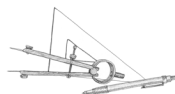


## CHAPTER 2



Rick crossed the hall to his parents' bedroom the next evening and knocked on their door.

"Come in," Beth said. He opened the door to see her lips pursed in concentration as she straightened his father's tie. Then she smiled, patted him on the chest, and turned to study her son's attire. "Oh, Rick, you look perfect!"

"And you look absolutely lovely, Mom."

"She certainly does." Rick's father, Matt, stood behind her, smiling with admiration.

Beth wore a beaded cream evening gown that perfectly suited her lightly tanned skin and blonde highlights. She twirled, grinning like a child while her husband and son gazed at her affectionately. She took both of their arms and said, "Now you two handsome men, let's go throw a party!"

As they descended the stairs, jarring notes from a variety of instruments wafted from the fourth-floor ballroom where the chamber orchestra tuned up. The house sparkled, and fresh flowers adorned nearly every surface. A cleaning crew, decorators, and caterers had been busy all day working their magic, and it showed.

The first guests were old friends, the Greens, who arrived

promptly at seven. Peters opened the door for them, dressed immaculately for his role as butler.

"Hello, Beth," Mrs. Green gushed. "I've been so excited for this evening! Thanks for including us."

"Darlene, you know I couldn't throw a party without my favorite co-hostess." Beth and Darlene chatted while her son, Andrew, and Rick exchanged pleasantries.

Many guests arrived soon after. Maids took coats and wraps. Andrew and his mother helped direct people up the stairs while Rick and his parents stationed themselves in the ballroom to form a receiving line.

The Ukrainian consul arrived with the ambassador himself, who had flown up from DC to offer an official welcome to the ballet company.

"I apologize for my bad manners in bringing an uninvited guest. I hope it is not an inconvenience." The consul bowed over Beth's hand.

"Not at all. Of course, we are delighted to have the ambassador," Beth assured. "You did exactly as I would wish."

Introductions were made. However, at the first opportunity, Beth signaled for the waitstaff to oversee the rearrangement of the dinner settings to ensure they observed diplomatic rank properly.

Rick was glad he remembered enough Ukrainian to greet the ambassador and other officials in their native language. Matt, of course, was fluent in Ukrainian and several other languages, but Beth didn't speak enough of it to be comfortable, so she used English.

A great chattering commenced below, growing louder as the voices ascended the stairs—musical voices speaking in Ukrainian, Russian, and heavily accented English—announcing the arrival of the celebrated dancers. Everyone crowded around the doorway to welcome them, and Beth grabbed Rick's arm and squeezed it in excitement. His heart pounded in sympathetic anticipation. The emotional buildup was contagious.

A young woman with raven hair, artistically arranged, appeared at the top of the stairs. High cheekbones and a creamy complexion complemented her elegant profile. Her graceful, slender figure swayed as she climbed the steps. Folds of flowing black fabric swished around her legs while a snug halter top left her arms and shoulders bare.

She was looking at the man next to her, laughing while he grinned. Her hand glided along the railing, and as she stepped onto the landing, she turned her head to survey the waiting crowd with a radiant smile. The way the rest of the company lined up behind her to offer a collective bow indicated she was the prima. This was Iryna. She turned her sparkling blue eyes on her host and hostess, and as she moved to greet them, her gaze rested briefly on Rick.

A jolt of electricity ran through him. His pulse throbbed in his ears, overwhelming all other sensations. His knees weakened as if he might actually faint. The only thing holding him together was his determination to not give his mother that satisfaction. *Breathe, man, breathe!* Now the woman was shaking his hand, and he wondered if she could feel the energy coursing through him. He was surprised there weren't visible sparks.

"It is so nice to see you again, Rrricky," she said with a slight roll of the *R*. Her accent was excellent. "You are just as perfect as ever."

Her remark caught him off guard. He replied without even knowing what he said and hoped he didn't make a complete fool of himself. Iryna's hand lingered in his for a moment before she turned away to address the ambassador. His skin tingled.

"You didn't tell me Ukrainian women were so beautiful," Andrew said, appearing behind Rick's shoulder. "Looks like I'll have to spend some time at the ballet!"

A surge of jealousy coursed through Rick, and he was saved from making a childish reply by the necessity of greeting the rest of the company. Over thirty dancers were present, plus the trainers, choreographers, and director. A number of local dancers

would support the cast. He shook hands in a daze, and by the time everyone had filed in, the room was quite full.

Beth sent a big smile Rick's way and signaled the orchestra to play the music for the first dance. Matt led Iryna to the floor while the ambassador escorted his hostess to the tune of a familiar waltz. Other couples followed, and Rick saw Andrew take the floor with a pretty blonde.

Rick downed some ice water, hoping it would cool him off a bit. The daughter of a family friend approached him, a woman who his mother had previously set him up with. Her name eluded him. He avoided asking her to dance even though it was rather rude as a host, but his eyes followed Iryna's every move. At the first opportunity, he passed the family friend off to Andrew, who appeared more than happy to dance with her.

Iryna captivated him. She floated gracefully through each dance, matching her partners' moves without showing off. Rick desperately wanted to dance with her, but admirers surrounded her like water around a fish. Even if he had been brave enough to ask, approaching her proved daunting.

He chatted for a moment with a few members of the troupe who were enjoying the appetizers. Several savory Slavic favorites were available, including something wrapped in grape leaves, and he ate one without really tasting it. Many members of the troupe were originally from Russia or Georgia, but all spoke some amount of Ukrainian, so Rick made awkward conversation with his limited vocabulary.

"What do you think of America?" he asked a circle of dancers.

A slim, athletic dancer named Maxim answered smoothly, "Oh, I am all excitement to be here. I have some ... souvenirs I am eager to acquire."

"I am enjoying the dancing," another dancer said. "The waltz is easy, but I am less familiar with the Latin dances. I have had no time to learn them, being focused solely on ballet."

"Iryna can dance them all," remarked another, waving toward the couples twirling across the floor.

"Even tap and hip-hop," Maxim said as he reached behind Rick to lift a glass of champagne from a tray.

"True, she dances everything. It is an honor to work with someone of such talent," said the second dancer. Heads nodded in agreement.

"But you knew her before us." The trainer, an articulate and well-toned woman named Katherine, smiled. She switched to English, to Rick's relief. "Didn't you live in Kyiv for a while?"

"Yes, my father was in diplomatic service for many years."

"So you must be able to tell us some interesting stories about her." Katherine raised an eyebrow and leaned in conspiratorially.

"That was a long time ago," Rick laughed. "But I do remember she was a good dancer, even then."

"Were you also in Poland? I heard your father was there during the Cold War."

Rick wondered where the trainer had heard that since it wasn't common knowledge. "No, that was before my time. We were in Kyiv for several years when I was a boy, then we returned to the States and my father worked with the consulates here in New York."

"There you arrre!" said Iryna, appearing magically before him. "You have not yet asked me to dance," she complained with feigned petulance.

"Ah," Rick said, searching for something to say, "I felt as a host that it was my duty to share you with your adoring fans." He managed his most charming smile. "But if you are free"—he bowed slightly—"it would be my honor to escort you for this next dance."

Iryna smiled and gave his arm a light squeeze before resting her hand on his. He led her to the floor and turned to face her. She slid effortlessly into his embrace, forming a perfect dance frame. His entire body tingled in awareness. The musicians

played a foxtrot, and a Sinatra-style crooner sang the lyrics to “Beyond the Sea.”

Rick stepped forward and entered a dream. Iryna followed, interpreting his lead from the slightest pressure of his hand. He limited himself to basic steps at first, to ensure his concentration and his feet didn’t slip. The vibrant reality of Iryna in his arms was enough to distract anyone.

But after one turn around the floor, he led Iryna in a promenade and performed a triple twinkle. He incorporated more complicated steps as he relaxed. He was grateful, for once, for the lessons his mother made him take so he’d be presentable at occasions such as this. *As long as she doesn’t make me talk and dance at the same time, I’ll be okay.* Luckily, Iryna focused on her movements and did not require him to speak.

At the end of the song, he spun her out then back into a dip. It was a bold move since he had not practiced it in years, but he executed it flawlessly. Those nearby applauded.

As he raised her slowly, she murmured, “How appropriate, that song.”

“Oh?”

“Now we meet on another shore,” she said cryptically. “Thank you for the dance, Ricky.” She moved away, smiling, leaving him to puzzle out what she meant.

“Bravo!” Someone clapped a hand on his shoulder. A middle-aged man named Alexei, one of the choreographers, stood next to him. He had met so many people at once it was hard to keep them all straight. “Eet can be very, ah, eentimeedating to dance weeth one as good as Iryna, but you deed verry well.”

“Thank you, but I think she would make anyone look good.”

“Oh yes, she weel make everyone look *better*, but you geeve her room to make herself look good, and not everyone can do that. You must have the good eenstincts for dance.” The man handed Rick a drink and raised his own. “*Vashee zdarovye.*”

Rick replied in kind and felt he had been given a great compliment.

As the party continued, Rick attempted to be a better host and danced with a few other honored ladies, but he knew he was inattentive. He was relieved when ten o'clock neared so they could sit down to dinner. To his surprise, his mother stood beside the musicians' platform and called for attention.

"Good evening, everyone! You are in for a special treat this evening. Iryna Shevchenko, prima ballerina of the Ukrainian National Ballet, is going to perform an interpretive dance." Mrs. Carter gestured toward Iryna, who had reappeared in the center of the floor wearing her ballet slippers.

A slight flush reddened her cheeks, but besides the fact that her nose was a little shiny, nothing betrayed the fact she had already been dancing for over two hours. The lights dimmed, and a spotlight appeared. The excited buzz that greeted the announcement fell to a reverent hush. Rick held his breath in anticipation, not wanting to miss one moment.