

Praise for *Toxic*

‘A hugely accomplished debut novel about the complexities of teenage girlhood. Menacing, heartfelt and oft very funny, Natasha Devon is a new YA voice to watch.’

Juno Dawson

‘A sensitive yet powerful portrayal of what it is like to live with anxiety.’

Poorna Bell

‘Brilliant on female friendship and the humiliation and confusion when it turns poisonous. Will give a lot of readers greater confidence to identify toxic relationships.’

Mhairi McFarlane

‘A deeply compelling and beautifully written story with characters you can’t help but fall in love with. Through the eyes of her mixed-heritage protagonist, Natasha perfectly captures the conflict of identity and belonging that many people will be able to relate to.’

Natalie Morris (author of *Mixed/Other*)

‘An insightful testament to the fact that the most important relationship we’ll ever have is the one with ourselves.’

Anna Williamson

‘*Toxic* is simply unputdownable – from the first encounter with its characters to the flawless intersection of plots and twists that navigate the grey shades of feminism, race and privilege – Natasha Devon doesn’t hold back.’

Dr Shola Mos-Shogbamimu

‘I wish I could travel back in time and give this book to my teenage self.’

Coco Cole

Also by Natasha Devon



More praise for *Toxic*

'I wish Natasha Devon had been writing books when I was a teenager!'
Bryony Gordon

'Natasha is the cool older sister all teens need in their lives. She truly cares about the mental wellbeing of young people and this makes her such an exciting new author of YA fiction.'

Holly Bourne.

'Young adult fiction at its finest.'

Netgalley review

'I would recommend this to anyone who enjoys a good read and especially those who have teenage daughters.'

Netgalley review

'This was one of those books I just couldn't stop reading. I devoured it in two days, even reading until 5 a.m. because I just had to finish it.'

Netgalley review

'The writing is superb and enthralling.'

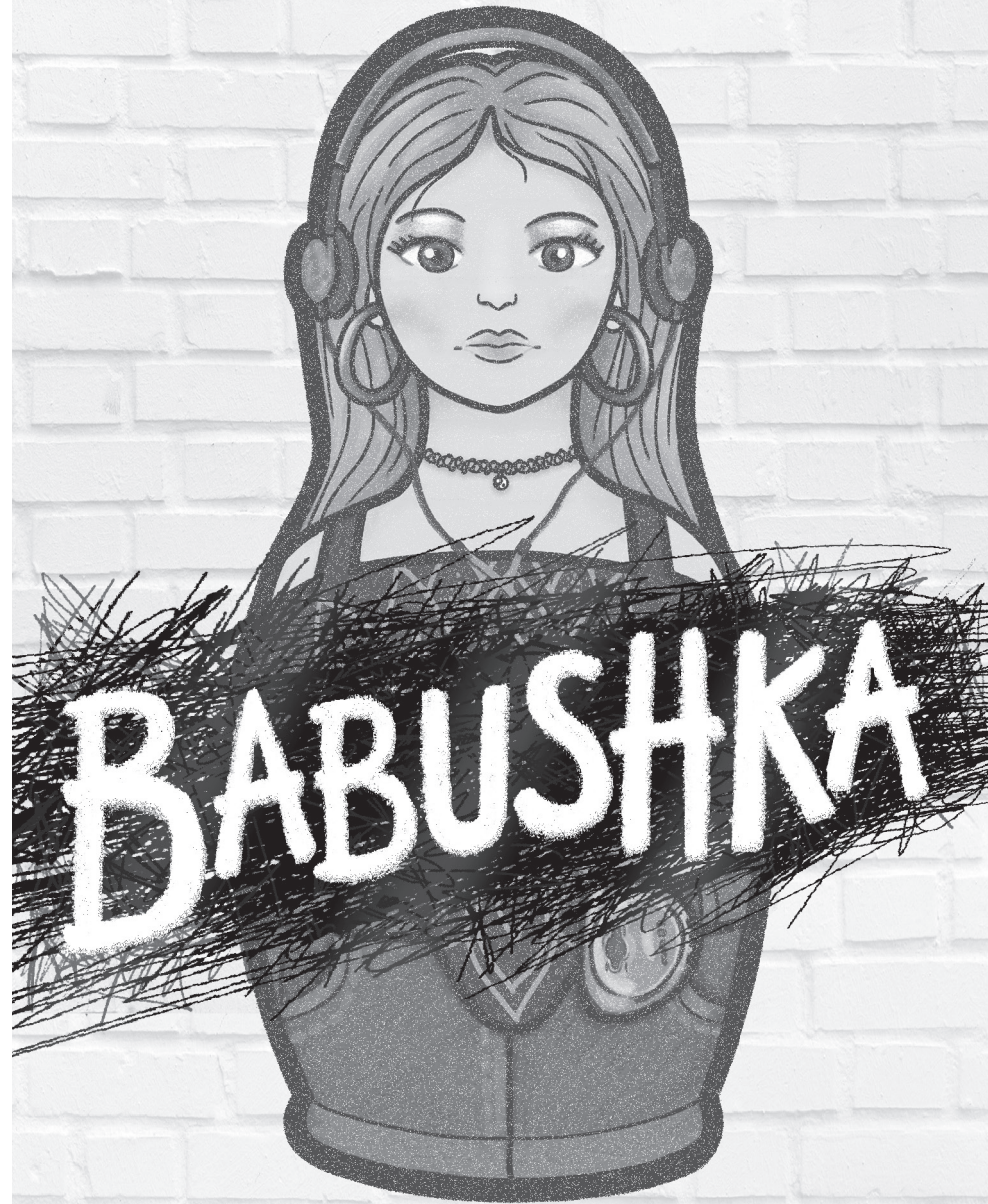
Netgalley review

'Timely, thought-provoking and totally moreish.'

Chris Russell

BABUSHKA

NATASHA DEVON



uclanpublishing

This is a work of fiction. All the names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents in this book are either a product of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

To my lovely nan, Sylvia. Thank you for all the love and care, gifting me a life-long love of Tom Jones and (inexplicably) ironing my knickers. Thank you also for showing me how to stand up for what I believe in and teaching me never to buy anything from the front of the shelf in the supermarket.

Babushka is a uclanpublishing book

First Published in Great Britain in 2023 by uclanpublishing
University of Central Lancashire
Preston, PR1 2HE, UK

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Cover artwork © Emily Peet 2023

978-1-915235-63-3

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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Set in 10/16pt Kingfisher by Amy Cooper.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

PROLOGUE

June 2001

I have a fear of looking into telescopes.

It's really embarrassing and anyone I've tried to talk to about it has taken the piss. To be honest, even I don't totally understand why. I only know that every time I try to put my eye to a telescope, I instantly get an unpleasant fizzy sensation in my stomach and my limbs turn to jelly.

I got that same feeling just before the moment that changed everything. I didn't have the strength to hold myself up. I kind of folded in on myself, like one of those weird collapsing plastic donkeys you can buy at the seaside. I forgot how to breathe. Everything felt as though it was happening in slow motion.

Later, I wondered whether the thing that actually scares me is reality. When you look into a telescope, it forces you to think about how massive the universe is. How tiny and insignificant your life and your worries are by comparison. It can't just be me who finds that overwhelming.

Watching the blue lines appear on the plastic stick was similar in a lot of ways. You go your whole life believing you can control what happens. Seventeen years I'd believed that.

Then I was slapped by fate. I felt tiny and helpless and stupid.

I had been so sure that it was all a coincidence. I remembered an article I read once called 'Five Reasons You Have Sore Boobs (And How to Fix Them)'. None of them involved a plastic stick and blue lines. I'd missed a few periods, but so had Carrie Bradshaw in season one. She was worried about nothing, it turned out. Somehow, I thought this would all end up being a meaningless blip in my own *Sex and the City*-inspired fantasy.

But this was reality, where my top cost £9.99 from New Look and I had a mammoth decision in front of me I wasn't ready for. If only I could rewind time. Or even just press pause for a bit. There were too many thoughts whizzing around in my mind and I couldn't focus on any of them.

I sat on the edge of the bath and put my head between my legs, trying desperately to focus. I just had to work out who I could tell about this. Did it have to be someone who knew me? Confessing to anyone I knew would involve coming clean about so many other things.

I could write to an agony aunt, maybe. Use a fake name. Perhaps someone already had. The solution to all of this could be waiting for me in the stack of *Adept* magazines piled in the corner of my room. It was worth a shot, I decided. Anything that might help me deal with this without dropping a bomb on my entire life.

That was when I heard Wyn's keys in the door.

She didn't call out 'hello darling!' as she usually did. I just heard her sigh as she kicked off her shoes and hung her

handbag on the hook in the hallway. It occurred to me that she might not know I was home.

I stood, shakily, and looked at myself in the mirror above the sink. I looked like a ghost. My eyes were huge, my skin even paler than usual. I was blurry around the edges, somehow. I wasn't going to be able to hide this from her.

I picked up the stick with its blue lines and turned the door handle. Maybe Wyn would know what to do. Perhaps she wouldn't get angry or say 'I told you so'. I imagined her making us tea and smoking a fag out of the window, telling me everything was going to be fine. Like she used to before I came to live here. She'd been through something similar herself, she'd probably say. She'd sort everything out. She'd reassure me that I wasn't to worry.

I knew Wyn would be in the kitchen, so I took a deep breath and walked the six and a half steps along the softly carpeted corridor to tell her the news. I drew in a big breath, then stopped.

Wyn looked even worse than I did – like a ghost who had seen a ghost. She was slumped at the kitchen table, a bottle of whisky in front of her, alongside a heavy-bottomed tumbler. She was staring with red-rimmed eyes, not seeming to be looking at anything in particular.

Did she know already, somehow? How could she, though? Unless she'd noticed the lack of sanitary towels in the little pedal bin in our bathroom over the past few weeks? But that was ridiculous. Wyn was a lot of things but she wasn't psychic. It must be, I realised with horror, something else.

‘Hi,’ I said, cautiously, manoeuvring myself so I was directly in her eyeline. ‘Are you OK?’

It was a stupid question when she so obviously wasn’t, but I couldn’t think of anything else to say.

She blinked, then held out her free hand, the one that wasn’t clutching the glass of whisky. I took it and sat opposite her, holding my breath.

‘Darling,’ she whispered, her voice quiet and somehow dry-sounding. It was so different to how she usually spoke.

‘I’m afraid I’ve had some bad news.’

CHAPTER 1

October 2019

I was snapped out of my teenage memories and back to the present by a squeaking sound, which echoed around the gallery as the oligarch's wife moved her left foot. It was 9.15 p.m. and she'd been facing the wall, unmoving, for so long I had seriously considered removing my shoe and throwing it at her to check she hadn't turned to stone. Instead, I opted for a less violent option and let out a small sigh, hoping it would rouse her from her reverie and we could wrap up this sale.

The piece she'd expressed an interest in was one of my favourites in the collection. It was by an up-and-coming British painter, who'd done a series of cryptic, partial self-portraits – their torso reflected in a car window, their elongated shadow on the grass of a park, their hand as seen from their point of view as they looked down at it. Apparently, the artist learnt that mirrors weren't invented until the fourteenth century and became fascinated by the notion of trying to piece together a sense of physical self from the glimpses you might catch as you went about your day. It reminded me of my first ever attempt at art when I was at college. An attempt to carve out an identity from what the world mirrored back at you.

Maybe that's what sparked the memory of that awful night back when I was sixteen. Months before I got pregnant with Loo but connected in my mind, somehow.

The painting that had immediately captured me (and, it would appear, the oligarch's wife) was the artist's tiny, distorted reflection in their mother's eye. It was a special piece, one I could tell was going to appreciate massively in value once the artist inevitably made a name for themselves. Whilst it was annoying the potential buyer was taking so long to make up her mind, at least she seemed to be thinking. Too often, the uber-wealthy swept into my gallery and just bought whatever they saw first, or whichever piece looked gaudiest.

Finally, the oligarch's wife spoke.

'I think . . . I will take it,' she said.

I plastered on a bright smile as she spun round, even though part of me was sad to see that particular painting leave the gallery and in spite of the fact that my feet were killing me. I'd been on them for almost twelve hours.

'Excellent!' I responded. 'If you follow me to the desk over here, we can arrange payment and shipping details.'

'And we must celebrate!' she insisted.

Bugger. It was customary for me to have a glass of champagne with customers after making a sale, but I was kind of hoping she wouldn't know that.

'Of course!' I said, recalibrating my plans for the commute back home to Surrey and wondering if the meagre funds left in my account each month after I'd paid Loo and Hugh's school fees would stretch to a taxi. I didn't know what time Loo was

going to get in but I really wanted to be there when she did.

I reached into the mini fridge under the front desk, taking out a bottle of Bollinger and two flutes. I knew instinctively there was no point trying to fob this woman off with the cheaper stuff. I carefully poured a modest measure for each of us and held her glass towards her, watching as she tottered across the shiny wood floor in her vertiginous heels to grab it.

I'd been working with seriously rich folk for so long and yet they never ceased to enchant and repel me in equal measure. This customer bore all the hallmarks. Clothes which were obviously tailored to fit her toned, slender frame exactly. Hair completely devoid of frizz, professionally highlighted to a subtle honey shade. Skin so smooth, polished and wrinkle-free it almost looked wet. But what really set them apart was the total lack of anything apologetic in their behaviour or demeanour. No club was closed to them, no space wasn't theirs to claim, no experience out of reach.

The oligarch's wife – I ran my eyes discretely down my appointment diary to remind myself of her name (Valentina) – knocked back the glass of champagne in one gulp and held her empty flute out for more.

'It's an excellent choice,' I told her, as I reluctantly poured more booze.

'It is a gift. For my daughter.'

'How wonderful.' I smiled, thinking about how supremely unimpressed Loo would be if I tried to dictate what she displayed on her bedroom walls.

'You have children?'

‘Yes. Two. Llewella is seventeen and Hugh is fourteen.’

‘You don’t look old enough to have a seventeen-year-old,’ Valentina said, squinting and stepping a little closer to scrutinise my face.

‘Ah . . . thank you.’ I blushed, not wanting to go into why I wasn’t, really. ‘I can’t believe she is practically an adult.’

‘And yet, we mothers never stop worrying.’ Valentina sighed, which surprised me. I suppose I’d just assumed she, like most of her class, had packed her kids off to boarding school as soon as possible in order to continue a lifestyle of shopping and globetrotting.

I felt the champagne I’d drunk warm my stomach and something make me say, ‘Actually, Loo is out in town tonight. She doesn’t usually go out in London but she made a friend recently who is from up East and . . . I’m happy she’s having fun and I never wanted to be one of those parents who got in the way of that but . . . I’ll be glad when she is home.’

‘Valentina regarded me for a moment, as though I was one of the installations.

‘This worry you have,’ she said finally, ‘it is a babushka worry.’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘My grandmother, she used to have a set of matryoshka dolls – you know, the ones that go inside one another, getting smaller and smaller?’

‘I do know them. We used to call them Russian dolls,’ I told her, hoping that wasn’t offensive in some way.

Valentina nodded. ‘Yes, they are called different things. Where my grandmother came from, they would call them

babushka dolls. And she would say, as we get older, sometimes it is not us who reacts to something but one of the smaller babushkas that lives inside us.’

I must have looked confused because she leant across the desk to look me in the eye. ‘So, say when you are young you have a thing happen to you and it leaves a scar. It makes a little babushka. And then later, when you are older, another thing happens that is the same. And even though you are older now, and the thing doesn’t matter any more, the babushka . . . she starts to cry.’

I imagined all the previous versions of myself, nestled inside me. And then, quite suddenly, I knew exactly which babushka was crying. Loo was out in London. At night. For the first time. With her new friend.

My sixteen-year-old self was, I realised, not just crying, but screaming . . .