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# OCEAN HIGHWAY

A Quick Read



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# Владимир Козаренко

## Ocean Highway

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### Аннотация

A dreary grey morning on the highway, a slick road, and smeared mascara—Alina Voronova never expected a mundane car accident to become a one-way ticket to the other side of the world. A gift from Mark, a sleek millionaire from Miami, felt like a fairytale come to life. A black card with an unlimited balance, the azure beaches of Florida, and a man who looks at her like a priceless painting—but is terrified to touch her.

Everything changes when her convertible rolls onto a private tropical island, and Ethan appears on the doorstep of a luxury villa. A wild, brutal surfer smelling of the ocean, he is the exact opposite of the proper and polished Mark. An invisible war erupts between the two men for the right to possess Alina. Instincts override reason, a midnight kiss on the pier shatters a lifelong friendship, and Alina is left on the island completely alone—trapped without documents, without money, wearing nothing but shorts and another man's shirt.

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# **Владимир Козаренко**

## **Ocean Highway**

### **Chapter 1. The Frozen Ring**

February in Moscow was suffocating in a gray, slushy mire. Dawn didn't even bother to break at this early hour; the sky merely shifted its hue with grim reluctance from a hollow, oppressive black to a dull, leaden gray. Looking out the window was physically painful. It felt as though the entire city had been smothered under a massive, dusty blanket, beneath which people, groggy and resentful, submissively crawled toward their unloved jobs.

The thermometer on the dashboard of my aging Opel Astra coupe stubbornly read two degrees below freezing. The cabin was warming up with agonizing slowness, the vents blowing barely lukewarm air that smelled faintly of cheap windshield washer fluid. Beneath the tires, a treacherous, slick mixture of ice, melting snow, and toxic road chemicals crunched loudly, coating the windshield in a thin, corrosive crust every five minutes. My low-profile sport tires—which I, out of sheer stupidity, had been too lazy to swap for practical winter studs—repeatedly lost their grip on the road. The Opel shuddered over every pothole, as if begging me to turn back into the courtyard and stay home today.

It was far too early. The MKAD highway seemed unusually empty at this hour, but this illusion of open space offered no comfort. I was catastrophically, hopelessly late for a site visit with our newest, most temperamental client. This man had already rescheduled the final interior design review three times, and if I failed to show him the completed floor plans today, my studio boss would simply grind me into dust. And losing my job was not an option. Absolutely not.

"Why is everything always so damn..." I muttered an expletive under my breath, stealing a quick glance into the rearview mirror.

My face in the reflection looked tired, to say the least. Against my pale, almost translucent skin, the dark circles from chronic sleep deprivation and late-night laptop sessions loomed stark and purple. Sighing, I clamped the steering wheel tightly with my knees, using my left hand to steady a small, suction-cupped vanity mirror, while my right hand dug into my purse for an eyeliner pen. I needed to draw the perfect winged eyeliner right now, on the fly, just to look somewhat like a successful, confident designer rather than a burnt-out freelancer under siege by depression.

In the back of my mind, the numbers of my personal financial disasters ticked like a countdown. My wallet was empty, with a week left until payday. My phone displayed three missed alerts from my banking app. The cursed credit card with its hundred-thousand-ruble limit, which I had opened last summer for a foolish trip to Turkey with Tanka, sat like a dead weight. Every

month I threw my last remaining pennies at it, but the interest devoured everything, and the balance refused to budge. That card was strangling me like a noose.

One careful, precise stroke of the black marker across my upper eyelid. The car veered slightly as a tire caught a patch of black ice.

"Steady, Alina, stay the course, don't panic," I commanded myself, straightening the wheel.

Ahead, about fifty meters away, a massive, predatory silhouette was smoothly and silently braking near the shoulder. A new Porsche Panamera, it seemed. A true jet-black master of the universe, its lacquered flanks gleaming even in this murky Moscow morning slush. Just the sight of such cars always made my chest tighten—it was transport for beings from another planet, people who didn't know the meaning of words like "loan," "studio apartment rent," or "supermarket discounts."

I shifted my gaze back to the mirror to finish the sharp tip of my left wing. My hand trembled ever so slightly. In that exact millisecond, my Opel hit a deep ice rut hidden beneath the snowy mush.

The rear end of the car swung violently to the right. A panicked, frantic stomp on the brake did absolutely nothing—the sporty summer rubber simply glided over the ice like skis on grease. Time locked up; the wheels were frozen.

"No, no, no, oh God, please no!" I screamed to the empty cabin, dropping my makeup and grabbing the wheel with both

hands.

The black eyeliner pen flew somewhere beneath the passenger seat. The seconds stretched, morphing into a viscous, slow-motion nightmare. Time seemed to mock me. Directly in front of my hood, the flawless, glossy black rear bumper of the Porsche grew with catastrophic speed. I could see the reflection of my jalopy's headlights in its paint.

*A crunch. A grinding of metal. A solid, dull thud.*

The seatbelt slammed violently into my chest, knocking the remaining air out of my lungs. My Opel shuddered through its entire frame, its broken headlight let out a pitiful chime, and it came to a dead stop, its deformed nose wedged into that foreign piece of German luxury. A ringing, deafening silence settled over the cabin, punctured only by the rhythmic, monotonous thud of the wipers, which continued to smear gray road filth across the windshield.

I squeezed my eyes shut, terrified to open them. My heart was pounding somewhere in my throat, executing frantic flips. When I finally forced myself to look into the mirror, I wanted to howl. The right wing had turned out perfect, but the left one, due to the sudden jolt, had smeared into a thick black streak across my entire cheek all the way to my temple, turning me into a crazed, frightened clown.

"Well, so much for the client meeting," I whispered quietly, lifelessly, feeling hot tears of utter helplessness well up in my eyes. "This is it. I'll be paying for that bumper for the rest of my

life. They're going to throw me in debtor's prison."

Ahead, breaking the geometry of the gray landscape, the heavy driver's door of the Porsche swung slowly open. From the warm, neon-lit interior, wrapped in a barely perceptible trail of incredibly expensive cologne, a man began to step out. His long, camel-hair cashmere coat looked as though he had just walked off a Milan runway, not gotten stuck on a filthy, exhaust-choked Moscow ring road.

I swallowed the lump caught in my throat, wiped a tear with the back of my hand—smearing the mascara even further—and reached for the door handle with a trembling hand. My brief, gray fairy tale was over before it could even begin. A harsh, merciless February reality was moving in.

## Chapter 2. The Predator's Card

The cold Moscow air, thick with exhaust and road salt, instantly bit into my face the moment I forced open the warped door of my Opel. But the man standing in front of me seemed completely indifferent to the wretched February chill. He just stood there by the fender of his car, radiating a kind of transcendent, almost palpable internal energy. He exuded an absolute, unshakeable calm—the way people behave when their universe is never disrupted by minor inconveniences.

He was tall, lean, and incredibly well-built. The expensive camel-hair cashmere coat fit him flawlessly, accentuating a perfect posture, but even beneath the thick, elite fabric, I could physically sense the power of his physique. The broad set of his shoulders, his strong neck, his taut silhouette—that kind of definition isn't built by casual weekend trips to a fitness club. He was likely a professional athlete in the past. Or a man accustomed to training not just his body, but his own will to the point of exhaustion every single day.

When he turned smoothly in my direction, I met his gaze and nearly forgot how to breathe. He had striking, piercingly blue eyes. A true predator's gaze—intelligent, icy, assessing, locking onto a target instantly and without miss. There wasn't a shadow of anger on his well-groomed face; rather, it held a cold, high-bred curiosity.

I froze by the door of my dented Opel, which was dull with road grime, feeling like the ultimate fool on this planet. From the impact, my hand had slipped, and the thick black eyeliner had smeared in an ugly, ridiculous streak across my entire left cheek, ending forlornly somewhere near my ear. The picture was completed by my tangled hair and a down jacket that now felt like the pinnacle of bad taste.

"Well, well, auto-lady," his voice turned out to be surprisingly soft, deep, with a pleasant, velvety rasp, but an underlying metallic, distinctly masculine confidence rang clear through it. "Where are we rushing so desperately at this ungodly hour? And drawing wings on our eyes on the fly, no less? Do you always assault other people's bumpers when you're running late?"

"I'm so sorry..." I stammered, feeling a hot flush of shame wash over my cheeks. I wanted nothing more than to sink through this wretched, filthy asphalt straight into the underworld. Taking a timid step forward, I looked at the bumper of his Porsche. My hood had wedged underneath it, leaving a deep, jagged dent on the otherwise flawless glossy black paint, stripping the color down to the bare metal. "I... I lost control. The rut. Let's call the traffic police... I mean, the police. Or maybe I can pay for the repairs in cash? Right now, on the spot?"

I whispered the last sentence, barely managing to hold back my tears. Who was I trying to fool? Myself? Him? I didn't have a single kopeck to my name. In my purse, tossed on the front seat, lay an empty wallet and a plastic noose—a Sberbank credit

card with a completely maxed-out hundred-thousand-ruble limit, which I hadn't been able to pay off for six months, scraping together rubles just for transit. Repairing the bumper of this German rocket cost as much as three of my Opels put together, plus my kidney thrown in for good measure.

The man didn't answer right away. Instead, he took two unhurried steps forward, closing the distance between us. His piercing blue eyes slowly, shamelessly, and very intently swept over my figure. And even though I was wearing a bulky winter down jacket, under that X-ray, appraising gaze of his, I suddenly felt completely naked. A good, proper figure cannot be hidden from a practiced male eye—and it seemed this predator fully appreciated both my narrow waist and my long legs. My mascara-stained, terrified, but objectively cute face clearly evoked not rage in him, but a lively, purely masculine amusement. A barely perceptible smirk played at the corner of his lips.

"The police? At this hour and in this freezing cold?" He gave his head a slight, careless shake, and a few snowflakes drifted from his perfect haircut onto the collar of his coat. "The damage is unpleasant, of course, but I simply don't have three hours to waste on reports and officers. And besides, I can see that parting with cash would bring tears to your eyes. Why would I want a crying girl on the highway?"

He reached smoothly into the inner pocket of his coat and pulled out a small, rectangular business card. It was crafted from thick, matte black cardstock with minimalist gold embossing.

Nothing extravagant, but it literally smelled of massive wealth.

"Let's do this differently," Mark held out the card, and I caught it with fingers trembling from the cold. "Instead of money for the repairs, I propose you have dinner with me tonight. Agree to it, Alina. It will completely absolve you of your debt to me and save your nerves."

I lost my tongue for a second, my mouth snapping shut. I looked down at the card. In elegant gold lettering, it read: "*Mark Gromov. Founder and Managing Partner of Gromov Capital, Miami, USA.*"

My ears began to ring. Oh wow. Look what I'd gotten myself into. This wasn't just a local rich guy or a bureaucrat—standing before me was a major international investor from the most iconic city on the American coast. A man from a completely different, unattainable reality.

"But... I don't even know, this is all so strange," I muttered, blushing deeply beneath the layer of black mascara smeared across my cheek. "We don't even know each other. And the accident... it was my fault."

"Time is short; I flew into Moscow for just a week on business and I'm leaving for the States soon," Mark pulled a massive flagship smartphone from his pocket, his blue predator eyes crinkling with amusement. "Dictate your number, Alina. Let's meet at exactly eight o'clock tonight on Tverskaya, at Grand Café Dr. Zhivago. You know the place, right? Of course, you have absolutely nothing to worry about. Dinner is entirely on me.

Consider it compensation for your ruined makeup."

Obediently, as if under the influence of a powerful hypnosis, I dictated my mobile number to him. My voice shook slightly from the cold and the adrenaline.

"Perfect," Mark quickly punched the data into his contacts, read my name softly from the screen, winked at me with his incredible eyes, turned effortlessly, and climbed back into the cabin of his Porsche.

The massive SUV moved forward smoothly, without a single extra sound, neatly bypassed my stationary Opel, and vanished a second later into the thick, gray Moscow haze. And I was left standing in the middle of the slick, freezing highway, childishly pressing the expensive matte card to my chest, acutely aware that this filthy February day had just irreversibly turned my life upside down.

## Chapter 3. The Digital Romance

That memorable dinner at Grand Café Dr. Zhivago flew by like an unreal, cinematic blur. Mark had reserved the prime table by the panoramic window, offering a staggering view of the illuminated red towers of the Kremlin and the snow-dusted Manezhnaya Square. He was flawless, gallant, and witty, ordering sophisticated reinterpretations of Russian cuisine and delicate desserts whose prices made my head spin in silence. Mark carried himself like a true gentleman, never offering even a hint that would make me feel guilty about his ruined bumper. At the end of the evening, he settled the astronomical bill by carelessly tossing a black card onto the table, warmly kissed my hand goodbye at the taxi door, and... flew back to the States.

And that was the catalyst for our strange, addictive, and frighteningly intense digital life. A romance forged in pixels and messaging apps.

The eight-hour time difference between Moscow and Florida completely rewired my nights, transforming them into an endless, agonizing vigil. By the time I, thoroughly exhausted by my daily routine at the design studio, collapsed into my sagging bed in a cramped, gray one-room apartment on the bleak outskirts of Moscow, the day was just beginning in Miami. And Mark possessed an amazing, almost mystical ability to ensure that his distant day crashed onto the screen of my smartphone in

blinding tropical flashes.

He never wrote long, winding letters or cliché declarations of affection. He operated differently—visually, like a seasoned and calculating strategist. It felt as though he were deliberately seducing me with his picture-perfect life, teasing me, probing the boundaries of my resilience, and forcing me to loathe my surrounding reality with increasing sharpness.

*Ding.* A brief notification in the messenger shattered the midnight silence of my bedroom. I would frantically snatch the phone, and the screen would instantly flood with sunlight. A snapshot of a massive, futuristic villa in the elite neighborhood of Key Biscayne, which Mark mentioned he had rented for the entire surf season. Flawless white walls of concrete and glass, sprawling fans of palm trees lining the perimeter, and a perfect, azure square of a massive swimming pool reflecting the piercingly blue Florida sky.

*Ding.* The next photo. His new personal car—a massive, predatory, jet-black convertible with its top dropped, parked directly on the golden sand against the backdrop of the crashing ocean surf. Every detail in those images shouted of freedom, massive wealth, and absolute success.

But what truly unhinged me, causing my heart to stop in its tracks, were his rare personal photographs. Mark was an avid, fanatical surfer. About once a week, he would send shots captured by his friends right on the Atlantic coast: there they stood against the endless azure of the water, drenched, laughing,

holding bright, wax-covered surfboards under their arms. In those moments, Mark wore nothing but loose beach shorts.

I could sit for hours in the darkness of my room, endlessly pinching the phone screen to zoom in, staring at his physique for long stretches. A perfectly natural, hot, and shameful arousal would build inside me. He possessed an ideal, athletic body. Not that artificially bloated muscle mass built in suffocating gyms that I was used to seeing on arrogant Moscow gym bros, but lean, searing, steel muscles. A physique literally sculpted by harsh ocean waves, polished by the salty wind, hardened by the southern sun and a constant battle with the elements. A true predator, the master of his domain. Against his backdrop, I felt like a pale, half-dead houseplant slowly withering away without sunlight.

What could I possibly send him in return for this luxury? Dull, depressing Moscow landscapes with filthy snow piled along the curbs and gray, concrete panel high-rises outside my window? My miserable, dented Opel with its smashed headlight, now sitting in the courtyard, eternally coated in a gray, hideous crust of salt and road chemicals? I was flat-out, tearfully ashamed of my world, my impoverished lifestyle, and my pathetic reality, compounded by that perpetual Sberbank credit card noose.

Then, late one night, as a fierce March blizzard howled outside my window in Moscow, hurling handfuls of icy sleet against the glass, a text arrived from him that made my heart turn a wild somersault:

*“Alina, it looks like a permanent ice age has hit Russia over there. It hurts to look at those rare photos of you bundled up in those giant, shapeless down coats. Stop hiding. Send me a shot where I can actually see you. Take a photo in light summer clothes. Shorts, a tank top. I really need to remember what a real summer looks like.”*

I sat on the bed, pulling my knees tight to my chest, staring at the screen. The apartment was chilly due to the old radiators, but his words instantly made my cheeks flush a poppy-red. Shame, pride, and a wild urge to play along battled within me.

I slowly stood up, walked over to my old sliding-door wardrobe, and pulled down a pair of short denim shorts and a simple white tank top with thin straps from the very top shelf—clothes I had worn last summer during a brief and modest vacation in Turkey. Dressing like this in the middle of a freezing Moscow winter felt like pure, unadulterated madness.

Pulling the light garments over my bare skin, I walked over to the large mirror in the hallway. My skin looked far too pale under the amber glow of the dim energy-saving bulb, but my figure... my figure was truly my only absolute source of pride. A narrow, graceful waist, high firm breasts, rounded hips, and long, slender legs. I wasn't a model, but nature had blessed me with proportions that even a sedentary office job couldn't ruin.

Taking a deep breath to steady the tremors in my hands, I raised the phone and snapped a few quick pictures in the mirror, trying to force a look of feigned nonchalance and boldness into

my eyes. I selected the best frame. My finger practically glued itself to the screen over the "Send" button. I clearly understood: if I pressed it now, I was fully accepting his rules of the game, becoming a part of his universe, and there would be no turning back.

I squeezed my eyes shut and slammed my finger onto the glass.

Mark's reply came incredibly fast, just three minutes later, causing me to let out a ragged breath:

*"Stunning, Alina. It's very hot in Miami right now, but your photo is going to make it even hotter here. You have a magnificent body. I think it's time for you to urgently change that gray scenery."*

## Chapter 4. A One-Way Ticket

Mark had casually asked for my exact home address during one of our midnight chats, nestled between conversations about the weather and ocean tides. At the time, I attached absolutely no significance to it, assuming he was merely testing the waters, trying to appear polite, or at best, planning to send some cliché American postcard or a holiday souvenir.

But an ordinary, unremarkable, overcast March morning completely obliterated my familiar, gray Moscow reality.

The doorbell rang—sharp and insistent. Startled, I adjusted my old housecoat and padded over to answer it. On the threshold stood a young courier in the branded jacket of FedEx. In his hands, he held a massive, thick cardboard envelope sealed with bright security tape.

"Alina Voronova?" The guy offered a routine smile and extended an electronic tablet. "Sign here, please. High-value international shipment. From the USA, Miami."

My fingers turned instantly cold, and my heart skipped a beat. With a trembling hand, I scribbled on the screen with the stylus, took the package, and locked the door with every bolt. The envelope felt unusually substantial, heavy, as if something solid lay inside. The sudden wave of anxiety was so intense that my knees buckled. I sat right down on the hallway floor, without even taking off my shoes, leaned my back against the front door,

and with trembling hands, tore open the thick, sealed cardboard.

Inside lay a glossy, official invitation in English that smelled of expensive printing ink, a printed electronic business-class ticket for a complex Moscow–Istanbul–Miami route, and... a heavy, matte rectangle of a black MasterCard. Right there on the front face, my name was embossed in glossy gold letters: *ALINA VORONOVA*. It felt like pure madness, an impossible dream. How had he managed to issue a card in my name from America? He probably just added me as an authorized user to his account, but the sheer fact of it...

Pinned to the plastic was a small note. I unfolded it and recognized Mark's sprawling, large, and frighteningly confident handwriting. He had written by hand on thick paper bearing his company's emblem:

*"I'll be waiting for you in a month and a half. The dates on the tickets are fixed. This card holds funds for your current expenses, visa fees, and a new summer wardrobe. Don't think about anything, and don't worry about a thing. See you in Miami. M."*

I sat on the floor, staring blankly at this royal, staggering gift. In my mind, a whirlwind of conflicting thoughts spun around. Why on earth had Mark been so incredibly generous? Had those amateur photos of me in shorts and a tank top in the dead of winter really made such an indelible impression on him? Apparently so. The whims of truly wealthy people—more money than they know what to do with, so they set up

exotic entertainment for themselves, flying in girls from snow-bound Russia. But deep in my soul, cutting through the euphoria, a cynical, logical question clawed: didn't they have beautiful girls over there in America? Is there a shortage of blondes on Miami beaches? Why did he need to bring an ordinary girl from Moscow thousands of miles, spending thousands of dollars to do it?

But the fear of the unknown quickly retreated before a wild, intoxicating anticipation of freedom. Fortunately, I had a valid passport—last summer my best friend Tanka and I had flown on a cheap package tour to Antalya. But the American visa turned out to be a much thornier issue.

When Tanka found out about my escapade, she nearly burst with venomous, undisguised envy at first. Our design studio office was buzzing; my friend retold every single detail to the other girls. But Tanka was practical, and she gave me an invaluable piece of advice just in time:

"Alina, whatever you do, don't you dare show that official invitation from a single American guy at the embassy! The officer will think you're going there illegally to get married or work. They'll give you a lifetime rejection! Hide his papers. You have money on the card now, right? Just apply as a regular, independent tourist. Say you just saved up and are flying to see Miami and the ocean."

I listened to her. But the first thing I did, even before heading to the visa center, was run to a random ATM in the shopping

mall by the metro to check the balance. My heart was ready to leap out of my chest, and my hands were shaking as I slid the heavy black card into the machine's slot. I entered the temporary PIN code provided in Mark's note and froze, pressing the "Check Balance" button.

The figure that flashed on the screen a moment later forced me to frantically slap my hand over my mouth to keep from screaming in shock across the hall. Ten thousand dollars glowed in neat rows of digits. Nearly a million rubles at the current exchange rate! To Mark, this was pocket change, the price of a single lunch with partners, but to me, it was the annual budget of my modest life. Right then and there, I transferred a portion of the funds and completely paid off the cursed, suffocating Sberbank credit card, breathing freely for the first time in six months.

The next month and a half flew by like one prolonged, crazy day. Emergency visa processing through a consulate in a third country, endless, intoxicating shopping sprees, buying new light dresses, swimwear, and shorts... I took an unpaid leave of absence at work, flat-out lying to my boss that I needed to check into a hospital urgently for tests. He grumbled but let me go.

And so, forty-five days later, I stood in the middle of the vast, echoing terminal of Sheremetyevo Airport. In my hands was a single suitcase, inside of which lay my new life, purchased with Mark's money. Ahead was a long, grueling flight over continents, and beyond it—an unexplored ocean, palm trees, and a man with

piercing blue eyes who was waiting for me on the other side of the world, completely confident that he held all the strings of control in his hands.

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