

## Language of love

It was her first day at work at *Ukrainian Reconstructions Pty Ltd*. She had excelled in her Architectural degree and towards the end of the previous year, when she had applied for a job with them after her exams were over, she had been hired. However, she had lived in eastern Ukraine, so she had not met any of the staff personally because all her interviews had been done by Zoom, so she was looking forward to meeting her fellow workers. Her desk was in the centre of their open plan office and all she had on it was her computer which she sat looking at.

She had arrived early to work so she could become familiar with her new surroundings. She was scheduled for an appointment in half an hour to talk to their personnel department which was to be followed by a meeting with her supervisor to discuss a project they wanted her to work on.

Her new employer made it clear that they were keen to have her in their organisation but asked that she learn Ukrainian. While day-to-day she spoke Russian, she was also fluent in English thanks to her mother who had been a translator before marrying her father and who insisted that they speak the language at home on a regular basis.

She could hear two men arguing so she went to see what was wrong. She navigated herself to the cubical where they were and she could see them with a toy that they seemed to be having difficulty putting together. They continued arguing but they were speaking Ukrainian so she could not understand what they were saying.

She knew the toy as her nephew had one at home. When they saw her they stopped and spoke to her, but again she didn't understand, so she pointed to the toy and then to herself and they pushed it over to her. She pulled it apart and then she picked up the package it came in and when she shook it, another small part fell out. She put it in the toy, reassembled it and handed it back to them.

The men looked at each other and then continued to talk to each other. They looked like brothers, they were both good looking and they both wore wedding rings.

"You not speak Ukrainian. You speak English?" said the taller one in English.

"Yes. I have not started to learn Ukrainian yet," she replied, "I didn't mean to disturb you, I heard you arguing so I came over to see what you were fighting about."

"We not fighting, I was telling my little brother he an idiot and he say I a moron. We couldn't put a kids toy together so it seems this time we both right. Thank you for helping us", he said.

He then turned to his brother and spoke to him and they both laughed.

"My name is Danylo Bilenko and the idiot here is my younger brother Danov," he said and Danov immediately punched him in his arm.

"Not idiot," he said. Danylo grabbed his brother and holding him in a headlock he kissed him on his forehead.

He kept hold of Danov. "I not have seen. No, I have not seen you before so you new?" he asked.

"I arrived in Crimea on Saturday and this is my first day. My name is Daniela Zelensky but I am not related to the President," she replied.

He let go of his brother and they both shook hands with her. Then Danov kept looking at her.

"Welcome," said Danylo and when Danov was silent, he punched him in his shoulder and gave him a serious look.

Danov then smiled. "Welcome here. Good to work," he said.

"The toy is for his child's third birthday, but he has never seen him, so he is sending it to his ex-wife's sister. His wife went to Poland when she was pregnant and she married her host. He has not reconstructed ... Sorry, I have to find

the word. He has not recovered as he loved her," he said. There was another lively discussion in Ukraine and the older brother pointed to Danov's wedding ring. Danov immediately covered his left hand with his right one. He then picked up the toy and put it in the box he had brought with him and sitting down he pushed it under his desk.

She looked at Danylo and then at Danov. "Tell him that I am sorry to hear it. It happened a lot during the war. It wasn't something people thought about when they sent their wives and families away. The consequences of the war will extend for a long time. I want to design beautiful buildings. That will be my contribution to help heal our country."

Danylo turned to his brother and translated what she said into Ukrainian.

Danov continued to look at her. "Zank you, Daniela Zelensky," he said and he smiled again.

Danylo turned to Daniela again. "My idiot brother is not spending enough time learning English. Perhaps you help him? Maybe he help you with Ukrainian?"

"Not idiot," said Danov, but this time he smiled. "You hep me, I hep you?" he said looking at her.

"Yes," she said.

"You petty," said Danov.

Danylo spoke to his brother again, and this time he pulled his ear.

"Sorry, you pretty," said Danov.

The men smiled at each other and Danylo put his arm around his younger brother's shoulder and this time he kissed him on the top of his head. Danov jumped up and they started to wrestle again, so she left them to it.

She didn't see them again that day, but Danov came looking for her the next morning.

"Tonight?" he said, "English? I feed you?" he said.

She noticed that his wedding ring was no longer on his finger and he saw her looking at it. "Three years so I move on," he said, "Danylo got ring. He like you for me. Hit me not hurt me. Convince me," he said, showing his fist and pointing to his shoulder. "Good brother. You pretty and smart. Make toy Ok."

He could see she was smiling so he handed her a note that he had written which gave a time and his apartment number. She looked at it and she put it in her purse.

"I see you," he said, "Feed you."

They continued smiling at each other before he left.

Apartments came with their contracts and were within walking distance of the main building. His apartment was located on the floor below hers. She wondered if he was what they called 'damaged goods' and how much emotional baggage he carried because of his wife and child and even the war. She was attracted to him, but there were plenty of men to choose from at *Ukraine Reconstructions*, and she was in no hurry to settle down, so she decided she that would keep her distance and not encourage him in any way.

As she approached his apartment she could smell the delicious aroma of traditional Ukrainian food. His door was open and she knocked on the door frame and called his name before walking inside. He came out of his kitchen and he hurried over to her and putting his arms around her, he passionately kissed her. He then led her to the table and he pulled a chair out for her to sit on.

He handed her a glass of wine and he looked at her. "Zank you for coming", he said, "First we eat, then we English."

He had some flowers on the table which was set up for their meal. He put three open dishes of food in the centre of it, next to some sliced bread, and he pointed to them one at a time. She nodded to all three of them, so he ladled them into a bowl carefully keeping them separate and handed it to her and he did the same for himself.

He watched her as she ate and he could see that she was enjoying the food. When her bowl was empty, he pointed again, but she shook her head to indicate she didn't want anymore. "You're an excellent cook. The food was delicious," she said.

He removed everything from the table and wiped it clean. He then brought out his lessons books along with his computer and they sat side by side.

"One lesson, two maybe three feeds," she said smiling. He looked at her before his eyes lit up. "I understand. Slowly I learn".

She turned on his computer and he entered his password and they started at 'Lesson 1'.

At nine o'clock, they heard a knock on the door frame and Danov called out "Come in moron."

Danylo entered and walked towards Danov who immediately covered his shoulder with his hand. His brother laughed and headed for the kitchen and Danov continued repeating the sentence he was working on.

Danylo came over with mugs of coffee for them all.

"How is idiot little brother going," he asked her.

"You are very pretty," said Danov looking at her.

Daniela smiled. "He is learning fast," she said, "I thought I would start on the important sentences." They all laughed when she said it.

"She is very pretty and funny," he said looking at his older brother.

"I didn't teach him that sentence," she said smiling.

Danylo could see that his brother was happy. He had taken losing his wife hard. When he looked around the room all the photos of her had been removed, which he had insisted that his brother do before Daniela came to his apartment.

Danov's former wife was a model and she was incredibly beautiful and Danov had deeply loved her, so when she had texted him that she wanted a divorce he was devastated. Danylo had never trusted or liked her, and because she was pregnant when she divorced him, Danov felt that he had not just lost his wife but he had lost his unborn baby as well.

"That's enough for tonight," said Daniela and when she stood up to leave, Danov was quickly beside her. He turned her around and he kissed her again before she left.

As soon as she arrived back in her apartment, she Googled Danov Bilenko's name to see if she could see what his wife looked like. It didn't take her long to find her as she had been a finalist in the last pre-war Miss Ukraine competition.

"Bitch," she said out loud.

He came over to her cubicle just before lunch the next day with a brown paper bag in his hand. He opened it to show her that he had made sandwiches for them both.

"I feed you?" he said.

“Would you like to join me for lunch?” she said.

At first he looked puzzled and then he smiled and he repeated the sentence.

“Yes, I would be delighted,” she replied.

He had a favourite place in the gardens that surrounded the building where they worked that he liked to eat his lunch, so he held her hand and they walked there together.

He had two bottles of water in his pockets, so he handed one to her before passing her a sandwich.

“I shot in war,” he said, “My brother save me. I lose much blood. Replace with his. Transfusion. I think that the word. He good big brother, good man. He always hep me.

“He tell me you good for me. You like me?”

She hesitated before she spoke.

“That should be ‘help’ not ‘hep’. Say, ‘He is a good big brother and he always helps me,’” she said.

He repeated the sentence two times and she nodded.

“Why you don’t say. Maybe you not like me?” he said.

“I don’t know you,” she replied smiling, “But I think I like you.”

“I show you one place where I shot tonight. I feed you. No. ‘Would you like to join me for dinner?’” he said slowly.

She laughed. “I will come over.”

“What ‘come over’ mean?” he asked.

“I will come to your apartment tonight,” she replied.

A big grin appeared on his face when she said it.

She was back again that evening and again he kissed her. When they had finished eating he cleared the table and he set it up again for their next lesson.

“See where I was shot?” he asked her.

“Would you like to see where I was shot?” she said.

“You shot too? Oh no, that bad,” he replied.

She smiled at him and he then repeated the sentence.

“Yes, I would like to see where you were shot,” she replied.

He surprised her when he stood up and he undid his trousers, dropping them past his knees. She noticed that he was wearing Kelvin Cline underpants. He turned around and she could see two large scars on the back of his left leg. She put out her hand and she felt them with her finger tips.

“Feel good, do again,” he said when she removed her hand.

“It’s time for your lesson,” she said.

He then turned around and she could see the bulge in the front of his underpants before he quickly pulled up his pants.

That evening they repeated and completed 'Lesson 1'.

His brother turned up at nine o'clock and again made them coffee.

He moved a chair next to Danov. "How the idiot getting on?" he asked, and he hugged him.

"We have just started 'Lesson 2'. Danov is doing well," she said and she turned to Danov and smiled at him.

"He showed me where he was shot in the leg," she said.

"He does that to all the girls," said Danylo.

"Not true. She first," he said and he launched himself at Danylo and they wrestled until Danylo had him in a headlock. Danylo then kissed him on his forehead.

"Ok. I bullshit," he said, letting him go.

"I carry him when he shot, I think him dead, but I carry him, I not leave him behind. His blood all over me.

"It just after she told him. I blame her. I hate her," said Danylo, "Idiot is my only brother. I love him."

Danov smiled as he looked at Danylo. "He is a good big brother," he said slowly before punching him in his shoulder and calling him a moron. She stood up to leave and Danov quickly followed her and he kissed her before she headed for her apartment.

She did not have a sister, and she admired the closeness of the brothers. She wondered if Danylo and Danov's parents were still alive. She realised that she knew little about their backgrounds including where they had come from.

She was on a training course for the rest of the week that went on well into the evenings, so she didn't see him.

There was a knock on her apartment door on Saturday morning, and when she opened it, Danov was standing there. He took a step inside and he passionately kissed her.

"You go on my motorbike?" he then asked her.

"Would you like to go for a ride on my motorbike?" she said.

"You got one too?" he replied. Then he rolled his eyes and he smiled.

"Would you like to go for a ride on my motorbike?" he said.

"I'll get my jacket," she replied and she headed into her bedroom.

He looked around her apartment and it was neat and tidy. The walls were bare but her dining table was covered in sketches.

She returned wearing a leather jacket. "You not say where you live, but Danylo find you. He did good," he said.

"Can we do more English next week?" he asked as they walked to his motorbike. "I have been working on it while you away. Danylo has been helping me. He is a good big brother."

"Of course," she said, "I'm enjoying teaching you and I really enjoy your cooking."

He drove fast as he headed to the beach. It was a warm sunny day and the sky was blue. He knew all the seaside shops, so they sat beside each other eating ice cream while they looked at the ocean. He told her what he had heard about Crimea during the occupation and its liberation at the end of the war. As she looked around at its beauty, she

found it difficult to imagine the devastation that the peninsula had suffered. He explained that *Ukraine Reconstructions* had cleaned it up quickly after the war was over, so that people would enjoy living there again.

He held her hand as they walked along the beach and he showed her some of the small pieces of wreckage that had washed up with the tide and would continue to do so for some time.

“Your English has really improved,” she said.

“The moron had been beating it into me,” he replied and they both laughed.

“You are good for me,” he said, “You make me forget. I had a bad time but I think I will be Ok.”

He stopped and turned her to look at him. “You like me yet?”

She smiled at him and she softly kissed him on his lips. “Yes, I like you,” she said.

They continued walking and she could see he was smiling.

“Your wife was beautiful,” she said, “I saw a photo of her.”

“Beautiful on outside, ugly on inside,” he replied, “I know that now but I not want to see it before. She not a nice person. Not like you. She never funny. She bad to me even when we married, but I pretend all OK. Maybe not even my baby. Wrong colour eyes. Danylo said she had another man, but I not want to believe him because I loved her so much. I don’t love her anymore. Not since I met you last week.

“Not many bruises from Danylo to convince me.”

They looked at each other and laughed.

“He is a good big brother, the best,” he said, “Not a moron, but I not tell him that. He not as smart as me, but I not tell him that either.”

They walked in silence for a while, listening to the sound of the ocean.

“Maybe later, you sleep with me?” he asked, “I not been with a woman since my wife, so maybe I forget what to do. You have to show me.” She could see he was smiling when he said it.

“We’ll see,” she said. In her head she thought about throwing him onto the sand, ripping his clothes off him and having sex with him there and then, but she pushed those thoughts from her mind and they continued walking. She had only known him for six days and she was still getting used to her new life including her job and being away from her parents.

He steered her into a lane that led away from the beach. They continued walking until he stopped in front of a large industrial building, when he turned to look at her.

“I want you meet papa. He working here this morning”.

The name on the building was *Bilenko Engineering Pty Ltd*. He pressed the intercom and a female voice answered.

“Tell the moron that idiot is here with Daniela to meet papa,” he said. He knew the woman had a full view of him, so she knew who he was, but he enjoyed saying it.

The front door was remotely unlocked and they headed for an office on the ground floor. Danylo was in it leaning over his father’s desk looking at some working diagrams for modifications to some equipment that had been brought in. Danylo walked around the desk and picking her up he carried her over to meet his father who was in the workshop. Danov followed.

They had a conversation in Ukrainian that she didn't understand, but she could see the smile on his father's face.

"I hang onto you so idiot doesn't lose you," he said putting her down.

There was a scuffle and again Danylo soon had Danov in a headlock.

Their father shook his head and he asked her in Russian to come to his office. "I will leave the moron and the idiot to enjoy themselves," he said smiling, "Both Danov and Danylo wanted me to meet you, so let's sit down and talk."

Before she sat down, she turned to look for the brothers and she could see that they were standing over the equipment and were deep in discussion.

"My sons have not stopped talking about you. If you are free for lunch, would you like to meet their mother? She has heard all about you. Danylo's lovely wife will be there as well. She is having their first baby, our first grandchild, so we are very excited."

She looked at him when he said it.

"The other one is not Danov's, but we haven't told him because he would be angry with us.

"We were already investigating her before she fell pregnant. The child has brown eyes and both Danov and his ex-wife have blue eyes. Blue eyed parents cannot have brown eyed children, so he is not the father, but she put his name on the birth certificate, so he feels responsible for him.

"Danov is technically a genius, but he wasn't using that part of his anatomy when he chose his wife.

"We were pleased when she asked him for a divorce but he took it badly and then he was injured. For a while we thought we were going to lose him, but even though he recovered he was unhappy. However, since last week he has been himself again. He is crazy for you, but I suppose I better let him tell you himself."

Danov and Danylo soon joined them and they spoke to each other in Ukrainian.

Their father turned to her smiling. "Yet again, the idiot and the moron have solved the problem. They are good sons; the best" he said, and he moved between them and put one arm around each of them and they all smiled.

He asked her again to come to their family home for lunch and she agreed, so she and Danov left to retrieve his motorbike.

They soon arrived at a beautiful home that looked out onto the ocean. Danov told her that his parents had to leave everything behind when the Russians annexed Crimea, but after the war all their property was returned to them.

Danylo's wife came to the front door to meet her and she led her to the kitchen where his mother was preparing a range of Ukrainian foods for their lunch.

After the introductions, Danov took her on a tour of their family home. It was three stories high and was beautifully furnished. There was an upstairs patio that looked onto the ocean, so he asked her to sit down and he brought her a glass of wine and they sat together enjoying the view. It wasn't long before Danylo called out telling them to come down for lunch.

Danov sat next to her and he kept turning to look at her throughout the meal. His parents had many questions for her about her family, where she was from and her education and if nodding was any indication, they were clearly impressed by her. They all spoke Russian, so that made the conversation easy for them all.

After the meal, Danov took Daniela to his bedroom and he asked her to lie beside him on his bed. He had his arm around her and she had her head on his shoulder and he talked about his life as a child both before and after the

Russian annexation. He asked her if he could take her for another ride the next day and that he would show her some of the damage that still remained. She said that she would like to see it.

Late that afternoon, he rode back to their apartment building and as they walked to her door, he offered to take her out for dinner, but she declined saying she was tired and that she had eaten too much at lunch.

When she opened her front door, he kissed her and as she turned to walk into her apartment, he didn't let go of her hand.

She turned to look at him. When she shut her door he was on the inside of it.

She led him to her bed and they made love to each other.

When she looked at his chest, she could see the scar from the bullet that nearly killed him.

"I stay alive for a reason," he said, "And that be you."

She moved in with him the next day.