Moonlight in Odessa

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Extract

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Chapter 1

MR. HARMON HAD BEEN driving me mad for six months, three weeks, and two days. From Monday to Friday, nine to five. He actually timed me when I fetched our morning coffee. Best time: fifty-six seconds. It had just been made. Worst time: seven minutes forty-eight seconds. I had to prepare the coffee myself, though he insisted that I'd wasted time flirting with a security guard. Perhaps, but I was also watching the coffee perk. I always had to keep one eye on my work, the other on Mr. Harmon. If he wasn't sneaking up on me, he was listening in on my phone conversations. If he wasn't looking over my shoulder (and down my blouse), he was at his desk plotting to get his hands on me. But so far, I'd been faster.

These irritations were nothing compared to his latest machination. A month ago, he'd finally agreed to have the Internet installed on my computer. Actually, he'd been prodded by the head office in Haifa. I was dying to have it (even though I didn't know what *it* was exactly), but Mr. Harmon always found a way to stop the connection. Today, I let myself feel a glimmer of hope. Perhaps I would finally be connected to the world. The third computer technician I'd hired walked in wearing Ukrainian cool circa 1996 – carefully ironed jeans that came up past his navel and a brown leather jacket – and introduced himself with the easy smile of a man who still lived with his mother. He sat a little too close while explaining how to dial and connect; I inched my chair away, knowing it would upset Mr. Harmon. I saw flashes of his dark blazer as he paced his office, glaring out at us.

'Daria, get in heeeeere!' he bellowed.

The technician's brows rose, I rolled my eyes and excused myself.

'That man is flirting with you,' Mr. Harmon said.

True. But in Odessa, everyone jokes and flirts. It's our way. Even if I'd been a pensioner with bulging eyes and thinning hair the technician would have winked and repeated the same jokes. *Four fonts walk into a bar. The barman says, 'Get outta here! We don't serve your type.'* Or, as he patted the computer monitor on the head like a wayward child, *Be careful with this thing. Computers let you make more mistakes faster than any invention in history, with the possible exceptions of Kalashnikovs and vodka.*

'He's just doing his job.' I pointed to the man as he redialed the access number for the tenth time. Everything takes time in Ukraine. And money. If Mr. Harmon didn't dismiss this one, we would be among the first offices with Internet in all of Odessa.

'I don't like him,' Mr. Harmon said.

'You don't have to. In twenty minutes, he'll be finished and we'll never see the man again.'

'Fire him. And don't pay him! He hasn't done his job.'

'Please don't make me fire another one,' I whispered.

'Don't argue, Daria.'

Red-faced, I returned to my desk and said in Russian, 'I'm sorry. You have to go.'

The technician looked upset. 'The old boy is jealous, eh?'

I nodded. It was hard to be dependent on the fickle desires of Westerners. They had the power, we had the desperation.

'It took me over an hour to get here,' he said. 'You know how it is. I need this job. My mother … her medication –'

'I know. I'm sorry.'

'What are you whispering about out there?' Mr. Harmon yelled. 'Speak English!'

I grabbed some money from my purse and tried to pay him. He refused the bills and invited me out for a drink, his Odessan bravado restored. We are so good at faking it. Feeling Mr. Harmon's intent stare between my shoulder blades, I shook my head. 'Go. Before he calls security.'

This was not the first time that Mr. Harmon had dismissed a man for speaking to me. I'd tried to find a female technician, but

there simply weren't any. I tried to find a homely old man, but in Odessa, only young people know anything about computers. Whenever I hired a new one, Mr. Harmon paced around my desk, sniffing and growling like a bulldog at the handsome, yet interchangeable men, making sure that they weren't coveting me, his bone.

The only man he couldn't object to was Vladimir Stanislavski who was so daunting that Mr. Harmon didn't dare say a word. After all, he knew that the last person who'd been rude to the gangster had been evacuated to an emergency room in Vienna.

I sighed. Would I *ever* have Internet?

None of the other prospective employers I'd met with had came close to matching the salary that Mr. Harmon's firm, an Israeli shipping company, offered: three hundred dollars a month when the average was only thirty dollars.

During the job interview for this position, I'd actually thought that Mr. Harmon was handsome. Different. Better. Threads of silver at his temples made him seem scholarly. He wore a well-cut suit. He was shorter than me, but then most people are. He had a mustache and was rather robust, yet when his face broke into a grin, he looked so happy that he scarcely seemed older than me, though as a director, I knew he must have been nearly forty. Mr. Harmon was certainly more interesting than Ukrainian bosses. He'd traveled. He spoke English and Hebrew. His fingers were long and elegant, his teeth perfect. He smelled fresh and clean like a meadow. And – most importantly – he was foreign.

While he spoke about the job, I discreetly caressed the soft leather of the boardroom chair and marveled at everything about the room – the satiny paint, the bright lights, the sleek cordless phone. It felt as if we had left the dismal, dark former Soviet Union and arrived on Wall Street. Mr. Harmon stared at me and seemed to savor every word that came out of my mouth. He even invited me to have lunch right there in the boardroom. A middle-aged woman scurried in and laid out a fine repast on a white linen tablecloth. I'd never had cheese from France before. The Brie melted in my mouth. And the wine! After we finished the first bottle, I picked it up and placed it on the floor, since an empty

bottle on the table is bad luck. When he opened the second I noticed it had a real cork, not just a plastic stopper like our wine. The food was all so good, but the best was the hummus. It tasted like sunshine – golden, warm, and light. I closed my eyes and felt it slide down my throat.

'It's the olive oil,' he said, watching me. 'You don't have that in Odessa, I imagine. We bring all this food on our ships. If you worked here, you could eat like this every day.'

To stop myself from smiling, I rubbed my fingers on my chin as if I were carefully considering whether I wanted the position. If Boba, my grandmother, had been there, she would have grabbed my hands and put them in my lap.

'We have branches all over the world,' he continued. 'Germany. America. There's no reason a smart girl like you has to stay in the same office all her life …'

America! I couldn't believe it. I smiled, and quickly put my hand to my mouth. 'To speak English all day … It would be my dream.'

'Your English is impeccable,' he said. 'Did you study in England?'

I shook my head. No one in this country went anywhere. Didn't he know that? Everything we needed to know was learned here. He could not imagine the pains we had endured in Maria Pavlovna's class. She was a difficult mistress. Her thin gray hair pulled back into a tight bun only made her bug eyes and thin lips more prominent. She was the only Odessan I ever knew who didn't smile or joke. But we did learn with her. She scared even the biggest, baddest boys into studying. We had to memorize texts and recite them in front of the classroom. When we made a mistake, Maria Pavlovna banged her meter stick on the desk. If we slipped up again, we feared she would strike the back of our thighs. She played records on pronunciation over and over. Though. Thought. Bough. Bought. Once, when I hadn't pronounced the 'ou' sound correctly, she grabbed my jaw and pulled my lips until the sound she wanted came out.

She kept a metronome on her desk, and we recited the irregular verbs to a tick-tock that sounded faster and faster each day. Tick-tock, tick-tock. Ticktocktick. Tockticktock. Arise-arose-arisen,

begin-began-begun, break-broke-broken, burst-burst-burst and cut-cut-cut (our favorites because they stayed the same), eat-ate-eaten, fight-fought-fought, get-got-got, etc., etc., etc. Years later, the ticking of a clock still made me unbearably nervous, and when I was nervous, I couldn't stop myself from reciting her list of one hundred irregular verbs randomly in my head.

Drink-drank-drunk. My thoughts started to spin, and I put my wine glass down.

'There were no trips abroad,' I explained. 'But we had rigorous teachers.'

He frowned, which made me think perhaps he, too, knew something of discipline at school.

'The other candidates I interviewed could barely say "hello." '

I'd seen the girl he'd 'interviewed' before me. Where had he found her? The casino?

The woman returned with espresso. I inhaled the steam that billowed from the white porcelain cup. It smelled so good, so rich and dreamy, that even though I was full, my mouth began to water. Mr. Harmon handed me a square of dark chocolate. I accepted it gingerly. Of course we had such luxuries in Odessa, Mr. Harmon was wrong to say we didn't. It was just that people like me – 98 percent of the population – could not afford them. Hoping he wouldn't notice, I slipped the chocolate into my purse so that I could share it with Boba.

'Have you ever had champagne, my dear?'

I shook my head. When he ordered the woman back into the room with two snaps of his fingers and asked her to bring a bottle, I couldn't believe my luck. Wait until I told Olga and Boba that I'd had champagne, real champagne! From France! In my family, we only drank *champagnskoye* once a year, to celebrate the New Year. 'A drop of sweet *champagnskoye* makes life sweet.' That's what we say in Odessa. Everyone knows that if you don't drink *champagnskoye* on December 31, the New Year will be a disaster. Ask Boba if you don't believe me. The one time we didn't meet the New Year with *champagnskoye* was the year my mother died.

He poured the champagne. The bubbles glistened like tiny *brillianti*. Diamonds.

We clinked glasses and he proposed a toast, 'To a significant … partnership.'

Did that mean I got the job?

He watched as I took my first sip. It was bitter. I wanted to cough, but held it in. He extended his hand and I placed mine in his, feeling that our meeting was destiny. Feeling that after so much struggle and loss, something good would finally happen. Then he winked and said, 'Of course, sleeping with me is the best part of the job.'

I snatched my hand away. He'd made it sound like a joke, but he was serious. Suddenly, he resembled a walrus in a puce jacket that he'd been quick to point out was Versace. The silver threads at his temples became dull smears of gray. He was just like other men, only with shinier teeth and fancy cologne. We stared at each other. The only sound in the office was the ticking of a clock. *Weep-wept-wept. Win-won-won. Withdraw-withdrew-withdrawn. Stop it!* I shook my head. *Think!* In addition to fetching his coffee and translating his documents, was I capable of sleeping with him? Could I do *that* for a job? The thought of his meaty hands touching me made my skin crawl – I'm a vegetarian. Behind his tinted glasses, he observed me with hot black eyes, waiting for me to decide.

He'd come from Israel and quickly got used to being treated like a VIP. Many Western men came to the former Soviet Union because of the clout they had here. At home, they were invisible and barely eked out a living. Here, they were considered rich and had large apartments, cooks, cleaning ladies, and plenty of other 'ladies.' (For Odessans, everywhere from Tel Aviv to Tokyo is considered Western; geography is not dictated by the compass but rather by abundance.)

I thought of my friends. Of Olga, who had three children but no husband, no job, and no money. Of Valeria, a teacher who went to work every day but didn't get paid, like most government employees. Of Maria, a conservatory graduate who'd recently become a waitress and had to wear a skimpy skirt as part of the job. I thought of ten, twenty others. I didn't want to end up like my girlfriends, with no choices and no money. Maria, with her beautiful voice, was mistreated by her boss and the bar patrons. If I took this job, at least I would be harassed by only one man.

I'd graduated from the university six months earlier and still hadn't found a full-time position. I needed to support myself and my Boba, who'd taken care of me since I was ten. Our situation was dire – Boba's pension was only twenty dollars a month. (Ukraine had declared its independence in 1991; five years later our currency was still unstable, so we used dollars.) I shouldn't have been surprised by his proposition – it hadn't been the first. I just hadn't expected it of a Westerner. Maybe Boba was right. Maybe we were cursed. I looked at Mr. Harmon again.

Chess. There's a reason the former Soviet Union has more world champion players than any other country. Chess is strategy, persistence, cunning, and the ability to look farther into the future than an opponent. The bloodlust of killing off others, one at a time. Chess is every man for himself. Building traps and avoiding them. It is mental toughness. And sacrifice. In Odessa, life is chess. Moves. Countermoves. Feigns. Knowing your adversary and staying one step ahead of him.

I took the job.

An hour after the interview, I found myself wandering around the city center on trembly legs. What had I done? If only I could afford to sit at a café and have a tea, just the time to collect my thoughts. Home seemed so far away. I found myself walking towards the sea, towards Jane. She was so positive, so encouraging – like no one else I knew. Odessans are fatalists and pessimists. Whenever I spoke of travel, my friends would say, 'Wake up! There's a reason they call it the American dream.' My Boba's friends shook their heads at me and said, 'Horses dream of sugar,' the Odessan way of saying that good things are for other people. With Jane, I could talk about my hopes and dreams and she made me believe that they would come true. Her flat in the city center, only three blocks from the sea, was a haven, a heaven. High ceilings, parquet floor, a balcony with grape vines. She had her own kitchen, her own space. No one else our age lived independently. Maybe it was easier to be an optimist when you had so much.

An *Americanka* who'd come to perform what she called 'community service,' Jane had tried to teach Odessan pupils about democracy. She lived like she'd never learned the meaning of the

word 'no.' She wore trousers to school. It was as if she didn't know that it was against the rules for females – even the teachers – to wear them. I'd seen her win a shouting match with a bureaucrat *and* punch a corrupt cop! I kept a notebook of words and phrases she taught me. Awesome. Cool. Fuck. Whatever. It's easier to ask forgiveness than it is to ask permission. Go for it. Just do it. Her vocabulary was as colorful as her red hair. And the stories she told. I loved hearing about America. Even her impressions of Odessa were interesting to me. In this shady city famous for its shades of gray, Jane saw only black and white. She made life seem so … uncomplicated.

I slipped into the courtyard and tiptoed into her building, but the babushka on the first floor heard me anyway and opened her door a crack.

In Odessa, there is always someone watching.

'Going to see Janna?' she asked.

'*Da*,' I replied, though it was none of her business.

'Well, don't stay too long. She needs her rest. The poor thing's been packing all day.'

I didn't need a reminder that my dear friend was going home. I walked up to the third floor. Jane opened the door before I could knock.

'How did the interview go?' she asked and pulled me inside.

'I got the job.'

'Awesome!' she said and hugged me tight. She put on the tea kettle and we sat at her table. The pure joy on her face, the way she said, 'I've been so worried about you and I was leaving and felt like I was totally abandoning you. But now I know you'll be okay.'

'I'll miss you,' I said, looking into the living room at the piles of clothes and books – her two years in Odessa reduced to two suitcases. 'You're so different from my other friends.'

'Friends,' she snorted. 'I know they mean well, but don't listen to them, especially not to that Olga. Don't listen to anybody.'

'You're right …'

' "Nothing I do matters. Nothing ventured, nothing lost," ' she mimicked the fatalist Odessan refrains. 'No. Don't let the bastards get you down. You need to believe in yourself. Not your Odessan superstitions, not your Boba's curses, not fate. Yourself. You're stronger than you think you are.'

'I'm not so sure …'

'Believe it. I would have died without you. I was so lonely and scared when I got here, but you called every evening, you helped me learn Russian, you taught me all I needed to know about Odessan men …'

We laughed.

She stroked my cheek. 'God, what would I have done without you? I'll miss you. But now I know you'll be fine. You've got a good job. No, a great job. You'll be speaking English all day, your dream.'

'Do you think my English is good enough?'

'Hell, yes. You speak better than most native speakers. Your vocabulary is better than mine. You've mastered the language. You even know differences in British and American English. I'm telling you, you know more than I do. Remember how disappointed my colleagues were when they learned I was "only an American" as they put it? When they were disappointed because I didn't speak "real English," who helped me learn the vocabulary?'

I basked in the glow of her praise. And decided to quiz her. 'What's a "flat"?'

'An apartment,' she shot back.

'Queue!'

'A line. Or to wait in line.' She squeezed my hand. 'What would I have done without you?'

We sat in silence and doubt crept back.

'But what about my accent?'

'How many times do I have to tell you? Everyone has an accent. I have an accent – you can tell right away I'm American. British people have accents. Canadians have accents. Yours is almost imperceptible – that's not something New Yorkers can say!'

I laughed. She knew how to put a person at ease.

'My God! Think about it. You'll be earning a huge salary. You'll probably be running the place within a year. I'm so proud of you.'

So how could I tell her the truth? That nothing in Odessa is entirely good. That this contract had a cost. For excellent-paying jobs, candidates paid a bribe, which Odessans called 'an investment.' And with this position, my investment would be more personal and painful than most.