

## **Going There, I Don't Know Where!**

'She shot my tires!' Dimitar was panting after getting back to Brashlyan in record time. 'She just bloody shot two tires and left without a word!'

The party was speechless. They had high hopes that the entire spectacle was a joke and Dimitar would be back in the church with Valkuda at his side in no time flat. The only flat things for the moment were Rada's Jeep tires and the whole idea of a wedding for the day.

'It means I am not going to bear crowns today?' there was a hint of tears in Iossif's voice. 'Does it mean that we are not going to have the feast either?'

'No, sweetie, we will scrap the crowns' part for now but we will have the feast no matter what.'

'Throwing good food is bad, Mom says!' the boy said with a somber expression.

'She is right, my dear! Let's go and have lunch everybody!' Mitzi took the little hand and started towards the house.

'I will go close the church first and will join you in few minutes,' Father Ivan turned towards the wide stone steps.

'What am I supposed to do now?' The question was to nobody in particular.

Tantche took pity of the jilted groom and said 'I am more or less sure you will not ride the Green Fairy yourself but I will give you a lift to the town as we need to replace Rada's tires anyway. Ready?'

'Give me a minute to get out of this suit and I will ride with you!' Dimitar hurried to the house.

Konstantin looked at Rada, Vantche and Tantche and shrugged his shoulders. 'Tantche, you are the specialist on human psyche, what do you think?'

'I think she was right to run and she will come and pay for your tires. It would not have lasted anyway. If he were that much in love with her we would have been breathing the dust of the Green Fairy by now. He is in love with the idea that she is in love with him and she hoped she had been in love with him for so long that she was keeping her eyelids shut to keep the illusion. It is not a case of bridal nerves; it was a run for her life. I hope he has an idea where she might be going but I doubt he knows where to look for her. Well, I

better be going, changing a suit will not take ages. And don't eat the entire cake alone, save me a piece; I will be back by five hopefully.'

The four of them joined Mitzi and Iossif who were devouring some of the cold cuts in the cool kitchen. Since his stitches had been removed the boy's appetite had increased tenfold and Mitzi was constantly feeding him vitamins, immune boosters, milk, honey, oranges, sweets, everything that would catch his attention. The deadly pallor of his cheeks upon his arrival had changed to healthy tanned pink and his unruly black hair was sticking in all directions. He was an epitome of good health and the hideous scar did not seem to bother him much. He loved his card playing tricks with Riste and clung to every word of the fairytales Mitzi read him at night. He squealed with delight when Tantche gave him a ride in the Green Fairy and fell in love with the sea, even if Rada did not allow him to go further than his knees in to prevent salt from getting into the wound.

'Will anyone else marry soon?' the boy asked after swallowing his bite.

'Not that I know of for now, we married a month ago!' Rada ruffled his hair.

'Uncle Riste is married to Aunt Vera, so they will not either... ' Iossif was disappointed. He looked at Mitzi hopefully. 'May be you can marry?'

'I will marry you! But first you have to grow up and to grow up...'

'I know, I have to eat. May I have a piece of that cheese where the cow is laughing?' Iossif giggled.

'Come! Let us empty the ice box!' Mitzi was up.

Dimitar entered the kitchen dressed in his jeans and a shirt, holding a backpack. He was about to start apologizing when Riste and Vera entered.

'It happens!' the elder man said amicably. 'Go and sort it, we are not going anywhere for the moment!'

Tantche hastily opened the door to the yard and propelled Dimitar to go first.

They stopped for few minutes to take off Rada's Jeep blown tires and stored them in the back of the Green Fairy. Tantche was concentrating on the road that started being familiarly bumpy and Dimitar was alone with his thoughts. He still refused to believe it - Valkuda had walked out of the wedding, just walked out! No explanation, not a single idea where she was heading and what she was planning to do! Was it that the

wedding was small - but it was her idea not to invite the town and she insisted that it concerned only the two of them and the less was more. Dimitar was trying to figure out what had been said right before Valkuda had suddenly bolted a few seconds before Father Ivan opened the door to lead them into the church. He had complimented her choice of dress which he honestly thought was spectacular and had joked that very soon he would stop being jealous of every man past, present and future as she would be his forever. She had laughed and then all of a sudden had said "Excuse me!" and run towards the house. Kosta and Rada, his best man and the matron of honor, had been surprised but the first thought was that his bride had forgotten something and was coming back in a jiffy. When a car had roared out of the door, the entire bridal party had poured out of the church and looked how Valkuda had sped down the road like a Formula One champion. Rada had told him where the Jeep keys were and Dimitar had sped after his bride running away only to catch up with her at the beginning of the bumpy road. She had stopped and waited for him to stop also and when he had come out she had taken her gun and shot the two Jeep tires on the passenger's side, then sped again without a word. It was ridiculous, it was Valkuda of all people, the woman never acted upon an impulse, without the careful consideration of the action itself and its implications. He looked at the blonde expertly steering the green Trabant along the final meters of the ravine-speckled dirt road.

'Tantche, what do you think, why did she shoot Rada's tires?'

'I believe it was a polite way of asking you to stop following. If she wanted to stay and talk she would have stayed and talked in Brashlyan.'

'She did not even tell me where she was going!' the sulking notes in his voice angered him.

'I think the purpose of running away is for the people who would like to find the runner to have some hard time doing it, but I may be wrong. Do you have a pursuit plan already?'

'No, but I think I will go to Varna first. We live there, it is logical to go there, I think. And she had been working lately from Varna's office so....'

'Hmm, you know her better, so it is your judgment that counts.' Tantche did not seem convinced though.

'How are you going to get to Varna?'

'I am going to rent a car or take a bus, whatever I can do. I think the buses are pretty frequent and I doubt it will be wise for me to drive. We started the celebration somewhat earlier with Kosta.'

'In that case, I will drop you at Varvara if there is a bus in the near future, if not, we will see...'

The little bus stop's attendant assured them that there was a regular minivan that was supposed to pass by twenty minutes later. Dimitar assured Tanteche that he had enough money to get to Varna and would be fine alone. The Green Fairy sped up towards the village's garage. Dimitar bought a bottle of water and the few newspapers that were at the stand and sat down to kill the time. He skimmed over few articles but his brain was going in overdrive. Her grandfather had told Tanas Sr. that she would protect him - that much about protection! She could have shot him aiming at those tires and she could have simply yelled instead. He hoped that she had bolted to Varna and made a mental note to call the office from Bourgas.

It was definitely his tire-related day. Few kilometers before Bourgas the overloaded minivan blew a tire and the passengers had to hitchhike to get to town. Luckily he was without any luggage but it took him a good chunk of time to get a ride. Most of the cars were coming back to town loaded with happy vacationing people buried under tents, blankets, kids and generally piles of stuff and the people did not want to bother clearing up a spot for a hitchhiker. He was so frustrated that when he reached the bus terminal to Varna sweating and dusty, he forgot to call the office. When he got there at sunset the guards gave him a strange look and said that there was a message for him in his study.

Dimitar almost run there. On his desk there was a big envelope which he tore as fast as his trembling hands would allow him. Out of it came the snake ring that he had made for Valkuda and a resignation letter. A note was stuck to it saying 'I did what was best for both of us!'. Dimitar dropped in his executive leather chair and wept like a kid who had been refused a promised ice-cream on the hottest day of summer.

Valkuda was driving back at a speed much above the safe limits. She had left the big car in the office garage and was driving her old red Volkswagen that had always stayed in Varna. She did not need a car in Sofia and used the red drop rarely but kept it in top form. The young woman stopped at the outskirts of Bourgas to fill her tank and stretch. She caught the quizzing look of the gas station attendant and realized that she was still dressed in her wedding gown. It was a flowing white silk, a simple cut decorated with a smattering of pearls over the front and an intricate ribbon closure on the back. The girls had had a good

laugh in the morning that it was up to Dimitar to untie it as she could not do it herself. She thought of changing it but it would take some acrobatics with a knife and was not a job to be performed in a minuscule gas station bathroom. Valkuda paid and continued down the road. She passed Varvara for a second time in the day and was about to take the turn on the dirt road to Brashlyan. She needed to apologize for spoiling the fun. Especially little Iossif would be disappointed; he had been so cute with his serious face and the frown of concentration when Father Ivan had given him his candle. The young woman was sure they would understand her motives even if they did not appreciate her timing. She knew Dimitar was in Varna as the guards had called her that her message had been delivered so Brashlyan was safe for the moment. But she could not stay there for the night. Dimitar may decide to come back and then the hell would break loose. She still did not want to see him, she needed some time to heal from the constant drip of his jealousy's venom. He had admitted he was jealous just before they were about to embark on a life journey together. The joke had been the final straw that had broken the camel's back after countless hints and open accusations. It was bad enough that he had believed about her involvement with his grandfather but he had mentioned also the men present and future. It was not good for both of them to start any union with that chip on his shoulder as it would invariably fire back at her. Valkuda looked at the dirt road one more time and pressed the gas pedal. The little red car zoomed past it and into the lowering sun.

It was insane. She was going to a place she had never been to without even knowing if the person she was looking for would be there or at the other end of the country. She was not sure of the address either yet the first elderly lady she stopped to ask told her how to find the place. The good woman inquired few times if the driver was sure she wanted to get there alone in the coming darkness. Valkuda was not sure but she had come that far and was not going to turn back before she was sure. Her grandfather would not have done it, she was positive. She drove along the winding road and passed what would marginally serve as a gate. Valkuda drove closer to the old house that needed an urgent layer of paint and honked. There was no dog visible but that did not mean that there was not one at all. If there was no living soul around she was not planning to stick around as she needed to find a place to stay for the night.

The grin on the old man's face was spreading like the sun rays over the sea at dawn. He had that feeling that the day would finish on a note different from what it started and had insisted that his young friend had a good sleep in the afternoon. The old man had expected the young woman earlier and had almost given hope but at the sound of the rooster beating in his pen; he had woken the tall man who was hastily trying to comb his locks with his fingers. He bended to look through the window then bolted out of the front door. The door of the little red car opened with equal haste when he stood in front of it.

There were still some tiny white roses in her jet-black hair that the wind had swept out of her elaborate hairstyle and she was wearing her wedding gown. Tanas grabbed her right hand and looked at her ringless fourth finger. He lifted her hand and kissed the red line where her engagement ring had been until few hours ago. With one rapt movement he slammed her slender frame into his sturdier one and was kissing her and she was kissing him in return. They stopped to breathe and fused again and again. Her eyes were shimmering with some unshed tears. Tanas was drowning in their green depths with the thought that there would never be another woman in his life whether he lived to be a hundred and she died before dawn. He did not care if she had been his grandfather's mistress or his brother's fiancée, he did not care about the previous men in her life, he wanted to be the one and only last one. He did not mind what she would ask for if she would agree, he was ready to give her everything he was or he had for the privilege to be her man.

A laughter behind them burst and Tanas swirled her around laughing before reluctantly putting her on the ground. He did not release her though as if Valkuda would run away.

'I know who she is since she was in diapers and she obviously knows who I am to find you, so you can skip the introduction. But may be you can take a blanket and sit somewhere to discuss what you will do. I will guard the coastline!' said Stavros, still laughing a little.

'You promise you will wait for me until I fetch that blanket?' Tanas murmured in her ear.

'I do!'

Stavros looked at her and raked a hand through his gray hair. 'You gave me a fright that you may not come, you know! But I have faith in you, you showed up finally!'

'How did you know that I will come when I had no idea I was going to? I was supposed to get married at midday.'

'Ah, you see, I thought that either Tane had taught you well or it was not worth worrying anyway. You see, I knew your grandfather and you have his eyes. He could see what the others could not and I hope you could do that also, but you got me concerned.'

'How did you know my grandfather?' Valkuda was so surprised she could hardly breathe.

'It is a long story and not suitable for a nice evening anyway.' Tanas came out carrying a bundle and offered her his free hand. 'Stavros can always tell it to you later!'

'That is true, it is late and we the old men should go to bed early!' Stavros chortled and entered the old house.

'Where are we going?' Valkuda was trying to keep her dress's hem above the high grasses that covered the slope going to the sea.

'Stargazing. When was the last time you were laying down looking at the stars, do you remember?'

'No, may be when I was going with grandpa to the apiary. He would put a blanket for me outside the shack and we would lie down and he would teach me the stars. I doubt I remember much...'

'I am not good either but we can always improvise,' there were licks of laughter in Tanas' voice.

They stopped at a small flat patch where the tall grass was stomped. Tanas laid down the heavy blanket then a white sheet on top of it. He turned to Valkuda and pulled her close to him. Hesitantly she slid her hands around his waist. He lifted her chin to look in her eyes and kissed her, slowly as if not to scare her into run again. The tall man kept kissing her while he pulled the pins from her hair and let the black curls free. His fingers played with them together with the breeze. The darkness was thickening around and the only light came from the almost full moon and the blinking stars. Tanas slid down her slender silk-clad body and took off her shoes. He was standing on his knees and pulled her lightly to him. He held her head in his palms and started kissing her again, murmuring inaudible words between kisses and caressing the softness of her shoulders. Slowly, so very slowly her hands slid into his hair and he heard her sigh. He turned a fraction and licked her palm, only a darting slip of his tongue over her skin smelling of her usual soap and the leather of the steering wheel. He registered her sharp intake of breath and his passion-clouded mind

cleared enough to get suspicious. Tanas kept kissing her neck up until his lips touched a small ear and he whispered low enough that the crickets around could not hear him.

'You are wearing white because it is appropriate?'

Valkuda went rigid in his embrace.

'It does not need to be here and now, just tell me what you want!' the murmur was even gentler.

The young woman swallowed and the green eyes locked the black ones 'You, here and now!'

'You may regret it in the light of the day!'

'I trust you will make it worth it during the night before the dawn!' her breathing was shallow.

'You are not doing it to spite Dimitar, are you?'

'No, the engagement was a mistake for both of us.'

'I am glad you found it out on time. But may be I am a mistake also?'

'Why?'

'You are his manager and you love management and I am not exactly rich or at least nothing to compare with him'

'I resigned today and I love you more than management despite that I am good at it and I am not after your money anyway.'

'I have no protection!'

'Tanas, will you shut up and kiss me?'

'As you say my lady!' he buried his face in her tussled curls and his last thought for the night about Dimitar was that he was a miserable idiot. Then Valkuda lifted her lips to meet his and he forgot about his brother completely.

He tried to go slowly. His fingers slid the ribbon that was holding her dress through the tiny loops one by one until the bodice slid off and hung on the spaghetti straps on her shoulders. He kept kissing her hand up to her shoulder and his teeth tugged lightly on the first strap then repeated it on the second. The dress slid and he rose in one flowing movement to his feet taking Valkuda with him. She blushed furiously and tried to hide her face in his shoulder but he tugged on the lavish curls to tilt her head to look into her face. He grinned

and kissed the tip of her nose. Tanas felt her trembling hand fumbling with the top button of his shirt and said, 'Next time you will rip it off, I promise!'

She would not have been the woman he loved if she did not rise to the challenge. Before he blinked his buttons went flying in all directions and she was sliding the fabric remnants over his sun-kissed shoulders. Valkuda did not stop there but kept kissing him while trying to get him rid of his jeans. Their fingers tangled in the desire to get the obstacle out of the way and they laughed together and the next moment they were laying in each other arms and there were no way to stop the dam from bursting. She did not let him be gentle and slow, she wanted all of him right at that moment and he was too much of a man to not oblige. She felt like heaven and was his. He intended to keep her like that forever.

Stavros's rooster announced the imminent day. Valkuda opened her slumberous eyes to find herself molded to Tanas and blushed at the memory of the night that was seeping away. She looked at his face and saw his lazy smile and wide-awake eyes.

'Good morning, love, we have few minutes before we jump and go to apply for a marriage license.'

'Why should we do that?'

'Because I love you and because we are pregnant and you are the mother!'

'How do you know that?'

'I don't know, I hope! I am selfish, I want a little green-eyed monster that looks like you hanging on my hair while I still have some and if I am lucky - several of them. Say "yes"!'

'Yes. But if I am not pregnant?'

'We can always repeat the process until a satisfactory result is obtained,' Tanas' imitation of the venerable professor who had taught them both economy of small enterprises was so accurate that Valkuda dissolved in laughter. When she calmed down a little she kissed him and sighed.

'I though you will never offer...'

Tanas was a man who stood behind his offers, she found. Although there had not been much of stargazing but she could not blame him alone for that.

The sun had half risen above the horizon when Stavros's voice carried to them. 'You have five minutes to finish what you are doing and show for breakfast! After I feed the hens, I am sitting and eating with or without you!'

Tanas stood up and shook her dress that had served as a pillow case. Valkuda groaned - it would take much longer to get into it than the five minutes granted. Tanas pulled the young woman to her feet and swiftly draped the top sheet around her like a sari. 'You look fabulous!' he smiled sincerely. Valkuda shook her tresses and stood in a classic statue pose.

'Don't make me laugh, I can't push my buttons,' Tanas was in his jeans.

'If I remember correctly, you don't have much left!' retorted the statue and shook in very non-statuesque giggles.

'I love the way you took the last shirt off my back and you are welcome to repeat it any time, love, as far as we are alone! Now let us climb back while Stavros is in the pen and I will find you something to wear although the jeans will be somewhat big for the moment!' he splayed his fingers over her belly. 'But we will correct this soon, won't we, little one?'

With dismay Valkuda realized that she was not the little one he had referred to. She felt the heat of his big hand flowing through her and it stirred primal earnings that she had never felt before. After two lazy circles his hand reluctantly went up and he caressed her cheek before he kissed her lightly.

'I wish we could continue but Stavros said five minutes!'