes, luxurious hair, ideal skin, sensuous lips, high breast... Why? Possibly, Nature's purpose is just this – to rob men's minds of their complacent peace and fill women's minds with an explosive mixture of admiration and hatred. And the director's reception room in a major bank is as good a place for such a beauty as any.

Nina said, "Hello". The typing woman said "hello" in response without turning her head or stopping her work. The beauty gave Nina a sliding glance and rose languidly from her table. She took two steps on her breathtaking legs, opened an inner door and asked, "Pavel Mikhailovich, shall I...?" Then she invited Nina in with a nod.

Feeling an ugly duckling, Nina went in.

It was a conference room. A long table with a dozen chairs at the sides ran along the middle. At one end, the director's table stood across, completing a capital "T". The walls were covered with wood paneling and, as those in the reception, hung with paintings. The carpet on the floor was even thicker here. It was the bank's headquarters, where business talks were held and important decisions were made. When Nina came in, the chairs were empty, and it seemed to her for a moment that there was no one in the room. Then she saw him. By an open window, *Gradbank's* General Director Pavel Mikhailovich Samsonov was standing on one leg, in a very weird pose. He was tall and big, now with his suit jacket off. A May wind from the window was playing with his tie and tousling his thinning hair. At the sight of Nina, the director smiled and stood on both legs.

"*T'ai chi*, an ancient Chinese practice," he explained. "You need to strike a balance between *Yin* and *Yang*."

"Have you struck it?" she heard her own impertinent question, hardly believing her ears.

The man burst into laughter, "No, I haven't. Not yet. But I'll do it."

She forced a smile.

Putting on his jacket, he said, "You're Shuvalova, aren't you? Good, come along."

From the conference room, they moved on to the next one – his personal office. After the grandeur of the other rooms, Nina expected to see something in the manner of a sultan's chamber, but the office looked rather modest. However, the armchair that the director offered her was bottomless, lulling, of expensive leather.

"Why don't you put that box down?" he asked. "What do you have in it, anyway? I hope it's not a bomb." He laughed again, but not as merrily as before. "All right, let's get acquainted."

The director sat at his table. The armchair Nina was sitting in was quite close, placed at an angle.

"You are Nina..."

"Yevgenievna," she prompted. "Just 'Nina' is all right."

"Good. And I am Pavel Mikhailovich. Do you mind if I smoke?"

He moved an ash-tray closer to himself, took out a cigarette and used his lighter. Nina did not smoke but even she realized that the cigarette was good and the lighter was very expensive.

It was the first time Nina could see his face properly. Everything was large about him: a high forehead with a receding hairline, a prominent nose, a large mouth with sharp creases at the sides.

"Sorry, I didn't offer you a cigarette," he said. "You don't smoke? That's wise of you. I mean to give up, too, but I haven't been able to so far. Do you want some coffee? No? ... Coca-cola? Mineral water?"

"A little water, please," she asked, feeling suddenly that her throat was actually parched.

He picked up the phone handset and said into it, “Marina, some coffee and mineral water, please.”

It seemed to be no more than a minute before a door opened and the beautiful Marina came in carrying a small tray. She put the tray with a cup of coffee on it on the director’s table and shoved a glass of water into Nina’s hand. Nina murmured, “Thank you.”

“So,” the director said when the door was closed after Marina. “I need to discuss something with you.”

Samsonov opened a drawer and took out a plastic file. Before even he put it on the table, Nina recognized her report on *Sirius*. It had been her first independent assignment in the analytical department of *Gradbank*. *Sirius* was the project of building a large sports center in an outskirt residential area. About two dozen companies were involved. The general contractor had applied to *Gradbank* for a large loan and the terms proposed were quite attractive to the bank.

The loan was considered a decided matter, with only some routine procedures yet to be completed before its closure. Nina was tasked with polishing some financial figures in the business plan. She tackled her job zealously, eager to show her worth. Having gathered all the available information, she ploughed through it again and again, staying at work after hours. And not in vain. She discovered some inconsistencies in the project: some risks were underestimated, the inflation was not fully allowed for, and the expected profit was bloated through certain accounting tricks.

Nina consulted Ariadna Petrovna. The woman said, “Don’t you cram your little head with this. Every project is full of this kind of shit. Make a note of it in the report, though.”

Nina went on digging and gradually she became convinced that there was something very wrong with the project. As she looked for the hundredth time through the papers bearing the pretty logo of the future sports center, she was pervaded by an almost physical sensation of danger. Where that sensation came from, she never could tell.

The time came to submit her report. Nina presented neatly what was expected of her and then, as a supplement, listed the inconsistencies she had unearthed. After some hesitation, she typed the addition, “On the whole, Project *Sirius* raises some serious doubts which, for the lack of time, could not be either confirmed or dispelled. Under the circumstances, I cannot recommend the Project to the Bank. N. Shuvalova, Analyst.”

At the sight of that, Ariadna Petrovna gasped, “Of all the cheeky rookies! Who are you to recommend anything? ... Not bad work, though. You have grip, girl. All right, leave it to me, I’ll take care of it.”

Afterwards, Nina heard that Project *Sirius* had been declined by the Bank. No comments were issued.

Now she saw her report lying on the director’s table.

“I want to know what reasons you had for your opinion,” Samsonov said covering the file with his broad palm.

That was an awkward question. Trying to dodge it, she mumbled away hastily, “It was too bold of me to write that, I understand. I had no business sticking my neck out with any recommendations. I am sorry for having presumed so – it was inappropriate...”

“On the contrary,” the director interrupted her. “It was most appropriate. Apart from you, there was only one person in this entire bank who was against *Sirius*. It was me. But I knew certain things that could not be known to you. That’s why I am asking what reasons you had for your doubts. I’ve read what you wrote here. You make some good points, but they don’t amount to much. So?”

Seeing that there was no dodging it, she confessed, “Mostly it was intuition. I wasn’t able to prove anything.”

“H-m,” he grunted. “Is it often that way with you?”

“About fifty per cent of the time.”

“And the other fifty per cent?”

“In about half the cases, I manage to find firm facts and work it all out.”

He pondered.

“Well, I guess it’s a fair proportion. It seems that you’re really a good analyst. As for me, I hardly ever can work it all out, and my intuition can fail me, too. But I know more facts.” He grinned.

“How long have you been in financial analysis?” he asked.

“Six years.”

“Graduated from the financial university, right? And where did you work after graduation? I can see that you specialized in construction.”

“Yes, I did construction loans in...” Nina named an obscure bank which could not stand comparison with the smallest of *Gradbank’s* branches.

“Ah, yes, Sinitsin told me.”

Nina was not at all eager to dwell on her old job. Trying to change the subject, she blurted out, “May I ask why *Sirius* was declined?”

The man raised his eyebrows. *Gradbank’s* general director, who was routinely settling business issues with big bosses, seemed to be at a loss to handle a bold young employee.

“I insisted,” he said after a pause. “You see, I just knew the man behind that project – the one who had really devised that whole *Sirius* racket. In the old days, we were in the university together. He got me expelled from the Young Communist League. A rare bastard. I was sure that he wasn’t to be dealt with. But that’s just sentimental talk – I needed some more solid arguments for the board. Of course, I would have my way anyway, but I admit that your report came in handy. So, thank you.”

To Nina’s surprise, she was pleased to receive acknowledgment from the man.

“By the way, if you are interested – *Sirius* got itself a loan elsewhere afterwards.” Samsonov named a well-known credit bank. “It all ended in a big scandal.” He smiled wryly. “The friend of my youth managed to transfer all the cash to an offshore bank and absconded. He’s still wanted. That’s the way it goes...”

The director was scrutinizing Nina openly. To make it easy for him, she rose her glass to her mouth and, with her eyes dropped, plunged her lips in the mineral water for a long while.

“All right, enough of *Sirius*,” said Samsonov. “I’ve got something else to discuss with you.”

The director walked to a safe in the wall, clicked his key repeatedly in the slot, opened the massive door and extracted a folder – a huge, hard, tightly fastened monster.

“That’s what’s really important,” he said, banging the folder down on the table. “What do you know about the project, *Zaryadje–XXI*?”

“Almost nothing,” Nina admitted honestly.

She had heard on the TV and read in the papers that plans were afoot to build a huge business center – not somewhere on the outskirts, but right in the historical heart of the city. Protectors of architectural heritage voiced their protests, but those voices were few and sounded muffled – a sure sign that the city authorities were in support of the project and kept the situation under a tight control.

“So that you understand – we’ve never before been involved in such a big project. If we make it, *Gradbank* will be rated among the top five investment banks in the country. And if we mess it up... Then, with luck, we’ll be selling hot dogs in the street.”

“I wasn’t even aware that *Gradbank* had anything to do with it,” said Nina.

“A request for tenders is going to be announced tomorrow, and we’re officially among the tenderers, so it’s no longer a secret. But, mind you, everything else about it is a secret. Top secret, and I mean it.”

“I understand,” Nina assured him. “But I don’t know anything.”

“You are going to. I want you to study the materials on *Zaryadje* – absolutely everything, every goddamn detail. You study it all and write your conclusion.”

Nina caught her breath. She had suspected that she was in for some kind of assignment, but that was beyond her wildest expectations. If she had been after a career in *Gradbank*, she would have

been triumphant. What a chance! But Nina had not come to this bank to make a career, and instead of triumph, she felt cold anger – the same kind of anger that always filled her on the tennis court.

“Do you want me to find arguments in favor of the project? Or the other way?”

“Neither. I’m not going to suggest answers to you. As for me, I’m stuck in this business too deep now to see the big picture. So, your job will be to take an outsider’s look and tell me what you think. There are two questions, basically. One, whether we’ve done everything possible to win the contract. And the other, whether it’s a good idea for us to win it.”

He looked at her intently. Despite the easy, almost friendly tone that he took with her, it was obvious that he was talking of a matter that was very important to him.

“So? Are you in?”

“I am. That is, I’ll try. Thank you for giving me such credit. Only... What if I fail?”

He made a gesture of resignation.

“If you fail, I’ll send you back to Ariadna Petrovna, that’s all. She didn’t want to let you go, by the way.”

He patted on the folder. “Start with this, here’s the main stuff. Klara Fedorovna will help you with the rest. Have you made her acquaintance yet? It’s my assistant – she’s sitting here, in the reception. Now listen: you’ll be working alone, in a room close by, on this same floor. Klara will show you. You must not discuss anything with anyone besides me. You must not take any papers out. Klara and Sinitin will fill you in on everything that concerns the computer – passwords, data bases and the like. Is that clear?”

Nina nodded.

“All right then, go ahead. Get to work,” the director said with a satisfied look on his face.

Nina tucked the heavy folder under her arm, picked up her box and moved towards the door, but after a few steps, she dropped both the folder and the box on the floor.

“Hey, no, that won’t do.” Samsonov came out from behind his table and bent down his massive torso to pick up the folder. “Let me walk you there.”

Ignoring her protests, he grabbed her box along with the folder and strode out of the office. Nina could barely keep pace with him.

In the reception, at the sight of them, the older woman jumped to her feet, came running up to Nina and held out a key. “This is to your room. I am Klara Fedorovna. Welcome.”

Marina did not say a word but, as Nina was going out the door, she felt Marina’s glare on her back. If a look had been able to kill, Nina would have been writhing in mortal agony. As it was, she was just amused. “I really feel for you, my dear,” she addressed the beautiful secretary in her mind. “Life’s not fair, is it? See? I’ve just arrived here, and the boss is carrying boxes for me already! ... All right, relax, I’m not going to plot against you. I’m not planning on sticking here for much longer, anyway.”

They walked down to the end of the hallway where there was only one door. Samsonov nodded, “Open it.”

She opened the door, and they went in. The room was quite small, containing a table, a couple of chairs, a file cabinet, and a safe in the corner. On the table was a computer with a web of cables running from it into the wall. Everything was empty and tidy, but Nina noticed a thin film of dust on the table – apparently, the room had been out of use for some time.

“Here, make yourself at home,” said the director, dumping his burden onto the table. “Whatever’s up, be sure to call me – Marina will be putting you through. I’ll be coming round myself, anyway.”

He held out his hand and her narrow palm got lost in his paw – a huge, hard one, with perceptible corns of the kind that come from weight-lifting. Apparently, *t'ai chi* was not the only practice Samsonov was into.

“*Gradbank’s* fate is in your hands now.” He smiled broadly, looking her straight in the eye. “And my fate is, too.”

Again, despite his facetious tone, Nina felt that he was not really in a joking mood.

The director left. Nina sat at her new desk and buried her face in her hands. It had happened. Her vengeful plot – the one for which she had come to that hateful bank – was working itself out in the most incredible way. She had occupied a super-advantageous strategic position and was now only one step from her objective.

Chapter 2

That night Nina had a celebration, all by herself in her one-room apartment. For the celebration, she had two causes. First, she had every reason to congratulate herself on a major breakthrough in her subversive plans against *Gradbank*. The other cause was not a worthy one in her eyes – the day happened to be her twenty-seventh birthday.

She was sitting, with her legs tucked under her, in her favorite armchair. A standard lamp was casting around a soft, cozy light. On a small table by the armchair was a one-third empty bottle of Merlot and a plate with some cheese and cookies. What else does a single businesswoman need to celebrate her special occasions? In addition, there was the twinkling of the TV set in the corner – from an old habit Nina kept it turned on, but with sound off. The flashing of silent pictures helped her relax by keeping her eyes thoughtlessly occupied.

Her father had called to wish her a happy birthday. His voice on the phone struck her as tense and coarse. Could it be that he was drinking again? Her heart ached at the thought.

Also, her two girl friends had called – the only two she had left from her university years. Both were steadily married, with children. They updated Nina on their family life and chided her for living like an oyster. “It’s a crime we’re not seeing each other more often. Let’s get together!” Nina agreed but no real gathering was ever arranged. In recent years, her girl friends had been trying hard to fix her up – so that Nina had even reduced her visits to them in the fear of having to maintain an agonizing conversation with yet another ‘colleague of my husband’ or ‘friend of ours who chanced to drop by’. Quite possibly, those eligible bachelors were not all that bad, but the problem was that Nina was horrified by the mere thought of having any relationship with them.

On the screen, the president of the country was delivering a mute speech, gesticulating vigorously. “That’s who I’d like to meet,” Nina said aloud to the TV set. “I’m sure he’s not anything like those characters I’ve known. That’s me – give me the president, I’m not going for less.” She refilled her glass and clinked it against the bottle. “All right, first lady, happy birthday to you once again!”

The wine took effect – the TV picture became fuzzy, and her mind wandered. As always in such cases, she remembered her mother and her school days.

Nina was born into a good, city family. Her father, Yevgeniy Borisovich, was a builder, chief engineer in a construction syndicate, her mother a French teacher in a college. They lived in a spacious three-room apartment which was considered enviable at the time.

An able girl, Nina was breezing through her school studies. Mathematics was her favorite. “That’s my genes working,” her father would say complacently. He taught Nina how to play chess and for some time, the two of them had a game every evening. However, her father soon ceased to enjoy their chess sessions as Nina began winning, and he had a hard time even making a draw. Her father planned to sign her up for serious chess lessons but her mother vetoed the idea. “What kind of occupation is that for a girl? I won’t let Nina become a bluestocking!” Instead, Nina was offered to choose between figure skating and tennis. Nina picked out tennis.

The choice was a fortunate one – the game came easily to Nina, and she was running to her tennis classes eagerly. Very thin, with a figure like a grasshopper’s, she was darting around the court almost always getting in the right place at the right moment. The coach took notice of her, and she was entered into the regional junior tournament. It soon became apparent what made her different from the others – she played a calculated game, figuring it out two strokes ahead and often baffling those obviously stronger than her.

Nina’s tennis career came to an end abruptly. Accidentally, she overheard a conversation between two girls one of whom she had just smashed up on the court. They were talking about her, Nina. “That’s what I call crazy, breaking her neck so!” said the defeated one. “Who wants that stupid

cup, anyway? ... Me, I didn't come to tennis for any cups." They giggled. Nina guessed vaguely why the other girls played tennis. On the court, there were always boys around, and tennis provided lots of opportunities for 'gluing', as boys called it, and some girls did, too. The one whom Nina had overheard was pretty, her neat legs under a short white skirt acted like a magnet, and she was a constant object of 'gluing' – not only by boys of her age but older guys, too. Yet nobody had tried to 'glue' Nina. Ever. "Well, what do you expect of a freak like that?" heard Nina. "Winning cups, that's all she has. Who will ever look at her? Did you see her knees? Horrible!"

They left, and Nina was still sitting, dumbfounded, trying to take in what she had just heard. That was true, she was a freak. She went up to a mirror and inspected her knees. On her disproportionately long, skin-and-bone legs, her knees looked huge, alien. Horrible, indeed. On her way home, she hurled her tennis racket into the nearest garbage can. At home, she told her parents, without giving any reasons, that she was not going to play tennis ever again.

And she did not, not for over ten years. Then, after her graduation from the university, she once found herself near a stadium and heard familiar noises – the thumping of tennis balls and players' voices – coming to her through the green hedge. On impulse, she went in, hired a racket and practiced some strokes at the wall. Since then, she came regularly to the court where she played with accidental partners. Surprisingly, her hand and body had not forgotten the tennis lessons she had received in her school years. Her figure had improved since her early teens – it was no longer scraggy or angular, and nobody would think of laughing at her knees. From time to time, men approached her trying to strike up an acquaintance but, faced with blunt indifference on her part, they retreated. However, she had no problems getting taken into a game as she played well – in a committed, concentrated, and powerful way. Rather like a man.

When Nina finished school, the country was being swept by the reforms. Her father said, "Honestly, Ninok, I don't know what advice to give you. In the former times, I would say, 'Go into science, you're totally cut out for that,' but who wants science now?" Nina applied to the financial university which boasted a huge competition for entry and got admitted without pulling any strings or bribing.

Her university studies were a child's play to her. Her concerns lay in a totally different area. The problem was, she had never had anyone. No specimen of the male race had ever asked her out for a walk, let alone anything bigger. Meanwhile, girls of her age were dating like crazy and actually getting married. The most advanced ones had even got divorced already. Her mother, who was aware of Nina's problem, was reassuring her, "Don't you worry, Ninusya, you're not missing anything, believe me. Just wait, your time will come." Nina waited, but her time did not show any signs of coming.

She was no longer the plain little thing that she had been at school, but deep inside, she was still a grasshopper with ugly knees. The boys felt it and kept clear of her. Besides, she was smart – much smarter than all those immature males – and whoever fancied that in a girl?

Everything changed in her life when she was in her fourth year. Her mother died. It was cancer – long neglected, inoperable. It all ended in a few months. Trying to protect her, Nina's parents were hiding the truth from her, and her mother would not let Nina visit her in the hospital until the time came for a final parting. When she approached the hospital bed and saw an emaciated woman with a grey, wasted face, Nina did not recognize her at first. Only the eyes were not changed – they were her mama's.

Her mother took Nina's hand in her own, waxen, transparent one, and smiled. Her smile was not changed either. "Well, how are you, sweetheart?"

Nina cried.

"Don't cry, sweetheart," her mother said. "Be a clever girl, don't cry." But her own cheek was wet with silent tears running onto the pillow.

"You see how stupid your mother is, leaving you when you're still so young. There will be no one to help you or give you advice, you'll have nobody but yourself to rely on. Forgive me, sweetheart."

Nina burst out sobbing, clinging to her mother's breast.

"Don't cry." With her weak hands, her mother detached Nina from herself. "Stop it, please... Listen to me. Sweetheart, you must promise me two things. Promise you won't leave papa. He needs you. Promise?" Nina nodded through her tears. "And one more thing..." Mother stroked Nina's cheek. "Ninusya, please, bear me a granddaughter. A grandson is great, too, but I'd rather have a granddaughter. You will try, right?"

Her mother had never complained of poor health and after she was gone, it took Nina a long time to accept the fact. As she came home from her classes, she would involuntarily prick her ears for mama's voice, expecting any instant to hear her croon some lines from her beloved Joe Dassin while checking her students' papers. *Et si tu n'existais pas, Dis-moi pourquoi j'existerais...* What Nina heard instead was her father coughing in the kitchen where he was sitting for days on end smoking and drinking alone. He was jobless at that time. He and Nina did not talk about mama – what was there to say? – but each felt the other's pain and suffered for both.

About half a year passed that way. Then she got married to Dima. Dima was the least impressive of the five boys in her group – rather short, pimpled, quiet. The only good thing about him was his surname, Shuvalov. When she first heard it, Nina, who was into Russian history at the time, thought, "I wish I had a count's surname like that!" Her own surname, far from being count-like, sounded right ridiculous: Kisel. Nina was embarrassed by it. When she asked her father where their surname had come from he said that his great-great-grandfather had been a German immigrant of the name of Kessel, but the clerk that had issued the papers had altered that to his liking. Whether that was true or not, Nina could never understand. Her father appreciated a joke and could have invented it all.

For the first three years, she paid no attention to Dima. Then he started taking a neighboring desk in the library. At the time, they were doing their end-of-course projects and had to spend long hours rummaging in the literature. Finally, Nina took notice of his reddish head, and her memory hinted that he had sat next to her on the last five occasions at least. "My God, can he be...?" she thought. The idea that Dima might be taking interest in her was so stunning to her that she stared at him without blinking. Dima remained motionless, buried in his books, but a deep blush spread all over his cheeks and ears, even neck. Nina was still in shock mentally, but the woman inside her woke up and took the situation under control.

"Dima," the woman said amiably. "What's your topic?"

Dima started and came to life. He blurted out the title of his project and asked, "What's yours?"

Their topics turned out to be very close. She learned afterwards that the coincidence had been arranged by Dima himself who had swopped topics with another student at the cost of an almost new player.

When the proximity of their topics had been established, Dima's red face expressed a happy amazement after which he fell silent again. The woman in Nina was a little upset by his timidity but she was not about to give up. "Tell me what you've done so far," she suggested.

Provided with such a safe life buoy, Dima clutched at it and never let go. He began recounting eagerly, in every detail, his plan for the project. As she was listening to him with half an ear, Nina scrutinized him feeling a rising excitement in her breast. She had a boyfriend!

Since then, they spent a lot of time together every day sitting in the library and then going home by the underground – luckily, they lived in the same part of the city. After a month, Dima asked her out to the movies. In the theater, when the lights were out, he took her hand in his. Nina did not remove her hand, and that way, hand in hand, they sat through the show. Afterwards, Nina could not remember what the movie had been about.

The next day Dima had the courage to invite her to his place under the pretext of a final discussion of their projects which supposedly was impossible to have in the library. "Mother will be out all night, so we won't be disturbed." Nina realized what was going to happen and did not resist

the idea although Dima did not at all resemble a man to whom she would lose her virginity in her girlie dreams.

Dima and his mother lived in a small, two-room apartment in a drab, municipal housing unit. Poverty and ideal order reigned there, nothing like the somewhat disorderly home life once created by Nina's warm-hearted, easy mama, let alone the state of neglect into which Nina and her father's household had slid after her death.

Dima offered her tea. "Or, maybe, you want some wine? I have a bottle of..." – he ventured but bit his tongue, scared of his own boldness. Nina agreed to tea. Dima seated her on a cheap, threadbare sofa and, after some fussing around, brought a tray with a teapot, two cups and a small bowl of chocolates. Apparently, he had made his preparations for the date.

However, he clearly did not know how to get down to business. When the tea was finished, he started discussing hotly some mutual acquaintances, then told a long, stale joke and laughed at it nervously himself. Then there was a long, painful silence. At last, unable to bear it any longer, Dima reached into his backpack. With a dejected look on his face, he fished out his project paper and embarked on reading some chapter of it to Nina.

Nina was sitting silently, with her eyes cast down. She was all like a taut string.

"Dima, come here." Nina touched the sofa with her fingers inviting him to move closer. Dima sat by her side without letting go of his project paper. His hands were trembling noticeably. Nina took his paper away from him and put it aside. "Embrace me," she said softly. Dima put his hands awkwardly round her and kissed her – on the cheek. Nina turned her head and held up her lips to him. It was the first kiss in her life.

It turned out that she was Dima's first woman, too. He fumbled with her clothes, not knowing the right way to unfasten them and take them off. At last, with some help from her, he got her undressed. Hectically, he laid some bedclothes on the sofa and undressed himself. At the last moment, he darted aside and turned on some music. Apparently, music was an important item on his plan. "Light," Nina asked. Dima turned off the light. They were immersed in a shadow dissipated only by a bulb in the hall that was left on...

It hardly lasted more than a minute. Nina felt pain and issued a cry. Almost immediately after that, Dima leaned back and, breathing heavily, sank onto the sofa beside her.

Nina was lying on her back, staring at the dark ceiling in bewilderment. "Is that all?" she wondered.

As if in response to her mute question, Dima came to life and resumed his activity – with a little more confidence and less fever this time.

The tape recorder was blaring. God knows how all that would end if it were not for that fatal music. It was because of it that they failed to hear the entrance door open and stirred only when the light went on. In the room, just a couple of steps from the sofa, stood a coated woman with a bag in her hand. Dima's mother.

With her mouth wide open, the woman was staring at their naked bodies on the sofa. Nina pulled a sheet over herself and uttered, "Good evening."

The woman gulped and responded, "Good evening."

Then Dima blurted out, "Mother, this is my fiancée. Her name is Nina. Nina, please meet my mother, Tatyana Yurievna."

The woman regained her senses. Without a word, she walked to the anteroom to take off her coat, then shifted to the kitchen and from there, she cried to them, "Come down here, let's have tea!"

They slipped into their clothes and spent half an hour with Tatyana Yurievna in the kitchen. Half dead with shame, Nina kept silent, sitting with her eyes fixed on her cup. Tatyana Yurievna, quite unperturbed outwardly, questioned her son about his university affairs as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

Nina traveled back alone, having rejected flatly Dima's offer to see her home. Luckily, the underground car was almost empty at that late hour and nobody paid attention to a strange girl who laughed and frowned alternately for no apparent reason. In fact, she had a reason – she had become a woman. Moreover, she had become a fiancée.

They got married two months later. It so happened that nobody had really asked Nina whether she wanted to marry Dima. Actually, she was not sure herself. It was not that she had some doubts or was weighing rationally pros and cons – she just yielded numbly to the flow of events. The woman inside her which previously had taken a big step towards Dima's timid advances was keeping silent now.

When he met Dima, her father was clearly disappointed, but he forced himself to be amiable – told jokes, patted Dima on the back, and poured him vodka. Dima was not at all his idea of a guy for Nina, but there was nothing to be done, it was her decision. Uneasily, her father asked whether they were expecting a baby. Nina answered truthfully that they were not but she could see in his face that he was still doubtful. In his view, it was the only reason that could make his brilliant daughter tie herself down to such a colorless little fellow.

In the meantime, the colorless little fellow was bustling about in great excitement, making arrangements for the registration and wedding. He was happy – as happy as his timid soul could be. The wedding took place in a students' café where their whole year managed to cram in. Everything was very loud and incoherent.

Nina's married life began. It was Tatyana Yurievna's will that the couple live with her. They were afforded the larger of the two rooms – the one with the sofa. Dima and Nina were inseparable round the clock now – traveling to the university in the morning, sitting through the lectures, going back home, having dinner, doing homework.

Tatyana Yurievna was even and civil with her daughter-in-law, but Nina felt an arctic cold emanating constantly from the woman. Obviously, Nina was not the kind of bride Tatyana Yurievna had wished for her only son. Tatyana Yurievna never mentioned that dreadful episode when she had caught them *in flagranti* but apparently she considered Nina some kind of adventuress and profligate who had lured the innocent Dimochka into her net. As she pondered over that, Nina admitted to herself that such a view was not completely groundless. Also, Tatyana Yurievna's attitude showed some doubt – as if she did not believe in that marriage and expected every day that Nina would disappear into thin air. As it turned out later, she had been right about that, too.

Nina got used to Dima as people get used to their coat or handbag. He did not rouse any feelings in her – he just always was around. Willy-nilly, they had everything in common – friends, university-related cares, even textbooks and notebooks. Nina helped the not-very-capable Dima to prepare for the exams, and then write his graduation thesis. They were already making plans for their life after university.

Tatyana Yurievna worked in the planning department of some manufacturing company where she was only employed half-time because of the recession. She spent the rest of her day looking after her small household. She did not force her daughter-in-law to do house chores but she did not push Nina away either. At last it was settled between them that for an hour and a half every day, Nina was busy tidying, dusting, washing and scrubbing. Nina's own loving and over-lenient mother had not prepared her for that, and Nina had some hard time at first, but eventually she got used to doing housework and even got to liking it.

Possibly, her marriage to Dima could cement and take root with time, so that they became a family like any other, but there was a disaster zone in Nina's married life. It was the conjugal bed – or rather, sofa. Dima performed his duties of a husband with enthusiasm, but for Nina, it was a nightly ordeal. The moment Dima turned off the light and touched her, Nina's mind conjured up Tatyana Yurievna – with a coat on and a bag in her hand. In addition, the corporeal, not ghostly, Tatyana

Yurievna was close by, separated by a thin wall. The sound insulation was almost non-existent in the building, and Nina could hear her mother-in-law tossing and turning in her bed, then getting up, fumbling for her slippers, and walking past their door to the kitchen to take her gastric pills. That happened almost every time Nina and Dima had their intimacy, causing Nina to clench up inwardly.

Once or twice, Nina had heard some girls whisper about the “delightful sex” they had had with their boyfriends. For Nina, there was no delight in sex. There were some unpleasant, even hurtful sensations, a growing bewilderment and disappointment.

One of Dima’s few good qualities was his cleanliness fostered in him by his mother. He took a shower and changed his underwear every day, and his thin, almost transparent skin always smelled of strawberry soap – Tatyana Yurievna’s favorite, which she used on all occasions. Nina grew to hate that smell.

At last, it became unbearable. Nina wanted more than once to have it out with Dima but she never had the heart to. Meanwhile, Dima looked perfectly happy. He clearly thought highly of himself as a husband – undertones of male complacency could be heard in his voice.

Once, as she was buying a pen in a kiosk, Nina saw a brochure on sex techniques. “I’ll take that, too” burning with shame, she pointed at the eloquent cover. In snatches, locking herself up in the toilet, she read the brochure. About one half of it remained enigma to her, but she was staggered by the other half. A whole new world opened to her.

She did not dare to show the brochure to Dima until one day he stayed at home with a cold. As she was leaving for university, Nina tucked the brochure under the pillow in the hope that Dima would find it and read it himself. But it was Tatyana Yurievna who found the colorful booklet. When Nina came back, her mother-in-law met her in the doorway. “I was changing the bedclothes and found this. Apparently, it’s yours.” The woman held out the brochure carefully wrapped up in a newspaper.

It was the end, but Nina made another attempt to save the situation. She asked her father if it was all right if she and Dima came to live with him. Her father was all enthusiastic about the idea and offered to move their stuff the same day. However, when she broached the subject to Dima, she knew at once from the lost look on his face that it was no good. Still, Dima promised to raise the question with Tatyana Yurievna. The two of them had a talk in which Nina was not included. The outcome was that, hiding his eyes, Dima declared to Nina that he could not leave his mother. That night, for the first time since their wedding, they did not have sex.

There was no point in staying with Dima any longer, but through inertia, Nina lived with him for another month – until they defended their graduation theses. The defense went off perfectly for both of them. When she received her red-cover degree certificate, Nina felt liberated – a whole page in her life had been turned, and a new one began. Without even saying goodbye to Dima, she went off to her father’s with a firm intention never to set eyes again on the room with the fateful shabby sofa.

Dima brought down her stuff which fitted in a single bag. He was crushed. The castle in the air that he had built and lived happily in was collapsed now. Made eloquent by his despair, Dima entreated Nina not to leave him. However, he did not even mention the possibility of his moving in with Nina at her father’s. His mother’s control over him was absolute – he could not challenge her will even if his happiness was at stake. “But why? Why?” Dima kept asking. Nina only shook her head silently. She was not going to discuss her sexual problems with Dima – she realized by then that she would have left him anyway. “Sorry, Dima, it’s not going to work,” she said softly but resolutely. How could she explain it all to him? How could she explain why she had married him in the first place? “Sorry, Dima. Don’t take it to heart too much. Everything will be all right with you,” she said as she was turning him out of doors.

They got divorced. As a souvenir from Dima, she now bore his noble surname which she had never changed back. As a souvenir from Tatyana Yurievna, she now had a taste for tidiness and order which she tried to maintain wherever she found herself ever since.

Chapter 3

Nina lived with her father again, and it was not a joyful life. Her father had changed noticeably over the time of her absence. Not at all old – not yet forty five – he could not find a permanent employment and was getting by doing odd jobs. Worst of all, he had really taken to drink. He sank into self-neglect, was forgetting even to shave, and looked unhealthy, spent. When she saw those changes close up, Nina was appalled. In former times, her father had invariably been a genial person, the soul of every company. Her mother had told Nina once that he had first won her by his amateur ‘hiking’ songs – both of them had practiced some serious hiking in their younger days. Nina was sure that her mother would not have let him sag. With her around, he would have remained the same man – a hard worker, optimist and epicurean philosopher.

This responsibility – to give her father moral support – was Nina’s now, and she felt keenly her ineptitude. She pleaded with her father to stop drinking, had rows with him over it, tried to get him to see some doctors, but all in vain.

Once, in a sober spell, he said to her, “Ninok, stop it, don’t try to save me. Do you think I don’t realize that I am killing myself by drink? I’m doing it consciously. Tell me – what else do I have? I don’t have anything to live for.” “What about me?” Nina cried out, hurt by his words. She knew that she was the apple of her father’s eye, but apparently his love for her was not enough to fill his existence.

Nina got a job in a large, reputable investment firm and soon was absorbed in her work completely. She dreamed of making a rapid career and then... She had a very vague idea of what was to happen then, but she knew one thing for certain – she would find a way to help her father. Above all, he must not remain idle. Nina dreamed that she would study the ways of business from A to Z, accumulate the necessary contacts and then help her father open his own construction company. He was such a fine specialist, a bright mind! He was totally up to it, he only needed a start. Sometimes in her dreams, her father and she started a business together and made a huge success of it. Nina realized how naïve it all was and would be surprised to hear that quite soon her father was actually going to run a business of his own, and she was going to give him a hand in his affairs and then rescue his company.

The encounter that changed her father’s life occurred by accident, in the street. Luckily, he was not drunk. He was just on his way to the nearby wine store when a car pulled over beside him. The horn honked, and as he turned round, he saw somebody wave at him from the window of a posh foreign-made automobile. Yevgeniy Borisovich approached and recognized Simonyan, his former assistant in the construction syndicate. At one time, the two men had worked closely together, had got mutually adjusted, and now they were glad to see each other. Simonyan said that he was as busy as a bee at the moment but promised to find time for a proper get-together shortly. Promises like that are almost never kept, but after a few days Simonyan actually called and invited Nina’s father to his place to crack a bottle and have a chat about old times.

Simonyan lived in a new building of elite design. In his huge apartment, expensive decoration works had been started but not completed, and there was almost no furniture. “Got no time for that. And what’s the point, anyway?” Simonyan chuckled. One of these days I’ll bring home a new missus, and you can trust a woman to change everything to her liking.” He had just been through a divorce. According to him, his ex-wife was amply provided for, and his children were studying abroad.

His entire manner and every word he spoke oozed the satisfaction of a man who had achieved success. In the old times already, the two men had been on a first-name basis, and now Simonyan, who had sized up at once the deplorable state Nina’s father was in, sounded condescending. Still, he was really friendly and plunged willingly into reminiscences together with Yevgeniy Borisovich.

The main thing was said when they had recalled one by one all their mutual acquaintances and, having finished a bottle of superb Armenian cognac, started another one. Simonyan offered

Yevgeniy Borisovich a job. Unlike Nina's father, the man had not got lost after the collapse of their syndicate. In line with the new realities, Simonyan ventured several enterprises, one after another. To start with, he transformed one of the fragments of the syndicate into a small company aimed at doing engineering projects under contract with the city administration. He hustled about in the municipal lobbies day and night, courted the right people and finally managed to get his company written into the city investment program, thus giving his business a good start. His company took off and began to make profit. From that springboard, Simonyan rose and expanded his operations. Now he was edging his way into business of a totally different scale – export of precious metals and other stuff of the kind, all very shady and fabulously profitable. Simonyan needed a reliable man to dump his first company on, and most opportunely, Yevgeniy Borisovich turned up.

Nina's father was to become a hired employee of his former assistant, but Simonyan assured him that virtually they were going to be partners, and besides, he was planning to go out of that business in the future so that Nina's father could buy it out and be his own boss. That incredible promise was finally kept, too – apparently, it was not Simonyan's destiny to deceive Yevgeniy Borisovich.

Long starved for something real to do, Nina's father plunged headlong into his new job. Simonyan's company was about ten times smaller than his former syndicate, and feeling confined in it, Yevgeniy Borisovich was digging into every detail with passion. There were many things that could be improved, optimized, both in terms of engineering and in terms of management. Simonyan really gave Nina's father a free hand. Soaring in his new spheres, he only visited his company on rare occasions. When that happened, he listened with half an ear to the numerous suggestions that Nina's father had to make and said 'yes' to all of them, knowing full well that Yevgeniy Borisovich stood much higher than himself as a specialist. It was only in financial matters that Simonyan had his way.

His new work transformed Yevgeniy Borisovich – he looked younger, straightened out now. Besides, Simonyan was not mean – he paid his manager a decent salary. For the first time in his life, Nina's father became the owner of a foreign-made car, an assortment of good suits and various trinkets such as a Swiss watch and a golden lighter. He was a man again – even a classy man, one that women would give a lingering look. Nina felt jealous on her mother's behalf, vexed that the new rise of Yevgeniy Borisovich was not hers to reap. Soon, a real reason for that jealousy cropped up.

The reason was named Lydia Grigorievna. Not a young woman, she was well-groomed and stylish. She worked in some municipal organization, where Nina's father made her acquaintance as he was getting approval for one of his projects. Nina had not suspected that her father was seeing a woman until the very day when he introduced them to each other in some café. "Listen, Ninok, you see... The thing is, Lydia Grigorievna and I are planning to move in together. What do you think? ..."

Nina was seething with rage. She was about to splash the champagne poured out by her father into the well-groomed face of that bitch. How dared she! To take mama's place! ... However, it was not for nothing that Nina's parents took pride in her precise mind. Her mind reasoned that her father could not live alone. If not that woman, there would be another, so what's the difference? Lydia Grigorievna was smiling at her ingratiatingly. The woman realized already that Nina meant the world to Yevgeniy Borisovich and could easily wreck her plans. "All I want is for you to be happy," said Nina to her father raising her glass of champagne. He squeezed Nina's hand gratefully and kissed her on the cheek.

Lydia Grigorievna settled down in their apartment. A childless widow, alone after her husband's death, she could devote herself entirely to her new marriage. She had the sense not to make any radical changes to the apartment immediately, but she occupied every free minute in the life of Nina's father. Yevgeniy Borisovich, who had always been skeptical about theater, turned into a theatergoer: every weekend he and his wife went to see some première. They made some new acquaintances and exchanged visits with them. Lydia Grigorievna was fond of cooking and almost daily, Nina's father had to taste and praise a new dish of her making.

On the whole, she was not a bad woman and Nina had to admit that she was a good match for her father, but for Nina, it was right impossible to live under the same roof with her. Everything annoyed Nina – the woman’s voice, the odors of her creams in the countless jars with which she crammed the bathroom shelves, her culinary masterpieces... The fact alone that a stranger slept in mama’s bedroom and managed mama’s kitchen infuriated Nina. She made no attempt to break the ice in spite of the eagerness on the part of her father’s new wife. It soon became clear that they had to move apart. By common consent, they sold their apartment and bought two others instead. Nina wound up in a one-roomer in a new, remote built-up area.

It was hard for Nina to say goodbye to the familiar walls that had witnessed almost all her life. She had the feeling that in their old apartment, in spite of the arrival of a new woman, her mother was still present somehow, but now that they had robbed her of her home she had really left them, remaining only in their memories and photos.

They still had their dacha – another important locale in their lives. The dacha was a small plank cottage sitting on a few hundred square meters of sandy land some fifty kilometers from the city. The plot had been allotted to Nina’s father when he had been no boss yet, and everything there had been made by his and mama’s hands. Nina was taken there by her parents every summer all through her school years.

Lydia Grigorievna had no taste for dacha life, so she stayed behind when, one September day, Nina and her father went to visit their plank cottage ostensibly to do some small repair jobs and sort out some old stuff which was kept there, but actually, to have some together time. On the neighboring plots, bonfires of old leaves were being burnt spreading bitter-sweet smoke, and everything was like old times – except that mama was not there. On their way back, Nina’s father suggested uneasily that it made sense to sell the dacha. Nina gave no response to that, and he dropped the matter.

For a couple of years, things got more or less settled down. Nina’s father worked a lot, and the company expanded. When Nina visited him at his place, he would have a couple of drinks and talk enthusiastically about his plans. He looked young and happy. Lydia Grigorievna did not stop them from seeing each other but she was always present at their meetings and took every opportunity to show – by some word or gesture – that it was her home and her man. Nina detested her as before, but deep inside, she accepted the woman and reconciled herself to the fact that her only family – her dear papa – had to be shared with someone else.

At work, she was doing fine. Within a short period of time, she distinguished herself from a group of young business school graduates who had been recruited as the company had expanded. At first, they all were attached as trainees to experienced analysts and loaded with routine, technical operations. Nina’s mates complained about the work load, resentful at not getting a chance to show their true worth. They all were ambitious and fancied themselves financial geniuses. Nina was ambitious, too, but she never complained. Instead, she kept grinding through heaps of standard computations, polishing her skills to perfection and mastering computer software. In the evenings, she ploughed through specialized financial literature focusing on the construction industry finances. Soon Nina was marked out by her superiors who started charging her with independent tasks.

For a long time after her divorce from Dima, Nina did not have anyone. She did not feel any need for sex – Dima had not wakened her to that. The idea of going to bed with a man was neither repugnant nor exciting to her. In her narrow world, there was no room for anything but work. She did not consider herself deprived in any way, neither was she interested in the opinion of her friends whom she was seeing two or three times a year at somebody’s birthday. And yet... One evening, as she was walking through a park to her house, she saw a kissing couple. It was an incident of no importance, of course, but a hot wave spread suddenly in her breast. Nina quickened her pace, went up to her apartment, took a shower, had some supper and got down to her financial surveys. However, her mind refused to take in the numbers and graphs; instead, it kept picturing two intertwined bodies in the evening dusk. It was at least half an hour before she could get to the meaning of what she was

reading. Ever since, she would turn away painstakingly from any couple that she saw in the street or in the underground, be it a couple which were quite innocently holding hands.

One night, somebody called her by mistake. It was a late hour, and Nina was in bed preparing for sleep – relaxing her body and brain by a special technique that she had picked up from some book. The idea was to talk to each of her organs in turn – to thank them for the day's work and bid them good night. It was her heart that she was talking to when the phone rang. Bewildered, Nina answered. A deep male baritone said, "Ninotchka, baby, is that you? ... At last! How are you, pet?" Somehow, Nina was slow to realize that it was a mistake, and then it took her some time to make the man realize it. He kept saying, "Hey, baby, stop kidding me. You're mad at me, eh? ... Don't be mad, sweetie. I love my pet." On hanging up, Nina snorted. 'Baby', 'pet' ... How vulgar! What kind of woman allowed a man to call her that? Nina resumed her going-to-sleep routine but it did not work as it should – she lay awake for a long time afterwards although she had talked to each of her organs for three times. When it was well after midnight, she admitted to herself that she did not mind being called 'pet' – even by someone who did not possess such a velvety baritone.

Then Igor happened in her life. About ten years older than she, he was a section manager in the same company. Nina had never dealt with him work-wise and hardly knew him. The two of them hooked up all of a sudden at a celebration of the company's tenth anniversary. Nina found herself next to Igor at the table. He was attentive to her, entertained her with incessant jokes, and drank a lot. Nina also drank – too much by her measure. They danced, took part in some contests and games. Then they drank again. Eventually, Igor wound up in Nina's apartment. Both of them were very drunk, hardly able to move, so sex was out of the question. Nina bedded Igor down on a cot she had put up in the kitchen and collapsed right away onto her bed without even changing into her nightie.

The next morning, she was woken up by a rattling sound coming from the kitchen – somebody was using the kettle there. Nina's head was splitting. She remembered that she had a man in her home – that she had brought the man herself – but she had absolutely no idea as to why she had done that. Suffering from a terrible headache and suspecting herself of insanity, Nina dragged herself to the kitchen. Igor was in a wretched state, too – he had drunk about three times as much as she had and was having a severe hangover. The two of them made some super-strong coffee and drank it while chewing aspirin pills.

Nina asked Igor if he wanted to make a call home to tell them not to worry about him but the man waved the suggestion aside. He was married and had a son, but for a few months already he had been separated from his family. "What the hell does she want from me? Stupid skirt," Igor said meaning his wife. "And there's her dear mother, too... You see, they've totally driven me to the edge with their nagging." Igor was staying in the apartment of some friend who had gone abroad. "So nobody's going to miss me," he summed up with a wry grin.

Nina took a close look at him. He was rather well-built, though with a noticeable belly. Not very good-looking at his best, he looked a real fright now that he was having a bad hangover. However, Nina realized why she had brought him to her place – as at the party the night before, she felt at ease and relaxed with that man as if they had known each other for a long time.

When they had finished their coffee, Nina saw him out. They did not as much as kiss goodbye, but on Saturday that same week he came to her place again and they became lovers.

Nina asked herself afterwards whether her relationship with Igor could be called love. In fact, she had nothing to compare it with – her marriage to Dima did not count, and she did not believe in love as depicted in movies and novels. Every weekend, Igor came over and stayed overnight. Nina got used to his visits and anticipated them. While normally managing with ready meals from the microwave, she did real cooking for Igor. She would serve him and then watch him eat with her head rested on her knuckles. Having made some tea the way he liked it, she filled a large cup which she had bought specially for him. As he was drinking his tea, she listened to his stories. Igor was great at telling stories – he remembered lots of funny episodes, and showed admirably their colleagues, the

company's bosses, and the clients. Often there was more to his stories than just empty fun – Nina learned from them the backstage ways of business, something that one did not read about in books or articles.

In the company, they were hiding their relationship – Igor wanted it to be that way, and she did, too. As a rule, things like that get out soon, but it is usually because the woman who is having an affair with a colleague babbles it out to some friend herself. Nina did not share her personal life with anyone – neither had she any friends in the company – so her intimacy with Igor remained secret.

Igor was an experienced man – there was no need to slip him brochures on sex. In bed, he employed a wide range of techniques, and Nina allowed him to do anything, although what she really liked was the prelude – their first hugs and caresses, as they were dressed yet and he was her good friend Igor rather than an expert male. Also, she liked going to sleep by his side when, having accomplished all his feats, he became human again. “Sleep well, kid,” he would say, kissing her. “Well, I guess, ‘kid’ is better than ‘pet’,” she smiled to herself, breathing in his agreeable and already so familiar smell.

Nina and her father once arranged to have a meeting after work – Yevgeniy Borisovich started to take his daughter seriously as a specialist and meant to ask her advice on some bank loan matter. Having arrived at the office building where she worked, he waited for her in the street. When Nina came out to meet him, Igor happened to be around, too. Embarrassed, Nina introduced the two men to each other, and as they were shaking hands, was struck by their semblance – close in height and hair color, they had the same voice quality, the same type of starting baldness and the same manner of smiling.

An educated girl, Nina had read about Freud's teaching. She shuddered at the thought: could it be that, being unconsciously attracted to her father, she had found a substitute for him in Igor? She rejected the thought with indignation but was never able to put it out of her head. One evening, after a hard working day, they were sitting at table in her kitchen, drinking tea. The TV set in the corner was on, in mute mode. It showed a beatnik-looking guy who was singing to his own guitar accompaniment. “Turn the sound on, please. I want to listen,” Igor asked. “You know, in my younger days I did some singing in an amateur way, even wrote songs of my own. If you like, I'll bring a guitar next time and sing a couple for you.” “No!” Nina cried out frightened by the discovery that Igor was like her father in that, too. Igor was surprised and clearly hurt.

Those freudist fears made it more difficult for her to make love to Igor. The inward clenching that had possessed her in her marriage to Dima was back again – as she got in bed with Igor, she involuntarily thought of her father, and her trying to drive those thoughts away only made it worse. Apparently feeling something, Igor reduced his male program – gave up his attempts to inflame her with his skill. They would sit in the kitchen chatting until late at night and then, after a brief sex, go to sleep. Nina liked it that way.

Chapter 4

A year passed. They never discussed their relationship or made any plans for the future, but gradually, Nina came to believe that Igor had always been there and always would be – how could it be otherwise? Besides weekends, Igor started coming over on weekdays. He was clearly in need of a home, and she liked having him about – washing and ironing his shirts, giving him massage for his beginning osteochondrosis, treating his colds. Gradually, his stuff accumulated in her apartment: toothbrush, razor, slippers, bathrobe, books. Then Igor brought a pair of trainers and a tracksuit – trying to lose weight, he was running every morning and would not break his routine when he stayed overnight at her place.

Imagining her future life with Igor, Nina tried to listen to the woman inside her. The woman kept silent, but rather in an approving way – she did not seem to mind.

It all ended on the very day of their anniversary. Preparing to celebrate, Nina made a special dinner and laid the table nicely for the occasion. She had a plan for that night – she was going to make Igor a proposal. Her idea was to sell her apartment so that then they could buy jointly a new one that was larger and located closer to work – a place for them to settle down together. She was sure that Igor would agree – she did not imagine what objections he could have against such a sensible scheme. Nina did not insist on getting married. According to Igor, he was not seeing his wife – the woman would not let him cross her threshold, not even in order to see his son, – but they were not formally divorced, and Nina did not mean to rush things. She was sure that everything was going to sort out with time.

On hearing her out, Igor remained silent for a while, and then spoke in a thick voice, with his head down. “Well, it’s just as well... It’s for the better, I guess. You see, I’ve been meaning to talk to you, too.”

Nina listened to him unable to grasp the meaning of what he was saying. It took her some time to realize that Igor with whom she had grown so close was going to leave her and was telling her so. “But why?” she cried out. From his confused explanations, it appeared that actually he had been seeing his wife all that time. According to Igor, it was all for the sake of his son. The boy was to go to school that year, and Igor wanted to be there for him – wanted his son to have a father.

Nina kept silent. Logically, she admitted that everything was fair – that she had no claim on Igor, and so she should accept his leaving with good grace – but she was paralyzed. Nobody had dumped her like that before, and she had not known how hurtful it was. When Igor had collected his things and was already standing in the doorway, he said something else. “Excuse me, but I don’t think it’s so very important to you. You don’t feel anything in bed, do you? ... I can see it, I’m not an idiot. I’m not saying you’re frigid – maybe, you just need another man, I don’t know.” Nina thrust the door open furiously: “Go away!” And he did.

That night, Nina did not have a wink of sleep, agonizing over Igor’s treason and her own humiliation. For some time, her logical mind tried to reason with her, arguing that Igor had not made any promises to her and thus, had not betrayed her – that there was nothing especially humiliating to her in that whole story – but soon her logical mind had to shut up overridden by the wounded, indignant woman. Together with billions of other women on this planet, Nina delivered the verdict that all men were swine – and cursed the stupid skirt whom she had never met and who had managed to get her husband back in spite of all her flaws. To be sure, that skirt was not frigid, oh no. She was probably doing all sorts of dirty tricks in bed – everything that males, those lewd apes, were so crazy about. Nina, who had never uttered a bad word in her life, cursed the woman in the meanest possible expressions.

The next day Nina phoned in sick and then even wangled a two weeks’ leave. She could not imagine running into Igor at work.

It was her first proper leave since she had come to work in the company. For a young employee, she was drawing a good salary while spending very little, so she had some savings. Now she decided to treat herself to a grand vacation. Since she had never been abroad before, she went to the country that was visited by all those of her compatriots who managed to earn some spare cash – Turkey.

On her first day in Turkey, she got a terrible sunburn.

The trouble of making reservations and buying tickets had done her good – she had got distracted from her agonies of a rejected woman and by the time she arrived at the seaside, she was open to new impressions. She stayed in a large hotel – allegedly, a four-star one. One half of the guests were holiday-makers from Russia while the other half were Europeans, mostly Germans. Having dumped her bag in the hotel room, Nina ran off to the beach at once. The beach was occupied by the Russians, while the Germans disdained Nature and spent their time in a civilized way, by the swimming-pool. Nina was not impressed by the water – it struck her as too salty and not as clear as that in the Black Sea. Nevertheless, she enjoyed a good swim and then stretched herself on a chaise-longue. She felt free and independent.

All around her, there was the bustle of beach life going on – naked bodies, joyous screams and laughter, the tumbling of volley-ball players, and the romping of children. Nina made acquaintance with a married couple from Novokuznetsk. The husband had a business of his own – a small shop manufacturing cast-iron fences for private residencies. It was the couple's second visit to Turkey, and they were planning to do Italy the next year. Apparently, the fences were in demand. Seeing Nina roast in the sun, her new acquaintances offered her sunblock lotion but she waved it away laughingly. "Not to worry! It's nothing, I'll be all right." The sunshine did not seem very strong, the sky being overcast with a light haze and a cool breeze blowing from the sea.

Nina went to swim another couple of times, lolled about on her chaise-longue, and when she came back to her room, she was surprised to discover that she had spent a good four hours on the beach. Then nightmare began. Her skin turned tomato-red from head to toe, blisters sprang up, and it all hurt unbearably. She recalled that cologne was supposed to help, and that she had a bottle of it in her bag. She got the bottle out and poured the contents onto herself. It did not help any, but now she was stinking of a cheap hair-dresser's. Sensitive to smells, Nina was suffering doubly.

She thought of another folk remedy – urine. It took her some time to pluck up her courage, but finally she dragged herself to the bathroom. The folk remedy did not help much but now the stench of cologne was mixing with that of piss. That was too much for her. Nina jumped into the shower and washed it all away. Then, without wiping, she wrapped up in a bed-sheet and lowered herself onto the bed with a groan.

She was shivering with fever. Late at night she managed to doze off for a while, but then she woke up again. It was dark outside. Nina heard some noise coming from the bar on the same floor as the last customers were dispersing for their rooms. Everyone was going to sleep while she was in for a sleepless night. "Idiot," she scolded herself. "Serves you right. Such idiots wind up in hell where the devil casts them into fire. Ah-a-a... Damn, how it hurts." She recalled a summer when she had been taken to the Black Sea by her parents. A little girl, unaccustomed to the southern sun, she had got a little sunburned at first. What was it that her mother had used to treat her? Her memory gave her a prompt – it was sour cream, the Russian *smetana*. The idea of cool, dense *smetana* which she could spread all over herself, was beautiful. But where was she to find *smetana* in the middle of the night, in a Turkish hotel? Desperate and hopeless, Nina went out of her room to search of it.

In her bathrobe and slippers, she dragged herself to the bar. The door was closed, and it was dark inside. Nina knocked and waited, then knocked again. At last a fat Turkish barman appeared. He pointed at his watch – the bar was closed. Nina pleaded, "*Pozhaluista*, please. Just a second." With a displeased look on his face, the barman opened the door. But how was Nina to explain to him that she needed *smetana*? The Turk did not speak Russian, and Nina did not know the English for *smetana* – it could be that the English people did not eat *smetana* and accordingly, did not have a

word for it in their language. Using to the limit her scanty stock of English words, she made up the sentence, “Please give white put in salad.” The barman frowned in bewilderment, then smiled and nodded. He went to the kitchen and came back with a jar of some light substance. Heartened, Nina slipped him five dollars and hurried back.

The jar was icy, right from the fridge, and Nina wanted to use all of it as soon as possible. Once in her room, she threw off her bathrobe, scooped up a handful from the jar and spread the substance generously over her shoulders and the back of her neck. For a few seconds, she really had a sensation of pleasant cool, but then it started to burn twice as bad, ten times as bad! It was as if a red-hot iron was being applied to her shoulders. Nina smelled the substance, then tasted it. It was mayonnaise – a very hot, mustard-based kind. Nina started to cry. She was the most miserable person in the world.

Throughout the next several days, she was staying confined within the four walls of her room, recovering slowly. She ordered food from room service, but she had no appetite, and the contents of the tray remained almost untouched. The paperback detective story which she had taken along on her journey had long been finished, the local TV was impossible to watch, and she had got tired of the view from her window. For days on end she was lying in bed with headphones on, listening again and again to a course of conversational English. She never learned how to say *smetana* in English but it occurred to her that she should have simply asked the barman for some yoghurt.

She bought a large box of it from the same barman and, standing before the mirror, spread the yoghurt all over herself. It was a terrifying sight. “A new dish – roasted idiot under yoghurt,” she said aloud and stuck out her tongue at her own reflection. Still, the yoghurt helped.

Gradually, the pain subsided. Her burned hide started to peel off, revealing a new skin – thin, glistening, and already touched by suntan. On the sixth day, Nina went out of her room. The burns still hurt in various spots, but she could live with that. Beach was out of the question. Instead, Nina went on a touring spree. Before that, she had not realized that what was now called ‘Turkey’ had once been part of the antique world with Greek cities, theatres, baths, and arenas for athletic contests. The ancient world whose vestiges emerged from beneath the ground here and there was much more exciting than anything that was on that land now. An old fan of history, Nina bought up all the guide-books that were available and within the next few days visited every historical site within reach.

On the advice of her Novokuznetsk acquaintances, she also went to a folk restaurant located in desert highland, a half hour’s drive from her hotel. The restaurant was decorated in the oriental style and served dishes of local cuisine, but its main hit was a show of folk performers who sang and danced, involving the guests, Russians and Germans, in their dances. The fiery rhythms and throaty foreign voices had their effect on Nina. “In the final account, my holiday has worked out well,” she thought, clapping her hands. “It surely is something to remember.” A young mustachioed Turk wearing super-wide trousers with a super-wide belt drew her out to the center of the circle where she imitated – awkwardly, but gaily – a local dance. Then she drank strongest coffee, tasted oriental sweets, and inhaled the fumes from hookahs. Everything was perfect.

The show ended after midnight. Nina went out into the velvety southern night. There was a small crowd by the restaurant – the Germans were pushing for seats on the last cheap route bus. Nina avoided the crowd and went on to the taxi stand. A young man sprang up beside her. He smiled at Nina, “You danced splendidly.” Then he suggested, “Why don’t we share a taxi? What hotel are you staying in?” It turned out that they were staying in neighboring hotels, so they rode back together.

The guy’s name was Oleg. In the dark, Nina did not get a good view of him but he seemed rather handsome, of a tall, slender, light-haired type. He chattered on about something, and Nina responded irrelevantly, watching the trees and sparse buildings glide by in the beams of light from the car. A cocktail of local smells was flowing in through the open window. Beyond the trees, a grey strip of the beach could be seen embraced by the impenetrable mass of the sea with sparkles of waves under a huge yellow moon.

It was late, but Nina could not even think of sleep. The rhythms of Turkish dances were still reverberating in her head and her whole body. Breathing in the aromas of the night, she felt almost happy.

“How about a swim?” asked Oleg. Nina had not even noticed that they had reached their destination. They paid the fare and got off the taxi. The car disappeared leaving them on a narrow road under dark plane-trees. Her hotel was a five minute walk in one direction, and his about as much in the other. Close by, a gravel path branched off and wound down to the beach. Oleg took hold of her hand and put his arm around her shoulders. “What a night! Do you feel this warmth? It’s coming from the sea. The water is like fresh milk now. Come on, let’s take a dip,” he said looking her in the eye with a smile. In fact, Nina did not feel like returning to her hateful room – she felt like fooling around and being naughty. “I didn’t bring along my bathing-suit,” she replied with laughter hardly believing that she was saying that – that it all was happening to her. “I didn’t bring along my trunks either,” Oleg said with the same kind of laughter.

They actually took a dip – for just a minute. Then, for a long time, they made love on a chaise-longue that somebody had left behind on the beach. Above them was a coal-black, star-spangled southern sky. The planks of the chaise-longue were digging into Nina’s barely healed back, the waves were splashing onto the beach and receding, with loud hissing, just a few meters away, and in rhythm with the wash, a man was entering her – a man whom she had only known for half an hour. “It’s insane, it’s totally immoral,” urged the voice of conscience, but that voice soon faded away. What did conscience have to counter the southern night, the sea, and the wild, shameless love-making on a chaise-longue?

Nina felt good. At first, it was just good, all of it: the starry sky, the warm breeze, and the tight embrace with a man whose skin was salty from sea water. Her head was empty, and she abandoned herself to the rhythm that her partner created on a par with the surf. Then it was not simply good – a new sensation arose in the lower part of her belly, and in her thighs and buttocks. Weak at first, the sensation was growing rapidly. Her whole body tightened in anticipation of something extraordinary that was going to happen the next moment... However, the next moment Oleg made his last abrupt thrust with a groan and sunk onto the narrow chaise-longue by her side. Nina wanted more – the new sensation that had surged in her would not go away. She waited for a continuation, but the man kissed her casually, lit a cigarette and said, “Well, it’s time to go bye-bye, eh?”

Oleg walked her to her hotel. He suggested that they see each other the next day and go somewhere to dance. “And after that – to the beach,” thought the insane, totally immoral Nina with a smile. Oleg kissed her once more and vanished into the darkness. Nina watched the burning tip of his cigarette fade away, and then went up to her room. “I only hope I’ll recognize him tomorrow,” she thought giggling as she was taking a shower.

The next morning she woke up in high spirits. Her whole body was springy – she felt like moving, dancing. After breakfast, she went to the beach and took a swim. When she saw her Novokuznetsk acquaintances, she greeted them merrily and told them that she had had a very good time in the highland restaurant. “You look great. What happened to you?” asked the manufacturer of cast-iron fences simple-mindedly. “Nothing. I just relaxed,” Nina answered with laughter and said goodbye to the couple. As she was walking away from them, she saw the spouse of the cast-iron businessman explain something to the man with a grin, nodding towards Nina.

In order to kill time until the evening, she went down to a neighboring city that was famous for its bazaar. While she was at it, she meant to pick some souvenirs for her father and... and for his Lydia Grigorievna, damn her. The bazaar was really impressive – it was rather a whole town, with countless booths, or tiny shops, and a crazy labyrinth of aisles between them. The air was filled with a cacophony of sounds and an incredible mixture of smells – of coffee, exotic fruits, sweets and spices, leather, dyed fabric and burning ovens on which food was cooked or metal was heated by craftsmen who worked embossing designs on the spot. Russian tourists, known for their propensity to spend

money easily, were popular here – recognized at once and solicited insistently. Within the first five minutes, yielding to the pressure from some swarthy tradesmen, Nina bought a shawl of impossible colors and a coin necklace that any Gypsy woman would be proud to have. Then she realized that none of those things was of any use to her – they would be impossible to wear at home – and tucked away her purse. After that, she was only browsing with the firm intention to go all over the bazaar. Finally, she bought a nice embroidered fez for her father and a perfectly tasteless brooch for Lydia Grigorievna as well as some trifles for her university friends.

Back in her hotel, she had lunch and lay down to have some rest – to store up energy for her night of dissipation. For dinner, she only had a cup of coffee. She could hardly wait for the appointed hour, and when it finally arrived, she walked out to the meeting place by the hotel – with a spring in her step, a shawl over her shoulders and a jingling coin necklace around her neck. After half an hour, her elated, mischievous mood was replaced by bewilderment, then vexation – her lover did not show up. It occurred to her that it could be a misunderstanding – that Oleg could be waiting for her on the road – and she ran down to the spot where they had previously got off the taxi. Oleg was not there. Another couple were kissing under a plate-tree. At the sight of Nina they laughed and, holding hands, glided down the gravel path to the sea. Nina waited for another quarter of an hour, and then dragged herself back to the hotel.

All her recent grievances assailed her again. “What’s wrong with me? Why am I being dumped? What am I – the worst woman ever?” she thought with tears in her eyes, ripping to pieces the innocent shawl.

She fell asleep towards morning and got up all jaded the next day. She did not feel like doing anything. It was the last day of her vacation – she was flying home the next afternoon. That gave her an occupation – she had to pack up, which could keep her busy all day, if necessary.

After dinner, she said to herself: “Like hell, I still have a night.” She put on her shortest skirt, a blouse that ended above the navel, and her posh coin necklace. Armored in that way, she went out on the prow.

At the hotel, those who were seeking company for a night had a choice between hitting one of the hotel’s six bars and doing the promenade. Nina did not like the idea of sitting alone in a dingy, smoky bar room amid noisy, drunken compatriots, so she took the other option.

The promenade was a paved walking strip used in the daytime by married couples with children, and in the evening, by loners, men and women, in search of a bit of private good luck.

That was disgusting and humiliating – to pace to and fro pretending to be a lover of walks and waiting to be approached by some representative of the male species. Other women who loved walks just as much were cruising around casting unfriendly glances at each other. It was unbearable for Nina to be one of them, and it was only her angry determination that made her walk the whole promenade back and forth three times.

She was about to give up when a guy spoke to her. Shortish, dark-complexioned and fussy, he did not impress her at all, but she did not have any other choice. The guy called himself Zhora. Judging by his accent, he was from somewhere in the South – possibly, Rostov or Ukraine.

They did some chit-chatting, without much enthusiasm. Zhora livened up when Nina mentioned that she was leaving the next day. “That calls for a celebration, I swear!” he insisted joyously. He said that he could not invite her to his room as he was sharing it with another man, so it appeared that Nina had to invite him to hers. She did not like the idea – she no longer was in a mood for anything – but, being Nina, she had to carry through what she had begun.

On the way, Zhora picked up a bottle of the cheapest wine from the bar. In her room, they poured the wine into thick hotel glasses and drank it. There was nothing to talk about, and Nina wanted to be through with it as soon as possible. “I’m going to take a shower. I’ll be right back. You lie down,” she said without any ceremony, not wondering at herself any more.

When, wrapped up in a towel, she came out of the shower, the representative of the male species by the name of Zhora was already in her bed. Her instinct spoke loudly telling her that she should not lie with that Zhora, but from some evil obstinacy, she did.

Her instinct was right, it was no good. Zhora gave her no joy whatever. It was nothing like her recent love-making with Oleg – no stars, no sea-wash, and no gripping sensations in her body. Nothing. Besides, she soon felt sleepy and flaked out without even making it to the end of Zhora's fidgety performance.

Her awakening was a nasty one. She had a headache, but worse still, she had a feeling that she had made some serious error for which she was going to pay. She received evidence of that at once – her bag was wide open, her things scattered about and her purse turned inside out. She had been robbed. The shortish Zhora from the South was a hotel thief who was in the business of robbing lonely dames that looked for adventure. He had drugged her wine and cleaned her out while she was knocked out. He took into account that she was leaving and so had no time to search for him and make a row. Nina buried her face in her hands and groaned from humiliation and shame. However, she had only about an hour left before the departure time, so the groaning had to be cut short. Thank heaven, Zhora had not taken either her passport or air ticket – he obviously wanted her to leave. He had even left her twenty dollars – enough to pay the bus fare to the airport.

On the plane, Nina was still stunned, unable to come to herself. All that had happened was so not like her, not her life. "Some vacation, to be sure. A real distraction," she thought and suddenly remembered the stupid coin necklace. The greedy Zhora had snatched it, too. Somehow, the thought of it seemed so absurd to her that she burst out laughing hysterically causing the passengers to cast surprised looks at her and giving serious concern to the air hostess.

On arrival, she went out to work at once, trying to obliterate Turkey from her memory. She never saw Igor who had transferred to another branch of the company by that time. Apparently, his breaking up with Nina had not been easy for him, either, and he did not want to bump into her every day. Besides, Nina found that she did not care about all that as much as before – her feelings had blunted, and she had almost left the whole break up story behind her. She could live on.

However, she had to pay once more for her Turkish escapades. At first she did not pay attention to certain unpleasant symptoms, but after a week she had to see the doctor. The tests confirmed that the wretched Zhora (or was it the romantic Oleg?) had endowed her with a shameful disease. Nina felt as if the sky had collapsed on her. The doctor reassured her, "Don't you rack yourself so, my dear. You look like a ghost. We've all been there, believe me. It's nothing, it's totally curable. You'll be as good as new in a couple of weeks." Nina had no way of explaining to the cynical, jovial doctor how horrified and disgusted with herself she was.

She took a course of treatment, then turned to another, more expensive clinic and insisted on being given another course although the tests indicated that she had been completely cured. Nina was certain now that she was not going to have anything to do with any men ever again – lovemaking was crossed out of her life with a thick, red line. "It's simply not my thing," she said to herself. "How much more proof do you need? Some people are born for this sex nonsense, others for profession. I live to be a professional, to make a career."

Besides, she was soon seized by totally different events which involved her father, so that she had to put her intimate frustrations out of her mind for a long time.

Chapter 5

Nina's father had worked for Simonyan for over two years when everything in the company began changing, and not for the better. Simonyan who, previously, had been paying only occasional visits to the company started showing up almost daily. He rummaged through the accounts and questioned Nina's father at length about the company's assets and operations. Then, one day, he broke to Yevgeniy Borisovich, "Sorry, old boy, we'll have to tighten our belts. It's hard times, you see," – and ordered that most of the assets be sold out and half of the employees be dismissed, with only a bare minimum kept, which meant giving up some of the company's projects.

Yevgeniy Borisovich was dumbfounded. He was convinced that the company was on the rise, and the market was in for growth, too, so it was time to expand rather than economize. Simonyan cut short his questions, "I said, it's hard times!" – but then, seeing how upset his manager was, he softened, patted Nina's father on the shoulder, and said reassuringly, "Take it easy, man. Things will sort themselves out." Still, Yevgeniy Borisovich was in extreme distress and confusion.

Shortly after, Simonyan took out a large bank loan in the name of the company and immediately transferred the money to another account of his. He did not explain anything to Nina's father – he only promised to return the money as soon as he could. Then he took out another loan and yet another one. The company's total debt exceeded a critical level: with the reduced business that the company had left now, it was not capable of paying off the loans, and bankruptcy was looming. That did not go unnoticed by the bank, and when Simonyan applied for a new loan, he was refused it and forced to sign a protocol on the accelerated repayment of the accumulated debt.

When Simonyan came back from the bank, he was not himself – his stateliness and gloss was all gone; now it was an intimidated, harassed man. He and Nina's father had a decisive talk. Simonyan admitted that he was in a desperate plight and needed money badly – any money, down to the last ruble.

Yevgeniy Borisovich realized finally that Simonyan was ready to sacrifice the business. In his former life, Nina's father had put almost twenty years into a construction syndicate only to see it finally go up in smoke. That was understandable, though – the whole country was falling to pieces at that time, not only some syndicate. Now that he had worked in Simonyan's company for two and a half years he was attached to it as he once had been to his syndicate. He worked hard, constantly throwing in evenings and Saturdays. All the workers of the company had been selected and trained by him personally, and he could rely on every one of them. All the projects and technical solutions were his projects and solutions. However, the company had an owner, and the owner chose to drown it because of some problems he was having.

Yevgeniy Borisovich told Simonyan what the other man was perfectly aware of himself – that there were no more assets to sell as their obsolete equipment could only be disposed of as scrap. The company's main worth was in its cadre, their skill and experience, but that had no salvage value. It was true, some money could be made if the remaining projects were sold off to other companies. The leases on the office and warehouse were also worth something – both had been paid for a year in advance and could be ceded to someone else. "But that means that there will be nothing to give back to the bank. It's called liquidation of pledged assets, a criminal offence," Nina's father remarked gloomily. Ignoring his remark, Simonyan asked how long it would take to negotiate and close the deals on the projects and leases, and gave an answer himself, "At least a month. It doesn't work for me."

For a long while, Simonyan sat in silence, drumming his fingers on the table. Then he looked pensively at Nina's father and said suddenly, "Listen, Yevgeniy, why don't you buy the company from me? I'll sell it cheap." Yevgeniy Borisovich was taken aback. "But..." he muttered. "How do you mean? ... Where would I get the cash, anyway? I've got no money to speak of, you know that." Simonyan looked intently at him. "I said, I'll sell it cheap," he repeated. Then he named his price.

The figure was not large by Simonyan's measure, but for Nina's father, it was huge, impossible. At least, that was what he thought at first. But apparently, Simonyan knew more about such matters. "How much salary have I paid you, all in all?" he asked and gave an accurate total himself. "So, you must have put by about..." That other figure suggested by Simonyan made Nina's father start – it was exactly the current balance in his savings account. Simonyan went on reasoning aloud, "You can mortgage your apartment and sell your car... Does your wife have anything? Fur coat, stones? You don't like the sound of it, I understand, but check it out – it's your once in a lifetime chance." It appeared that, if Yevgeniy Borisovich sold and pledged everything that could be sold or pledged, the necessary sum just worked out. In exchange for that he could acquire an over-indebted, drained out company that was in for bankruptcy. "Only I want it quick," added Simonyan.

Yevgeniy Borisovich said that he would think about it. He said so out of politeness only – he was sure that there was nothing to think about. The company was doomed, and however strongly he was stuck to it, it was no reason to put his head in the noose. He was not that insane – no, sir. However, deep inside him, a temptation stirred and whispered contrary to all common sense, "It's your big chance. Don't miss it." For the first time in his life, Yevgeniy Borisovich – an honest, hard-working man who had a lot of talent but not much business grip – was faced with such a choice.

He asked Nina to come over to his place and together with Lydia Grigorievna, they held a family council. Nina was against the buyout adventure. She was aware of what had been going on between Simonyan and her father recently, and she was sure that the company was hopeless. She spoke harshly, without sparing her father's feelings – she believed that it was the right thing to do in the situation. Simonyan simply wanted to shift his debts onto Yevgeniy Borisovich, and it could very well end up in Nina's father and Lydia Grigorievna being stranded with no money and not even a roof over their heads.

That was when Lydia Grigorievna surprised Nina for the first time. She put her hand on the hand of Nina's father and said, "Do what you think is right. I am with you."

Yevgeniy Borisovich collected the necessary money and bought out the company.

Everything was completed in a rush, in a matter of two weeks. When the money had been handed over to Simonyan and all the papers had been signed in the company office, the two men opened a bottle of Armenian cognac of the same brand as the one that had started their business relationship. Simonyan was wistful and talked little. As he was leaving, he hugged Yevgeniy Borisovich suddenly and said, "Hey, man, we've done some nice kicking around, right? I don't regret anything."

The next day, it was announced on the local news that on the highway leading to Sheremetyevo Airport, a car accident had occurred killing Artur Simonyan, a businessman known in certain circles.

A hard, nervous time set in. Nina submerged herself in her father's affairs; every day after work and on weekends, she came to his company to pore over the papers until late at night. Soon she knew the company's accounts like the back of her hand. Even without being an expert in engineering matters, she could see that it was a good, sound business. The projects were reasonably devised – they promised financial gains and paved way to further prospects. The staff remaining after the reduction was like a clenched fist, all its members being experienced, reliable, and committed. Many of them had known Yevgeniy Borisovich from the times of the syndicate, they trusted him and were ready to tighten their belts in order to make it through the bad streak. In another couple of years of steady work most of the projects would have been completed. Then the gains would be enough to pay off a major part of the debt and launch new projects whose contours could already be discerned. The company would take on additional staff, expand operations, and in just a few years, unfold like a spring into a strong, profitable business. However, there was a snag that blocked all those prospects – the paying off on the loans was due much earlier than the projects could be completed, and the money was nowhere to be found.

Nina started a struggle for economy – scrutinized every single item of assets and expenses, including the smallest ones, and handed her father a list of what she thought could be cut. Although the list did credit to her thoroughness and professional skills, the total economy was insignificant. Everything of value had been withdrawn by Simonyan who had squeezed the company out like a lemon.

Nina was seeing her father almost every day now, but they did not talk much. Yevgeniy Borisovich was not himself after the recent events, especially Simonyan's death of which he did not even know what to think. His only answer to all his concerns was work. He dug even deeper into the engineering problems – spent his whole days out in the field, at the company's objects, meddling in his men's responsibilities. The problem of paying off the loans did not exist for him – he just refused to discuss it, hiding his head in the sand like an ostrich. "Don't you worry so much, Ninok," he would say to his daughter with feigned optimism. "It all will sort itself out one way or another. When the time comes, I'll go to the bank and explain everything. I'm sure they'll give me an extension on the debt. After all, they're not monsters, are they?"

After having worked in an investment company for a few years, Nina knew more about banks than her father and had no illusions about their mercifulness or even common sense. However hard she racked her brains though, she was unable to come up with any other idea – it appeared that they could only pin their hopes on an extension that the bank might mercifully grant them. Only, of course, they should not come to the bank bare-handed – they had to present a detailed business plan providing absolute proof that the bank was better off saving this business rather than drowning it.

Nina got down to drawing such a business plan, for a five-year period. For that, she could use some advice from Igor who was an expert in precisely that field – estimating financial efficiency of investment projects – but she had not seen Igor since the door had slammed after him. Calling him now and asking for a meeting was out of the question – Igor would think that she was trying to get him back which she had no intention of doing. She was not going to let any more men into her life – ever.

Nina could handle the business-plan job on her own – she had brains enough for that. She was worried about something else. She had made some inquiries about the bank that was her father's creditor to find out that it was one of the many small, shady financial establishments that had sprung up out of nowhere during the last decade of the past century and had made money out of thin air. In recent years, some of those establishments had been trying to cleanse themselves and join legal business, but the problem was they were filled with people of the old cast, whose mentality stemmed from the turbulent nineties. Those who were going to read the business plan which Nina was laboring at in her evenings were probably incapable of understanding what it was about, and if they did understand it, it was likely that the five-year prospect meant nothing to them. As a hungry dog does not believe in anything but meat, so those people did not believe in anything but cash, and not any time but today.

Nina had a backup scheme: if their business plan was turned down by the company's bank, they could take the plan to some other bank in the hope of finding more professional and reasonable creditors there. Once they estimated the prospects of the business, the reasonable creditors in the other bank would hopefully give the company a long-term loan so that it could pay off its short-term debt, but then the reasonable creditors would certainly try to take over the company or at least enter it as co-owners. Nina thought that her father should agree to this last alternative – on the condition, of course, that he retained the control of the company.

However, life showed again that it always had surprises in store capable of upsetting the plans and calculations of ordinary people.

One Saturday, as usual, Nina and her father were alone in the company – Yevgeniy Borisovich sitting in his office, and Nina, over her papers, in the reception room. Suddenly, the door opened, and three men came in. One was of medium height, lean, dressed in a good overcoat, while the other two were musclemen, each of the shape and size of a wardrobe, wearing leather jackets. The lean one cast a sliding glance at Nina, said something to the musclemen and walked on into the office

of Yevgeniy Borisovich leaving his companions behind in the reception. Nina knew that her father was not expecting anyone. She sprung up from her table meaning to find out what the matter was, but one of the musclemen raised a shovel-like hand: “Sit.” Nina was thinking frantically – what was that, a robbery? Those two were clearly criminal characters. But her father did not keep any money in the office – what was there to steal?

Nina calmed down a little when she heard voices coming from her father’s office – it sounded like a normal conversation, not an assault. “All right, maybe they are some odd clients,” she thought. “I wish they placed an order that could make us some quick money. If they do, then let them be demons from hell.” She returned to her papers but could not concentrate on them – she kept pricking up her ears for the voices coming from behind the door, trying to make out what was going on. One of the two gorillas lowered onto a chair beside Nina, making it squeak pitifully. The man grinned at Nina and uttered, “Ghy-y-y...” Nina had clearly caught his eye. Dragging the massive chair with him, he moved up closer to her intending to start active flirtation. However, the other one – apparently, he was the senior of the two – dropped curtly, “Cut it out, you.” The romantically disposed thug dulled at once, moved aside, fished out a comic magazine from his pocket and got absorbed in it.

Afterwards, Nina made her father recount in every detail the conversation that he had had with his unexpected visitor.

It was rather a young man dressed in expensive, though ill-assorted clothes. There were no scars on his face, his hands were not covered in tattoos, and he smelled of French cologne rather than prison close-stool, but anyone who happened to be near him thought momentarily of something horrible and criminal, and had a chill running down their spine.

The gangster took a chair beside the desk of Nina’s father and then kept silent for a while. Looking around the office, he pulled a cigarette case from his pocket, extracted an unusual brown cigarette with a twisted tip, and lit it. A strange-smelling smoke floated about the room.

At last the gangster looked at Nina’s father. The man had fowl eyes – sick and insane, they were jumping all the time, unable to focus on anything. However, he saw and noticed everything he meant to.

Unable to bear it any longer, Nina’s father rose from his chair.

“Be so kind as to tell me what...”

The other man waved the hand that held the cigarette.

“Sit. Don’t fuss.”

Nina’s father obeyed, as anyone would in his place. When actors play gangsters in movies, they shout or speak in unnaturally hoarse voices, use obscene language and make scary faces trying to be convincing. However, in real life, those who actually kill people as if it is ordinary work do not need shouting or cursing to make impression. The visitor of Yevgeniy Borisovich did not shout.

“Come on, sing,” he said quietly. A few words like ‘sing’ were the only slang he used – otherwise, he spoke an almost correct language.

“Wh-what do you mean?” uttered Nina’s father with difficulty.

“It’s you who was under Simonyan here, right?” asked the visitor.

Yevgeniy Borisovich assumed a dignified air. “I am the director of the company.”

“Yeah, that,” nodded the other.

The visitor drew on his cigarette and asked, “Do you know who I am?”

Nina’s father shook his head emphatically.

“You’ve been lucky,” said the gangster. “But your luck is over.”

“Wh-what do you mean?” Nina’s father asked again.

“Your buddy Simonyan owed money to some serious people. And he ditched it, rat.”

“But... He got killed,” mumbled Yevgeniy Borisovich.

“Yeah, that’s what I say – he ditched it. Some sly son of a bitch, he was. Come on, tell me about this racket of yours. Think how you’re going to pay.”

Nina's father was paralyzed by fear. Afterwards, he asked himself why he had been so scared, and whether he could have behaved in a different way – and admitted to himself that if that conversation had happened again, he would have been just as crushed. Yevgeniy Borisovich Kisel faced a real, big predator in his office, himself being a sheep in comparison, and there was no changing that.

Nina's father was about to say that he owned the company now, but bit his tongue. To the gangster, he was a Simonyan's man, period. After some meaningless mumbling, Yevgeniy Borisovich outlined the situation. Simonyan had drained the company dry, there was no money left in it – worse still, they were up to their ears in debt to the bank and actually in for bankruptcy.

"You're not lying to me, eh?" asked the gangster and looked into the eyes of Nina's father which made the older man's heart miss a few beats. "You're not, I can see it. Damn Simonyan..."

The gangster crushed his cigarette discontentedly on the ash-tray.

"What bank is that?" he asked.

Yevgeniy Borisovich named the bank.

"Yeah, I know the joint," said the man. "I'll go have some face time with them so they get off your back. And you work, dude. Get stuck in, earn the cash. You'll have to cough it up anyways, you dig?"

"I'll send along an accountant," he added. "But that's just for looks. You're not going to jump me like Simonyan, eh? ... Simonyan told me you're kind of a family man, right? It's not for you to go jumping..."

The visitor rose and headed out, but paused in the doorway.

"The one in the reception – your daughter, eh? Looks like you."

Nina's father gulped, his fists clenched.

"All right, relax. Nobody's going to touch her. You're under me now, and I don't believe in hurting my people," the gangster said almost tenderly and walked out.

The next day an accountant sent down by the gangsters arrived. His name was Samuil Yakovlevich. As soon as he made Nina and her father's acquaintance, he announced, "I can see that you are good people, so I'm telling you like you were my own family – don't trust me. The gangs... – I mean, those kind gentlemen have me on the hook, so I'll be reporting everything to them, may you forgive me for that. Let me ask you – who can be trusted, anyway? I've lived sixty years in this world, and I'm telling you – you cannot trust anyone, not even yourself."

He was a talkative type, and for any occasion he had a saying, a story, or an anecdote, but whenever Nina's father asked him about his criminal patrons, the accountant clammed up and shrank. He had clearly been frightened out of his wits, once and for all. Only much later, in a moment of candor, he said to Nina's father: "You want to know what can make an old Jew slave to bandits? Children, what else? Arkasha, my only boy. The young ones are all impatient – they want everything, and they want it now. Arkadiy got mixed up with the wrong people, ran into debt, and here I am..." He sighed despondently. "We really should leave – we have relations in... no, I'm not telling you in what country. But who's going to let us out? Here, Simonyan wanted to leave, too."

With all that, he was an excellent accountant, and when he was not telling anecdotes or drinking tea with marshmallow sticks which he was very fond of, he would give Nina and her father very useful advice. His mission though was to keep an eye on the company's affairs and report everything to the chief gangster whose name turned out to be Mikhail Antonovich, or, among his own crowd, Misha Permyak. Apparently, Samuil Yakovlevich had reported the state of things truthfully, since Misha Permyak paid no more visits to the company and visited the bank instead. That became apparent when Nina's father had a call from the bank and was summoned to a conference, which had never happened before. Yevgeniy Borisovich was received by the head of the industrial credit department. Averting his eyes, the banker said that it had been decided to restructure two of the company's short-

term loans which were nearly due by replacing them with long term debt, and handed Nina's father papers for signing.

That was a princely gift. The company received the necessary breathing space, and with it came a hope for survival. However, instead of joy, the company was plunged in depression. Nina's father had never been able to recover from the fear that he had experienced during Misha Permyak's visit, and the position he was in would not let him forget anything. After he had been for a short while the boss of his own, although nearly bankrupt, company, he was now a gangsters' puppet who was allowed to work only for the purpose of bringing money to the thugs.

Nina's father was constantly irritable and depressed. Even his universal remedy for all sorrows, work, did not help. He alternated between fits of frantic activity when he would snatch at any job, and depression when he locked himself up in his office for whole days refusing to see anyone. When that happened, Nina used any truth or lie as an excuse to take a day off at her own job to spend it in the company office from morning till night taking on herself more and more management duties. That caused fierce arguments between her and her father. On the day following the gangsters' visit Yevgeniy Borisovich declared that she must not come anywhere near the company ever again. "You don't understand what those bastards are capable of," he told her. "I'll never forgive myself if you get mixed up in this." Nina protested that it was all the same now – it was pointless for her to hide as the gangsters had already seen her, knew who she was, and were capable of finding her anywhere if they meant to. Although her father never agreed with her on that, Nina kept coming to the office almost daily to delve into the company's affairs.

The worst of it was that Nina's father seemed to have taken to drink again. Nina had not seen him actually drunk – she had only traced alcohol on his breath a couple of times – but she observed the same vacant, lackluster expression on his face as he had a few years before when, workless, he was sitting in his kitchen getting drunk for whole days. Nina was no longer a young, helpless student girl, and supposedly could be helpful to her father in many ways, but the outcome was the same.

Half a year passed that way. With all the problems that the company was having, the project works were going on according to plan, but there was still no money in the till.

One day, the door opened again and Misha Permyak with two bodyguards came in. The bodyguards were not the same but very much like those that had accompanied the chief gangster the first time. In the same disciplined manner, they stayed behind in the reception room while Misha walked into the office of Nina's father. This time Misha told Yevgeniy Borisovich to call in Samuil Yakovlevich and Nina. Yevgeniy Borisovich opened his mouth to protest that Nina had nothing to do with it, and there was no point in getting her involved, but when he met with Misha's gaze, he shut up and obeyed.

Misha took the same chair, lit the same kind of cigarette and glanced around those present. This time though, he did not say "Sing", but simply nodded at Samuil Yakovlevich. The accountant started speaking hurriedly – pouring out figures, dates and accounting terms – eager to provide the gangster with a full picture of the current situation. Misha listened silently for a few minutes, and then motioned to the old man to stop.

Suddenly, Misha glanced at Nina – looked her straight in the eye. His own eyes were totally insane; there was nothing human left in them.

"You," he said.

Seized with fear, Nina could not utter a word.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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