

CHAPTER 1

Portofino, Italy, July 1995

The evening was beautiful, as July evenings can't help being in Portofino. An assortment of elegantly dressed guests of mixed ages and nationalities populated the veranda of the Hotel Splendido. Dan Ze'evi sank into one of the luxurious armchairs provided by the hotel for its guests, deep in thought, fantasizing about how his business trip would fix all of his company's problems. Little wonder then that a stranger's unexpected question failed to register.

Coming out of his reverie, he lifted his gaze, expecting to see a waitress pushing drinks at him as before. Instead, there was an elegant young woman before him, who was anything except a waitress. *An heiress is more like it*, he thought. She was slim and of medium height, with auburn hair and piercing green eyes.

"Are you waiting for me?" she asked. She was so beautiful, and he wanted to say yes until it hurt.

"I'm afraid not, unless you're a middle-aged businessman in

disguise who has shaved his mustache,” he responded instead, surprised at his own uncharacteristic wit.

She flashed a smile at him, wiggling the tip of her nose as a bonus. “You’re Dan Ze’evi, right?”

He felt the smile leave his lips. “How do you know my name?” he said, jumping to his feet in a late show of politeness.

“I’m waiting for Andrey Leskov too,” she said. “He called to say he was running late and that he would arrive in Italy tomorrow. He asked me to seek you out and make sure that you got the message.”

“Oh...do you work for him?” he asked.

“You could say that.”

“Doing...?”

“I don’t think that we should talk shop tonight. Not before Andrey arrives,” she answered.

Her long hair was arranged into a casual ponytail. Her whole girl-next-door look, free from any noticeable makeup, made her an unlikely candidate for a Leskov business representative.

“Are you allowed to say your name, or is that off limits too?” he asked after a brief silence.

“I am Claire Williams,” she said, blinding him with another smile and offering him a hand to shake. “Nice meeting you, Dan.”

“The pleasure is all mine...”

“I hope not,” she said, and she made it sound as if she meant it. She sat beside Dan and he sank slowly back into his armchair, seeking for something to say to keep the conversation going.

The house musician had taken over the piano and was singing old Sinatra songs. A couple who looked like royalty on a

honeymoon were dancing like pros. Dan looked around. He was out of his element and would never have spent the kind of money that the Splendido charged its guests had it not been for Leskov's invite. But since his host was footing the bill, he could be grand, he reminded himself with a chuckle.

"Would you like a drink?" he asked.

She waved the waiter over without answering and ordered lemon vodka. Dan opted for another whiskey sour, an ill-advised choice for someone not well used to drinking. *Pretty good stuff*, he thought with appreciation after gulping down his second one. He seldom drank much, but he had to keep his hands busy with something because Claire's presence was making him nervous. Something was wrong with his hands—he couldn't figure out what, but they were sweating.

Dan wasn't a self-conscious person as a rule, but he had never been more aware that his belly was starting to show a hint of a bulge. Though he had shaved that morning, the feeling of the bristles on his face made him wonder if his appearance was unkempt. And he suddenly realized that his jeans were old-fashioned and his sneakers were worn down at the heels. He had felt at ease until Claire had come along, but she had somehow managed to make him feel ill-suited for their elegant surroundings. The second drink had helped that. But now he was woozy and in danger of making a fool of himself by throwing up on the floor.

"I...I need some fresh air," he gasped.

Claire took a step back and nodded. "I expected that you would by now," she said. "Come with me."

The fresh air on the balcony did wonders for Dan. His head cleared a bit and the glass of ice-cold water that Claire had

brought him from the bar sobered him some more.

“You shouldn’t be drinking if you’re not used to it,” she said, sounding either reproachful or amused—he wasn’t sure which.

“It’s that evident, eh?”

“Uh-huh,” she agreed, nodding for emphasis.

“I’m okay now,” he said. “Embarrassed, but otherwise okay.”

“Are you up to walking?” she asked.

“I think so.”

“Then let’s take a walk down to the garden. The path that leads to the harbor is steep, but it’s a beautiful evening and it would be a shame to waste it.”

“Good idea,” he said, getting up. He was still a bit uncertain on his feet, but he hid it as best as he could.

They walked down the path until they reached the edge of the garden, where stone steps led down to the harbor. There she stopped.

“Let’s catch our breath here for a moment. It’s a magnificent view,” she said.

“It is...”

“Your accent is what, German?”

“No, Israeli. Hebrew is my mother tongue.”

“So tell me about yourself.”

Dan paused, considering how to present himself in the best possible light. “I’m an electronics engineer,” he said at last. “I design underwater communication equipment...for divers, you know?”

“I don’t, really. I’m a mountain girl myself. But go on,” she urged him.

“I have this small company in Tel Aviv...in Israel. It’s only

me and a couple of other guys—and this year I decided to go to CeBIT’95, last March in Hannover, Germany.”

“I’ve heard about CeBIT. It’s a big electronics fair, isn’t it?”

“Huge. I spent a small fortune—for me, at least—but I didn’t get much out of it and went back home rather low-spirited. Then, last month out of nowhere, Andrey Leskov’s representative comes and says that he wants to invest in my company. I gather he’s rich.”

“Oh, yes. He’s rolling in it.”

“How is he? As a person, I mean,” Dan asked.

“You know, I think you need to form your own opinion. He may impress different people in different ways.”

“Am I imagining it, or are you avoiding answering my questions?”

“You are imagining it,” Claire said, flatly. “We need to go back now. Tomorrow it’ll be an early start and you need to sleep it off.”

She turned her back to him and strode back up the garden path.

“Hey!” Dan called after her, “Slower, please. I’m still a bit shaky on my legs.”

Claire stopped ahead to wait for him. “Be careful not to break a leg. Tomorrow is your big day.”

“You didn’t tell me anything about yourself,” Dan said when he reached her.

“That’s correct,” she said, and started walking again.

CHAPTER 2

New York City, January 1995

Claire almost missed his figure, standing in the dimly lit hallway. Mr. Jones—Jack, as he had begged her to call him—looked even smaller and more frail than she remembered from the last time they had met a few days before.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Jack,” she said as he tugged at the sleeve of her heavy winter coat. “I didn’t see you. I’m so absentminded these days...”

The old man smiled a quick, sad smile that seemed to express his resignation at being unnoticeable. “Will you come up for tea later?”

“I have some work to pick up...” she began, but the imploring look in his eyes made her stop. “But I guess I’ll be back by five o’clock. Five okay with you, young man?” she asked, trying to lighten the atmosphere.

“I’ll be waiting for you,” he said, nodding. He let go of her sleeve. Even holding the cloth looked like a painful deed for his

hands, which age and arthritis had deformed without mercy.

“I’ll be there,” she said, trying to sound as enthusiastic as she could manage.

Mr. Jones nodded again and shifted his gaze from her face to the floor. Claire nodded too, but more to herself than to him. She opened the door and walked out into the frosty morning.

Claire had met Mr. Jones for the first time five months earlier, when she had moved into the old building where he lived. The building was in bad repair, with the heating system breaking down more often than not—but the rent was cheap, and its location in a safe part of town made up for its many flaws. For Claire, who kept odd hours at the advertising agency where she worked as a graphic designer, it was a perfect fit. The agency was only three blocks away.

Mr. Jones lived in the attic, two floors above Claire’s flat, which the owner had converted into a tiny apartment. She had had a long tea session with Jack not long after moving in and had heard the story of his life—or, as she later discovered, the least interesting part of it—and how he had happened to end up so far away from his native Ireland. She liked the old man—he was eighty-seven years old—and he had made no secret of his fondness for her. He often waited for her in the hallway to catch her on her way to work, giving her oranges or peeled apple quarters. That always brought up fond memories of her mother, who used to wait for her at the door back home in Colorado, to make sure that she would take a bite on her way to school.

Mr. Jones’ apartment, which seemed carved out of another dimension, had a kitchen that doubled as a living room, an ancient sofa next to a small window, and a bedroom to which one acceded through a door squeezed between the sofa and a

wood-fire stove. When Mr. Jones opened the door for Claire on that winter afternoon, the kettle was already starting to whistle with perfect timing. She took off her coat, which he laid in an orderly manner on the sofa, and he motioned her to sit at the table. After a few words of welcome, he placed tea and butter cookies before her and they drank in awkward silence.

“Your place is really cozy,” said Claire, to make conversation. “I see that you still keep the wood for the stove outside the apartment, near the log with the ax. Are the neighbors still coming up to split wood for you? I’d like to do that too. This January is colder than ever. Do you have enough wood to get by?”

Seeing that her prattle wasn’t getting any reaction from Mr. Jones, she stopped and waited. “What’s on your mind, Jack?” she asked after a while.

He looked at her with his watery blue eyes for a few seconds before speaking. “Tell me a bit about yourself, Claire,” he said at last. “How did you wind up in New York?”

Claire didn’t like to talk about herself. She took a deep breath, becoming suddenly aware of the smell of incense. It came from a candle burning before the portrait of a severe-looking woman in her sixties that Claire knew was Jack’s late wife. “Well,” she said eventually, “after my brother’s nineteenth birthday, when he decided to enlist in the army, there wasn’t much left for me to do in our hometown. I’d been taking care of him—of both of us—since my mother died, but at that point...our hometown felt too small for me...and there were other reasons too.”

Claire didn’t feel like expanding on those and was happy that Jack let it go.

“And your father?”

“He died six years before my mother. Skiing accident.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. I didn’t know. You’re from Colorado, right?”

Of course you didn’t know, Claire wanted to say. *How could you?* She hadn’t expected that she would have to bring up unhappy memories at afternoon tea. She wished she could change the subject.

“Yes. I’m from a small mountain town. Our family owned a hardware store that kept my brother and me going. I sold it and the house, and with my half I managed to get through design school. So now here I am, almost twenty-seven years old and struggling to get by. But I’m not complaining—I’ve been on my own since I was eighteen. I’m used to it.”

She spoke matter-of-factly, without a hint of bitterness. Mr. Jones nodded in appreciation, as if she had just recounted some commendable accomplishment.

“You’re strong, Claire. You’re doing fine and you’ll be all right.”

“Do you think so?” said Claire. She felt a strange need for his approval. She had been forced to become an adult at too young an age and sometimes missed a parent’s support. Jack’s fatherly demeanor made him a good candidate for a shoulder to cry on, she thought, if she should ever indulge in self-pity.

“I’m sure of it. I think I’m a good judge of character. You’re a good person...perhaps too good,” Jack said, choking on the words. He lowered his head in embarrassment.

“What’s the matter, Jack?” Claire asked apprehensively.

He kept his silence for a few more moments, then lifted his head and pursed his lips. “I’m old, Claire, and I don’t have much time left,” he said.

“Oh, nonsense!” she rebuked him. She tried in vain to find

something to say that wouldn't sound too much like a cliché. He shook his head and struggled for more words, as if wanting them to linger in his mouth.

"No, I mean it," he said at last. "My days are numbered. I can feel it in my bones. My body is getting ready for it and is warning me...How considerate of it," he added with open sarcasm. He made an effort to smile.

Claire felt a lump in her throat, and her fingers instinctively took the old man's thin hand. His bones felt as fragile as those of a bird's wing, and she held his hand in a gentle grip for fear of breaking them.

"Don't worry," she said, immediately regretting the stupid words.

"Oh, I'm not afraid of dying," he said, and she knew that he meant it. "I'm about ready to go and I have nothing to hang on to life for. But I'm scared of dying alone. I'm terrified at the thought that I will die here, all by myself, and nobody will know—nobody will care..."

His voice broke, and he swallowed as in an effort to regain composure.

"You told me that you have a daughter," Claire managed, relieved that she had been able to recall that detail from an earlier conversation.

"My daughter," said Mr. Jones with a sigh. "She is busy with her life and there is no room in it for me. She's ashamed of her father, of my poverty."

"Don't say that!" said Claire, her voice breaking, "I'm sure that she's not ashamed of you. There's nothing to be ashamed of."

"Claire," he said, this time speaking without hesitation, "will you sit with me while I die?" She turned with a jerk to face

him, her eyes wide. “Please? I know it’s a huge favor to ask of you, but it won’t be for nothing...”

“I don’t want anything,” Claire said quickly.

“But I want to give you something—something truly important. It’s nothing tangible. It’s not money. It’s knowledge that has an immense value for the right person. I want you to have it. I don’t want it to be lost when I die.”

He gazed at her intently. As she hesitated, he said, “Please,” again, in a low, pleading voice.

Claire couldn’t find the courage to reject his gift, whatever it was. She swallowed, putting on a brave face.

“I’ll take it. Thank you, Jack.”