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A Meeting on Hazard Street

a novel by

ANDREA H. HEDEȘ

translated into English by the author



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If you keep going down the Hazard Street at a certain time of the day, you can see a petite young woman in a slightly flared emerald green overcoat with a yellow silk scarf around her ivory neck, striped trousers on her ankles, stomping around in black patent leather ankle boots, with a matching purse and a navy backpack over her left shoulder. She wears her glossy black hair Cleopatra' style, so that's what we'll call her from here on out. She holds the hand of a girl in an ink blue velvet dress and quilted hooded coat of turquoise. She has black curls full of bows and beaded clips, big absinthe green eyes, just like her mother, she makes determined gestures as she speaks. It's clear from the way her mother looks at her that she's a real princess, so we'll call her Sara.

After crossing the penultimate crosswalk, the two pause for a moment, Cleopatra pulls the gold phone from her purse and looks at her watch. The two take their cheeks in their hands and shake their heads, muttering:

"Oh, my phone and fingers! I'm too soon, I'm too soon, I'm too soon!"

They both look at each other and laugh.

"Now we have to try not to rush. Let's see who can walk slower. This heavy backpack is also slowing me down."

"The rucksack, it's called the rucksack", says Sara.

"Who say it carries it", Cleopatra smiled thinly.

"I can carry it, I'm strong and fast."

"I know, you'll take it when you grow up, don't worry. I think that instead of seeing who goes the slowest, we'd be better off seeing who eats an ice cream faster... What do you say?"

"I bet I'll win!"

They entered the elegant place and sat down at a small table by the window. They both ordered vanilla and lavender ice cream with extra syrup, lavender and strawberry. Sara finished first and managed the performance of not staining either the velvet dress or the white stockings.

"Cleopatra, come on, there are five minutes left and the bell is ringing!"

"Yes, I'm paying now."

In front of the school they hugged, Cleopatra kissed her on the cheek and transferred her backpack whispering „I love you“ and then watched her climb, with a very serious face, with her back straight and without looking back, towards the group of children in front of the bank. She sighed deeply and only then seemed to notice the other parents. She was quick to smile and wave left and right as she slipped through them to get to the main street.

As soon as she steps on the large, rectangular tiles, she sinks into thought. She strode past the row of young sycamore trees that lined the street on the left and the Empires' era buildings with elegant balconies on the right, golden in the October sunlight. Hazard Street started from the majestic station building and ran right into the heart of the city, gracefully crossing the Axion River. Many who arrived in this cosmopolitan

city did not leave it before taking a picture on Hazard Street, with one of the famous buildings in the background, or on the Iron Bridge, not before attaching a padlock to it, as a sign of eternal love and then to throw the key into the waters of Axion... Four majestic buildings, four palaces, guarded the head of the bridge, on one side and on the other of it, the Sisters, as the locals called them. But Cleopatra passed by today as if she saw nothing of all that made Hazard Street so famous. Deep in thought, she also passed by the noisy group of students who had come out for their cigarette break and who occupied the entire sidewalk in front of the Faculty of Letters. And under the scaffolding erected for the renovation of the facade of the imposing building guarding the head of the bridge, without hearing the workers' comments. After another bit of walking, she looked up. In the sky, an old, fluid gold mingled with long streaks of delicate petal blue.

From above the light fell like powder, sifted thread by thread and descending slowly, carefully, over the roofs of the buildings, over the tops of the trees, over the crests and shoulders of the people who simply minded their own business, without noticing the wander, only the birds went crazy as if they were spinning in wide and fast circles, trying to get as high as possible. She steps on the Iron Bridge. She gazed at padlocks hanging there, scratched or painted with initials or words, some with meanings only to those who fastened them there. The Axion was flowing black and lazy as usual. Two old willows arched over it, dipping their leaves in the water, between the two banks. Tiny grains

of light were sifting through here as well. The black surface of the water had become a churned mirror, soft shards of shiny glass into which the world above descended: the sky with its molten gold, its long strips of delicate blue, the flocks turning in wide circles, the buildings that lined its banks. The world above, descending willy-nilly into the world of living glass, found itself there, toppled, but continuing its life, up and down, here and there, as if nothing had happened. The colors, the shapes, were a little different, but each had its share of truth and beauty. Every passer - by appeared and then disappeared, as if he had never been, his passage through the mirror was like his passage on the bridge reflected in the water, while the gold and blue continued to chain, furrowed by fragile flocks, to move under the influence of air and light from the sky, of the flow of water down on the earth. The sky above and the sky on the waves of black water, over which came the land with the people, the buildings. Which is true, which is truer? The world above or the world in the water? And what about us, where are we? Here in the middle? Where is our place? The wrought iron railing of the bridge reached to his middle. Cleopatra closed her eyes and leaned over her.

"Distinguished lady, aren't you really... yes, really the composer?"

Cleopatra turned limply to discover who had firmly grasped her arm.

"Indeed, in a matter of musical creation I allow myself to disturb you. A problem of music creation and something more."

The large eyes, of a velvety, deep black, the long, made with mascara and carefully curled eyelashes, which blinked lazily under the beautifully arched eyebrows, seemed to look into her soul. The perfect porcelain face was framed by a few bluish-black locks that a light breeze blew revealing the earrings, two diamond tears, the rest of the rich, silky hair being gathered in a ponytail. Over his jeans he wore a black satin tunic embroidered with a double-headed golden eagle, open at the neck, revealing his robust chest. A long coat of bright sable fur wrapped around his tall, strong body. The left hand, with sea-blue nails, lazily twisted a strand. It spread a perfume of cedar and nard, and it seemed as if the air around it flickered, ignited in small flames that danced, gathered and burned in a fire difficult to tame, then disappearing from sight but making itself felt, strong and consuming, although hidden. His sensual mouth spread in a winning smile:

"Quite so, in a matter of musical creation I allow myself to disturb you. A problem of musical creation and something more," he repeats in a deep, slightly tired, almost melancholic voice.

Full of beauty and brilliance, it looked like a black sun rising in the middle of the iron bridge, at noon.

"And you are...?" Cleopatra asked.

"Call me Basil," he introduced himself in his melancholic voice.

You will surely wonder, and rightly so, how come this strange pair made ad hoc, in the middle of the iron bridge guarded by four palaces, in the middle of an autumn day, does not surprise anyone? Let me make it

clear: we are not in some town with narrow-minded people, that is, trully narrow-minded. Oh, no. We are in a cosmopolitan city and believe me, the people here have seen it all. Moreover, they are well known for the detachment and wisdom with which they look at life. On top of that, it was the week of 2000 years of documentary attestation, 2000 years of uninterrupted existence of the city. A week of celebrations, exuberant celebration, madness, costumes, seven days of carnival.

"But let me invite you to a coffee," said Basil and they entered the nearby cafe, a small place that could fit the long bar counter and four chairs by the window. It was on the ground floor of the building, one of those four sister buildings that framed the Iron Bridge, reconciled with their old-fashioned elegance, their serene spiers rising blue into the gold-touched sky.

They perched on the high chairs and, waiting for the coffee, watched the passers-by in silence. A burly bartender with a beard and hair in a ponytail brought them two espresso lattes. Creamy and fragrant, in small white porcelain cups, the coffee sat in front of them for a long time. Basil apologizes, confessing that he never drinks coffee. Cleopatra also excuses herself, saying that she is understandably unable to take even a sip right now. They didn't look into each other's eyes. Basil's gaze was almost unbearable, his eyes stung and crushed, deep in them there was a terrifying fire that then disappeared, like a thought. They didn't talk to each other. The coffee smell was fading. Cleopatra's trembling fingers coldly encircled the cup turned cold as well. She took them off for a moment and hurriedly

took a small silver mirror out of her purse. It was a round object, engraved with blooming roses, and also embedded with a clock and compass. Cleopatra took a long look in the mirror, as if no one was around anymore, arranged her hair, looked at the hands of the clock and put the complex jewel back. Basil did not react in any way to her gesture, not taking his eyes off the street. The cafe was quiet. The music was off. The bartender with the phone in his hands was surfing the internet. Through the open door came the sounds of the street: the voices of passers-by, the sounds of traffic, the siren of an ambulance. They only accentuated the stillness within. Tired and soft and warm, the silence sat between them. It had begun to change into something else, into that shadowy, lofty, sacred silence of the old cathedrals. It enveloped them, it encompassed them, it seemed that it was loaded with deep scents that rose with the smoke to the sky. A blackbird flew past the cafe and its trill sounded strange. Basil went to the bar, quietly paid for the two coffees, returned and said:

"Allow me to accompany you a bit of the way."

Cleopatra said nothing. Basil offered her his arm helping her down from the high chair. With one step they left the cafe in the middle of the street. They made their way to the crosswalk, through the crowd, and waited for the green light.

"Thank you," said Cleopatra. "For the coffee."

Basil replied with a smile.

The old cobblestone road bordered by the canal was a shortcut for the locals. They walked with

measured steps past the benches lined up along the canal.

Cleopatra stops at the gingerbread stall and buys two hearts richly decorated with red and white frosting. She then goes into the incense shop, buys white myrtle and opium, frankincense and palo santo, and a small white ceramic horse. In a bakery and pastry shop they sat in a row, behind a long line of pensioners and hipsters.

"Give me a loaf of that kind!"

"From what kind? What do you mean?"

"Not from that, from the other."

"Peasant bread?"

"What have you said?! Peasant? Then if that's how they call it..."

"Shall I slice it for you?"

"Then... I would like to tell you what you should do for me, yes... but..."

"The next one! How can I help you?"

"Give me a cream soup, please... Is it hot? Yes? Are the croutons included? Are they fresh? Yes? And give me a fresh baguette sandwich with olives, yes, chicken ham, yes, with white specialty, yes. Is the salad crunchy? Is it organic? Yes? And yes, a coffee, with cinnamon, yes. Oh, and the sandwiches, two of them, okay? Oh, and a vegetarian one. A vegetarian sandwich. Yes, with olive bread and guacamole. Yes. It will be quickly ready, right?"

"Give me half a loaf? White. Are they soft?"

"We only have fresh bread here, madam. It is freshly made every morning."

"I am asking you if it is soft, not if it is fresh!"

"As I told you, new merchandise every day, please."

"Come here too, welcome, what can I serve you with?"

"A black bread, unsliced," said Cleopatra.

Then she leaves, struggling to make his way through the customers.

They stopped at the cross. Basil bowed ceremoniously.

"I would be very happy to see you again, Madam."

"You never know" answered Cleopatra vaguely, saying goodbye.

"Dear madam, thank you very much," said Basil, bowing slightly and taking the path that opened to their left.

Cleopatra enters the staircase of the block. She headed for the mailbox. She found a single envelope, ivory, of noble, satin paper, on which was written *Invitation* and to the addressee she could read *For Lady Cleopatra*. She quickly climbed to the top floor of the building built in the glorious years of the old regime. She unlocked the iron grill that depicted blooming roses, then the wooden door and entered the small apartment where she lived in a tenement. The kitten greets her, not with meows, but with a kind of light trills. Swallow was a blue mountain cat with amber eyes, a rare breed and the legend says it was the creation of holy men who led their lives in a place of meditation and prayer in the mountains, perhaps from there came a particular way of being, a distinction laced with arrogance. She caressed Swallow, than

changed quickly, she put the pot of what would be chicken soup for the soul on a low heat and smiled at the thought of the appetite with which Sara would eat it. She turned on the oven as well. Meanwhile, the coffee heats up in the coffee maker and she pours herself a cup, without sugar. She turns on the PC. She checks his email on his mobile phone and postpones solving the correspondence until the next day. Lots of mails and time consuming, that's why she only answered messages every 2-3 days. She hoped no one would call her and eat up her spare time. She puts the meat in the tray, added garlic, rosemary, cloves and lemon, salt and pepper, put everything in the oven and set the timer.

Only after finishing all this does she sit down at the table with the envelope in front of her. She often does this. Delaying as long as she could a moment that she suspected was extraordinary. She was thinking about it, savoring it, the pleasure of waiting, the excitement and joy of the accomplished moment. She found the journey to that moment almost as pleasant and wonderful as the moment itself, especially since such occasions were very rare. She lightly touched the precious surface of the envelope with her fingertips. She reads again: *Invitation*. The addressee: *Lady Cleopatra*. She opened the envelope. She could smell the scent of spikenard rising from him. She pulled out the invitation, a pale yellow tissue paper on which was handwritten, calligraphically in purple ink:

*By His Majesty's command,
Basil,
We have the special honor*

A Meeting on Hazard Street

*To invite you
To the Grand Ball
At Midnight
At the Butcher's Palace
On Hazard Street.*

Cleopatra began to laugh lightly, with a hint of emotion and nostalgia. No way. At that time it is impossible for me. And even if I could, I have nothing suitable to wear for such an occasion. Besides, a ball at the palace. What palace? It's a joke, right? She turned the invitation inside out a few times, and did the same with the spade, hoping for a clue that would put her feet back on the ground after allowing herself a moment of reverie.

"You just have to accept it. No more worries." Cleopatra heard a strange voice coming from within her.

"Of course, why not. If it's a ball, let it be a ball," Cleopatra said loudly and began to laugh.

She sat down at the piano, took a deep breath, and looked at the cover: *Another blue hour...* She would only have time to work on it at night. Cleopatra went over the scores once more. She had everything ready: the composition for the baptism, the two for the wedding and the one for the funeral. "I am fortunate to know Mrs. Isolde," she thought. She was a singing teacher at the Conservatory, knew all the students there, and had put together a quartet of the most talented. They had every Saturday and Sunday busy until the end of the year. The world wanted music that was stylish but unique and new. The same „classic“ compositions

played at all weddings were boring, lackluster and even annoying. Mrs. Isolda had explained to her. She said one has to understand how customers think in order to give them what they want. So she could earn something too, by creating by demand, and at night, after Sara fell asleep, she could work on her great symphony, *Another Blue Hour*.

It was afternoon and Cleopatra trotted lightly, with small steps, a little stiff, some would say, with her black patent purse on her bent left arm. She was hurrying to school, and although she was in a hurry, she was trying to make her way without giving up a trace of distinction, through the stream of people who had made up their minds to all walk in the same direction as her. She looked worriedly at the phone. Three more pedestrian crossings, plus the congestion at two bus stops and the tram stop... "I'll get there, I'll get there," Cleopatra told herself.

Time passed by with the meal, the homework and the evening bath. She found a light movie for her and Sara before going to bed.

*

It was night and the small rented apartment was quiet. The child was sleeping. The cat purred. The night light gave off a soft turquoise light. Cleopatra left the door ajar and had retreated, tiptoe close, so as not to wake them up, into the kitchen. Of the twenty four hours of the day, this was Cleopatra's quiet time. She immerses herself in the peace around her and enjoys doing nothing, without thinking about anything,

simply being. She breathed lightly, afraid that the miracle of peace would be lost, like a dandelion puff blown by the wind.

Suddenly a light knock was heard on the balcony door.

Cleopatra's eyes widened in amazement and she tried to process the situation. A gentle knock on the door of the balcony on the top floor, the eleventh floor, of the modest block of flats, was certainly something completely unexpected at any time of day, but even more so at that time of night. She stood still, holding her breath. The knock is repeated! Cleopatra gently picked up the paralyzing spray she was holding nearby with her right and the phone with her left. She carefully approached the glass door and decisively pulled the curtain aside. After only a moment she drops both the spray and the phone and covers her mouth with his hands. In the balcony, in front of the glass door, stood a tall, majestic stag, entirely made of diamond, with magnificent antlers studded with sapphires, emeralds, and rubies. It had a saddle clothed in blue silk, with silver tacks, and a bridle like it. A white moonbeam fell on him making him shine more beautifully than a dream. The stag bows before Cleopatra as soon as it saw her. With a heart full of wonder and delight, with trembling hands, Cleopatra wide opened opened the door.

"My respects, said the deer, bowing. I'm ready, Mistress!" It said in a soft voice.

Cleopatra knelt limply on the floor and cupped her temples in her hands, never taking her eyes off the diamond stag. "Undoubtedly, musicians do not lack