

2. KEBABS

Ethan Kitsell had spent the first twelve years of his life in California. Home was an eight-million-dollar beachfront house, living with a mother who owned a computer security company and drove a Ferrari. He was a self-confessed geek, whose hobbies were chess and robot building.

But that life had been built on a lie. Ethan's mother wasn't Gillian Kitsell. Her real name was Galenka Aramov, daughter of Irena Aramov who ran a billion-dollar criminal network headquartered in the landlocked Central Asian republic of Kyrgyzstan.

The Aramov Clan ran sixty cargo planes that moved stuff normal airlines wouldn't touch: drugs, weapons, fakes, criminals, mercenaries and illegal immigrants. Ethan had only found this out five months earlier, when two assassins broke into his California home

and executed his mother.

They'd wanted Ethan dead too, but he'd survived because the killers mistakenly killed his best friend instead. When Grandma Irena found out what had happened, she'd kidnapped Ethan from under the noses of the US authorities and smuggled him back to Kyrgyzstan.

The good news was that whoever wanted Ethan Aramov dead would be unlikely to touch him on his clan's home turf. The bad news was that Ethan hated everything about Kyrgyzstan. He often found himself thinking that a bullet through the back of the head would have been better than getting stuck in a place that felt like hell.

It was a mild spring afternoon and kids were piling out of the depressing three-storey block of Upper School Eleven (US11). Bishkek was Kyrgyzstan's capital and the wealthiest part of the country, but Ethan still found himself in classrooms with mildewed walls and ragged classmates who'd cast hungry eyes when he unpacked his lunch.

Two things kept Ethan from completely losing the will to live and one of them quickened her pace to catch up with him. After a gentle tap on the back, the girl spoke to him in Russian.

'How was your day?' Natalka asked.

She was only a month older than Ethan, although a quirk in the calendar meant she was in the year above him at school. She was a little shorter than he was, but while Ethan was stick thin she had an athletic build,

pretty face and curves in all the places that boys like to find them.

‘My day was shit,’ Ethan told her.

‘We had the same day,’ Natalka said, as her freckled face cracked a smile. ‘I’m *dying* for a smoke.’

They were passing a group of older lads and one spoke loudly. ‘Why hang out with that loser, Natalka?’

‘Just cos he’s an Aramov,’ another boy added.

Natalka gave the lads an up-yours gesture. ‘Ignore the pricks,’ she told Ethan, as they kept walking.

Being related to the super-rich Aramov Clan was a huge deal, especially in a place where some kids weren’t even getting enough to eat, but Ethan’s status wasn’t the basis of his friendship with Natalka. They’d clicked as soon as they’d met and Natalka’s *I hate everything* attitude meshed nicely with Ethan’s state of depression.

‘I had to sit next to Kadyr all afternoon,’ Ethan moaned. ‘Bad enough that he stinks of BO, but he sits with his hand down the back of his tracksuit scratching himself, then he borrows my calculator without asking.’

‘Eww!’ Natalka said, as she fished a cigarette packet out of her jeans. ‘Bloody poor people. Screw charity. Gimme a machine gun and I’ll shoot the smelly bastards.’

‘Exactly,’ Ethan said, laughing but only half sure that Natalka was joking. ‘I couldn’t even touch that thing after poo-fingers was all over the keys. I just left it there.’

‘You still trying to persuade your grandma to send you abroad?’

‘Trying,’ Ethan said. ‘But she’s got this thing about

me not living in a protected bubble, and having to learn my own people's culture. Whatever the hell that means . . .'

'It's mostly slaughtering goats and kidnapping brides around here,' Natalka said, as she took a puff on her cigarette before offering it to Ethan. 'You want?'

Ethan took a long drag on Natalka's cigarette. The nicotine gave him a nice buzz as he looked up at the sky and spoke dreamily. 'Right now I'd give *anything* for a big greasy burrito, a movie at the multiplex and a big Apple Store spend-up on my mom's credit card.'

'I'm with you,' Natalka said, as Ethan took another long drag. 'When you take me to America we'll go crazy spending all the Aramov money you inherited from your mum! And give my ciggie back. I've only got two left and you're smoking the whole bastard thing.'

'Nobody smokes in America,' Ethan said, laughing as he risked a cheeky final puff before giving the cigarette back. 'They're even worried that breathing *other* people's smoke will give them cancer.'

Natalka laughed. 'Everyone here drinks themselves to death long before they're old enough to worry about cancer.'

By now they'd reached a main road a couple of hundred metres from the school, where the *Kremlin Bus* was waiting for them.

The Kremlin was the nickname given to a large, mostly residential, building at the edge of the airbase from which the Aramov Clan ran their operations. The locals had named it after the Russian president's Moscow fortress because the Aramovs and most of the

pilots and mechanics who lived there were Russian or Ukrainian, rather than native Kyrgyz.

Most Kremlin residents were men working away from home. But some had school-age kids, including Natalka's mum who was a tough-as-boots Ukrainian-born cargo pilot.

All Kremlin kids made the half-hour drive into Bishkek to attend US11 where lessons were taught in Russian, rather than one of the rural schools where lessons were in Kyrgyz.

The little Kremlin kids got out of school twenty minutes before the older ones, and were already bouncing around the bus, bored off their heads. The twenty-four-seater was a quarter of a century old and was actually a crude Soviet design that wasn't so much a bus as a truck with a corrugated aluminium hut welded on the back.

The driver was Alex Aramov, the sixteen-year-old son of Ethan's uncle Leonid. He stood by the doorway with his nineteen-year-old brother Boris, both of them swigging bottles of Dutch beer.

Ethan had nothing in common with his two cousins, who'd both abandoned education at fifteen and now dedicated their lives to pumping weights on the massive outdoor stack behind the Kremlin, riding horses, chasing girls and generally using the Aramov name to act like big shots.

Once his empty beer had been smashed on the dirt road, Alex got behind the wheel. His driving style was about what you'd expect from a drunken teenager, and

like everyone in Bishkek he drove with one hand on the steering wheel and one hovering over the horn, giving a blast every time he got near a junction, a sharp corner, or a fit woman.

The bus was only half full so Ethan and Natalka each got double seats and sat sideways with their trainers on the bench and their heads resting against the window. They didn't bother talking, because it was too much effort competing with horn blasts, five little kids crawling under the seats throwing pistachio shells and the glassy-eyed stoner daughter of a Belarusian mechanic who had some kind of heavy beat coming out of her iPod.

'Get me out of this zoo,' Natalka groaned.

Ethan nodded in agreement as his teenaged cousin drove a corner way too fast. As Bishkek's shabby low-rise streets passed by Ethan noticed that Natalka had undone two buttons on her plaid shirt, giving him a top-notch view down her cleavage.

'Hey,' a boy said, in English.

For an instant Ethan thought he'd been caught staring, but it was his little cousin Andre. It was hard to believe that this angel-faced ten-year-old was the son of Leonid Aramov, and brother of thuggish Alex and Boris.

'Put your feet down,' Andre said, as he squished on to the seat beside Ethan. 'I want to practise my English on you.'

Andre had a certain charm which enabled him to be bossy without you really minding.

'I'm kinda beat,' Ethan said. 'Maybe later, in my room?'

Natalka liked teasing younger kids and shouted in Andre's ear, 'Give me your cigarettes.'

'I'm not dumb enough to smoke,' Andre said indignantly. 'It's bad for your health and it makes you smell like an old sock.'

'Are you saying I smell?' Natalka growled, as she bunched her fist. 'Gimme your ciggies or I'll bash you.'

Andre gave Natalka a pitying look to show that he wasn't intimidated and spoke to Ethan in English. 'I read a joke and I don't understand,'

'Go on then,' Ethan said wearily.

'What's the Internet's favourite animal?' Andre asked.

'Dunno,' Ethan said.

'The lynx,' Andre said. 'Do you get it?'

Ethan smiled. 'It's a pun; you know when a word has two meanings? A lynx - L Y N X - is a type of wild cat. Links - L I N K S - are what you click when you're on the Internet.'

'Right,' Andre said, nodding keenly. 'I've got another one.'

Before Andre could continue the bus jerked violently and driver Alex threw everyone forward by slamming the brake pedal. Natalka came off worst because she'd been sitting sideways and Andre made no attempt to hide his amusement as she sprawled over the appallingly filthy floor in front of her seat.

'What now?' Natalka asked, glaring at Andre as they came to a squealing halt. 'Did we hit something?'

'I wouldn't be surprised, the way my brother drives,' Andre said.

Ethan turned to look out of the window. They'd left the built-up part of Bishkek and reached the start of the desolate mountain track that led up to the Kremlin. This stretch of potholed road was also used by trucks taking cargo from China to Russia, and a few locals scraped a living selling food and drink off roadside stands.

One of these sellers worked from a pitch twenty metres behind where they'd stopped. He sold spicy lamb kebabs cooked on a barbecue made out of an old oil drum. Natalka had made Ethan try them once and he'd found the kebabs delicious once he'd got over the fact that they were prepared by an elderly bloke who had an entire ecosystem growing under each nicotine-stained fingernail.

Within seconds of stopping, Alex and Boris had jumped off the bus and steamed towards the kebab seller. Boris inflated his beefy chest and shouted in Kyrgyz, a language he wasn't fluent in, while Ethan hardly understood a word.

'What's his problem?' Ethan asked.

Nobody answered because the kids were all piling towards the back of the bus to get a better view. There were more shouts in Kyrgyz and the old man looked scared as the muscular teens closed him down.

Alex threw a brutal punch, emphasising the blow with a shout of, 'Ker-pow!'

When the old man hit the ground, Alex doubled him up by putting his trainer on his stomach and walking over him. Meantime, Boris launched a kick at the hot oil

drum, spewing sparks and coals across the roadside.

The kebab seller groaned as Alex ground his hand under his heel.

‘Satisfied now, you old buzzard?’ Alex shouted, as he beamed with sadistic pleasure.

Boris had grabbed a set of metal cooking tongs and used them to pick up a lump of hot charcoal. As Boris closed on the old man, the kids on the bus winced or looked away.

Ethan turned towards Andre and shouted accusingly, ‘Why are they beating him?’

‘How should I know?’ Andre shouted back. ‘You think I’m responsible for those nuts, just because they’re my brothers?’

‘We’re Aramov,’ Alex shouted in Russian as he stomped again. ‘Nobody messes with Aramov.’

Boris pushed the smoking coal up to the old man’s cheek, close enough to singe white facial hairs.

‘We see you again and you’re dead,’ Boris hissed. ‘No more warnings. Get out of town.’