

FRAME of REFERENCE

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To those with doubts, may you find grace

“The Lord shall preserve thee from all evil: he shall preserve thy soul.” (Psalm 121:7 KJV)

*“Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.”
(James 1:17 NIV)*

*“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”
(Romans 8:28 NIV)*

CHAPTER 1



Friday, November 4, 2017

Kyiv 14:50 New York 7:50 a.m.

The crowd in Independence Square swelled as the protestors chanted louder. Natalia's heart burst with pride as Danylo addressed the onlookers.

"We are fed up with corruption! Fed up with cronyism! We call on Parliament to establish an independent anti-corruption court," Danylo thrust his fist in the air.

Natalia hoped he'd finish his speech before she had to leave, since Iryna expected her to see her off at the airport. She checked the time on her phone. It would take fifteen minutes to reach the airport by metro, and Iryna would not arrive for over half an hour. *I can stay a little longer.*

As Danylo continued his impassioned oratory, the spectators grew more agitated. Someone bumped into her, and Natalia backed away.

"Out with Poroshenko!" cried a protestor.

A rock flew toward a nearby police officer. People started yelling.

No, no, no! This is supposed to be a peaceful protest. Saying a brief prayer that God would keep Danylo safe, Natalia edged

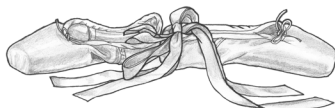
toward the nearby office building. She could lose her role as prima in the upcoming Grand Kyiv Ballet season if she appeared in a news report or got arrested.

Natalia turned to face the center of the square, where Danylo fought to maintain control of the crowd. He'd understand if she couldn't stay to the end, though he'd be disappointed. It was important to him that she support his goals, but he supported hers as well. That's what made him such a great boyfriend.

A smile tugged at her lips despite the surrounding tension. Soon, she would have to introduce Danylo to her father. As she walked toward the street, she pulled out her phone to text Danylo she was leaving.

Intense pain jolted her system, and she crumpled to the ground.

"One down, two to go" were the last words she heard.



Kyiv 15:30 New York 8:30 a.m.

Iryna glanced at the clock on the wall above the ticketing counter. *Where is Natalia? She said she would be here to say goodbye.* All around her, other dancers embraced their spouses, children, or friends. But Iryna was alone.

She shook herself. It wasn't like this was her first time touring. *I'm a professional. I'm a prima. This is my job, not my first day of primary school.*

Besides, she and Natalia had spoken at rehearsal yesterday. Iryna's parents had dropped her off at the airport that morning—quite a sacrifice on her father's part since the political situation was so unstable and his job as a cabinet minister constantly in jeopardy.

Still, it would be nice to have someone in her circle of family and friends here just for her. She fingered the cross on her charm bracelet. *The Lord is with me.*

"Let's go, *Irynochko*," called Viktor, the director of the touring half of the ballet company. His normally stern visage sported a deeper frown than usual. Traveling was stressful, and traveling while in charge of a large group of people had to be wearing.

Iryna clutched her ticket and passport to her chest and grabbed the handle of her carry-on as she followed her troupe toward the security line. Fortunately, they qualified for expedited screening.

"Do we have everyone?" Katherine, one of the trainers and Viktor's occasional secretary, asked as she scanned the sea of faces before her. "I don't see Fyodor."

Olena rushed up to Viktor. "The ticket counter wouldn't print a boarding pass for me. The flight is overbooked."

Viktor scowled. "When is the next flight?"

"Tomorrow morning. Anyone else who isn't here yet will be bumped."

"Be sure you're on that flight." Viktor held up his passport for the security officer while speaking to Olena over his shoulder. "We need our choreographers."

Katherine gave Olena a quick hug. "Don't worry. It will be fine. Let us know your flight number, and we'll send someone to pick you up."

One by one, they passed through the screening area, leaving Olena behind. Iryna was glad she didn't get bumped since she was already nervous, and not only because of traveling. This was the first time she would see Rick since the Carters left Ukraine.

Since Cassie had died. It was still hard to believe her lively, mischievous little friend was gone. She hadn't even known the severity of Cassie's illness until after they had returned to America. How hard that must have been for her brother.

Her heart sped at the thought of meeting him again. She adored Rick when she was little. The brown-haired boy with eyes like a steaming cup of chai with the leaves still in it had been so kind, so smart, so ... *cute*. How much had he changed? Would he remember her? She cringed at the memory of her starstruck, attention-seeking behavior. Maybe it would be better if he didn't.

"Our gate is this way," Katherine said once everyone with a pass had completed their security check.

The troupe lumbered down the terminal, toting their overstuffed carry-ons, until they reached their assigned gate.

"Everyone, find a seat," Katherine said in a shrill voice. The dancers squished into the last available seats, though Iryna would have preferred to stand. But performers were always a superstitious lot, and Katherine was a prime example. Sergei, one of the younger dancers, lounged against a pillar. "Sit down." Katherine made a downward motion with her finger.

"Where?" He gestured to the packed waiting area.

"On the floor if you have to. And be quiet."

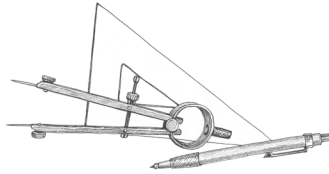
Sergei flopped onto the floor at Iryna's feet. "Do you know how long the flight is?"

"Hush!" Katherine said. "Everyone must sit quietly so we will have a safe flight. Now you must spit over your shoulder three times." The trainer mimicked spitting over her left shoulder.

Sergei repeated the action without enthusiasm then rolled his eyes and pulled out his phone.

Iryna smiled at the younger dancer's antics, but her smile faded as her thoughts returned to Natalia. Was the metro running on time? Had there been an accident or closure? She hoped nothing serious had happened. Natalia never let her

friends down if she could help it. When the intercom announced boarding was beginning, Iryna said a quick prayer, entrusting both her journey and Natalia's safety to God. *Your will be done, Lord.*



New York 5:15 p.m.

“Yes, Mother, of course I’m staying for the party,” Rick spoke into his hands-free device as he wove his black sedan through the Friday rush-hour traffic headed to Manhattan. The heavy traffic had turned a quick drive into a significantly longer one. He ground his teeth, wishing he’d taken the subway.

His mother raved on, despite his inattention. “—and of course Iryna is the prima ballerina! It’s been so long since we’ve seen her! She was such a pretty little girl. I wonder what she’s like now?”

The Ukrainian National Ballet was coming to town, and as the consulate had no rooms big enough to throw a large party, Rick’s parents were happy to host a welcome gala in their spacious mansion. His great-grandparents had purchased their house in the 1930s for a song when everyone else was moving to upper Manhattan, and succeeding generations had managed to keep it in the family despite numerous offers to repurpose it.

Rick focused on what his mother was saying. She had been talking about this event for weeks, so there was no way he could forget the date of the party. He suspected it was another attempt

to introduce him to eligible females. At nearly thirty, he had yet to provide his parents with any hope of grandchildren. He dated casually, but no one had really piqued his interest. However, because he desired to make his parents happy whenever possible, he came when called.

“—and she’ll be staying with us. Your father promised Vasyil we would look after her while she’s in New York. We’re right around the corner from the consulate and only thirty minutes from the theater, so it should be very convenient. I don’t suppose you’ll be able to show her around town while she’s not rehearsing?”

Aha. There it was—the expected setup.

“Well ...” He was torn between disappointing his mother and enduring the torture of escorting some entitled dancer around town. “I’ve got a lot of projects in the works right now. I’ll have to see.” *Good thinking. Put the decision off until after you meet her.*

Of course, he *had* met her before, when his father was the US ambassador to Ukraine in the nineties. Her father was a government official, and their parents had become friends, though his dad had worked with Vasyil in Poland previously. He searched his memory for a glimpse of Vasyil’s daughter. Surely at least fifteen years had passed since they’d returned to the States for Cassie’s unsuccessful cancer treatments. He shrugged off the somber feeling and searched his mind for images of his life in Kyiv that did not directly involve his sister.

There *was* a little girl. Their families had exchanged dinner visits. A little dark-haired girl, with startling blue eyes and an impish smile. She’d challenged him to a game of chess, stating, “I will win you,” and trounced him in an embarrassingly low number of moves before throwing her hands in the air and dancing around the room. He had laughed at her antics and congratulated her politely. *Such a funny little thing.*

The memory left Rick rather unsettled. Was that girl Iryna? He must have blocked her out of his mind along with Cassie.

He had a vague impression of other informal meetings, family dinners, and passing the girl in the hall at the diplomatic school he'd attended, but he hadn't really spent any time with her. He heard Cassie's voice exclaiming "*Iryna ballerina!*" with childish delight. His throat tightened.

"I'm going to hang up, Mom. I'm almost there."

"Okay, sweetie. We'll see you in a few minutes! Peters can park your car for you."

He pulled up in front of the house and double-parked, tossing the keys to Peters on the way up the steps. Beth Carter's idea of economizing was to have one all-purpose butler/chauffeur/handyman, one cook, and one maid on staff, hiring a cleaning or catering company when more was required. They would have to hire at least a dozen valets just to shuttle vehicles around for the party guests without chauffeurs.

Beth greeted her son at the door with a wide smile and open arms.

"Hi, Mom." Rick hugged her and kissed her on both cheeks, a habit picked up from living most of his youth in Eastern Europe.

"You didn't bring a bag?" she asked in an accusing tone.

"You know I keep half of my clothes here. I'm here almost every weekend."

"I hope you have a nice tuxedo. It's white-tie."

"Peters took it to the cleaners for me when I was here last Saturday. I bet he already picked it up. Don't worry—I'll be as dapper and charming as ever," Rick said with a hint of sarcasm.

Beth sighed. "You know very well you can be irresistible when you wish, and there won't be anyone here even half as handsome as you."

"Well, I hope you invited a doctor to attend to all the ladies who faint when I walk in the room." He snickered.

Beth rolled her eyes. "One of these days, son, you will be the one to faint, and that will be the happiest day of my life!"



New York 12:20 a.m. Kyiv 7:20

“*Allo, Tato,*” Iryna said as she sank with relief onto the hotel bed. It had taken her twenty minutes to figure out how to make an international call from the hotel phone. Her eyelids drooped.

“Hello, my *Irynka*. How are you? How was your flight?” Vasyl Schevchenko’s deep voice swaddled her and eased the tension in her shoulders.

“Good. I slept for an hour or so. Then the turbulence woke me up. It’s probably a good thing I’m not going to the Carters’ until tomorrow. I can’t stay awake another minute.” Iryna stifled a yawn.

“Matt and his family will take good care of you.”

“I’m excited to see them again.” She especially looked forward to dancing at the party, hopefully with Rick. “How was your day?”

Vasyl sighed. “More of the same. The protests downtown got a little tense. Russia continues to build up its forces in Crimea. The economy is on the brink of collapse. Some days I think I should just retire and move to America.”

Iryna laughed softly. “You know you love Ukraine too much for that.” His reference to the protests stirred something in her mind. Hadn’t Natalia said something about them?

“*Irynka?*”

“Hmm?” She forced her eyes open. “I must have dozed off.”

“I will let you go. Get some sleep.”

“Okay. Love you. Bye.”

“Bye.”

Iryna fumbled to replace the phone with half-closed eyes. *I should call to check on Natalia.* Before she could act on the thought, she fell asleep, still wearing her travel clothes.

In her dreams, Natalia appeared with her hand outstretched, urgently calling Iryna’s name.