



Corridor **ONE**

RAFAEL H. DERCHANSKY

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Rafael H. Derchansky

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Published by: Rafael H. Derchansky

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First Printing: 2015, ISBN 978-0-9940642-2-6
<http://www.rhdera.com>

Dedication

This book is dedicated to Mikhail Derchansky and Jacob Kogan who taught me the true values in life, and to their grandchildren Miron, Issack, Iris, Efrat, Yanir and Adam. It is my hope that they will carry the legacy of their grandfathers in their hearts forever.

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Acknowledgements

Only now, after having completed this book and as I go through my manuscript before its publication, do I fully understand the value and the great amount of work that was done by my many supporters and editors.

I am extremely grateful to Edith Krohmalnik, a student at the Faculty of English at the University of Toronto who took the first crack at more than 21 parts of this text and always found the time to edit between her exams.

My gratitude extends to Genya Ryzhik, professor of English at Humber College, who thoroughly went through the manuscript page by page, line by line, word by word, marking it with her red pen.

Lastly, I thank my family, who helped turn my dream into a reality by editing and proofreading, followed by more editing. To them goes my love and deepest appreciation. This book could never become a reality without their support. Thank you.

Prologue

"It took me a long ten months to restore all of the memories. Ten months, day and night – especially at night – lying in bed and trying to recreate what happened more than twenty years ago. Picture after picture. Faces, one after another. My brain jumped from one event to another without any logical explanation or connection. One second I was in one place; the next second I was months, or even years away from the memories I had just recalled.

I was trying to restore all I could remember, bringing new and once forgotten details to light. Frame by frame, I returned to the beginning of my story, restoring faces, places, events and conversations. Where does reality end and fantasy begin? Was it really me? Is it all a part of my imagination? I am correcting myself, hoping that my memories are stored and therefore become real.

And now, after ten months of torture, I am finally ready to write it down and examine it slowly, surely and in great detail."

“From the day you're born, till the day you die

You're learning how to survive

Surviving loneliness and cold

Surviving love and getting old

Oh, what better reason to survive

Than to live a sparkling, joyful life”

Tamara

Roman's Diary

Dina woke up, sensing that the airplane was in descent. A short glance at her watch revealed that she had been in the air for thirteen hours. A long flight. Thanks to the comfort of business class and the sleeping pill she'd taken, the time had passed quickly. She had never been a big fan of business class and preferred to travel in coach with 'real' people, observing different behaviors, having conversations, making new friends. But this was a long flight, and she wanted it to pass quickly and forget all the unpleasant client meetings from last week. The pilot announced the estimated landing time and expressed his gratitude to all the passengers for flying with his airline. Dina began preparing her passport and customs documents, which a flight attendant had left neatly on her tray table while Dina slept.

The plane landed and the long walk to customs slowly brought her back to reality. She checked her cell phone for messages and started planning the work to be done on the weekend. Today was Friday and the day was already planned. She tried to remember where she'd left the documents in her apartment before her departure a week ago. The customs line was relatively short, and not having a chained briefcase attached to her left hand or rolling behind her with important artifacts would make getting through customs a piece of cake.

"Good morning, Miss Greduer. How was your flight? Anything to declare?"

The voice of the customs officer grounded her, and she answered politely, "The flight was okay, thank you for asking. And no, nothing to declare today."

The officer smiled at her. "Have a great day, Miss Greduer. Say hello to your team for me."

"I will. Good day to you too."

Since when did my team become so popular?

She moved quickly toward the airport exit, straight to her usual pickup spot, having to artfully maneuver between people, luggage and 'welcome home' signs.

The sun was shining and today, April 15th, was a perfect spring day. She stopped, took out her sunglasses from her briefcase and looked around from right to left. She found her driver standing near a shining black limousine.

"Good morning, Ma'am. " As she neared the limo, the driver opened the door, and Dina found herself in a comfortable seat with a fresh air-conditioned breeze blowing against her face.

"Good morning."

"How was your flight? Where are we going? Office? Home?"

The moment her brain recognized the word 'office', Dina's eyes reflectively scanned her dress, looking for perfection. Shoes, okay. Pants, okay. Shirt, okay. Hands, okay; then she stopped. No way am I going to the office now.

"Please go home and stop near a grocery store. I think I need milk."

"Will do," was the short reply from the limo driver.

The car slowly moved out of the parking space and within two minutes, was on the highway, racing home toward Dina's regular duties as the owner and executive of MirexGlobe.

It took more than twenty minutes for the limo to get to the back door of her condo building, the usual spot Dina used to get into the lobby. During the ride home, she concentrated on reading the messages left by her staff over the last two days. Even when the

driver stopped near the grocery store and went in to buy her milk and bread, her eyes were glued to the screen.

Her small business was her entire life. She had established MirexGlobe approximately seven years ago, two years after graduating from university, and it had taken her a good five years to build her reputation as the top expert in her field. Throughout all of these years, she could still hear her father saying, "We are here to survive, and we will do what it takes to survive. We are survivors. "

Dina was an expert in forgery investigation. Her clients comprised private individuals, governments, affluent businessmen, auction-houses and sometimes, people with a 'shady' past. Her company had three employees and MirexGlobe was careful to avoid court appearances at all costs. Her contracts always highlighted that her job ended with sharing a proof of forgery or authenticity; she always came up with solid evidence but never agreed to court or committee appearances.

On her ride home, she found about a dozen envelopes in a cardboard box left on the seat of the limo. Some of these were from clients, which she left to her assistant, Tamara. Some were from Gregory, her chemical and compound analyst, and probably concerned the final results of his investigations. She marked these as 'Need to Read'. One of the documents was from Igor, her day-to-day detective, whom she jokingly called 'Igor Holmes', which described a series of pictures he had analyzed for a case they were slated to present to a client next week.

The door of the limo opened, and she pushed the box of envelopes away as she slid out of her car seat, feeling some pain in her back. *Possibly from sitting too much on the plane or from being in an uncomfortable position in the limo* she thought.

"Miss Greduer, do you want your luggage in your suite or should I leave it with the concierge?" asked her driver.

"Leave it with the concierge please – they know what to do with it. Thank you for a quiet ride. Tell your boss to include your tip in the bill as usual, and please take the envelopes I left on the car seat to my office."

"Will do, Miss Greduer. I highly appreciate it. Have a great evening."

The limo moved away slowly from the back entrance as Dina stepped into the lobby, hoping to get into the shower as soon as possible. Her luggage had already been brought in by the concierge, who waited near the door.

"Miss Greduer, luggage as usual?"

"Yes. The green bag to the laundry, and the rest, please bring into my suite. And thank you for watering my plants. "

"No problem. Your mail is on the kitchen table. By the way, Miss Greduer, you had a visitor come in looking for you three times this week."

"A nice young man on a white horse?" Dina smiled.

"Not really. He was young but he rode the bus every time. I told him that you were away as per your directions, but I did not tell him when you were coming back, as you requested. He was persistent and waited for an hour every visit, and he left an envelope with me on his last visit. I put it with all your mail on the table. "

"Great job. Did they fix my elevator?"

"Not sure. One second," He reviewed the log file for a minute. "No, sorry. They're still working on it. It says that they ordered the parts and they'll be here on Wednesday. Could you please sign this form, to allow the technician to enter your suite if you're not home?"

"No problem," said Dina, and signed the form. "Thank you." She stepped through the doors of the public elevator, wondering why the hell she was paying extra money to have a private elevator that was not working half the time.

The condo lights were turned on and the city looked grey and boring from the twelfth floor. Dina looked around, put her briefcase and laptop on a table, and moved to the bedroom, removing her shoes on the way to a long-awaited shower.

Her happiness was cut short by the loud 'you-must-answer' ring of her phone, which she answered in her underwear and bra.

"Hello, Dina. "

"Is it you, Holmes? Leave me alone. I'm on my way to take a shower."

"Wait, Dina. I know you read my report. What are your thoughts?"

"Igor – I'm your boss and I'm telling you to call me in an hour or call Tamara, please. I'm as dirty as a pig."

"Dina, the dress is authentic; the fabric is from the 17th century. The dirt in the pockets is also from the right region in Holland, I checked with Gregory; everything points to us dealing with the authentic clothing of a King."

"You aren't listening – call me back in an hour, and if you're wrong, I'll remove the Munich museum's commission from your fat monthly paycheck. Am I clear? To be even more specific, you have an hour to check the small rip I saw in your photograph of the dress near the left pocket. Do a spectrum analysis, and tell me when and how it was ripped. Are we on the same page?"

"Dina, go take a shower. I'll call you in an hour. "The line went silent, Dina left the phone handle off the hook and with a smile and a little dance, moved through the shower door.

Dina showered quickly, put the phone back on the hook, and a short while later, blues music sounded from the bedroom as she half sat, half lay on the sofa. Blues always made her feel both relaxed and charged with energy. At work, the sound of blues was a necessity; it helped her concentrate and do things efficiently. She could not explain this phenomenon.

It took exactly one hour for the phone to jump back to life with its Brrrrrr sound. Igor Holmes was on the line, and she could guess from his greeting and his tone that something was wrong.

"Take my paycheck and burn it."

"What's wrong?" asked Dina.

"I don't know how you do it, but either I'm an idiot or you're a genius. I checked the rip that you mentioned again. It came from a sharp object. Any object can do it and I've verified that the rip is indeed one hundred and fifty years old. But when I put a needle under the rip to bring it closer to the microscope, I noticed a small amount of a white residue. I asked Gregory to have the powder analyzed, and guess what he found? It's twentieth century laundry detergent! That's quite surprising since this dress had supposedly been in a museum for a hundred and thirty-five years, under a glass cover with humidity control. Like I said, you're either a genius, or I'm an idiot for having missed this," Igor almost screamed.

"Relax, you're not an idiot. We're just dealing with very smart people."

"I need to redo all the work from the beginning – except now I need to prove the opposite."

"Relax, Igor. Ask Tamara to give me a call please, as soon as possible."

"Okay. Ciao."

Dina thought for a moment as she moved from the sofa to the kitchen table. She poured herself a glass of water and went back to the sofa. It took almost ten minutes before Tamara rang.

"Welcome back. I guess our quiet life is over. It's 10pm and I'm calling you, as per your request. "

"Hi to you too, Tamara. We don't have time, sorry. The Munich museum is going to pay a quarter of a million Marks to the Japanese for a forgery. Call the Japanese seller and inform him that we know this is a fake and that we will report our findings to Munich immediately

after we end the call with him. However, because we are professionals and as we know how important his reputation is in this small, tight-knit community, gently suggest to the seller that should he choose, for a small lump-sum payment of \$100,000, we'll be willing to postpone the delivery of our report by 24 hours. This should give him ample time to cancel the sale, withdraw the forgery, save face with Munich and trigger the 'exit clause' in our very own contract with Munich, by which we will no longer be required to share the results of our analysis. The secret will be safe. "

"Wait, Dina. That's twice the price we are charging Munich!"

"Yes, and if they won't agree, we will send the report to Munich immediately and the Japanese seller will be shut out of the trading world forever."

"Okay. Sometimes it's difficult for me to change sides, but I agree with you."

"Tamara, remember, we don't take sides. Our job is only to verify and analyze."

"Okay, okay. Do it your way. Good night, Dina. See you tomorrow at the office."

"Good night."

As Dina replayed her conversation with Tamara, she smiled, and made herself comfortable on the sofa, soaking in the jazzy sounds of the blues.

We are here to survive and we will do what it takes to survive. We are survivors.

Dina's eyes closed slowly as jet lag took hold. From the moment she sat comfortably on the sofa, the glass of water in her hand felt as if it weighed ten kilos. She knew what to do; it had happened many times already. She needed to put the glass back on the kitchen table, otherwise she would wake up tomorrow in a pile of water or, even worse, a puddle of water would appear all over the Persian carpet that she so adored. Overcoming the unusual heaviness, she stood up and moved slowly toward the kitchen table, her left hand rubbing her eyes to keep them open. She smiled, covering a distance of two meters before landing in a kitchen chair. *Mission accomplished.* She smiled again as her eyes met the pile of mail left on the kitchen table by the concierge. Her smile disappeared. She cursed and took a minute to think of what would happen if she opened the mail tomorrow.

She could, but what if some mail was work related? The weekend would go to waste. As she was searching for a compromise, her eyes slowly closed again. Okay, she decided, I'll open some of the mail now. She slowly moved the pile of letters and magazines toward her body and, with only one eye open, started to separate magazines from letters.

The process was easy; magazines were pushed to the end of the table and landed on the floor, a kind of childish game that gave her some satisfaction. Letters went to the right side of the table, and she smiled again. There weren't so many. There were two big envelopes, one brown, one white, and a dozen regular ones, some from the bank, some from the cable company, and one or two advertisements. She huffed and pushed them from the table. She smiled again as the falling envelopes reached the floor, and the sound of it made her feel like a little girl again. She experienced happiness not only from the process, but also from her sleepy condition – *I'm Superwoman, I'm a robot* – and she smiled again, a happy smile.

She stopped for a second and started to open envelopes one by one. An invoice for the dishwasher repair. A cable bill. An electricity bill. An invitation to her condo Board meeting – these letters flew directly to the floor. In three minutes all the small envelopes were open and sorted. Now it was time for the big ones. She placed all the envelopes into a single pile, knowing that the first white envelope was the court invitation she had been awaiting for over a month. Some of her clients insisted on seeing her give a testimony in court even though she would never dream of such a thing. She would even go as far as having her clients sign a contract attesting never to invite her to court, but some tried their luck. From time to time she got phone calls from court clerks and follow-up letters. The first white envelop parachuted to the floor, joining the others, producing again the noise of happiness.

Dina looked at the brown envelope with one eye open and slowly, like in a dream, read its inscription.

Dina, I'll be in town next week. Hope to see you, R.

Slowly, she opened her second eye. Her facial expression turned to surprise and curiosity took hold. A handwritten greeting with no return address and no stamps. It had been a while since Dina had received handwritten greetings in large mysterious envelopes. It got her attention. She hesitated. *Open it now, or do it in the morning?* The size of the envelope was also suspicious. Something big was inside. She took it in her hand and flipped it over several times.

Dina, I'll be in town next week.

Analyzing items around her had become second nature. Even though the handwritten sentence was short, she was certain that it had been written by a man. The brown colour of the envelope indicated that it was from a convenience store; their big brown envelopes were made from cheap recycled papers. The envelope had a visible line in the middle, telling Dina it had been bent, probably for the convenience of transfer.

She became irritated by all the thoughts going through her head and stood up from the kitchen table, ready to finally move into the bedroom. As she got up, her right foot slid on top of the papers on the floor. On the verge of losing her balance, she grabbed the top of the kitchen table with both hands. Scared and shocked into instantaneous alertness, she realized that the brown envelope was in close proximity of her face.

"Damn you," she said out loud. She never had been superstitious. "Okay, fine. I'll see what you have inside," she said in mock exasperation.

She took the letter opener that she had used for all of the other letters and ripped the brown envelope open, lifting it up from the corner, waiting to see what would come out. A bunch of letter-size pages, around 30 to 40 held together with a metal clip, fell out. Dina recognized that the larger pages were photocopies of the smaller originals that they were clipped to.

The color of the originals was dark yellow with horizontal blue lines. They looked like standard banknotes. She needed more light to recognize what was written on them, but even without light she was able to see that they were handwritten in blue, or maybe black, ink.

As she moved towards the kitchen dimmer switch, she caught a brief glance at the wall clock and noticed that it was quarter after eleven. Dina turned the dimmer all the way up and the kitchen became instantly brighter. She was back in the kitchen, this time carefully going around the papers on the floor. Now, with all of the pot-lights working to their maximum, the kitchen table looked as if it was under a projector, thanks to the extra light Dina had installed when she moved into the condo six years ago.

She sat comfortably on a chair and began browsing through the first page, slowly going to the middle of the pile, then to the end and back to the beginning again. She noticed that the handwritten letters became smaller and smaller as she moved from the first page to the last. Towards the end, the writing was so small that the last page alone probably contained the same amount of written lines as all the ten previous pages combined. The colour of the ink was also alternating between dark blue and black and sometimes red, and she noticed that some paragraphs and even pages were written with a pencil. The handwriting seemed like that of a child, and she wasn't sure whether it was a boy or a girl. Some lines were written under intense pressure, making words and sentences jump over the blue horizontal lines of the page.

For some unknown reason, Dina got a warm feeling holding the papers in her hands. She didn't understand why, but she was now ready, with some surprising pleasure, to read the first page. She felt a familiar feeling just holding these pages in her hands. Something warm and homey.

Dina stood up, opened the refrigerator, and tried to find the energy drink that she usually had well-stocked in her fridge. Tonight, it seemed she was fresh out of this staple. Coming back to her seat and taking a small sip from the glass of water on the table, she brought the first page close to her face and began to read.

Today is day one and I have my fresh diary, given to me by my dad. Today he informed us – me and Dina - that we are going to move again.

Dina's hand, the one holding the page, began to tremble. She opened her eyes wider and read the first line again. Shock raced down her spine. She felt like she was sitting on ice – her entire body went cold. Her vision blurred. She knew she was going to faint if she didn't change her sitting position. She stood up fast, as fast as she could, as if somebody had poked her behind with a needle. With the sudden change of position, she felt a loss of energy and power, but her brain moved into a defensive mode as she fought to regain consciousness. She took the glass of water again and emptied it.

No, it's not possible, was the first thought that went through her head. *It's not possible. It can't be real.*

She took the envelope in her hands from where she had dropped it in her state of shock and read it again.

“Hope to see you, R.”

If it was a miracle, then R might've stood for Roman, her only older brother, from whom she'd been separated twenty years ago. She remembered the evening when their father told them they needed to move yet again. She did not remember that they moved before, but she'd only been six, and she could still clearly remember the pretty doll that their father had given her, and the diary he had given Roman. It was his way of consoling his children for their upcoming move to a new place, to new friends and to new environments. Roman was happy and smiled at his father's gift; he was nine years old at the time, and he'd wanted a diary for a while.

Dina decided to take a quick break before going back to reading. She refilled her glass with cold water, took a sip, and sat back down, still shaky and weak, feeling heavy and nervous. One part of her wanted to continue reading, but the other part was scared and shocked by the sudden resurgence of the sibling from whom she'd been separated. Her eyes watered, and tears came down her cheeks, from sadness and from happiness. She may have found her brother again, and this hope drove her back to the page resting in front of her on the table.

She took a deep breath and continued reading.

It was our third move in two years.

Dina stopped reading. She didn't remember any other moves. Even this one was hazy in her mind. But maybe... She had been only six years old. Maybe.

Dad told us, “We will be moving in the evening.” Dina was sleeping when dad told me the car was waiting outside and asked me to move quietly so we wouldn't wake our neighbors. Dad took Dina into his arms and we slowly moved through the building's corridor toward the first back door of the first floor where a small minivan was waiting. We had only one briefcase, and dad had his usual backpack that he always carried on his shoulder.

Dina stopped reading again. She recalled dad's backpack, but now it was clear why she didn't recall the move – she'd been asleep.

The car took us to the train station. We traveled three days and three nights and changed trains three times. I lost track of all direction, and when I asked dad where we were going, he answered with a smile, “You'll see, Roman. You'll see.”

Dina stood up. Three days and three nights. She remembered something. Yes, the train stopped sometimes for half an hour, and dad would jump onto the platform and buy cartons of fresh berries from the local women who were always there to serve the travelers.

Some images flittered through Dina's mind, and an idea came to her. She stood up and started to open several shelves on her work desk, looking for a notepad she could write on. She decided to compare her memories to the ones written in the diary. This way, she believed, the entire memory could be recorded and complement Roman's notes. She imagined that the photocopied pages were of Roman's actual diary notes. This is good. This is great.

After our long journey, we found ourselves in the middle of nowhere! Dina was annoying and asked dad to go to the washroom every hour. When we finally got off the train, the only thing we saw were a few houses, a water tower, and the station house, all surrounded by a green forest. Dad mentioned that somebody was coming to pick us up and bring us to our new home. It took around one hour or maybe two before a small green car showed up on the road, creating a big dust cloud behind. The car sounded very loud and Dina was scared.

Yes, Dina did remember the green car. She'd been behind her dad holding his leg when the car pulled up near the station house and one big, dirty man came out, shook dad's hand, and helped him with their briefcase.

"Our new home" is actually one room, with no kitchen and no washroom. To pee, we need to go outside. We are in a village. It has forty similar houses. I counted on the second day we arrived. It has one small store with nothing in it. One day each week, a green car brings bread and some cans with food from the store. The local people are nice. We don't have school. When I asked dad where the school is, he said we are going to have our regular classes at home. He will be our teacher and our mentor.

Dina took a pen and marked "Memory #1" on the top line of the page and started writing: "The village people were nice to our family; it took less than one week for Roman and I to make some friends. Roman was popular among the local boys. He was tall and could match anybody his age in physical prowess. I had two girlfriends, Anna and Maia, who became my childhood best friends." Dina stopped and went back to Roman's diary.

Dad found a job at the local repair shop. He can repair any small item, from watches to sewing machines. He also volunteered to teach math and physics to the local children from the ages of eight to sixteen.

Dina smiled and "Memory #2" appeared in the middle of the page: "I recall the evening classes dad taught in our room. I wasn't allowed to participate and was supposed to sit outside or in the corner of the room, and when he asked questions, I always knew the answers and tried to show off. It was easy for me; I had a good memory and tried to please dad, but he always looked to the others for the answers and gestured me to keep quiet with his hand."

Finished, Dina started reading again.

Summer was fun. Winter was difficult, cold and boring. Two years passed and Dina joined our class in the evening. She finally got a chance to answer dad's questions. This girl was a big show off! During last winter, we started having family time every Friday. Dad usually tried to come home early from his repair shop and we didn't have any classes on Fridays. Some days we were lucky and dad had some sweets for us too. I have no idea where and how he would manage to get them in our village.

Dina smiled again. She wrote down "Memory #3". She knew where dad was getting his sweets. One Friday, she spied on him and saw him going into Aunt Bronia's house on the outskirts of the village. Aunt Bronia would cook sweets using berries and birch tree juice, which locals collected in the spring. Dina would be in heaven when dad held all of the sweets in the big palms of his hands. Hands she adored so much. She also remembered a big, ten-inch pink scar on his left hand. The scar she loved to touch and stroke.

Our family time, Dina continued reading, involved a tradition of sitting on the floor in front of the iron wood heater, with dad telling funny stories and Dina and I adding our own

details, and even telling our own stories once in a while. Dad taught us to value our family. He repeatedly said to us “We are survivors”.

One Friday, a strange event took place as we were sitting and waiting for dad to come home. He was late and I started to worry. Where was he? It took an hour before the door opened and he entered the room completely covered with snow.

When I asked him what had happened, he mumbled something, took off his coat, dusted off the snow and sat near me with a big smile. “Today I’m going to show you something important,” he said, and he smiled again. “But before I show you, you must promise me it will be our family secret. Do you agree?” Dina and I did. “Ok,” dad continued, “it is our top and most important secret. Nobody should know about it, okay?” We agreed again. He put his hand into his jacket pocket and took out a green leather package the size of his palm, tied up with the same green leather string on top. It looked heavy and massive in the strong open palm of his hand.

Dina stopped reading and closed her eyes. A memory unfolded like an old picture. A warm stream of air brushed against her shoulder, coming directly from the burning wood in her fireplace. She was there with Roman and dad and the green package in dad's left palm. She was scared. She opened her eyes fast and stared for a second at the same point on the yellow page, knowing it was real and true – he may very well be alive. She recognized it was late, and outside, the city was already sleeping. The street lights, a stark contrast to the dark sky, looked like fishing net from her condo. The odd cars were still moving, disturbing the perfect harmony. It was after 1 a.m. but Dina's sleepiness and jet lag disappeared. She filled her glass with water again and sat up again, ready to read.

Dad lifted the green package from his left hand and gently put it on the carpet. He opened it slowly, removing the green string and placing the content of the package in the center of his palm.

Dina closed her eyes again, and the light from the burning wood struck the middle of the package directly, illuminating her face a thousand times stronger than normal light because of the package's contents.

I asked dad what it was. He smiled. “They are diamonds, my children. The most precious and expensive stones in the world.”