

## ACT TWO

### Scene One

*Boris is spotlighted up-stage standing at the lectern. A male voice calls out: 'Call Darya Alexandrovna Lubochna'. The call is repeated.*

Dasha        *(Dasha stumbles onto the stage and blinks in the harsh light. She takes up her position in the witness box and puts her hand on the Bible)*  
I swear that what I say will be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. As God is my witness. *(she makes the sign of the cross)*

Boris        Darya Alexandrovna Lubochna. *(pause)* We'll call you Dasha, shall we?

Dasha        Thank you, sir.

Boris        Dasha, would you be so kind as to tell the gentlemen of the jury how long you had known the deceased.

Dasha        Who, sir?

Boris        The deceased.

Dasha        Sorry sir?

Boris        The deceased. *(laughter from the public gallery)* You did know your own sister, didn't you?

Dasha        That's a bit of a daft question, isn't it, sir?

Boris        Answer it.

Dasha        I've known her all my life.

Boris        Would you describe her as a good woman?

Dasha        As good as the next.

Boris        And how good is the next?

Dasha        Good enough.

Boris        *(pause)* Was she a good wife, for example?

Dasha        Was he a good husband?

Boris        Dasha, it is my duty to ask the questions. It is your duty to answer them. Was she a good wife?

Dasha        (*pause*) Nobody's perfect.

Boris        At what age did she marry?

Dasha        Sixteen.

Boris        And was she a virgin?

Dasha        Sir!

Boris        Please, spare us the false modesty. Save that for your future husband. (*more laughter from the gallery*) Was she a virgin?

Dasha        (*pause*) Perhaps she was, perhaps she wasn't, sir.

Boris        Perhaps I can jog your memory. She was big with child at the time of her marriage.

Dasha        That's true.

Boris        So she could hardly have been a virgin.

Dasha        That's true.

Boris        To recap. At sixteen, she married - somewhat morally soiled, shall we say? (*pause*) What became of the baby?

Dasha        (*pause*) It died, sir.

Boris        And her other children?

Dasha        Lost to the fever, sir. Except her last born. He's a fighter, sir, little Nicholushka.

Boris        How good a mother was she?

Dasha        That's not fair, sir. God chose to take them.

Boris        (*he pauses and fixes Dasha sternly*) At what age did she take up prostitution?

Dasha        Don't say that filthy word, sir.

Boris        Did she not accept money from men in return for favours?

Dasha No sir.

Boris If not money, then some other payment, in kind?

Dasha No, sir.

Boris A length of ribbon? A bottle of vodka? A prize goose?

Dasha No sir. I swear to God she didn't.

Boris May I remind you, Dasha, that you are under oath. (*he eyeballs her*) Did she take payment for her favours?

Dasha (*she stares him out*) No, sir.

Boris Very well. Let me put another question to you? (*pause*) If she did not take money, why did she do it?

Dasha Do what, sir?

Boris Indulge in sexual relations with men other than her husband.

Dasha Isn't it obvious, sir?

Boris No. I'm afraid it is not.

Dasha Because she enjoyed it, sir.

Boris (*mock disbelief*) She enjoyed adultery?

Dasha Well . . .

Boris She enjoyed destroying God's law? She enjoyed desecrating the sanctity of the family? She enjoyed as an animal enjoys.

Dasha No!

Boris I put it to you, she was an animal.

Dasha She was not, sir.

Boris She had no strain of morality in her body. What could she know of self-denial? She who denied herself nothing. She who lived for the pleasures of the flesh?

Dasha She wasn't an animal, sir!

Boris She had lovers, do you deny that?

Dasha No.

Boris She had three at least. Possibly more. Do you deny that?

Dasha No.

Boris She willingly slept with the master, Evgeni Alexandrovitch, before his marriage, and was available and willing to do so after? Do you deny that? *(no response)* Do you?

Dasha *(weakly)* No.

Boris And yet, was she ashamed of her desires? Did she battle with them night and day? Did she hurl herself contrite at the foot of the Blessed Mother of Christ, begging for forgiveness after each tawdry session? No. Rather she boasted of her exploits, regaled the whole village with the sordid details, re-living each sinful pleasure and yearning breathlessly for those to come?

Dasha She so enjoyed it you see, sir.

Boris *(turning to the audience)* I put it to you, gentlemen of the jury. Stepashka Pechnikova came to the accused again and again, hungry to renew the pleasures she had known with him, casting her spells, weaving her web, luring him into the very gaping jaws of hell until he shattered, broke and plunged into a devastating moment of temporary madness. *(triumphant)* Thank you. That will be all.

*(Black out)*

## **Scene Two**

*Zhenya is standing by the window of his cell. The door opens and Boris enters, dressed in legal garb and jubilant.*

Zhenya Boris?

Boris Congratulations, old boy. You were magnificent. Simply magnificent. *(he strides up to Zhenya and gives him a bear hug)* What a triumph.

Zhenya I can't believe . . . Is it true?

Boris Such instinct. Such timing. *(quoting melodramatically)* "Can you condemn a wife to years of loneliness and grief for the sins of her husband? She will live in shame and alone. In shame and alone." There wasn't a dry eye in the house, I can tell you. *(quoting*

*melodramatically towards the audience*) “Lisa, forgive me. Lisa! Lisa!”  
(*sighs*) The effect was electric. You sly rascal. And then the master stroke. (*quoting*) “Please do not look in her direction. I have no desire to torment her further!” (*laughs with joy*) So of course everyone, but everyone, turns to look up at your darling wife, who was so saintly in blue. (*frustrated*) Why didn't I think of that myself? It was such an obvious ploy.

Zhenya It was heartfelt, Boris.

Boris Of course it was heartfelt. That was the beauty of it. Nothing impresses a jury like sincerity. It was the only card to play in a case like yours and you played it magnificently. (*quoting Zhenya*) “Behind the bars of my own conscience”. What a marvellous line. Poetic. “The bars of my own conscience.” Pushkin couldn't have put it better. (*sudden doubt*) It wasn't Pushkin, was it?

Zhenya (*Zhenya shakes his head, in a whisper*) No.

Boris Of course not. How could I doubt it? (*he pulls out his hip flask*) By God, Zhenya. Let's celebrate. (*he opens the flask and sniffs it*) Mmm. Pertsovka. Kicks the tongue into place alright. (*he takes a swig then pours a generous measure into Zhenya's glass*) A toast! To that rare and beautiful thing. (*he clinks the flask against the glass*) Sincerity. And all who sail in her. (*Boris takes another good swig*) If you can't lie, be sincere. It's the golden rule for those who haven't a leg to stand on.

Zhenya What if you are sincere, yet living a lie?

Boris (*noticing Zhenya hasn't touched his vodka*) Drink up, old boy! Put some fire into your veins.

Zhenya What if you desperately want to be sincere, but the lie keeps coming back?

Boris (*pauses to contemplate Zhenya, then sighs*) Let me give you a word of advice, Zhenya. Not from my own lips, but from those of our blessed Saviour himself. ‘Let the dead bury the dead.’ Eh? (*Boris raises the flask again*) To the dead. And all those who bury them. (*Boris contemplates for a moment, then laughs and takes another swig*) What a team we made, eh? Old Petrovsky would be proud of his boys. (*triumphant*) Nine months. Can you believe it? Nine months. I'll be honest with you, Zhenya. I was bracing myself for two years. Two years, I thought, and by the seat of our pants. But nine months – why, it's scarcely more than a vacation.

Zhenya (*distressed*) Her face, Boris - when everyone turned round to look at her.

Boris           Damn me if she wasn't right all along. Damn. Another lesson learnt. Though it has to be the right wife, of course. The wrong wife would have been a liability. *(he takes another swig)* And what a wife you have, Zhenya. What a treasure. She grows in my estimation daily.

Zhenya        *(Zhenya puts his head in his hands)* Oh God.

Boris           For Christ's sake. Anyone would think I'd lost you the case.

Zhenya        Where is she?

Boris           Lisa Petrovna? In the ladies room - doing whatever it is they do in there.

Zhenya        Fetch her for me

Boris           In the ladies room? I'd be drummed out of the regiment.

Zhenya        I must talk with her. I need to know how she feels.

Boris           Ecstatic, I imagine. She was convinced she'd lose you for good. I wouldn't mind being in your shoes in nine months' time. Or should I say, in your bedroom slippers? It'll be like a second honeymoon.

Zhenya        Find her Boris.

Boris           *(moving towards the door)* You're a damn lucky man, Zhenya. You have a whole life-time together. The least you can do is smile. *(Boris knocks on the door)* Guard!

Zhenya        Tell Lisa I love her.

Boris           Beyond the realms of duty, old boy. Making love to pretty young wives is not in my brief. Alas. *(sound of the door unbolting and Boris exits)*

Zhenya        *(rushes to the door and shouts through the grill)* Tell her I . . . *(he moves away from the door, rubs his face with both hands and moves restlessly to the window. He looks out thoughtfully for a while, then almost imperceptibly starts to hum a peasant folk song. Still off stage, Stepashka's begins to hum the song along with him. As they hum together, Zhenya leans against the wall, eyes closed)*

Stepashka    *(enters, chewing a leaf, still humming)* It's been a long time, sir. *(Zhenya swings round and sees her)* I've missed you.

Zhenya        Step . . . Stepa . . .

Stepashka    Don't I please you, sir? *(she moves away)*

Zhenya Don't go. (*she halts*) Stay a little. It can do no harm - to dream a while. (*he closes his eyes*) I can smell the nettles. That sweet, sharpness. They're damp with rain.

Stepashka (*ticking his face with her leaf*) You like that, don't you, sir?

Zhenya How fresh the world is with you in it.

Stepashka Rolling and rolling and rolling down the slope. (*laughs playfully*)

Zhenya You haven't changed. You never change. (*he takes hold of her skirt*) Come. There's still time. Lie down. Here. No-one will see us. There's still time. (*he pulls off his jacket in readiness*)

Stepashka I'm soaked to the skin, sir. Look at my blouse. It's awfully wet.

Zhenya Let me dry you.

Stepashka (*Zhenya reaches out and touches her breast*) Kiss me first, sir. I like a kiss.

Zhenya (*he traces the outline of her face with his hand*) I know every inch of you. (*he draws her to him slowly and kisses her mouth*)

Stepashka Would you like me to . . . ?

Zhenya Yes.

Stepashka (*she distributes kisses over his face*) You like that, don't you?

Zhenya Yes.

Stepashka (*she opens the top button of his shirt and kisses his neck*) You like that too, don't you, sir?

Zhenya Yes. (*he unbuttoning his shirt*) Yes, I do.

Stepashka (*kissing his chest*) All the way down, sir.

Zhenya Oh God.

Stepashka (*as if by prior agreement*) I done what you asked, sir. I haven't washed.

Zhenya You . . . . (*he pulls her to him and they kiss her passionately, punctuating it with denials*) No, no, no, no! (*he backs away*)

Stepashka What have I done, sir?

Zhenya We can't. We mustn't. It's not possible.

Stepashka (*she ties up her blouse again*) You could have had me, sir. It would have been easy.

Zhenya The shame. The guilt.

Stepashka You wanted me.

Zhenya I wanted you too much.

Stepashka (*moving towards the exit*) Two long years. Oh sir, what a crying shame. Never, never again. What a crying shame.

Zhenya Don't go!

Stepashka (*Stepashka starts to hum and dance*) You thought you could forget me. (*she dances seductively round him*) That day.

Zhenya Oh, this is intolerable.

Stepashka I was dancing only for you.

Zhenya I can't live like this.

Stepashka Then kill yourself.

Zhenya What?

Stepashka Kill yourself.

Zhenya No! How can I?

Stepashka (*she smiles seductively and begins to play with the strings of her blouse*) Then kill me, sir. Put a bullet through my chest.

Zhenya She was a woman, she breathed, she was made of flesh and blood.

Stepashka (*quoting his court speech*) "She was the devil, m'lud. The very devil. I had no power to resist her tricks." (*Stepashka takes Zhenya's hand and makes it into the shape of a pistol*) Put a bullet through her chest. And you shall have peace.

Zhenya (*horrified*) I shot her like an animal.

Stepashka (*slowly backing away towards the exit*) Where your hands used to roam so blissfully, so freely. Remember? Put a bullet through my chest.

Zhenya Soft. And warm. And free.

Stepashka (*backing away from him*) Five bullets through my chest.



Zhenya Oh God.

Stepashka Five!

Zhenya What have I done? (*the sound of five pistol shots; with each one, Stepashka buckles further*)

Stepashka Help me! (*she clasps her chest, staggering backwards, then holds out her bloody hands*) Like butcher's meat. (*she exits, hands outstretched. Zhenya stands silent and shell-shocked*)

Zhenya No.

Boris (*sound of the door being unbolted. Voices, as yet unseen*) You were a marvel, ma chère Lisa Petrovna. An inspiration to us all.

Lisa But I said nothing.

Boris (*Lisa enters the cell, escorted by Boris*) Indeed. But with such eloquence of spirit. (*to Zhenya*) I found her fluttering like a bird. A little bird of paradise, yearning for her mate.

Lisa Zhenya?

Boris I shall leave you two doves to twitter in peace. I know when I'm no longer wanted.

Lisa Oh, that's not true, Boris Nicholaevitch. You have my undying gratitude.

Boris I shall cherish it, my dear – undeserved as it is. You, and you alone, won this case. (*he kisses her hand and bows*) What man's heart could resist melting in your presence?

Lisa You're too kind. (*she turns to Zhenya*) Zhenya?

Boris (*to Zhenya*) Still got that indigestion, eh? It'll pass, old chap. Nervous tension plays havoc with the guts. (*confidentially to Zhenya*) Pull yourself together, man. (*more audibly*) I'll drop by tomorrow morning. Still a few loose ends to tie up about your . . . er . . . trip East. (*to Lisa*) Don't worry my dear. The time will fly by. (*Boris knocks on the door*) Guard! (*he bows to Lisa*) And remember, my carriage remains at your disposal whenever you need it.

Lisa Thank you, Boris Nicholaevitch.

Boris (*sound of unbolting*) A bientôt, mes chers amis. (*with a florid bow*) Amor vincit omnia. (*Boris exits*)

Lisa           *(there is a long silence during which Lisa looks timidly at her husband)*  
Zhenya? Oh Zhenya. Thank God it's over. *(Zhenya is motionless)*  
Hold me.

Zhenya       *(barely able to speak)* Lisa.

Lisa           You're not angry, are you?

Zhenya       Angry?

Lisa           I didn't come straight away, that's true. I needed time. For it to sink in. Everyone was staring at me, you see. I went and hid. I'm such a baby, aren't I? I hid in a little room by the gallery. I wanted to go down on my knees and thank God for his mercy. I wanted to sing and pray and cry. *(she rushes to him and kisses his hands repeatedly)* Oh Zhenya, darling. It's over. In nine months you'll be home. I can hardly believe it. In nine months we'll be walking in our garden. We'll take Mimi to feed the ducks on the pond, and have coffee on the terrace with Mama and Uncle just like we used to. Oh Zhenya, I'm so happy I could cry.

Zhenya       Why am I such an abomination?

Lisa           *(looking into his face)* It's that woman, isn't it? I see her in your face. Well, she's dead, Zhenya. You shot her - God forgive your sin - you shot her and she's dead. I'm your wife. I'm the one who loves you. I know what you think before you even think it. What did she know of you? What could she possibly have discovered in those few sordid hours you spent together? It was I who comforted you when you were depressed. It was I who rejoiced with you when you were happy. I was irreplaceable, you told me so yourself. "My little adviser; where's my little adviser?" Didn't I read up all about phosphates and crop rotation and irrigation – everything and anything I thought would help you in your work? *(Zhenya sighs)* Don't shake your head. It's true. We were happy, pulling together. Like two oxen in a field. You were my darling Zhenya. The Zhenya I fell in love with when I was seventeen. The Zhenya who was full of plans and ideals and enthusiasm. How could you have let a woman like her . . . Oh. How can you compare my love with what she had to offer?

Zhenya       I don't. I can't.

Lisa           She offered it to half the men in the village. I raised you up. She dragged you down.

Zhenya       There's not a thing I reproach you for, Lisa. Not a thing.

Lisa           *(long pause)* Did you really mean what you said in court today?

Zhenya       Every word. *(tenderly)* Dearest Lisa. You are a beautiful and courageous woman. A woman so full of love that you've found it in

your heart to forgive me. To brave a public trial. (*he takes both of her hands in his*) Look at me. Look at me with those beautiful kind eyes of yours. (*they look at each other for a moment, then he leans forward and gently kisses her on the lips*) How good you smell.

Lisa It's a new perfume. (*hesitates*) Boris Nicholaevitch was kind enough to . . . I hope you don't mind. He said you'd approve. It was in such a dear little bottle, I couldn't say no.

Zhenya Well it's very fine. And I'm glad for you.

Lisa He bought it in Paris. Can you imagine? (*pause*) Darling, when you come home, let's go to Yalta. We'll take Mimi and Nanny but not another soul. Not even Mama. Well, perhaps she could come, but just for a few weeks. We'll find our little rock and sit there like two happy seagulls. And when we've had enough, we'll fly, fly away.

Zhenya Those were happy days.

Lisa I'll sit in the sun and turn brown as a berry.

Zhenya (*sarcasm*) That'll please mama.

Lisa I'll throw away all my bonnets and parasols. No, I'm serious. I'll roll up my skirts, when no-one's around. I'll roll them right up my legs and get tanned to a hide. You won't recognise me. (*she twirls her skirts*) I'll dance for you. Just like a real peasant.

Zhenya God forbid.

Lisa (*she starts to clap her hands rhythmically and sings a peasant song, lifting her skirts up high above her knees*) Do you like it, darling? Do you like my dancing?

Zhenya What are you doing?

Lisa I'm your village girl, Zhenya. Kiss me. Kiss me like you used to kiss her.

Zhenya (*she tries to kiss him and he recoils*) No.