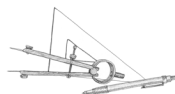


CHAPTER 3



Iryna unfurled a pink dance ribbon that stood out against her black outfit. Rick had paid little attention to what she was wearing before. He was focused on her face and her vibrant personality that made outer garments hold no importance, but now he realized the black jumpsuit with halter top and split skirt was designed perfectly to allow freedom of movement, accentuating her lithe form and graceful motions.

Rick and the rest of the audience watched, enraptured, as Iryna told an entire story with her dance. Beginning in a seated position, she rose slowly until her arms stretched toward the ceiling like a flower unfurling. As if they were petals in the wind, her limbs swayed with the music. Her slippered feet flitted in ways he didn't know were possible, extending over her head and fluttering across the floor as if on wings. Every movement matched the music perfectly.

The melody changed from lighthearted to dramatic, and Iryna leapt into the air, snapping her ribbon like a lightning bolt. Crashing cymbals chased her one way then the other, searching for safety in a storm.

Rick responded to every emotion portrayed as if she were a puppeteer with his heartstrings in her hand. He was under a spell. He held his breath as the tempo decreased and the storm

subsided. Iryna the flower straightened and shook off the rain, delighting in the restorative sun breaking through imaginary clouds.

A few plaintive notes crept into the song, and Iryna slowed her motions. Her arms drooped and her posture withered. Iryna dropped the ribbon. The flower died. When the music stilled and Rick thought the dance was over, a flute trilled.

Iryna spread her arms and threw her head back. Through pantomime, seeds fell from the withered flower and sprang from the ground as she picked up the ribbon and tossed it repeatedly in the air.

She spun across the room with the ribbon whirling around her and concluded her performance in a split with her head to the floor. The room fell silent for a moment as everyone processed what they had seen before bursting into thunderous applause.

Tears glistened on a few faces as the lights came back on. Rick's eyes misted. He was by no means a patron of the arts, but Iryna's talent was unquestionable.

People lined up to head downstairs for dinner. As the guest of honor, Iryna was escorted by Mr. Carter, and for the first time, Rick was disappointed that his mother's machinations had not allowed him the privilege. He held out his arm to the consul's wife after his mother and the ambassador descended the stairs.

"I fear you are relegated to escorting me." The consul's wife wore a knowing smile.

"Not at all," Rick answered, rallying all his diplomatic poise. "It is my pleasure."

The genteel woman patted his arm. They exchanged pleasantries with the ease of long practice and followed the others to the dining room, where an elaborate dinner awaited.

A full five courses, excluding appetizers, graced the menu, including soup, salad, pasta, a main course, and dessert. Waiters

rushed around serving and collecting plates, and conversation buzzed around him in multiple languages. It was quite noisy, and Rick could only watch while Iryna spoke with others a few places away. Occasionally, he heard her laughter above the general din. The food on his plate remained largely untouched, as he was kept busy with his thoughts. He tried to ignore them enough to participate in conversation with the guests on either side of him.

Finally, guests served themselves chai or herbal tea from a variety of silver and copper samovars on the sideboard. Rick wondered how his mother had rounded them all up and made a mental note to compliment her on all her planning for this event. He edged toward a circle gathered around Iryna and the ambassador.

"You do your country proud, my dear," the ambassador was saying. "I knew you were talented, but nothing I've heard prepared me for your dance tonight. I can't wait to see you perform when you play in Washington."

"I am excited for the opportunity. But I am not the only talented dancer in the troupe." Iryna took another young woman by the arm. "Let me introduce Karina, my understudy. She will be dancing some of the performances."

One by one, Iryna introduced the principal dancers to the ambassador and regaled him with their accomplishments. Rick was impressed. Not every star would willingly share the spotlight, let alone shine it on someone else.

The crowd thinned when the ambassador stepped aside to speak with a consular official. Iryna turned and caught Rick's eye as he moved toward her.

She glanced down at his empty hand and smiled. "You do not drink *chai* anymore?"

"I do occasionally, although I prefer coffee." He noticed her hands were empty also. "Would you like some tea?"

He filled a cup and handed it to her. She took it with both hands, as if to warm them, then held it under her nose, closing

her eyes and breathing in the aroma. When she opened them, they crinkled with hidden laughter.

Suddenly, a memory of another tea party came to mind—he, his mother, and Cassie visiting Iryna and her mother. Black and golden curls mingling over gold-edged china. The two girls giggling while he sat bored, forcing himself to sip a spicy dark liquid that nearly made him choke. Iryna laughing at him behind her cup like she was now.

He'd wished Iryna had a brother. He didn't wish that anymore.

"At the risk of echoing the words of every person you've spoken to, your dance was the best I have ever seen," said Rick.

Iryna's mouth quirked. "And how many have you seen?"

Rick let out a surprised laugh. "Um, okay, not that many. But your performance made me want to watch more."

Iryna nodded. "That is the best compliment—to instill an appreciation for the art in someone."

"*Irynka*"—the understudy, Karina, linked her arm through Iryna's and spoke in Ukrainian—"you must come translate for me."

Iryna glanced apologetically at Rick as she was dragged away. "We must talk more later."

Everyone milled around and chatted comfortably for a while longer, then Peters came and whispered in Beth's ear. After receiving instructions, Peters approached the director of the ballet company, Viktor Kravets.

"The bus to take you to your hotel has arrived," he told the director.

The director bowed toward Rick's parents. "Thank you to our gracious host and hostess for your hospitality. We could not have wished for a better welcome. Now we must take our leave so my dancers can rest before tomorrow's rehearsal." He rose from his bow and twirled his hand in the air. "Come, everyone."

The consul translated his words, and the guests moved toward the stairs. Gratitude and compliments were given to the

host and hostess as goodbyes were said. Diplomats and family friends departed when their cars arrived, then the last of the catering crew slipped out quietly, leaving only the Carters and Iryna.

"Whew!" said Beth. "I'm bushed!"

"Congratulations, my dear. The party was a great success!" Matt said with pride.

"Thank you, Mrs. Carter, for your kind thoughtfulness. I am so happy to be here!" Iryna flung her arms around the older woman, who patted her affectionately on the back. As she stepped away, Iryna cast a dazzling smile at Rick that nearly made his heart stop. "I have been looking forward to seeing you all."

"And we are delighted to have you. Absolutely delighted!" Rick's mom assured her. "But you must be even more tired than I am, you poor thing! Let's get you to your room so you can catch some sleep."

"Thank you." Iryna bounced on her toes and clasped her hands. "But first I must present my gifts to my hosts and hostess."

"Oh my," said Beth. "You didn't have to bring us anything."

"I wanted to," Iryna insisted. "I can't wait to see how you like them."

"I'm sure we'll love them. This way, dear."

They climbed the stairs to the next floor, and Beth took her to a room on the right at the front of the house. Rick and his father stiffened as she led Iryna into the bedroom, explaining where everything was and expressing hope that she had everything she needed.

"I'm sure you'll enjoy the view of Gramercy Park in the morning."

"It will be perfect. I love it. Thank you, Mrs. Carter!" Rick heard from the hallway.

His mind protested strongly. *That's Cassie's room.* Sunlight streaming through the window onto her golden curls, watching

her play with dolls on her pink carpet, and lying sick in bed ... He closed his eyes to the memories. Even the good ones hurt.

"Oh, please call me Beth, dear! You have your own bath through here. We make breakfast ourselves as the cook doesn't live-in, so help yourself whenever you wake up. Feel free to use the TV or the library. Make yourself at home! Peters can drive you to the theater whenever you're ready. His rooms are downstairs, off the kitchen."

"Ah, here they are," exclaimed Iryna from inside the room. She beamed as she followed Beth back into the hallway, holding a small armful of packages. "Mrs. Carter, here is yours." She held out a tissue-wrapped packet.

Beth unfolded the colorful wrapping and held up a beautiful brown-and-green silk scarf that brought out her hazel eyes. "This is lovely," she whispered, draping it over her shoulders. "Thank you."

"This is for you, Mr. Carter." Iryna handed Matt a small box.

He opened it to reveal a special brand of Ukrainian Cognac. "Oh, wow. I haven't had this in a while."

"My father sent it for you. Our diplomatic status allowed me to bring it through the customs. And for you, Rick." Iryna held out a tissue-wrapped box.

Rick took the package with building excitement, like a child waking on Christmas morning. Iryna's eyes sparkled. He tore off the tissue to reveal a box of Ukrainian candy. "These are my favorite! How did you remember?" He opened the box, unwrapped a chocolate-covered wafer, and popped it into his mouth. The creamy, buttery flavor was as tasty as his memory of them. "Mm. Delicious."

Iryna let out a delighted squeal as she clapped her hands. Both her thoughtfulness and enthusiasm surprised and warmed him. Why did something as small as him eating the candy make her so happy?

Iryna turned back to Rick's parents. "Thank you again for

letting me stay here. I am sure I will sleep wonderfully. Is there a phone I could use to make an international call?"

"Oh," said Beth, raising her eyebrows. "Sorry, I didn't think to offer a phone. You are welcome to use the house phone, but it's all the way downstairs in the foyer."

"You can use my phone," Rick offered. Maybe her phone was dead or didn't allow roaming. "You can set it on the table there when you're done." He pointed at a small table holding a vase of flowers. After disabling the lock screen, he held it out.

"Oh, thank you." She took the phone. "I will just be a moment. Good night."

She waved at them all as they wished her a good night. When she closed the door, the three of them stood staring at it. Mrs. Carter looked at her husband as he let out a long breath.

"I just couldn't put her on the third floor all by herself," she pleaded in a whisper.

"I know," he sighed, and turned away. "Good night, Rick."

"Night, Dad." Rick turned to his mom, still standing in front of Cassie's room. His mind rebelled at the idea of someone other than his sister staying there. He shoved the indignation aside for his mother's sake. "You are marvelous, Mom. I don't know how you managed it all." He kissed her cheek. She smiled at him but refrained from teasing him about Iryna, though the twinkle in her eye betrayed her thoughts.

When he reached his room and tossed his jacket over a chair, something fell from a pocket onto the hardwood floor with a tiny slap. With a frown, he bent and picked up a matchbook. *Gdańsk, Poland*. "Weird," he muttered. "Wonder how that got there." He tossed it onto his nightstand and finished changing.

A door opened, and soft footsteps padded in the hallway before the door closed again. Rick opened his door, spied his phone on the table, and retrieved it. It was still warm from Iryna's use. He fingered it for a moment before plugging it in. So many thoughts swirled through his head he feared he might never be able to sleep.

The pain of someone using Cassie's room gave way to the memory of Iryna dancing in his arms. The lyrics of the song they had danced to entered his consciousness. It was a song about two lovers living on opposite shores of a sea who longed to be together. He performed a mental double take. Did that mean Iryna had a crush on him as a child and was still nursing affection for him? *No, that's ridiculous. A woman like her must have dozens of admirers. I'm reading too much into a single comment about a song lyric. She's just teasing me.* Despite the argument, his pulse quickened. He couldn't possibly sleep now.

He had to figure out a way to discover the truth behind her words.



Iryna's chest tightened as she left Rick's phone in the hall and closed her door. Why hadn't Natalia answered the phone? It was after midnight in New York, which meant breakfast time in Kyiv. Natalia should be up. Maybe she didn't answer unknown numbers.

Heaving a sigh, Iryna let it go. She'd left a message asking Natalia to return her call when she could. She smacked her forehead as she remembered the time difference. Hopefully, Rick's phone would not ring in the middle of the night. She stepped farther into the room to focus on other things. Cassie's things.

A porcelain figurine on the dresser caught her attention. She remembered giving it to Cassie for her birthday—a gold-and-red

firebird to match her friend's bright hair and sunny disposition. Her heart ached for the Carters and their loss, for Rick. How she and Cassie had teased him! He must miss her. Since she was an only child, Cassie had filled a void in Iryna's life, and she mourned her passing. How had Rick handled his sister's loss?

I wish she was here now so I could talk to her about him. She had dreamed of this day for months—how he would look, what he would say and do. Would he even remember her?

A spark of recognition was evident in his greeting. However, he spoke little. Ever the gentleman, his perfect manners made it hard to discern what he was thinking. But he still danced! He and Cassie had taken ballroom lessons at the same studio where Iryna practiced ballet. When Cassie first became sick, Iryna filled in for her twice. Rick tolerated her, but though worried for her friend, she was thrilled to be his partner. And nervous.

Like tonight. She was never nervous when she performed, but she had trembled when she settled into Rick's arms earlier. Did he notice? Though he lacked the flair of a professional, he led her smoothly through the dance, keeping perfect rhythm. He seemed impressed by her performance, but his responses were carefully diplomatic. If only she could read his thoughts. She conveyed her interest subtly but had no idea if he reciprocated.

Deliberately setting these thoughts aside, she rearranged her luggage. When she moved the bag holding the slippers she had used for her solo, something small and white fell to the floor—a matchbook. She bent to pick up the item and examined it. Reading the name and address of a Polish hotel printed on the front, she frowned and flipped it open. Inside, a word was printed in a language she didn't recognize above a phrase in English: *your turn soon*. Turn for what? Was this even meant for her? How did it get in her bag?

The presence of the foreign item sent a wave of uneasiness through her. *Tato will want to know about this.* She'd called him from the hotel, but now she would have to call him again. Slowly, she opened her door and peeked into the hall. Rick had

already retrieved his phone. She couldn't wake him now. With a huff of frustration, she closed her door again.

Perhaps she should have given in to her friends' urging and bought a cell phone. No one ever believed she didn't have one. Her father, whose protectiveness borderlined on paranoia, viewed them as spy devices that made people too easy to track. He was finally forced to carry one for work, but Iryna hesitated to take the plunge. Everyone she knew was hostage to their electronic devices. There would be no going back once she acquired one.

She set a small framed photo of her parents on the nightstand next to the bed and laid the watch, the only piece of jewelry she wore, next to it. The arrangement made her feel more at home. In a room full of bittersweet memories and amid worries for Natalia, Iryna focused on a glimmer of hope. She had over a week to spend with the Carters, and she planned to make the most of it.