

THERE ARE WORSE PEOPLE

*CAUGHT BETWEEN CULTURES,
WILL THEIR LOVE BRIDGE THE DIVIDE?*



I R I N A A N G E L O V A

THERE ARE
WORSE PEOPLE

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SAMPLE CHAPTER

Prologue

I HEAR THE SOFT CREAK of the door behind me, but I don't move. My back is pressed against the cold stone wall of the little alcove I've found, hidden away from the party and the swirl of embarrassment that comes from the last seven years of questionable life choices. I'm trying to hold it together, trying to keep the tears from spilling over. It's so inconvenient, such terrible timing!

Then I hear Jesse's footsteps, steady and unhurried, as he approaches. He doesn't say anything at first, just lets the silence settle around us like a blanket. I can feel him close now, the warmth of his presence against the cold that's been seeping into my bones.

"Ilaria," he says softly, and there's something in his voice that makes the lump in my throat grow even bigger. I want to ignore him, brush him off with some excuse about needing a moment alone, but the truth is, I don't want to be alone. Not now. Not after that.

I finally look up, meeting his gaze. His eyes are filled with concern, and when he steps closer, I don't flinch away. He's

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always known how to be close without overwhelming me, how to offer support without smothering me.

"You know you don't have to tolerate any of this," he says, his voice a low rumble that somehow makes the space of the nook feel smaller, safer.

"I know," I whisper, my voice trembling despite my best efforts to keep it steady. "But it's not that simple, Jesse. It's ..."

"You don't owe them anything," he continues, his voice soft but firm.

I bite my lip, my vision blurring again. "I know that, but they're—"

"They're nothing," he interrupts, the rare edge in his voice slicing through my thoughts. "They don't get to make you feel like this."

His words break something in me, like a dam I've been holding back, pressing against it with shoulders that suddenly feel small, shaky, and powerless. A tear slips down my cheek, and before I can wipe it away, he's there, his thumb brushing it aside—gentle, almost reverent. It's the smallest of touches, but it undoes me completely. I squeeze my eyes shut, letting the tears fall freely now, feeling the walls close in around me as I start to crumble.

And that's when he pulls me in. Strong arms wrap around my shoulders, pressing me to his chest like he's afraid the flood from the broken dam will pull me under if he lets go. I want to protest, to push him away, to tell him I'm fine, but I can't. I just can't. Instead, I let myself collapse against him, let myself feel the steady rise and fall of his breath, the heartbeat that thuds calmly under my ear. It's grounding, this quiet connection, this wordless understanding that he's here, that he's not going anywhere.

I inhale deeply, catching a hint of his cologne—woody and clean—blended with the scent of his skin, which my nervous system has already labeled as "home," "safe," "mine," and "an absolute euphoric pleasure." It settles my racing thoughts, anchoring me to the present, to him. And suddenly, the rest of the world feels far away, like a bad dream I can wake up from.

His hand moves to the back of my head, fingers threading through my hair, soothing and tender.

“If you’d let me handle it my way ...” His voice tightens with a controlled edge that makes me glance up at him quickly. His jaw is clenched, and there’s a hard glint in his eyes—protective, almost angry. It’s a side of him I’ve seen before, the side that makes me feel safe but also terrified of what he might do if I let him.

Is he talking about a genius business move or a nasty fistfight? Either way ...

“No,” I say, shaking my head, even as a part of me craves what he’s offering. “I don’t want you to get caught up in this dirt.”

His expression doesn’t soften. If anything, his eyes grow darker, his grip on me tightening as though he’s trying to hold back everything he wants to unleash. “Ilaria, I’m already in this. You know that.”

I know he is. I know what he means—he’s in it because I am. He can’t stay away.

He must see the conflict in my eyes because his grip loosens slightly. “Let me take you home,” he says, his voice softening. “We’ll grab Milan, and we’ll go.”

I nod against his chest and stay there, letting myself be held. Just for a moment longer, I allow myself to be small, to be fragile, to let someone else be strong for me.

1

Two weeks ago

I 'VE ALWAYS BEEN A FOREIGNER.
When I was teaching English in a Chinese city of fifty thousand people, visitors at the food court would film me eating noodles—every single time I was eating them. Or eating anything at all.

When I worked as a tour guide in India for three tourist seasons in a row, my Indian acquaintances invited me to weddings simply because I had blonde hair and gray eyes.

When I worked as a translator in Malta, local men at a business lunch speculated about my breast size, assuming I didn't understand Maltese. How could they have known that, from my very first day, I was having morning coffee with my landlady and quickly picked up the curse words, numbers, and essential tourist phrases? My linguistically trained brain swiftly absorbed phonemes and discerned patterns in the flow of speech, allowing me to see each new country through the lens of its language.

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I was a foreigner when I married a Macedonian after three months of dating and plunged headfirst into traditions completely unfamiliar to me, hoping to learn to swim along the way.

Today, after seven years in Macedonia, I still haven't learned to swim. Though one could say I have—I'm easily spotted in a crowded pool of a hundred people: my swim cap is odd, my technique is off, my breathing unsteady. And I have to wear arm floaties. I remain a foreigner, just as I was before. Neither a local passport, nor owning property in my name, nor my heartfelt love for Balkan cuisine has made me Macedonian.

And now, once again, I messed things up: I put the dessert out too early.

"We don't offer sweets to guests right away," my mother-in-law complained, taking the box of wafer rolls from my hands. "They'll think you're trying to send them home!"

"Wasn't that about coffee?" I tried to recall the set of rules I thought had imprinted on my brain over the past years.

"No coffee, no dessert until the end of the visit!" she reminded me in a sharp whisper.

"Okay, I've got to go," I replied irritably, squeezing past her on my way to the living room, where her cousin's son and his wife sat, having dropped by unannounced. I never got used to such visits, though I'd learned to pretend I didn't mind. I'm not the one who'll have to deal with them anyway.

I apologized, explaining that work was waiting—thankfully, it was a weekday, and I had every reason to use work as an excuse. No one needed to know that my schedule was as flexible as I needed it to be. I'll take that fact with me to the grave.

I grabbed my laptop bag, slipped on my high-heel sandals, and within fifteen minutes, I was exactly where I wanted to be.

"Ilaria!" The waiter at my favorite café, Tuscany, waved at me as soon as I walked in. I liked this Macedonian openness that allowed Petar to greet me loudly, even with other customers around.

"How are you?" I asked as I settled into my usual spot by the window. Though there wasn't really a window—the glass wall had been slid open, turning the entire café into one big

summer terrace. That's a pity. I had hoped to escape the July heat in the dry, air-conditioned comfort.

"I ordered some T-shirts for Milan," Petar boasted, flashing a youthful smile. He loved dressing like a teenager, despite being several years older than me. He also apparently intended to help my son cultivate a taste in clothes at five years old.

"You've got to stop spoiling us," I tried to sound stern as I set up my computer on the table and plugged it into the charger.

"I want him to be the trendiest guy in town," he said, showing me the H&M t-shirts that had seemingly been handed over to the delivery service.

"He still won't outdo you," I smirked, silently vowing to be the best aunt to Petar's future kids—if he ever has any. But first, he might want to try dating someone for more than a month.

My laptop hummed softly as I began to work. The café was quiet, with only a few patrons scattered around—mostly fashionable grandpas sipping coffee and puffing on cigarettes, and a couple of moms spending another afternoon of maternity leave, rocking prams and picking at their salads.

I glanced up, noticing Petar sitting down to eat as he often did during this time of day. But today, he wasn't alone. A man sat across from him, someone I had never seen before. He had a strong, imposing figure, with a face that seemed to belong to someone I should recognize but didn't. His dark hair was neatly styled, and his broad shoulders filled the chair as though it had been built for him.

I tried to focus on the document on my screen, my fingers tapping out corrections with mechanical precision. But the low murmur of their conversation reached my ears, making concentration difficult.

"So, how's life in Japan?" Petar's voice carried easily from their table, which was just a meter away. "How are your parents?"

The man responded, his voice a deep rumble. "Japan was ... different. Good, but it's good to be home. My parents are fine; they got a dog."

I forced my attention back to the words on my screen and managed to keep it there for just a few minutes longer.

“No way!” the man exclaimed, his voice tinged with surprise. My fingers froze over the keyboard. What could Petar have told him to elicit such a reaction?

Stefan.

The name slipped into my mind unbidden, and with it came a cold, sticky feeling of dread. My throat tightened, and I forced myself to take a deep breath. *Stop it*, I told myself. There are a thousand things Petar could have told him. The world doesn’t revolve around Stefan or my personal drama.

Until I heard Petar say it. “That’s his wife.”

At that moment, I was a foreigner again—not just in this town, not just in this country, but in my own skin.

Petar didn’t even try to make it less awkward. He introduced us with the same exuberance he always had. “Ilaria, this is Jesse. He went to school with Stefan. He just got back from Japan. And Jesse, this is Ilaria.”

Jesse’s eyes didn’t leave mine as he studied me for a moment longer, making me even more self-conscious. Does this blouse make me look more Macedonian or less? Are these pants too tight on my thighs? Does the expression on my face give away the outraged discomfort I’m feeling right now?

Finally, Jesse spoke, his voice soft but steady. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

I nodded stiffly, not trusting myself to say anything more. The words had become a tired refrain, a platitude that lost meaning the more I heard it. I turned my attention back to my screen, hoping the conversation would end there.

But then Petar was summoned by another customer, leaving us alone. Jesse took the opportunity to continue, his tone shifting from formal to familiar. “Stefan was a great man. We were close in school. I spent a lot of time at his place.”

I clenched my jaw. How many times had I heard this before? How many people had come out of the woodwork, claiming some special connection to Stefan, as if that gave them a right to my grief?

“How’s Aunt Vesna?” Jesse asked, his voice almost nostalgic.

I thought back to today's dessert mishap, to the strained interactions with Stefan's mother. "She's fine," I replied, my tone clipped. "Babysitting her grandchildren."

"Right," Jesse said, his expression brightening. "How's Lazar?"

My mind raced. How much should I tell this man, this stranger who had somehow become a part of my life story without my consent? I certainly wouldn't share the mess of my relationship with Stefan's brother, or how my in-laws won't let me sell the property my own husband left me, or how I still have to share the same living space with them, or how they're fucking hypocrites. Or how despite all of this, my son loves them blindly because he's too pure or too young to see what I see. So, I just said, "Lazar's fine, too," my voice devoid of emotion.

I hoped I was making myself clear that I wasn't into small talk. People usually expected me to ask them questions in return. The only problem was, I never cared to. I didn't even really care to answer theirs in the first place, but that seemed like a line of unnecessary rudeness I wasn't willing to cross.

Luckily, Petar returned and asked me what I wanted to have, and I ordered an iced macchiato, hoping the cold drink would help me focus. But when Petar brought it over, I forgot myself, slipping into a tone I only used with people I trusted.

"When are you going to close the sliding wall?" I asked, my voice carrying a hint of irritation. "It's sweltering in here."

Petar, unfazed, grinned at me. "At 2 pm, ma'am, you know the drill!"

I huffed, not because I expected him to change anything, but because I needed to vent, and we usually vented to each other. I was about to make a quip when Jesse suddenly spoke up.

"Can't you close it now?" he asked Petar, his tone firm.

Petar shook his head apologetically. "Manager's orders. At 2 pm, bro."

Jesse frowned, clearly not satisfied. "Your customer is uncomfortable. Don't you guys think you should do something about that?"

I felt a knot of guilt tighten in my stomach. I hadn't meant for this to become an issue. "Really, it's fine," I interjected, trying to diffuse the situation. "I was just teasing him."

But Jesse wasn't letting it go. "You're a regular here, aren't you? You should be able to ask for the AC if you need it."

I blinked, taken aback by his insistence. "I only order a coffee and work here for hours. I don't think that qualifies as being a real customer."

"Do you come here often?" he asked, his eyes locking onto mine with a determination that made my pulse quicken.

Primal resolve flickered beneath the shadow of his dark lashes, like he already knew the answer but wanted me to say it, just so he could follow up with whatever urgent conclusion was poised on the tip of his tongue.

I hesitated, watching Petar move towards the back office. God, I hope he's not really bringing the manager. "Every day," I mumbled.

"Well, that's 2,400 denars a month," Jesse calculated quickly. "Unless they want to lose a regular to the coffee shop across the road, where the AC's on all day, they should take good care of you."

The way he said *"take good care of you"* sent an unexpected shiver down my spine. His voice was so assured, so resolute, that I couldn't help but react. My skin prickled with a mix of irritation and something I didn't want to acknowledge.

"Do they teach this in Japan?" The words slipped out before I could stop them.

Jesse looked startled. "What?"

"To solve other people's problems without them asking first?"

For a moment, we just stared at each other. Jesse's face shifted, confusion mingling with something else. I couldn't tell, and I didn't want to think about it. The guilt was already gnawing at me, making me regret the outburst. Here came the unnecessary rudeness.

"Sorry," I muttered, quickly gathering my things. I didn't look at him again as I packed my laptop and slipped it into my bag. "I have to go."

As I hurried out of the café, it wasn't until I was halfway home that I realized I hadn't paid for my coffee.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Irina Angelova has moved between countries her entire life, to the point where she's not sure where home really is. Pieces of her heart belong to Japan, Malta, China, India, and Macedonia. Currently, Irina lives in North Macedonia, raising her two children and two dogs, and loving her husband, while working as a pedagogical designer and content creator. This work gives her the freedom to write whenever and wherever she wants—often, like a true writer, in a coffee shop with her laptop in hand.