

It Is in the Bag!

Security agencies are round-a-clock businesses but the presence of Tanas, clean-shaven, immaculately dressed and sober as a pickle, behind his desk at six-thirty brought a rattle of hushed comments and few urgent phone calls. The boss was intensely polite which inevitable pointed at major disasters. He had been pouring over the books comprising the last six months and had already getting a pretty bad feeling. When his father was alive, Tanas had been the one to negotiate contracts and deal with day-to-day stuff, shifts, cars, emergencies. His father had dealt with the legal and financial side. It did not take a guru to see that the agency should have been much more profitable than the books showed; that what Valkuda had told him had its grounds. Half an hour after eight the secretary showed and by her pale face Tanas knew that she had not expected him to be there. He looked pointedly at his watch and said, 'Good morning! As far as I am aware, your working hours are eight to four-thirty or there had been something that apprehended you on the road?' The young woman nodded but did not say anything. Tanas glared, 'I want all the four dispatchers in my office at nine. I want Mrs. Palikareva in my office as soon she is in. And I want to know if this type of manicure does not prevent you from typing as I have some notes that need entering into an Excel table. You can come and get it after you call the dispatchers.' He turned back to the spreadsheets on the table.

The dispatchers were huddling in front of the door, surprised to be singled out. The storm that was evident on Tanas' face was about to be poured on them, they were sure, as the news about where their boss had spent the last week was public knowledge. They were surprised to find cans of soda in front of four chairs around the big oval table that had been gathering dust forever as nobody ever sat to discuss anything around it. Now the table was clean and half of it was occupied by company's documentation. Tanas motioned to the four men to sit and they tiptoed in, trying to sit as far as possible without it being obvious. Tanas made a conscious effort to relax his face for their benefit. He looked at them and said evenly, 'I believe I have given little reason for confiding in me what is going on, but at least hope you will answer my

questions. First I will read you a list of names and would like you to tell me when was the last time they were scheduled for a patrol or assignment according to your memory. We will go from there. Assen Iliev.'

There was a silence as the dispatchers looked at each other and nodded a 'no'.

'Martin Matev.'

Silence again.

'Stoyan Milanov.'

Nothing.

'Kiril Vassilev.'

'Kiro left last August, went to Spain and did not come back.' The elder dispatcher was surprised. Tanas was not much.

'Thank you. Kostadin Mishev.'

Silence. The list went on. One of the guys had left over Christmas and Tanas had personally fired another one for bragging too much to a client. Tanas opened his soda and the dispatchers followed suit as if they were hypnotized. When their boss abruptly called the meeting closed and wished them good rest and easy shift respectively the youngest one choked on his drink. The other three were thinking the same - if it was not darn impossible, they would swear someone had swapped Tanas with someone else. If he was not going to start drinking by the early evening, there were interesting times coming ahead. On that account they were completely right.

At ten the secretary announced that Valkuda had arrived. Tanas went to meet her and led her into the room where the books had crept over two-thirds of the table. Despite his grim mood he saw the irony - ten days earlier her presence in the same room would have caused him to jump out of his skin, now he was holding the door wide opened himself. She sat at the table and dropped her enormous handbag next to her.

'I was told you were never here before ten.'

'It is also one of the things that are going to change. I was going over some interesting figures and hate to say that but you had a point on everything you said yesterday. To say it in plain words, my dad had embezzled the company; the only question is with or without the kind assistance of our accountant. She has not showed up yet, probably thinking that I will be at my normal hours as you so kindly mentioned never

starting before ten. I know you are busy, but I hope you can tell me where to find an auditor that is not related to my father.'

'That is not hard. I don't know if you will be picky about who you will be working with or maybe you would not want to work with someone who works for Dimitar...'

'I don't give a damn for who else they are working if they are good.'

'I will e-mail you few names today. How about the assistant accountant?'

'Little Maria? She is here, I think she is putting the guys' hours at the moment. I see, wait.' Tanas pushed the intercom button and the secretary's startled "Yes!" rang in the air.

'Please ask Maria to bring me the last payroll. Now!' Tanas' voice was pure silk. Another "Yes!" squeaked.

'Will you compare my figures with yours in the meantime?'

'When did you manage to do that?'

'You see, it is really unhealthy to be sober, my brain needs to work in that case, so I came somewhat earlier than customary...Plus, I had not been that hopeless at school, you know...'

'Don't be coy, Tanas, there is nobody around. You know as well as I do - you were the talk of the town. The one and only person to ever get a perfect mark from Professor Angelov on integrals, and drunk as lord at that. Mr. Tanassov did not know whether to laugh or to cry when Angelov called him.'

'So the old man kept a tab on me also. I had no idea. I always thought he had eyes for Dimitar only. Whenever we met, he was shoving him in my face, so to speak. Dimitar did this, he won that, he was invited there. I was supposed to sit in the corner and clap. But it was then and this is now.'

The door opened and a young woman entered, carrying a balance book. Her face was furiously red.

'Good morning Maria! I believe Miss Martinova has introduced herself last week, right? I wanted to ventilate with you some salaries that I would like to know more about.'

'You should ask Mrs. Palikareva,' the voice was strangled whisper.

'I will do that whenever she chooses to arrive, thank you. Does everyone come to the accountants to pick up their salaries and sign?'

'No, Mr. Tanassov was sometimes bringing them to his office when he wanted to talk to people.'

'I see. Who keeps the dossiers of the people who work for us - you or Mrs. Palikareva?'

'She does.'

'Do you have a key of the big safe?'

'N-no. I don't have a key of Mrs. Palikareva's room at all.'

'What if you need to get a document and she is not there like now?'

'I will wait for her, there is always something else to be done, I will not sit idle!' Maria could not get redder if they painted her crimson.

'I did not say you would. I am just trying to establish the facts of life, calm down! It was Father who managed all the papers, now I have to catch up fast. I will be much obliged if you help me.'

The assistant accountant was dizzy with fright. It had been bad enough to fend the lusty looks from Tanassov the father since she had come to work for him at the end of last year. It had been bad enough that she had been made cover the real situation by producing false tax reports. It had been bad enough that she was filling a payroll that had little to do with the actual work done and it had been bad enough seeing that big chunks of the money the guys earned were streamed aside and deposited in a safe that was under the control of Tanas' father and Palikareva. But on the day the big boss died she had gone in the morning to put there a package and in the bustle after the bad news she had lost the key. Palikareva had been furious, no, she had been much more than that and had given her the weekend to find the way to open the safe. Maria had searched every nook and cranny of the office, everywhere she could think as she had been sure she had locked the safe and taken the key. She had even gone to the bank when it opened on Monday in desperation. It made the things worse - the bank manager had immediately ordered the box sealed and insisted that it would be opened either with the original key or by the manager of Tanassov's estate, as the safe was under his name, not the company. The news had made Palikareva scream in rage and order her to find the key before Tanas came back or else. Maria did not want to imagine what else meant. She could not lose her job, her husband had been without a work for almost a year and there were bills to pay, jobs were scarce to come by. She bit her lip.

Valkuda could sense fear like dogs could smell trace. She had already observed the erratic accounting practices of Mrs. Palikareva and for the part of the week spent in Tanas' office had glimpsed the scared looks of Maria when she was talking about her supervisor. Valkuda did not like it. Her quick check had shown that Mrs. Palikareva and her family were living high above the means that they had officially. Her new

car, her jewelry and her frequent shopping trips to Istanbul and Athens were hardly paid by the salary she signed against. The gray economy was nothing new but that smelled rotten. She looked at Maria and asked for a document she knew was in her room. The woman left and Valkuda cut swiftly, 'Tanas, how much you know about your accountant?'

'If you want to know what she drinks, I can enlighten you, but not much more, I am afraid. Spit it!'

'She lives beyond her means, a lot at that and I am sure she had frightened Maria to palpitations. She knows something and is afraid to say it.'

'Damn it, I hoped she was afraid of me only. What do you suggest?'

Before Valkuda could say a word, the door opened and Elvira Palikareva strolled in.

'Oh my dear, I am so sorry about your poor father, such a loss, such a great guy, and he loved you to distraction! I understand you were ill as well, who could blame you! May be you should not exert yourself so soon! I am telling you like a mother, we all miss him, but you were so close...'

'Elvira, Dad was lucky you took care of so many things for him.' Tanas pulled a chair for her and shot a warning look at Valkuda.

'I was telling Miss Martinova last week that we are very grateful for her intervention but surely there is some company information that could not be disclosed to a competition!' Elvira was looking at her with contempt.

'But of course now that you are back, there will be no need to do that, I believe you will take care of the business as your dad always intended to. I will do what I can to insure that all goes smoothly. Probably Miss Martinova has her own businesses to tend to...' the offer to clear the space was overt yet Valkuda did not even look at the door.

'Let it not be said that we were ungrateful! We can at least offer Miss Martinova a lunch. But if I remember correctly, on Fridays you are going to the bank in the morning, so we may meet directly at the restaurant, say around twelve? Will you manage to finish by that time? We may get a drink waiting for you. I think of taking a lazy afternoon if there is nothing urgent.'

Tanas was oozing concern about the bank delays and Elvira was mentally cursing her luck. Usually on Friday she was spending these two hours at her spa but to be on the safe side her agenda was marked with a bank appointment. She could skip it but it was not much time, Tanas looked like he was ready for a drink at the moment. It was the presence of the snake that was making her nervous. The woman did not miss a

thing, luckily Tanassov had made provision the books to be cleaned and whatever was important to be kept under lock. And the damn Maria still had not found the key which meant that Elvira still had no access to the safe. She did not intend for Tanas to get there first. Of the two people who had any idea how much money was there one was already dead, she mused. Maria knew only how many packages were deposited. Elvira made sure they were numbered and properly packed before given to her for deposit, then verified it on a weekly basis. She should take care of the stupid girl also, while she was too scared to talk, Monday the latest, key or no key. It was Friday and if the key was not on her desk on Monday, she would find a way to get an authorization by Tanas to open the safe. She would slip it together with the estate documents that Margaritov had started preparing. Elvira felt more confident. She could survive a dinner with the snake and after that she would be out of her hair for sure.

'I shall be going; you are right. See you at Misho at midday then. I don't think that there is anything urgent, moreover you need a rest.'

'You are right. Ah, Elvira, I will need the key to your room to find a phone. I think I penciled it on one of the personal surveys that I did when I interviewed some guys last year, but I am not quite sure which one...I will give you the key back at Misho', Tanas was waiting with his palm open.

The accountant was not prepared for that. She did not like anyone to look around her workplace but could not find any quick reason for refusing. She opened her purse and rummaged through. Tanas was waiting and Elvira cursed her vanity. Normally she carried more substantial bags but on Friday she did not expect Tanas to show at the office at all. She made a show of separating her car keys from the bunch and handed it to Tanas. He put it carelessly aside and thanked her. May be the snake would keep him busy - she definitely had that effect on people. Elvira decided that she may even like her for that at the end. The table was covered with papers, which should take them more than an hour for sure. Mrs. Palikareva's confidence returned.

Tanas waited for her car to safely depart from the employees' parking and turned to Valkuda,

'Come! We will find Maria first - she knows where the dossiers should be.'

'You are going to look for a stupid phone number?'

'Of course not, but I need some dossiers verified or better their non-existence verified. Then we will see what we will find!'

Maria was white as chalk when Tanas and Valkuda entered the little room next to Elvira's office. Before departing Palikareva had passed to hiss that either the key would be on her desk on Monday or Maria would be in trouble. Tanas' presence was not reassuring much - he would probably side with the accountant that had been with his father for ages, long before the company had been established.

The tall man sat at the chair across from her desk and pleaded, 'Maria, I need your help. I know that I don't know a lot but I can learn fast if someone tells me. I need you to help me find some dossiers in Elvira's office. You know where everything is, I don't.'

The young woman mutely nodded 'no'. Tanas frowned but Valkuda was quicker, 'You do not know where the documents are or don't want to go there?'

'I can't go there without her, she will find out,' Maria was whispering.

'But it is me who is asking and I am the boss!' Tanas was more surprised than angered. His staff was paid to do what he wanted at first call and here the assistant accountant was refusing point blank.

'She will kill me anyway!' Whatever was left of Maria's nerves snapped and the tears she has been holding all the week burst through her tightly shut eyelids. She heard two concerned "Maria!"-s but instinct was screaming "Run!" in her ears much louder. The young woman groped for her handbag, clutched its long handle and run for the door. A tiny nail sticking out of the desk caught in a seam of the old cotton bag and it tore open. Out of it fell a small worn-out purse, few coins that rolled in all directions, a lipstick and a small key. Maria sank to her knees, clutched the key and wailed, 'So that is where the safe key had been all along! God, it had been with me all the time, thank you, God, now she will be off my back!'

'Which safe?' Valkuda's voice was soothing as if not to wake up the woman on the floor.

'Mr. Tanassov's own one.'

'But I cleared the company's one three days ago.' The tone did not change and Tanas was trying not to breathe.

'That was the official one. This is for his personal one at the central office, where he keeps his own stuff. But there is only this key and I thought I lost it the day he died. She can have it now and I can sleep at night.'

Valkuda was not so sure of that and when she looked at Tanas she saw the same thought etched on his face. If his father and Elvira had maintained a double set of books and there was a safe known to only the three of them the girl was as dead as Tanassov. Her only lease of life had been the key she was clutching. If there was anything important in that safe, the moment the key reached Elvira's hands, Maria was going to die. Probably she was going to die with or without the key, as Elvira may lose her nerve and decide to get rid of her and find another way to open the safe.

'God, I checked everywhere and this stupid bag. The lining does have a hole, I did not think it may slip there.'

Maria was so relieved that she had completely oblivious to the presence of the two other people in her room. She bended to retrieve her purse and stopped frozen at the look of Tanas' polished shoes few inches away. Her look traveled up to his blank face and she sank back again. 'Oh no, now she will kill me for sure! Or you will!' she mumbled. The color drained again from her face.

'Why should I do that? About her there is no question...'

'No, she told me that if I say one word to you about his safe she will make sure I will never find a job in Varna.'

'Oh, yes, dead people do not need jobs, you know!'

'Tanas, it is not time to exercise your sense of humor!' Valkuda's voice was low but the warning was clear. He sobered.

'You are right, I am sorry, Maria! I think that we need to talk. Now. Will you go to my office with Valkuda, I will entertain the receptionist while you sneak there. Get some paper and look official. And don't lose that key again, will you!'

Tanas was glaring at the receptionist:

'I did say a week ago that I want a bottle of aspirin in my personal bathroom and mineral water in my fridge. I was not here for a week and all is upside down already. Do you have no memory at all?'

'But, Mr. Tanassov...'

'No buts. Here is a twenty and you pick up your ass and go now! I said now, if you did not hear!'

The frightened receptionist took up the banknote and hurried out of the door.

Tanas turned to Maria's office and said calmly, 'Coast is clear, go now!'

With some initial gentle coaxing from Valkuda, the assistant accountant spilled it all. Once started she could not stop. She confirmed that the extra "dead souls" who had been paid were a cover for getting the money out of the stream. She pointed at cash payments that had been "omitted" at accounts receivables and written off as a bad debt, premiums that had never reached the employees, Margaritov outrageous fees. It was like a flush flood. Valkuda was looking at Tanas' stone face while he was scribbling notes on his pad. She was afraid how he would handle it - especially after the previous night file reading. She should have hidden the ruddy file for the first day at least. Valkuda tried to convince herself that she did not give a penny for Tanas, but for the people like Maria who depended on him for their living. They needed him. The security business was an established entity, no matter how badly managed. People were getting may be less than earned but getting money none the less. It was up to Tanas to make it right. She caught herself that somehow she never questioned his will to do that. Valkuda thought that she needed her head examined. That was Tanas of all people, who was she kidding?!

The object of her thoughts was relieved. He had expected that he should be tracing the missing money down obscure accounts in remote places. But he had underestimated his father again. Tanassovs did not believe in accounts that were held by a third party. They believed in control. The cynical thought swam through his mind - how much time it would have been before his dad would have decided to get rid of Elvira? She had been his father's classmate and he had been her boss through the years but it would not have stopped him, Tanas was sure after reading his own file. Had he been waiting for the safe deposits to reach certain sum? How long it had been since they have started doing it? What was her share? Valkuda had mentioned that Elvira was living high above her means. But those were question that could wait at least a little. He looked at his watch. There would not be time to get to the bank before meeting Elvira but it could also wait. Maria had stopped talking and was looking at him. All her cheap cosmetics had been wiped away by the torrential tears that she had shed. The accountant looked better. Some color had returned to her face. Tanas opened his wallet and took few big banknotes.

'Maria, I do believe that all you said is true. The other thing that is true is that you should hold tight on that old bag of yours as it saved your life probably. I will deal with Mrs. Palikareva but I want you to be out of her reach before that.'

'You are not going to fire me?'

'No, but for the moment you have much more to worry about. Do you live alone?'

'No, I am married.'

'Any children?'

'No, we don't have. Roman is without work, we will wait a little!'

'That he is without a work may be even good. Where is he?'

'Probably home by now. He would have called me if he had found somewhere to work today. What is wrong? Why do you need him?'

Tanas sighed. Was she that naive to think that Elvira would let her continue as if nothing happened? May be not naive, but unused to the twisted thinking that he had been grown into. He felt dirty despite the morning shower and his fresh clothes. But the self-analysis could wait. The man stifled the feeling and turned to Valkuda who was sitting silently across from Maria.

'May be a girls' talk will be easier?'

Valkuda was about to frown but acknowledged that Maria might respond better to her than to Tanas.

'You see, chances are that Mrs. Palikareva will try to find a way to get rid of you and your husband may get harmed along the way. What Tanas was saying is actually that you have to pack now, grab him and run as far as you can.'

'But we have nowhere to go! She will find me anywhere she said!' Maria was verging on sheer panic. Valkuda calculated quickly. 'You have seen Stephan who was here with me last week? He works for our Sofia's office. I will call him, he will pick you both from the bus station in Sofia and will arrange for you a safe place to stay. Is that better?'

Maria dissolved in tears again, but nodded affirmative. Valkuda pressed her cell phone into the woman's hand.

'Call Roman. Tell him that it is a surprise award trip and he needs to pack for the weekend and be at the Central bus station in an hour. There is a bus to Sofia at 1 p.m.'

It had been nice of her to bail him out, Tanas thought. He understood his grandfather's admiration for the woman. Her skills were second to none, exactly as Tanas Sr. had said only a few hundred times. He envied Dimitar about that - Valkuda was worth more than the assets of their grandfather, she could make a fortune to herself if she put her mind into it. Hopefully his brother would appreciate how rare such qualities came in such attractive package as well. No surprise why grandpa had been so eager to flaunt her around. It was odd, she did not wear any jewelry, except that real strange ring that his brother had crafted. In the world Tanas had been circling the women wore tons of gold and designer stuff, some of it pretty expensive. She sure could afford some - and Dimitar could afford much more, so what was he waiting for? May be a little brotherly advise on this subject was in order.

'Shall we call your fiancé to join us for lunch? He might be angry if you are seen with me around, I have a reputation to protect.'

'Don't be ridiculous! It is a business lunch and your accountant will be there to chaperon you. Dimitar is out of town anyway, he went to Brashlyan to bring the application for the wedding permit. He will be back for supper, he said.'

The wedding idea was getting more real - when his brother had said "in few weeks" he had meant it. Good for him. But why he did not get Valkuda with him for the ride, it was beyond Tanas. He would not left her behind on something obviously important for both of them. Then he felt guilty again - she was in the office on his insistence. He had robbed her of a special occasion. He better make sure he made it up to her. May be he could buy her a piece of jewelry as a gift for the engagement. He had to talk to Dimitar about it not to meddle with some plans that he might have. The thought lifted a little his spirit which was steadily sinking for the last twenty-four hours.

The lunch was jovial - Elvira was in good mood, as she had skipped her spa and had stricken an excellent bargain in the meantime. She had spoken to some acquaintances of Tanassov, who had done some services for him before but not at that scale as far as she knew. The couple had agreed to take care of Maria and her husband for good measure. The assistant accountant lived in one of these ugly concrete villages planted upright that some people called living complexes. The only complex thing there was the way

to find the place one needed in the maze of blocks with confusing numbers, Elvira sneered. Nobody knew each other, nobody paid attention to the drunken arguments in the next apartment. So a domestic quarrel that would die away would be nothing new. With some luck at that hot weather, the bodies would be pretty decomposed before someone alerted the cops and the cops react to the notice of rotten smell. Those places smelled rotten to start with, some idiot of an architect had put garbage chutes on the floors and those were constant source of cockroaches and stench. Maria had not mentioned any relatives living around so chances were there would be no calls to the office. Elvira could officially fire her for not coming to work without notice. The assistant accountant's reluctance could easily be explained with the scare of working for a man who was a known brute and had just come from a mental institution. He had frightened enough the receptionist to a whispering mess when Elvira came in the morning. The timing was perfect. Tanas had no clue about the safe and it was safe for the moment as well, she could wait few more days until she "discovered" the stealing in Maria's accountant practices. The assistant had prepared the reports for the tax people and she had prepared the payrolls, Elvira could openly lament that she had trusted the boss and his protégé way too much. Then she could retire as it was about time. Tanassov would have paid his debt to her finally.

A visit to the bank might send an accountant into euphoria but not that high, Valkuda thought over her salad. She looked at her watch - Maria had not called yet and there were few minutes left to the departure of the blasted bus to Sofia. She better be on it as her boss was rather cheerful for Valkuda's liking. Palikareva had forgotten to be curt with her which made the young woman's spine tingle. Tanas had complained of some stomach pain due to the medicines to keep his blood pressure under control and had refused to drink anything but plain soda, though for such a severe sufferer surely had a square meal. He was generously refilling Elvira's glass with expensive wine the taste of which she had shared with his father. Valkuda could have sworn that she saw something slip from his fingers at one of the refills but her phone rang at that time and she excused herself to go and talk aside. It was Maria who was boarding the bus with Roman. The young woman would have thanked her even more profusely if not for an angry bus horn in the background. Valkuda returned to the table and said apologetically, 'Business, as usual!'

Around a quarter past one Elvira stood up to visit the bathroom. The rueful expression on Tanas' face did not fade when he took out his cell and pretended to talk to someone. Then he turned to Valkuda and said in a barely audible voice, 'Tell her I have been called by a friend double parked in front. It was an emergency with his company and I will see her on Monday. She does not have keys for the office. Keep pouring as long as you can. If you manage to score more than half an hour she will agree on everything you say. Tell her to go home and sleep; that should give us some time. Call me when you can. Please trust me on this, will you!' Tanas left.

Valkuda had many doubts about the sanity of doing it and even more questions to ask him, but the door of the ladies swung open at the other end of the restaurant and Tanas was already at the door. He waved at Elvira but did not stop. The accountant came to the table and plopped in her chair. She looked pointedly at her empty wine glass and Valkuda hastily refilled it.

'What is wrong with him? Where did he run to?' Elvira was surly.

'He got a call from a friend who had some emergency and was double parked outside. He said that we can enjoy the meal without him.'

'Ah, sometimes it is better that the men are not sticking around too much, dear! I have been married for a while and could not wait for my husband to get away,' Elvira's words were coming with a slightest hint of a slur. If she had reached the state of "dear"-ing Valkuda, she should be well on the road to complete oblivion. The young woman discretely looked at the nearly empty bottle, her own half-empty first glass and signaled the waiter. She ordered herself a sumptuous chocolate treat, grilled cheese bits for Elvira to go with the wine, and after a moment's thought - a new bottle. Tanas could afford it.

By three o'clock Valkuda's imagination started running low. After the cheese, she had ordered for Elvira the clams that the place had been famous for, then a mixed cold and hot meat platter. The accountant had guzzled the second bottle at record speed even without visiting the bathroom. That stamina had taken years to hone, the young woman resentfully acknowledged. The conversation had been moderately entertaining, Elvira doing most of the talking about the men in general, the women in general, the weather in general, everything in general, except some school memories about Tanassov the father which inevitably involved her as his confidante. Valkuda was skeptical that Tanassov had ever had a confidante in his life, but she

was too wise to argue the point. Accountant's words were coming out more and more slurred and it was getting harder to understand what Elvira was saying. It was time to act. The young woman summoned the maître d' and asked for the bill. It had been charged to Mr. Tanassov's account, she was assured. The young woman grudgingly admired the speed that he had dealt with it on the way out, she had not even noticed it. Valkuda asked for a taxi to be called and looked in Elvira's slightly unfocused eyes, 'I think you need to go home and take it easy for the day. Get some sleep and you will feel better. It is the heat that is getting to all of us!'

'As you say, dear, I think I will take it easy, I took care of Maria so it should be fine to get a rest, ha-ha-ha!' The laughter turned into gurgles but the content of her words hit Valkuda as a truck at full speed.

'You did take care of Maria?'

'Not yet, tonight, we will see, but it is for me only to know, now I will go sleep, bye, honey!' Elvira promptly grabbed the passing waiter's shirt to steady herself and stumbled to the car waiting in front of the door. Valkuda waited until the taxi left and pulled her cell phone.

There was a limit to surprises that a single person could handle before his system overflow. Tanas thought that he had passed that particular limit several times over but as he was sitting in front of the suitcase on his desk he was not sure whether he would be up for another one. After he had left the restaurant he had headed straight to the central bank office. Call it male intuition but before he had entered he had spotted very solid looking briefcase on the window of nearby luxury shop and had bought it without bargaining over its bloody steep price. The customer had made the day for the fragile-looking girl who had served him although he had cut short her learned by heart praises of the briefcase's security features. He knew about them. Tanas could expertly dislodge most of the security systems known around and which was better - could reassemble them back. Employing some con artists had its perks no matter how much his future sister-in-law disapproved on them. He had strolled in the bank as if he owned the place and was shown to the office of the vice-manager without delay. Tanas had thanked him about sealing the safe but said it had not been necessary. The situation was a simple mistake by a junior staffer and the original key had always been in a safe place. Tanas did not even need to keep his fingers crossed behind his back as it was essentially the truth. He put the key on the table and demanded immediate access to the safe.

'Of course, Mr. Tanassov, would you like to wait for Mrs. Palikareva or she is not coming today? She is usually on time for the Friday's inspection of the vault. She never misses it except for last week, but I understand that last Friday with the incident with your father there was no time for that...'

'I think she will be doing her rounds next week. Would you mind get going as I have other things to attend!' Tanas' icy voice could replace the air conditioner and the vice wilted like a flower under the cold fury in the visitor's gaze. He quickly opened the door and tried to smooth the shake out of his own voice, 'After you, please!'

The key fit a safe much bigger than Tanas expected but its contents filled nicely the briefcase nearly up to the edges. It took the young man few minutes to stack it properly. At the end he smirked, fished a penny from his wallet and left it in the center of the vault, then closed it and called the manager at around the corner to come and lock it. Tanas thanked loftily and left carrying the briefcase as if it weighed nothing. It had perks to keep in form also. The taxi dropped him in front of the office few minutes before two p.m. He had spent the remaining hour digging through the safe and cabinets in Elvira's office. The cabinets did not yield any surprises, there was no way she or his father would leave documents lying around when a tax inspector may knock at the door at any time. He verified few random names from his list of "dead souls" and as expected found nothing except old CV's in their respective files. Sloppy, he thought, a little bit more money would have bought fake work records and some photos, for propriety sake. But his father had not expected to die and if his plans were going as scheduled there would have been no one else to fool. Tanas found in his mind an odd empathy for Maria, both of them just obstacles in the path chosen by the real bosses. Tanas felt sick to his stomach and it had nothing to do with the fake medication he had invented to avoid Elvira's suspicion. The enormity to which his life failure measured started to sink and the wave of surprises could not keep it at bay for long. Tanas desperately thought of something to ground him, anything. Was that the nervous breakdown about which the doctors had been warning his brother? Dimitar had mentioned it casually the previous night and asked him not to be shy to ask for help. The young man bit his lip harshly and tasted blood. No, he was sane and sober. He did not need medication and doctors hovering around. He was free to do whatever he wanted. Free. The word hit a block of memories centered on Stavros. The Mad Stavros knew more about human psychology than half the hospital. May be it would be good to pay him a visit and learn more about his craft. What did he say - when there was a fog, the

lighthouses were useless, unless there was a bell strong enough to be heard over the roar of the stormy sea. The invisible bell could save your life at sea, so one should not underestimate the bells ever. Bell masters were a dying cast, Stavros had said. May be it was preferable to be a dying bell master than a dying piece of nothing. Then Tanas saw the files he was holding. He could not drop the people like that, they were trapped like him in a job probably most of them hated. He could not be free to pursue what he wanted unless he made it right for them. He better start. The big safe had exactly the money that was in the "legal" books, the seals and stamps and nothing of interest. Tanas carefully locked everything and moved to his office. The Augean Stables were awaiting him. Then his phone rang. Valkuda was calling and he better remember to change her nickname before she saw it.

"Come, I have emptied the safe!"

Those words were as irresistible as siren's call. Valkuda was so irritated by herself about it that snapped at the completely innocent taxi driver. He signed and she blushed beet red to the roots of her black hair - the man was old enough to be her father or even older. She apologized mumbling something about a hard day. As if he were strolling in the park, she reprimanded herself and apologized again. The man used a red signal stop to turn to her.

'You should better use this weekend to get some rest; you are tight as a bow string! Too much work is not good, see, the weather would be nice, take a day for yourself.'

'I am getting married at the end of August!' Valkuda said before thinking.

'Nice, congratulations! But you still have to get to that end of August. By the look of you, you will snap before that, excuse my frankness!'

The red light changed to green and Valkuda was saved from the necessity to think of an answer. May be the man was right, Dimitar also needed some rest. He had been snappy in the morning and it was easy to explain with his father's death and all the turmoil around it. May be she could convince him to do something different on the weekend. She could always toss an extra hour during the week to compensate. She tipped lavishly, thanked for the advice and entered the security agency building. The taxi driver looked after her and shook his gray head - for a bride a month away from her wedding she was not exactly a happy picture.

The receptionist was not at her desk although it was not even three-thirty. Valkuda frowned. Her staff would not dream of doing such a thing. She proceeded to Tanas' office and found him bended over a roll of paper that was spread over the table. He did not even look at her but said, 'Thank you, you can leave it next to the printer. And when Miss Martinova comes, let her in here directly.'

'Nice, now that I am here directly I suppose I need to wait for someone to leave something next to the printer!'

'Sorry! I thought it was the receptionist. I needed a new cartridge for the printer and sent her to the computer store down the road.'

'Does this receptionist of yours have a name that you know of?'

'Probably she does, but I have never managed to get hold of them long enough to learn their names. The receptionists are usually Dad's future or discarded one-timers, so they changed pretty often. It is a miracle some of them knew what to do with the phone, I guess.'

'Great selection process, what a pity he died before managing to patent it, would have made tons of money. What are you doing by the way?'

'Something to help with the staffing in fact. This is an organigram of the people employed and the salaries they get plus divisions and shifts. The pattern is so obvious; it is a question why I had not seen it earlier.'

'You know, your sober brain does seem to work by the look of this!'

'Thank you, your kind acknowledgment made my day!'

'I am sorry, that was rude of me, and I apologize!' Valkuda was mortified. What was wrong with her, she had insulted two people in ten minutes! Tiredness should not be an excuse for rudeness!

'It was not rude, it was honest and this is a rare commodity around, so you are welcome. The organigram can wait. I need some courage to start opening the packages that I brought from the bank.'

'What packages?'

Tanas went to the built-in wardrobe and brought the briefcase to the table. He opened it and Valkuda blinked few times in disbelief.

'All of it?'

'All. But I was nice; I left a penny for the returning people.'

There was a very hesitant knock at the door. Tanas went and got the cartridge. He glanced at the young woman who looked ready to run and asked curtly, 'Who is going to be in the office during the weekend?'

'N-nobody, I mean, only the dispatchers and the people on duty, but the o-office part is closed.'

'I just wanted to know, OK? Now if you print me what I gave you in the morning, I think you may go also. I will lock.'

'Y-yes, Mr. Tanassov!'

Few minutes later the machine spewed a pile of printed sheets and the young woman cracked the door open an inch to say she was leaving. Tanas waved at her and she hastily closed the door.

'You don't want her to see me going out of here?' came Valkuda's voice from the end of the table.

'I don't care. At least I do not scare you into stammering!' Tanas heaved.

Valkuda thought about it. She was not scared and she should be - she was almost alone with the same Tanas who ten days ago had gloated that his dad would take care of her. May be she was losing her touch but she was not afraid. She wanted to call Dimitar - he had been out of reach in Brashlyan when she had called from the restaurant but may be he was already in the range at the moment. She pushed the redial button on her small cell. A meter away from her another small set started ringing shrilly. Valkuda almost jumped out of her skin. Tanas had left to get more paper from the storage room and it was his cell that was making the desperate noise. Another ring and she would not hear what Dimitar would say. Valkuda looked at the annoying machine and the display flicked "The Snake". The young woman hardly had the time to think that Tanas had named at least one of his associates appropriately when an answering machine boomed in her ear. It was not Dimitar's though. An impersonal mechanic voice informed her that the voice mail of Tanas Tanassov was full and she should call later. Then the machine disconnected and the set on the table stopped ringing. The display changed to "Missed Call". Tanas entered carrying a stack of sheets and files and dumped them on the table.

'Damn, don't these people have anything else to do than calling me on Friday afternoon? Excuse me, I will call to see who it is' Tanas picked up his phone and flicked the reply without looking at the display.

Valkuda's phone rang and he frowned - what a timing!

His future sister-in-law opened her phone, looked at him and chimed, 'The Snake is listening!'

The look of the tall man who had turned deep crimson was worth it. He slowly snapped his cell phone shut and so did Valkuda.

'You will not buy it that I had changed it because of your wedding ring so I will just apologize. The change of your nickname is the least of my worries at the moment, but I will do it after we finish. May be you will choose your new one yourself as a compensation?'

'Apology accepted. But I think it is up to you to rename it, it is your phone. I did not want to snoop, I wanted to call Dimitar.'

'I think he will enjoy it! Where did he come up with that idea to make you a snake for an engagement ring, if it is not a sacred secret between the two of you? I swear he had not seen my phone up to now.'

'I don't know. When I figure whether I am the snake to offer the apple of knowledge - or the one that had been offered it, I may tell you. Now, the size of this suitcase tells me that we would be doing a lot of counting. Do you really want to start it?'

'It will have to be done one day or another. I am really grateful for the help though!'

'You are welcome. Do you want me to do the counting and you will do a table to enter it or I will do the paperwork and you will count?'

'I am supposed to be better on counting other people's money, I will count.'

Soon they fell into rhythm - Tanas was opening a package, recording the number and the amount, then was giving it to Valkuda for a second count and she was entering both the number and the sum in a table. They did not speak except for confirming a number here and there. There were few packages with small sums in German marks and one in pounds, but the rest were American dollars. Loads of them. Neatly sorted in five, twenty and hundred dollar bills, the twenties being the overwhelming majority of them. At certain point Valkuda realized that so much money could not have come only from the salaries and shortcut profits from the security agency. If Elvira had gone to the bank at least once a week to check, the deposits were made more frequently. According to the pristine state of the packages and the unnerving accuracy of the numbers' sequence, there had been no withdrawals. The amounts were fluctuating but not wildly. The wraps were not dated and that made impossible to trace a pattern as there were no two identical sums at any given time - or rather there were, but their distribution was random. Packages were piling and piling on the table next to her

and Tanas was getting more and more out of the suitcase and with every package he was getting paler and paler.

'Does this suitcase have a bottom?'

'Last layer. I am sorry I did not think that it will take so long.' Tanas did not look at her. He cut open another package and started counting. Valkuda spotted the bite mark on his lips and a creepy feeling trickled into her figures-clogged mind. She was the only one to know about the money apart from Tanas and Elvira. The sum was beyond anything reasonable and people had been killed for much less. The young woman was confident that she would be a reasonable adversary for a while but she was also aware of Tanas' formidable physical strength. Her knife was in her bag - the problem was that her bag was at the other end of the table. She had to think of an excuse to get it closer if only as a precaution. She counted the package that Tanas handed her and entered the sum. Then she said brightly, 'I did not call Dimitar, he might be worried!'

Valkuda walked briskly to her handbag and withdrew her cell phone. Dimitar was on the road and promised to call her when he would reach Varna. She picked up her bag and brought it next to the chair she was occupying. She started counting the next package.

'You did not need to do that.. .' Tanas sounded tired.

'Excuse me? It is me who decides who I call and when!'

'Not the call, the bag. I am not going to jump and strangle you, rest assured.' Tanas was counting or at least shifting banknotes.

'Why do you think that I need my bag for self-defense?'

'This dress of yours is not suitable for hiding knives so it should be your bag then. Here!' he handed her his wad.

'How on Earth you got to that idea?'

'By looking at your dress, obviously.'

'No, the idea that I have a knife.'

'Do you?'

'I asked first!'

'You do.' Tanas said calmly. The next split second a blade sank half an inch deep right in the middle of the sheet of paper in front of Valkuda. The handle vibrated a little then stopped. Tanas cut open the next

package, as if nothing had happened. Valkuda was sitting silent, her attention fixed on the knife in front of her. She was afraid, not of Tanas but of the answer to the question that was blowing her mind. She sucked some air and let it out, 'Where did you get this knife from?'

'You want to ask whom I got the knife from, don't you? But I believe you know.'

'This is my grandfather's knife.'

'It was. He gave it to me as a birthday present when I turned sixteen. And taught me how to use it, by the way.'

'I can't believe it!'

'Suit yourself! I liked your old man very much though. I wish I had listened more to him. Some of his advises came handy.' One of them had been damn useful fairly recently, he added in his thoughts.

'Grandpa taught you what to do with knives and gave you handy advises?' Valkuda was still not convinced.

'Oddly enough, but yes, exactly that. He always insisted I was not taught the right things, so I guess he tried to compensate. Are you going to count?'

'Yes, damn, yes!'

They counted the last remaining packages in silence. Then Tanas started adding the figures manually while Valkuda clicked a formula and tried not to whistle. The sum was surreal; she could not believe that Tanassov had led everyone including his father to believe he was starving while his safe had enough to keep him well fed until he reached the age of the Chinese Empire. It was not comparable with his father's money but was a fortune by the country's standard nonetheless. Valkuda looked at the tall man engrossed in calculations and saw his teeth breaking his lower lip for a second time. She pulled a handkerchief but waited until he lifted his head to give it to him.

'Bite this!'

He did not argue, just licked the drops of blood and bit the little square. Tanas looked at her and told her his result. It did coincide. He rubbed his face and groaned. It was going to be a long weekend.

'Now what?'

'You asked first,' Tanas chuckled, 'I think that first I will hide all this and will consider my options. I have to pay the guys what they were not paid properly, that is a start. If I work on Sunday I am positive I can

straighten it up and then meet each one for few minutes on Monday before my accountant shows up. Then I will handle her the key. How long can you hide Maria for me?’

‘As long as you wish.’

‘Thanks, keep her under cover and give me the bill. In the meantime I want to buy myself a place to live. I had been looking for a while and have some ideas.’

‘You will use this money to buy yourself a mansion?’ The reproach in her voice was not even laced.

‘You need to think the worst of me always, don’t you? No, I had no idea of this money until the early afternoon so I could not have relied on it. When I was born, my great-uncle, who was also my godfather, opened a bank account for me before they brought me home from the hospital. You see, he had no problem guessing the name of his sister’s grandson and he knew the date of birth, which was all that was needed in those days. He put a monthly salary to my name and continued to contribute whenever he could, although the musicians were not earning much at that time. When he died, whatever he had left was transferred to the account also, then Grandpa continued to put money, in his memory, I believe. He never told me about the existence of the savings until few days before the default when he virtually dragged me to the bank to withdraw the money and convert it to dollars then put them in a safe for me. He swore me that the only thing I would ever buy with them would be a home. He said that his brother-in-law never grounded and it was a pity, so his hard-earned money should buy me the home he never had. I have added some also, as well as all Grandpa’s presents for my birthdays and Christmas. You know he did not bother with something more personalized than the inscription on the envelope.’

Valkuda shifted uneasily. Tanas Sr. had always preferred to hand money for a present for the recipient to buy something to his own taste and she had thought that it had been the best idea. But some overtones in his grandson’s voice were ringing that he had considered it a lack of caring of sort. He had not spent it as if resenting the money despite being grateful for them. For Tanas Sr.’s birthday a case of really good wine had inevitably been delivered on behalf of his son and grandson, which wine was served at their next visit. The Christmas presents were usually an expensive bottle of imported spirit as Varna was a port town and a lot could be found by a searching person. Oops, Valkuda thought, someone had searched or at least ordered a subordinate to search instead of count banknotes. She had never thought of it before, a tug at her consciousness told her. She frowned and asked, ‘You are going to put that in your safe?’

'No, the banks are closed. With the permission of Dimitar, I hope to put it in yours if you can spare the space until Monday.'

'Aren't you afraid that he may decide to keep them?'

'Not much. Then they will be on his soul. You see, I had no idea about them so losing them will not make a change in my life, but first I want to repay what was stolen. I hope you two will descend to my low moral standards for a change.'

Tanas reached and pulled out his knife which disappeared in his ankle strap. Valkuda pensively touched the hole that was left on the desk.

'No, I don't think that Dimitar will object about the safe,' she said. 'Let's start packing.'

Tanas was driving one of the company's cars with Valkuda at the back seat, next to the suitcase. She looked tired, Tanas thought - no surprise after what she had been through the last few months following his grandfather's death. From what had slipped along the grapevine his brother had started putting on the Big Boss shoes but could not fill a fraction yet. Sure there were not many people who could do that but Tanas did not think Dimitar had been trying hard enough. The ease with which he could work on his art did him the trick to think that management could be equally easy. The result was an overdrawn Valkuda and some snickers behind his back, quiet for the moment. It made sense to try to talk to him even if it would be an initial waste of time.

'So despite that you liked grandpa you would have had my blood on your hands?' Tane's granddaughter was not known to mince words.

'My only excuse is that I was not in Varna. Father told me when I had already left Sofia to meet Dimitar. My intention was to threaten my brother by showing that I knew his hiding place and that we may eventually harm him by kidnapping you. I could not fathom that you may do such a dumb thing to go out without a guard. I am sure that it was the first time since Grandpa died. To be honest, I was not sure if Father was bluffing or not. If you had not told me that he was not, I would not believe it until I saw it. I knew Father was surrounded by guards as well and chances were he would not do anything to you in front of them. He promised me that you would be safe at least until I come back and that we would decide together what to do with you. The midday deadline was a stage stuff. Once I were back, I would have found the way, claiming

that I wanted you as a toy for myself for a while, he would have bought that. But as far as I got up to now since his death, he promised to a lot of people a lot of things that never happened. I am curious though, how did you drown him? The coroner's report that Dimitar gave me says that he had drowned.'

'I did not. I have no idea what happened to him. I remember that I left the office to go get a new bathing suit and was going through the park in front of the theater counter. An old gypsy came to offer me palm reading and the next moment someone had whacked me unconscious. The next thing I remember was that I was in Brashlyan with a concussion.'

Tanas did some quick calculations and compared them to what the guards had told him about his father's last hours. It did not add up. There was not physical chance that Valkuda with her whacked head would overpower his sober father, drown him, get a transport and drive to Brashlyan. Something was missing in the equation. He had to think about it and do some more homework. But that could wait. The tall man parked in the back yard of Dimitar's office and opened the door to Valkuda. She passed him the case and jumped after, 'Come, we will get through the back door!'

How appropriate, he thought.

When Dimitar came ten minutes later, he had to knock on the door of his own office and wait until Valkuda unlocked it. He blinked several times at the sight. His fiancée did not put much ceremonies - she pulled him in, kissed him briefly and went back to the working table where his brother was sitting and sorting money.

'Hi, may I give you a hand in exchange for a chunk?' Dimitar sat across from Tanas.

'Dimitar! I am going to get some rubber bands from my office!' Valkuda left.

'What are you planning to do?'

'Count them and deposit them in your safe if you don't mind. Damn, I put another twenty in the fives.'

'Where did you get those from?'

'Emptied Father's secret safe, one more twenty wrong.'

'If it was secret why did you need to empty it?'

'The problem is that it was secret from me. It is a long story. Look, what do you think to help with counting and after that we may have something to eat and we will tell you everything we know?'

Valkuda came back with a pack of rubber bands and small paper squares. The three of them did not talk much until the last banknote was sorted, counted and packed. Tanas put the stacks back in the suitcase and handed it to Dimitar who locked it in the sturdy almost empty safe. His grandfather had had a taste for those monsters, he thought, and remembered that that particular one had been his great-grandfather's one that had been fished from the basement of the house during the restoration. It had taken a horde of loaders with rolls to bring it one floor up and it had been a job that they swore they would not repeat for any money.

'Now we are washing hands and eating and you two are telling me what was that.'

'What shall I order?' asked Valkuda.

'If you are game for a Chinese, I know a decent place that delivers!' offered Tanas.

'I want seafood with anything, what about you, Val?'

'Fried noodles with whatever they have of the vegetables and some chicken.'

Tanas pulled out his cell and ordered their food, turned and motioned, 'After you two, please!'

He tried very hard not to see that Valkuda flinched.

The ice cubes were swimming in Tanas' soda while he and Valkuda were recounting the day's events to Dimitar. Stefan had called and confirmed that Maria and Roman were safely deposited with Father Innokentii at the small monastery at the outskirts of Sofia. Tanas Sr. had used the venue several times to hide people who needed a temporary refuge. The monastery was God-forsaken place and the three elderly monks had thought that it would die with them before Tanas Sr. had discretely poured some money in redoing the structure and then the less urgent repairs. He had asked for a temporary hospitality for the needy and had been using it sparsely. The monks had agreed to shelter the ones who had not been involved in crimes and he had kept his side of the bargain. It was not the French Riviera but was safe.

'So what is next on your agenda?' asked Dimitar.

'Tomorrow I will be doing the accounts and if I am lucky, I should be finished by Sunday midday. Do you know if one can still buy sugar cubes?' he turned to Valkuda.

She almost choked on her fried noodles in surprise. He had been normal all day, what were those cubes for, was her first thought, while Dimitar was patting her back. Tanas filled her glass with soda and gave it to her. His smile was teasing. 'Get real, I am not going to build myself a house of sugar cubes. You have read one

too many fairytales about pigs and witches. I wanted to bring some cubes with me when I go riding at the horse club on Sunday afternoon if I finish by then.'

'Sure you can buy cubes, right next to the sugar bags, what is the problem? I am just envious; I haven't been riding since I can't remember when.'

'What was that about building a house of sugar cubes, by the way?

'I told your fiancée that I had been planning for some time to buy a place of my own. Now that the lease is canceled it is the right time.'

'You have few days left...' Dimitar was skeptical.

'I have a secret weapon. Remember Raina, your classmate, the one with the spectacles? She is now the Queen of Real Estate in town. I will call her.'

'Reni the Carnation, whose mom was growing carnations for sale? Come on, I haven't seen her since high school. Call her now; she may join us for drinks!' Dimitar was enthusiastic. Raina that he remembered was a nice skinny girl with spectacles always perched on her nose, very shy and teased mercilessly by half the school because she was occasionally replacing her mom behind their carnations stand at the local bazaar. He was curious what had happened to her to get to the top of the real estate market in such a competitive town as Varna.

Tanas was somewhat bothered that Dimitar did not ask Valkuda first about such a sudden invitation after her obviously exhausting day. May be the French manners were not what they were spoken to be. Valkuda picked up her fiancé's enthusiasm though.

'She had recently done some really decent transactions for your grandfather and I do like her style. Are you sure you can persuade her? She may have other plans, it is Friday evening.'

Raina did, but at such an invitation she canceled them on the spot and arrived twenty minutes later directly from her girls-only evening out. She hugged Valkuda, shook hands with Tanas and stood in front of Dimitar.

'Not bad for a French lad, I would say! It agrees with you!'

'Not bad yourself, you look wonderful! Quite a change I would say!'

'You mean from Reni the Carnation to Raina Vanguelova?' Even Dimitar caught the bitsy bit of bitterness in her cheerful voice and hurried to smooth his faux-pas:

'No, you were Raina Vanguelova then also, but I have heard rumors that you are now Reni La Reigne de Real Estate, as a French lad like me should have said.'

Not bad, little brother, thought Tanas, otherwise his future broker would have started the evening with the wrong foot. Reni La Reigne was dressed in dramatic fuchsia with matching shoes, her hair's natural dull mousy beige was now burnished dark mahogany with fuchsia streaks, cut into stylish short spikes. Her modern big bad sported few hanging chains and ribbons but was a basic designer black. Her glasses were long ago replaced by contact lenses. She was attractive, single, ambitious to boot professional and he liked her. Tanas wrote off the lack of thrill on those points to the tiredness accumulated. He caught himself he had not been honest but decided to think about it later.

'You better make a nice reason why I have forfeited a good company and a decent drink!' Raina winked at Tanas.

'We are a better company and I am sure Dimitar will find something appropriately royal in the liquor cabinet. The real reason though is that I have finally ripened for a place of my own and as you have been kind enough to offer me your help around few thousand times, I am taking you up upon the offer.'

Dimitar victoriously held a bottle of cognac - Rémy Martin 1738 Accord Royal.

'I knew I have the right one!'

Tanas felt like grinning like a boiled lamb's head. It was only a quirk of fate yet the bottle that he had sent to the old man for the last Christmas was going to help him smooth his way to his own place. Grandpa would have like it. The bottle was opened so there was a chance that Tanas Sr. had enjoyed it also. Tanas however refused a drink to the raised brows of Raina.

'I drank and paid for it! Dealing with beautiful woman with brains requires full undiluted attention!'

'You and your snake tongue! You could deal with an architecture plan drunk above medical limit and refuse it as it was crap, don't even think that I have forgotten! But let it be, doves, will you let me have himself for myself for few minutes and after that we will catch up.'

Raina pulled a spiral notepad and flicked a new page, 'Go on, price up to, square feet from up to, house, condo, duplex, garden, barn, proximity to, places to avoid, color of the shingles and the sandbox, come on, I am writing!'

Dimitar hugged Valkuda and murmured into her ear, 'We can safely leave him in Raina's clutches. When she finishes with him, we will collect the shreds and put them into a plastic bag! I thought about something - why don't we also go riding, will remind us of something, OK, will remind me, but I think you enjoy riding also...'

'It will be nice, we can go tomorrow.'

'Not tomorrow, tomorrow we are going to buy your wedding dress...'

'But the groom is not supposed to see it before the wedding, brings bad luck!'

'Well, you can model seventy-five of them and I will forget them all so you can choose safely whatever you want.'

'I want to sit. I see dollars sings all over. I am curious how your father managed to amass so much without anyone getting a whiff about it. It seems like a long-term project.'

'I doubt that he would be divulging the info. Don't worry, Tanas will spend them soon enough. He said he is buying something - although the amount he had downstairs could buy him the Movie Center and a strip of the beach as well. Raina would make sure the City Hall people will sell it to him.'

'It is really, really odd, but today I was offered to sell practically exactly what you are asking for. I thought that it would not linger on the market for long, but I had no idea that it may be so fast. If you want to see it tomorrow morning, I will arrange it.'

'Go for it!' Tanas liked working with her. She was known to go only for the kill and not waste her time and the time of her clients with "one more thing over there across the river and into the trees".

Raina made a quick call and turned to ask him:

'Is eight-thirty despicable night time for you? The owner should be going after that and will not be able to show it until the early afternoon.'

'It is fine, book it please.'

Raina finished the call, closed her small phone set and dropped it in her purse. The deal was in the bag, she could feel it in her backbone.

It was stifling hot in the puny concrete apartment although the time was passing ten in the evening. The couple sitting on the faded sofa and watching the TV with the sound off was losing patience. As agreed, they had arrived around eight, confident that all the neighbors would be watching the evening news and the break-in would be a piece of cake and so it was. But their precaution not to alert the apartment's occupants had been a wasted effort - the place was empty. They searched silently the two puny rooms and the box called a kitchen by an imaginative architect. Nothing suggested that the owners had packed and gone - there was underwear drying on a string in the bathroom, there was some food and an opened bottle of soda in the fridge. The daily newspaper was opened on the "Employment" section and left on the rickety sitting room table with a pen on the side. The pair spoke in hushed tones and sat down to wait for their prey to come. At one point waiting was so boring that the man stood up and switched on the TV but killed the sound. They sat talking about the money they were getting for it and that it was time to get out of Varna and try their luck somewhere else. Tanassov's death did not seem accidental to them. His accountant was getting rid of her assistant as well. Cool logic told them that they would be next in line for the honors. At ten past ten they looked at the still closed door and the complex that was quieting down as per the city regulations of noise level. Domestic dispute at that time was bound to bring witnesses which was the last thing the couple wanted. So they left as silently as they had come and locked the door. They would try the next evening.

Tanas arrived at the meeting with few minutes to spare. He sat in the car admiring the quiet lane just off the main pedestrian street. The old linden trees were keeping it cool and would smell like heaven in spring. The price was not a greedy one but the sale came with the condition that the vendor may refuse the offer without explanation. Raina had told him that the elderly lady who was selling the place was very concerned about the purchaser - she had heard horror stories of young couples partying round the clock and keeping the blocks on toes, of enthusiasts demolishing the roofs to build ugly structures. The owner wanted to be able to weed the potential buyer as much as possible.

'She will either like you or it will not work, be your best!' Those were the last words that the fuchsia tornado had whispered in his ear when he had dropped her at her place last night. She had expertly hidden her disappointment that he refused to have coffee with her claiming that early rise made for early bed. He had

driven away with the feeling that something was fundamentally wrong with him if he had started avoiding coffee invitations from unattached cuties who did not mind no-strings close-ups.

A taxi stopped behind his car and the unattached cutie came in her full business glory - the fuchsia streaks were washed out of her primly combed hair, her dress was ankle-length white linen with small mother-of-pearl buttons down the front and she was carrying a big off-white cloth bag over her shoulder. She wore practical white espadrilles and a silk scarf with some light pink painted flowers. By some reason her outfit reminded Tanas of the old-fashioned duvet bags that were used in his grandfather's households since the time the old man had married grandma Margarita and were part of her trousseau. He should have his head examined, he thought, but came out of the car and kissed her hand. 'You should have called me to pick you up!'

'Thank you, you look nice!' Raina was going through a quick evaluation of his infinitely pale pinstriped shirt and black pants, polished shoes and hair combed away from his face.

'You look better anyway!'

'It is good to know, but it is you who is aiming at the heart of Mrs. Siran Hlebarova, not me! Let us not make her wait!'

Mrs. Hlebarova had been expecting them - she was dressed to go out and a worn out black oilskin shopping bag was propped next to the front door. The old lady led them through the common stairway to the top floor which was the part she was eager to sell. It was a sprawling loft, the entire attic being transformed into one big space except for a bathroom with a shower and two more sinks - one next to the terrace and one in a close proximity to the large sky window. The heating was electric but could be helped by two enormous fireplaces on both side walls. The wall facing the backyard consisted of less bricks than of French windows, opening into semblance of balconies with beautiful wrought-iron fences identical to the one lacing the front balcony. There a minuscule table and two chairs would fit, albeit with some difficulty, pointed Raina. As he needed only one chair, he would be fine even to stretch his legs, Tanas observed, and asked Mrs. Hlebarova what the use of the place had been before.

'We bought the house with my husband from an old painter, not famous, but a very nice man. This had been his studio. When we renovated the bathrooms downstairs, we added the one here as there had already

been the water pipes and the drains. We thought about renting it, but then Matey got ill and could not stand noise. We preferred to live simpler but to have our privacy, just like your grandfather.'

'You knew Mr. Tanassov's grandfather?' Raina was not quite sure what would come out of it - Tanassov Sr.'s reputation in his native town elicited vast spectrum of emotions. The fact that Mrs. Hlebarova had not turned them at the door was a good sign, the broker hoped.

'It would be real hard not to have known Tanas Tanassov in this town, my dear, but you are too young to remember that. Matey worked with him for a while and we were meeting for dinner from time to time, you know how close you lived from here,' she turned to Tanas. 'It was before Margarita got ill. After that he was taking such good care of her, but something died in him when the doctors could not help her. She was the light of his days, he could move mountains for her, yet she was so sweet, so nice, so undemanding... I was working with her at the Music School, but it was long before you were born. We tried to keep in touch with him after that but he did not want to, I think, he was not the same person without her.'

The old woman sniffed into her handkerchief and looked at Raina, 'What do we do from now?'

'It depends on Mr. Tanassov whether he likes it or not - then we sign the offer and if you both agree on the price, we can sign it on Monday as you have all the documents and he has the money...'

'I like it and I think that price is reasonable - plus Mrs. Hlebarova knows who I am, so she may be looking favorably at me as a possible neighbor again...' Tanas was dripping his famous charm flooding the paint-encrusted floor, Raina thought.

'You look so much like your grandpa, it is frightening, but I think I will get used to it. Reni?'

'If you will be so kind to offer me a flat surface, I will fill the contract form right now. It won't be long; I know you were going to leave early.'

Twenty minutes later the offer to purchase was signed and Tanas shook ceremoniously hands with Mrs. Hlebarova. Raina was going to take care of the notarial contract and they were expected to sign it on Monday evening, after the purchaser finished work. The old woman stood up with them and picked up her heavy black bag. Tanas' good manners kicked in automatically and he offered to bring it down the flight of front stairs for her. While she locked prudently the door's three locks, Raina was next to his car. The man

stood at the first step and watched the difficulty with which his grandfather's friend was negotiating the stairs.

'Mrs. Hlebarova, may I offer you a lift somewhere?' the words came out independently.

'No, no, I will manage it! I am going to the cemetery, will catch the bus, I will be fine.'

'What a coincidence, I am also going to the cemetery; I haven't visited my father's grave yet, so it will be no problem to take you there. We will drop Reni at my brother's office as her car is there, if you don't mind, and we will drive to the cemetery after that.'

'Don't be ridiculous, it is a block away. I am perfectly capable of walking there faster than you will be turning around the small streets and the pedestrian zone,' Raina was sure that the last place Tanas wanted to go was the cemetery, but she had told him to charm the old lady and he was pushing on all stops. He did not need to bother, the offer was signed, but it was better that way. And the lady was frail; that was a fact. Better keep her in good form for Monday. Raina remembered what a nightmare one of her deals had turned into when one of the two elderly sisters who were selling a big complex died the night before the signature. The ensuing battle of heirs almost killed the deal and made her life miserable for months. He better drive carefully. Dimitar's office was around the corner, three minutes most.