

## CHAPTER 1.

On Sunday, December 26, 1993 Vlad's flight landed in the Sheremetyevo International Airport in Moscow. Vlad was once again surprised by how gloomy everything, including people, looked. He was walking towards the border through the dim hallway painted in some nauseating dark color carried by the crowd of people around him. It smelled like dust and urine. *Thanks God I don't need to go to the bathroom*, Vlad thought recalling his last experience in this airport a year ago.

"Your passport, please", an angry-looking immigration officer stared at Vlad. "What is the purpose of your visit?"

"I am here for the holidays, visiting with friends", Vlad felt anxious under this implicating scrutinizing gaze.

"It's your third visit in the last three years. Do you have any business connections here?"

"No, not really... I am a medical doctor back in the States. I have childhood friends here," volunteered Vlad and regretted it almost the same second.

"Oh, you are one of those traitors, who ran away when things were tough and now are coming back with their tail between the legs," smirked the officer.

"Well, to be frank with you, I don't think it's any of your business," Vlad experienced a surge of annoyance. "Are we through?"

"I really dislike your type," the officer handed Vlad his passport. *Not that I care*, Vlad thought to himself. He exited the Immigration and Customs terminal looking for Danil.

"Here, Vlad, right here", he heard Danil's voice and a moment later saw his friend waving at him from the crowd. Vlad still tried to comprehend all the changes he noticed in Danil in his last

visits. He even looked differently. Vlad remembered Danil as a 15-year-old skinny teenager in the angst of the search for the meaning of life. His face with red pimples, awkward movements, and passionate arguments with adults connected him to teenagers everywhere. Today, however, there was no sign of that boy in Danil. Tall, full-bodied man, with black curly hair, clear pale skin, and big black eyes, dressed in grey business suit, dark red shirt, and greyish tie seemed an expression of wealth and success. His movements were lazy but gracious. He looked as if he was above most people surrounding him. Vlad, on the other hand, although successful and wealthy young doctor, was dressed in blue jeans and simple black sweater and looked like one of those average guys on the street that could be from anywhere.

“Hey, good to see you, buddy,” Vlad gave Danil a hug.

“I’m so happy you came! We gonna have lots of fun!”

“I sure hope so, Danil,” Vlad smiled at his friend’s excitement.

“Vlad, again, please, call me Dan. Remember this is my official name now,” Vlad’s friend sounded annoyed.

“Sorry, I forgot again. It’s difficult for me to adjust after many years of knowing you as Danil,” Vlad felt guilty. Three years ago, when he came to Russia for the first time after emigrating in 1977, Danil informed him that he was Dan now. He explained that this American name fit him much better than Russian version of it. He said that he changed all his documents to reflect it and hated when people called him Danil.

“Well, I’m not gonna respond to Danil from this point on. Hopefully, it’ll help you remember.”

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Two hours later Vlad, Dan, and Kristina, Dan's wife, were sitting at the kitchen table in the couple's apartment in Moscow. They were eating beef and vegetable stew and drinking red wine. Quiet music was playing in the background. Their conversation was calm and thoughtful with many pauses. Wind and snow were blowing just outside the kitchen window. It was very relaxed, homey, and nostalgic. Suddenly the door bell rang impatiently and loudly interrupting their dreamy state.

"Natasha", Kristina and Dan exhaled simultaneously with a special kind of smile. The bell continued ringing, and Kristina got up and rushed towards the door.

Vlad could not see the door from where he sat in the kitchen, but he heard it open and felt as if a hurricane suddenly entered the apartment. There was a smell of wind and snow and slightly bitter perfume. There was laughter, and excited female voice was firing many words that he could hardly understand. There were sounds of hugs and kisses. Finally, the hurricane entered and filled the kitchen. Vlad saw a young woman bouncing with happiness and energy, snowflakes stuck in her almost black long hair, little yellowish devils jumping up and down in her glowing green eyes, her lips open in the most charming smile.

"Hi... Dan... Vlad..." she said.

"Natasha?" Vlad sounded confused and awkward. He could not believe he met this woman before. He knew he did, but it was almost like he never really saw her.

"What do you guys have for dinner? I'm soooo hungry! You wouldn't believe how long it took me to get here from my dorm. Traffic is just horrible out there! But it's so pretty! Snow's everywhere. I walked half the way, cause I didn't want to be stuck underground or in the bus in the weather like this!

*Really?* Vlad thought. *I would rather be underground than outside right now.* He was

fascinated with this woman and his jaw almost dropped, as he was staring at her.

“Natasha, can you slow down, just a little? You are making me dizzy”, Dan said finally.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she said. “I’ll try”. But she could hardly contain her excitement and happiness.

They spent the rest of the night in multiple animated discussions of different subjects, including continued economic problems in Russia, Natasha's current fascination with biology, recent movies, including “Philadelphia” and “The Piano”, Dan and Kristina's vacation plans, Vlad's funny and crazy stories about his medical school and residency experiences, gossip about common friends, changes in relationships between US and Russia, beauty of Russian women, situation in Rwanda, and Natasha's latest “romantic failure”, a break-up that happened two months ago. They stayed up until 2 a.m. Natasha did not go back to her dorm that night, but slept on the couch in the kitchen.

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Next morning Vlad woke up around 10 a.m. in a very good mood. He did not even know himself why he was joyful. He did some push-ups and sit-ups, took the shower, brushed his teeth, shaved, put on sweatpants and a t-shirt and entered the kitchen.

Vlad froze in the doorway. He did not expect anyone to be home. But she was right there on the couch, laying on her stomach with her face turned towards him, her hair all over the pillow, and one hand hanging off the couch. She was smiling, her eyes closed but moving and her breath uneven. Vlad stared at Natasha struck by the energy emanating from her even as she was asleep. He was holding his breath not wanting to disturb Natasha in any way. But she suddenly opened her eyes and stretched under the blanket. Then she noticed Vlad in the doorway.

“Good morning”, she said smiling.

“Good morning”, Vlad mumbled in return.

“Have they left? What time’s it now? Is it still snowing?” Natasha started firing.

“You always ask several questions in a row?” Vlad smiled.

“I guess...” Natasha said thoughtfully.

“Which one do you want me to answer?” Vlad continued smiling.

“All of them.”

“They left. It's 10.30 a.m. And, it's not snowing anymore”, Vlad said playfully. “What are your plans for today?” Vlad surprised himself with this question.

“Don't know yet”, Natasha replied. “I’m done with school until January 4. So, I’m free as a bird.”

“I’m thinking of going to the Pushkinski Museum. Would you like to join me?” Vlad continued to surprise himself.

“Sure,” Natasha did not seem surprised at all, but rather excited about the upcoming adventure.

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Once outside, Natasha suggested that they skip a bus or a tram and instead go directly to the underground (metro) station, five blocks away. Vlad was not as excited about a walk in this cold, but he wanted to please Natasha. They dived into the snow, where two days ago, according to Natahsa, was a sidewalk. Natasha was rolling snowballs and throwing them at Vlad, she was running up and down the street, sometimes playfully attacking him and pushing into the snow. Very soon Vlad forgot that he did not want to be outside and engaged into the game. By the time they made it to the subway station both were covered in snow, with their faces and hands frozen

and red.

“We need to clean up real good now. Otherwise, the snow will melt and our clothes will get wet,” Natasha started shaking snowflakes off her coat and hair. Vlad was fascinated again by the snowflakes stuck in her curly black hair and her green eyes with flashing yellow devilish sparks. The day flew by very quickly for Vlad. After they visited Pushkinski museum, they walked along Boulevard Circle towards Old Arbat and stopped for a late lunch at “the Georgian House” that Natasha loved. Then they decided to watch a movie. Natasha chose “The Student” (L’Etudiante) with Sophie Marceau.

After the movie, Natasha and Vlad stopped at the bar.

“What kind of alcohol do you like?” Vlad asked Natasha.

“Well... I like red wine... But recently I tried martini for the first time, and I really-really liked it...Hm... I also love champagne. Sometimes though I enjoy cognac. And-”

“Oh, my God!” Vlad interrupted Natasha. “We’ll have to spend a whole night here in order to satisfy your appetites,” he was laughing, and Natasha joined him.

“What about you? What do you like?” she asked him, when they both stopped laughing.

“Right now, champagne sounds good. Are you OK with it?”

Natasha nodded, and Vlad ordered a bottle of champagne and a big chocolate bar. He learned during his last visit that this is how many Russian women liked drinking champagne.

“So, how did you like the movie?” Vlad asked.

“I loved it! Sophie Marceau is one of my favorite actresses,” Natasha stopped for a moment.

“What about you?”

“It was funny and light. Also... she reminded me of you,” Vlad looked at Natasha.

“Really? How so?” she seemed surprised.

“Well... she has black hair and green eyes-”

“Do you have to be so shallow?” Natasha sounded annoyed. Vlad felt satisfied, because he really wanted to tease her. Natasha caught his smile. “Joking again? Ok, ok...you got me. Can you be serious for a moment? I’m really curious.”

“On a more serious note... she is intelligent, passionate, energetic... Also, a little crazy and... romantic, just like you.”

“Wow!” Natasha laughed. “You spent with me like twenty four hours, and you saw right through it all”

“Am I accurate?”

“I don’t know. People can’t objectively see themselves.”

“Oh, this is such a cop out!” Vlad expressed as much disappointment as he could with his voice. Natasha started laughing.

“You sound hilarious, when you are trying to be manipulative. Obviously, you are not well-versed at it.”

“You’re right,” acknowledged Vlad. “But... I would like to learn. Can you teach me?”

“No, I can’t. You need to ask Dan. He has a real talent in this area.”

“Really? I never noticed it before,” said Vlad in a thoughtful voice.

“Well, you may have an opportunity this time around, as you will spend much more time with him than in your previous visits.”

They continued talking for the next two hours. Time really flew by. Vlad felt very comfortable and relaxed in Natasha’s presence. He liked her more and more with every passing minute. He also surprised himself quite a bit, as normally he was shy and somewhat awkward around women he did not know well. But Natasha with her easy going and spontaneous manner

made him feel really at ease. So, when 11:00 p.m. rolled by, and Natasha noted that it was late, Vlad did not want to say good-bye and was looking for an excuse to spend more time with her. Suddenly Natasha recalled that she did not have her student ID and that security will not let her into the dorm after ten without it.

“So, let's go to Kristina and Dan's,” Vlad could hardly conceal his excitement.

“Yeah, I guess... I think they wouldn't mind,” Natasha agreed.

When Vlad and Natasha appeared together in the doorway of the apartment around midnight, Kristina and Dan, who were lounging in the kitchen, met them with curious and, at the same time, cautious looks.

“I forgot my student ID at the dorm, and it was too late to go in without it,” Natasha explained. “Is it Ok if I stay for the night?”

“As if you need to ask,” Kristina grinned.

“How did you guys come in at the same time?” Dan wondered.

“Actually, we spent this day together,” Vlad volunteered. “We went to Pushkinski and walked the Boulevard Circle and old Arbat.”

“We also watched “The Student” and played in the snow. It was lots of fun!” Natasha added smiling.

“Cool,” Kristina and Dan exclaimed overcheerfully, looking at each other with meaning. An awkward pause followed.

“How about some tea?” Kristina broke the silence. “We all need to discuss our plans for the New Years”

“Oh, yeah... I've heard that you guys wanted to host” Natasha said.

“Actually, your parents volunteered to take the kids for most of the holidays. So... we were

thinking of having a “combination” party at our place. All your friends and boyfriends are welcome,” Dan replied to Natasha emphasizing the “boyfriends” and glancing at Vlad from the corner of his eye. Vlad's face expressed annoyance. Dan looked satisfied.

“What boyfriends are we talking about?” Natasha laughed wholeheartedly.

“Just ignore him,” Kristina said looking first at Vlad and then at Natasha.

The four of them spent another hour planning the weekend-long party, coming up with the list of guests, menu, wine list, music, entertainment, and calculating expenses. They all were excited, as the New Years was unique Russian-Soviet celebration, when miracles happened and hopes got fulfilled. They were looking forward to it.

“So, how many folks are on the list?” Vlad seemed confused.

“Around thirty,” Kristina replied.

“You gotta be kidding me!” Vlad raised his eyebrows in surprise. “How will you fit them in your tiny space?”

Vlad walked around Kristina and Dan’s apartment in his mind. There was one tiny hallway at the entrance, medium size separate kitchen, may be 12 x14, two bedrooms, at most 13 x 10, and a bigger size living room, where he stayed, may be 17 x 16. Also, there was one bathroom and a separate tiny room with a toilet, which was typical for Russian apartments. Vlad thought about his house in Austin, TX with overall 3,400 square feet of space. He would feel OK about hosting thirty folks in his house, as he had around 900 square feet of open space on the first floor, and a huge deck, and a screened porch, with a big back yard shadowed by the huge trees. But here?

“Hey buddy, you forgot your communist roots, didn’t you?” laughed Dan. “The more the merrier. Remember we have a saying ‘Squished but not offended’?”

“You’re right,” said Vlad. “But at this point, I’m horrified thinking of thirty folks jammed into

this apartment.”

“You’ll survive,” Natasha said. “I’ll protect you from the bad guys. Also, it’s a real cultural experience. You’ll have stories to tell, when you get home.”

“Ok, I can do it, but only if you’re by my side at all times,” Vlad smiled at Natasha.

Dan looked at Kristina pointing towards Vlad and Natasha with his eyes. Kristina shrugged her shoulders.

“If you can leave each other alone for just a moment, there’s something else that we need to discuss,” Dan sounded annoyed.

“What’s this about, Dan?” Vlad sounded surprised.

“Just disregard it. Remember what I told you in the bar?” said Natasha to Vlad.

“Oh, you already discussed me?!” Dan started to sound angry.

“Is it prohibited topic or something?” Natasha fired back.

“Enough!” said Kristina raising her voice. “Can we focus on finishing discussion of our plans? I’m really tired.”

Everyone looked at Kristina. She suggested that tomorrow night Natasha and Vlad stay at their place for a quiet family dinner and games with kids, who were eager to meet Vlad again and spend some time with their auntie Natasha, whom they loved dearly. Natasha and Vlad agreed. When the clock stricken one, Kristina suggested that it was bedtime.

“You two can sleep as long as you would like tomorrow, but we have to leave around eight,” she sighed. Natasha and Vlad nodded in agreement, as both were exhausted from excitement and stress of spending the whole day together.

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The next morning when Vlad got out of his room, he smelled coffee and heard sounds of the TV news program coming from the kitchen. When he came in, he saw Natasha in the bathrobe with wet hair and a cup of coffee in her hands staring at the screen.

“Another murder... When will this violence end?” Natasha muttered to herself.

“Good morning,” said Vlad.

“Hey, how are you?” Natasha's smile was so warm and sincere that it took Vlad's breath away. Does she really like me, he thought to himself, or does she greet everyone with such eagerness?

“The smell of coffee is overpowering. I cannot resist it for another moment,” said Vlad outloud.

“Here ya go,” Natasha jumped on her feet, poured some coffee in a mug and handed it to Vlad.

“Thank you,” Vlad murmured. “I had a lot of fun yesterday,” he added with a smile.

“Me too,” Natasha acknowledged simply and sincerely.

“Listen, I need to buy some presents for the kids, but I have no idea what they like or even where to go. Also, I hate shopping. Would you be willing to help me?” pleaded Vlad.

“This is perfect!” Natasha jumped up in excitement. “I’m not done with my own gift shopping for them. I also need to buy presents for Kristina, Dan, and my parents. And, I hate shopping too. So... we can share this suffering together.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Natasha and Vlad spent the day shopping for the gifts and really having fun with it. They had to take frequent breaks for coffee, as the crowded stores drove both of them nuts. During the breaks they continued to bombard each other with questions, both eager to learn as much as

possible about each other. By five o'clock in the afternoon they both had New Years gifts for the boys and presents for other friends and family. They also bought a game of scrabble and some kind of kids' board game for tonight. Later they stopped by the grocery store and picked up a gorgeous "Bird Milk" cake covered with chocolate, one of Natasha's favorites, and a bottle of red wine for the dinner.

At six Vlad and Natasha were back at Kristina and Dan's place. The minute they came in both boys ran out yelling and jumped on Natasha knocking her off her feet. She fell backwards, and Vlad, who was behind her, caught her with both hands. His heart sank, as his hands hugged her and her body leaned against his. The next moment the boys were all over Natasha and Vlad. The kids looked curious and excited.

"What is it? What do you have in your bags?" a younger boy tried to peek inside the plastic packets.

"There is a game in there! I can see it!" an older one yelled holding Natasha's hand and pointing towards one of the bags.

"Hush! Both of you!" Kristina ran out of the kitchen. "Let people take their coats off. Give them some space. Go and see what your dad is up to". The noisy gang of two disappeared behind the bedroom door. Vlad and Natasha were laughing, and Kristina joined in too.

Natasha disappeared in the kitchen to help Kristina with cooking and setting the table. Vlad joined Dan and the boys in the game of Memory. An hour later they were eating and laughing in the kitchen. The boys were fascinated by dad and Vlad's childhood stories and were eager to share their own thoughts and experiences. Kristina and Natasha were dying from laughter, as the boys were very funny in their cute attempts to make sense of the fairy tale stories that Dan and Vlad were sharing. After the dinner, men cleaned the table, and women set up the games. All six

of them had fun playing kids' version of Monopoly. The boys were especially excited, when Vlad accused their dad of cheating. Around nine thirty Dan and Kristina excused themselves and left taking boys with them. Natasha and Vlad moved to the kitchen.

"I'm going to stay in Moscow until the tenth," Vlad started. "I want to spend every day until then with you."

"You might want to wait to commit yourself until after the New Year's party," said Natasha jokingly. She seemed excited and flattered and, at the same time, too scared to acknowledge it.

"How so?" Vlad asked curiously.

"Well, there'll be many gorgeous single women at this party. You might reconsider," Natasha laughed.

"Sounds convincing," Vlad matched her playful tone. "How about we come back to this conversation after the party?"

"Deal," Natasha smiled at him.

"What about tomorrow though?" Vlad raised his eyebrows.

"Any suggestions?" Natasha fired back.

"Girl's choice," Vlad was not going to give up.

"When was the last time you visited the Moscow State University?" Natasha wondered.

"Ah... I think sometime before my emigration... maybe in 1976," Vlad realized with surprise.

"Well, I need to stop by the biology department tomorrow to pick up some books and exchange notes with a classmate. If you don't mind doing that, we can then tour the University, and I'll show you around," Natasha suggested.

"Deal," Vlad imitated Natasha.

They both were laughing, when Kristina and Dan came back.

“I am wondering if you decided to move in with us?” Dan asked Natasha in a playful way.

“Do you mind?” Natasha shot back.

“Not at all. You’re always welcome. We just haven’t seen you for a while and suddenly... it's third night in a row”

“Consider it your lucky time.”

“Natasha, what are you up to tomorrow?” Kristina cut in.

“Vlad and I are going to explore University Campus.”

“Wow, you guys are inseparable now,” Dan noted. “Is there anything you want to tell us?” he turned toward Natasha and Vlad.

“If there is anything you need to know, you’ll be notified, Mr. Nosy,” Natasha concealed her annoyance behind the joke.

“I’m feeling really tired after two nights of little sleep,” Kristina changed the topic again. “How about going to bed?” she gave Dan the look.

“I guess... Do you mind guys?” Dan asked Vlad and Natasha.

“Oh, no...Not at all. Go for it, pal,” Vlad sounded relieved.

When Kristina and Dan left, Vlad looked at Natasha with a serious expression in his eyes.

“What's up between you and Dan? I can feel tension and electricity in the air”

“I guess he is jealous of you spending all the time with me,” Natasha winked.

“Can you ever be serious?”

“Is it really necessary?”

“I don't know what to say,” Vlad sounded puzzled.

“So, don’t say anything then...” Natasha was looking at the shelves with the tapes. “How

about a movie?”

“Sure,” Vlad was really intrigued by what he saw and lost in his attempts to understand and explain tension that he witnessed. *May be I have too wild of imagination*, he thought.

Natasha chose one of the James Bond movies. Vlad was surprised but pleased by her choice, as he was craving something mindless. They sat next to each other on the couch staring at the screen. Natasha started dosing off pretty soon, and before the movie was over she was sound asleep on Vlad's shoulder. He felt her breath on his neck and cheek. He was afraid to move, not wanting to disturb her. To his surprise, Vlad felt a sharp desire to have more evenings like this with Natasha. He could hardly concentrate on the movie feeling overwhelmed by her presence. *Wow*, he thought to himself, *no need to go there*. Natasha woke up when the movie ended.

“Oh! I’m sorry I trapped you,” she said. “Was it good?”

“As always,” Vlad smiled back. “Do you have to be at the University at a certain time tomorrow?”

“Yeah... I am meeting a couple of my classmates at the cafe in the main building at eleven, and I have to stop by the library before that. So, we probably should leave at nine fifteen or nine thirty.”

“Ok. I'll better go to bed then.”

“Good night,” Natasha said sleepily.

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Next morning Vlad seemed distanced and absent-minded, when he and Natasha sat down to have breakfast.

“Are you feeling all right?” Natasha wondered.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Vlad said, at the same time feeling uncomfortable about lying to her. *Do I have another choice here*, he thought to himself. *Can I tell her that I am falling in love with her and that I am scared to death and that I have a partner of five years back in the States? Or maybe, I should tell her that for the first time in my life I want to drop everything and just be with her and that I don't do stuff like that, because it's not me?*

“Really?” Natasha grinned back. “You look miserable... and you seem mad at me or something.” *Oh, man. Here we go. What do you do now, Don Juan?* Vlad wondered to himself, as his heart sank.

“I’m...I’m just a little out of sorts today. I’m not mad at you at all. I’m glad to see you,” he said outloud.

“Oh, ok then,” Natasha seemed satisfied.

They left around nine thirty as planned. Natasha was in a good mood, joking around with Vlad, asking all sorts of random questions, throwing snow at him, laughing and running around. Very soon Vlad felt very comfortable again and forgot about his earlier troubling thoughts. He was playing along with Natasha. They stopped by the library to pick up some textbooks for Natasha. She showed him around the Biology building. They stopped by the molecular biology lab, and she introduced Vlad to the professor she was working for. An older man, in his late sixties, was alone in the lab today, and he was really excited to talk to the doctor from the States and explain his research. After that, Vlad and Natasha headed to the main building. Vlad forgot how magnificent it was. He stopped in the front of the building and just looked at it in awe. It seemed so solemn and overwhelming! For a moment, Vlad felt jealous of those students that lived and studied there.

“Amazing, isn't it?” Natasha said from behind. They entered the building, and Natasha took

Vlad on a tour around it. She knew a whole lot about its history, as well as current inhabitants.

Vlad really enjoyed listening to her.

“And, finally... we’re approaching the best part of our tour, the coffee shop with the best coffee in town and pastries that melt in your mouth,” Natasha smiled at Vlad, who suddenly started craving coffee and sweets. They entered the cafeteria, and a group of students waved at them excitedly.

“Here they are,” Natasha waved back and smiled. “Let's grab something to drink and eat and join them.”

“Sounds good,” Vlad was already eating up pastries with his eyes. In his opinion, Russian cakes and pastries were the best he ever ate, even though he traveled around a lot and tried desserts in multiple countries. They ordered two cups of espresso and two pieces of different cakes, agreeing to share with each other. Natasha chose a chocolate soufflé cake, and Vlad picked Napoleon. As they were finishing up at the counter, a handsome young man approached them looking with his honey-colored sweet eyes at Natasha.

“Hi, Sunshine. How are you doing?” he said staring at Natasha with the expression of a hungry carnivore.

“Maxim? What are you doing here?” Natasha did not seem very pleased to see him.

“I’ve heard you’re coming today... so, decided to drop by to see you. I’ve missed you.”

“Oh, really?” Natasha's voice was full of sarcasm. “Well, I guess I’m very difficult to find, as I don't have a phone and live on the streets.”

“Well, don't be mad. You know how much I love you,” Maxim glanced at Vlad as if checking what impression he has had so far.

“Cut the crap. Will you? What do you need?”

“I told you already,” Maxim was smiling innocently.

“Bye, Maxim. Let's go, Vlad” Natasha turned away and started moving towards the group at the table in the corner. Vlad followed Natasha analyzing the interaction he just witnessed.

“I'll stop by the dorm,” Maxim yelled at her back.

“Yeah... I'm sure you will,” Natasha muttered to herself with frustration in her voice.

Natasha introduced Vlad to her classmates and friends, when they reached the table. Vlad integrated into their conversation pretty quickly. He liked those kids instantly. They seemed open, friendly, funny, and smart. *The kinds of friends that Natasha should have*, he thought. They drank coffee and chatted for a while. Then Natasha exchanged notes with some other students and discussed the schedule of the study sessions for the Microbiology exam. All of them seemed scared of the upcoming oral, as it had pretty bad fame.

When Natasha and Vlad left the Main building, they decided to take a walk around the University park. It was very pretty outside that day. Huge pine trees covered in snow were surrounding the paved trails. Decorated Christmas tree stood in the middle of a little white square. Several young people bundled up in huge thick scarves and hats sat on the benches around the tree smoking and talking. Very few folks were walking around the trails. It seemed peaceful and relaxed.

“May I ask you a personal question?” Vlad cautiously looked at Natasha.

“You can try,” she smiled back.

“Who's Maxim? Why are you so annoyed with him? Does he really love you?”

“It's three questions in a row. Is it my bad influence?” Natasha laughed.

“It's definitely contagious,” Vlad started laughing too.

“Maxim is my ex. I finally broke up with him two months ago. I got tired of being taken for

granted in our on again off again two year-long turmoil.”

“Why didn’t you break up with him earlier?”

“I don’t know. I guess I loved him and wanted to believe he’ll change and start appreciating me more. Pretty silly of me,” Natasha said bitterly.

“I don’t think it’s silly. It seems pretty normal, even though painful. I was definitely trapped by those kinds of hopes before.”

“Really?” Natasha seemed surprised. “Thank you for saying this. It’s very helpful. I never hear men say things like that.”

“Do you think he can win you back?” Vlad really wanted to know.

“Oh, no! I’m over him. It’s so crystal clear to me now,” Vlad’s heart sped up in excitement. “Of course, occasional sex is still a possibility, but nothing more than that,” Vlad’s heart sank.

“Why would you want to have sex with him?” Vlad was shocked.

“Well, I know him well. He’s a good lover. I’m comfortable around him sexually. It’s much better than having sex with someone I hardly know, which I did in the past not once,” Natasha suddenly looked Vlad right in the eye. “Is it too much information?”

“Not at all. I really wanted to understand.”

“So, do you understand now?”

“Not really. I’ve never done something like this, so it’s difficult for me to grasp.”

“You never had sex with someone you hardly know or with someone you broke up with?”

“No. You see, sex for me is really connected to my feelings towards another person and trust and bond between the two of us. I can’t just randomly have sex, cause I want to have sex.”

“Wow! I’ve never heard a man talk about sex like this before,” Natasha looked at Vlad with a serious expression on her face. “I’m jealous. Your women are ...very lucky.”

*You can be one of them*, Vlad almost said outloud but bit his tongue in the very last moment.

*What the heck is going on*, he thought.

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Around six pm on December 31 guests started arriving. To Natasha and Vlad's surprise Maxim arrived among other guests. Natasha did not hide her annoyance with this fact.

"I think I know who invited him," she said.

"I bet I know it too. Was it Dan?" Vlad asked.

"I'll go find out." Natasha responded.

When Natasha found Dan, he was helping Kristina in the kitchen.

"May I talk to you in private for a sec?" she asked.

"Sure," Dan set the pan with the fried chicken on the table. "Let's go to the kids' room." When Dan closed the door, Natasha unleashed on him with a full force.

"Was it your brilliant idea to invite Maxim?" she asked.

"He's my friend too," Dan said defensively.

"Oh, wow! Since when?"

"Since you brought him in our lives two years ago."

"It's ridiculous, Dan! Are you doing this to torture me?"

"Why would it torture you? You said you were over him."

"Well, he doesn't seem to be over me though, especially when he sees other men around," Natasha said in exasperation. "By the way, did you tell him that I'll be at the cafe in the Main building, when Vlad and I visited the University?"

"I don't know. I might have mentioned it."

“You might have mentioned it?! You know, Dan, sometimes I just want to tell you go and fuck yourself. But I don't, cause I know you crave those kinds of emotions. You thrive on pain and anger of others.”

“What are you saying? Do you even hear yourself? All I ever did for you was love and support you. And you! You turned around and betrayed me! How could you choose Vlad over me? He's my friend, by the way.”

“Are you crazy? Did you forget that you're married to my sister? I'm not your property either. I'm sorry, Dan. I'm not saying it to be mean or anything, but you need help. There's counseling available. Also, Dan, stay out of my personal life. It's none of your business!”

Natasha turned around and left the room. Instead of joining Vlad and the guests, she sneaked out into the hall to smoke a cigarette. This is where Vlad found her fifteen minutes later.

“What are you doing here? I was looking for you everywhere.”

“I am trying to get back into the holiday mood. I hate it that they can ruin my party!”

“Who are you talking about?”

“Dan and Maxim, who else?”

“So, Dan invited Maxim, didn't he?”

“You know, Vlad, I would rather not talk about it right now. I really want to party and to have a good time. Will you help me?” Natasha looked at Vlad with an anguished smile.

“How?”

“Just have fun with me and help me stay away from Maxim and Dan. The latter should not be difficult given that we have thirty or more guests coming in.”

Next eight hours Natasha and Vlad spent drinking, dancing, playing games, eating, and having a good time. Vlad saw how much Natasha had to drink and made a mental note of that.

He wondered if she tried to relieve stress and anger by alcohol. But she was a lot of fun too. She was a life of the party. At one point, when they played “Fanty”, a popular party game, Natasha had to dance on the table. She was so excited about it, and her dance was free and sexy. Her long red dress showed off her body’s curves. Vlad looked around the room, and saw many men eating her up with their eyes. He felt jealous and surprised with his reaction. I have to remember that we are not together, and I don’t even have the right to think about it, Vlad said to himself.

Around 3 a.m. everyone was pretty tired, and guests started breaking into the smaller groups. Several people decided to watch “Irony of the Fate”, Russian New Year's romantic comedy, favorite of several generations. Others went to the neighbors' apartment to play mafia. A group of folks decided to go to the roof and use some of the leftover fireworks. Vlad and Natasha sneaked outside. They decided to go for a walk. Vlad took a bottle of cranberry cocktail, Natasha's current favorite alcoholic drink and two small glasses. The couple walked along Moscow streets covered in snow, confetti, and broken glass. Small groups of people were passing by from time to time. It started snowing. Natasha and Vlad stopped at once charmed by the huge fuzzy snowflakes dancing under the soft light of the street lamps.

“Make a wish,” she said.

“Will it come true?”

“If you don't tell anyone, it most certainly will.”

“Ok,” Vlad said smiling and pulled Natasha towards him. He called her by name with such tenderness in his voice. Natasha looked up, and Vlad gently pressed his lips against hers. She closed her eyes, opened her mouth, and moved her body even closer to his. Vlad was struck by the sweetness of Natasha's lips. They kissed for a long time, and when they finally parted both were shaking. Vlad wanted to jump on Natasha right there on the street, push her down on the

snow, part her legs, and take her. He was shocked by the power of his yearning.

“Holly crap! You’re driving me crazy!” Vlad said moving away and grabbing a handful of snow.

“I can say the same. Should we go back and let this passion unravel in your room?”

“I don't know. I would rather cool down and talk about it first.” Vlad grabbed another handful of snow and rubbed his face with it.

“Wow! You are the first man I met, who wants to talk about it first,” Natasha laughed. “No more kissing then. Otherwise, I may not be able to stop myself.”

“It's crazy. My head’s spinning. Let's just walk a bit more,” Vlad started moving forward holding Natasha's hand in his.

“What's crazy about it? We are obviously attracted to each other. We are two adults. So, I guess we can satisfy our cravings.”

“Natasha, I have a partner back home. Her name is Monica. We’ve been together for five years. What’s crazy, I never felt so attracted to Monica and never actually had any strong feelings towards her. I think of myself as a rational and balanced human being... I never put a lot of stock in emotions. I’m puzzled and kinda scared right now. I don't understand what’s going on with me,” Vlad paused for a moment.

“Well... Your relationship with Monica surely makes situation more complicated,” Natasha paused. “I appreciate you telling me about her. I don't think that I really understand your confusion, as I’ve always been driven by my feelings. But I hear that it’s difficult for you. So, I’m going to give you some space here.”

“What do you mean?” Vlad seemed anxious.

“Hm... You know I’m attracted to you and I want to have sex with you and spend time with

you here, in Moscow. So, the decision is yours. I'll understand either way," Natasha seemed serious and calm.

"I don't understand. You would like to be with me even though it doesn't have any future?"

Vlad was genuinely surprised.

"Vlad, we never know what the future holds. I may die before you even leave Moscow and join your partner. So, I prefer to focus on the present and enjoy what I currently have. Future'll take care of itself"

"Well said. Are you sure you want to become a biologist and not a philosopher?" Vlad smiled at Natasha. He was truly amazed. He has never been with a woman yet, who did not want his commitment and was not looking for some kind of guarantee. She seemed way too mature for her twenty two years of age.

Natasha and Vlad walked for another hour talking, chatting, laughing, playing in the snow. Finally, around five thirty in the morning they both acknowledged that they were tired.

"I'm going back to my dorm. I hope I'll get at least ten hours of sleep," Natasha said.

"When will I see you again?" Vlad asked.

"It's up to you. As I said, I'm going to give you some space to think." Natasha waived her hand at the passing taxi, and it stopped. "Happy New Year and good night," she said to Vlad.

"I miss you already," he replied. Natasha jumped in the back seat of the car and waved at Vlad. As the car started to move away, Vlad felt a sharp sense of loss and for the first time in many years he wanted to cry. He walked back to Dan's place. Most guests were sound asleep. Only Dan, Kristina, and Maxim were finishing cleaning up.

"Oh, here they are!" Dan said, when he heard a key turning in the lock. He stepped out of the kitchen and saw Vlad entering the apartment alone. "Where is Natasha?"

“She decided to go to her dorm to get some rest.”

“What happened?” Dan asked anxiously.

“Nothing happened, Dan. She just wanted to get some rest and alone time.”

“Is she going to join us tomorrow?” Maxim asked.

“I don't know.” Vlad said. “I'm really tired. I'm going to bed if you don't mind,” he added.

Nobody replied, and Vlad went into the living room, where he stayed. He made his bed, undressed, and slid under the blanket. He felt sad and really longed for Natasha. He wanted her to sleep next to him. He wanted to wake up and hug her. He wanted to look at her face and breathe in her sweetness. His desire was so strong that it scared him again. He knew that he could not fight it, even if he wanted to. *Why did I let her go today?* He thought to himself. Vlad decided to go to her dorm once he wakes up and let her know that he wanted to be with her for the rest of his stay in Russia.