

Logic Helps Logistics

While getting early was not the main virtue that the latest Mrs. Tanassova possessed, she could do it if necessary. Her nerves were worn down sufficiently for her to fear that what she knew was enough for her volatile husband not to bother with a divorce once more. He had mentioned it on few occasions himself and she had no reason not to trust him on that. The money that her father-in-law had left her was not big enough to be an incentive to keep her around, her husband had insisted. He had cackled after that saying it was a stupid joke, but she knew better. If the previous night was any indication, her time was running out fast. She had deliberately encouraged him and Tanas to drink at the party, while she tried to stay as sober as possible. The blondie knew that everyone considered her bad actress yet she was stellar in the role of a drunken consort. She had danced on the table, played kitten, played belly dancer and frowned at the banknotes stuffed in her garter belt until the sum was covering what she needed with some to spare. Then she had initiated a drinking match and encouraged her husband to compete in drinking with his son. Long after midnight the two men had announced that a second round would be needed and headed home. She had played a drunken sleep, snores and all. Father and son had been confident that nobody would listen to their conversation in the limousine, the driver being separated by a thick window. They have discussed that Tanas Jr. should kidnap Rada and drug her to make her say "I do!" in front of few witnesses at the city hall, then get hold of the ring from Mitzi as a wedding gift. They have smirked that it would be a shotgun wedding and even Mitzi would not be able to contest as she had married in such haste that even Tanas Senior had not been able to stop it long ago. They have mused that they should get rid of Valkuda and Tanas' father had mentioned a name that sounded like Milena, saying that the pensive people were the easiest to get rid of. The trio have arrived at the house they rented and her man had waked her up with few slaps. She had whimpered that until it was time to go and visit her spa she did not want to get up. She also had promised to shop until she dropped after that and then slumbered on the sitting room floor. Her husband had left her there after a mercifully inaccurate kick.

The blondie did not sleep though. She waited until her husband started snoring and checked her watch. It was almost five a.m. and if the Fate was a woman, she would keep the two Tanassovs asleep well into the late morning. Mrs. Tanassova slid into the bathroom and swallowed two aspirins, then crept into the bedroom. For once in her life she blessed the fashion of ladies handbags the size of a grocery bag, as her designer one easily swallowed a non-descript beige dress that she had purchased at a second-hand store few days earlier and the few real jewels that she had. She glanced at the pile of make-up and picked a compact powder and her favorite bottle of perfume, but left the rest intact. Her address book, her wallet. It was so little that a person needed when she run for her life, it was laughable. Few barrettes and hairpins, two elastic bands in brown, a comb, a scarf in white and beige and a pair of the cheapest and biggest sunglasses one could find at the corner stand. A pair of white tennis shoes with laces that would be great for running. She looked at the man snoring in the messed bed. A bitter bile rose in her stomach. She remembered a fairytale that her grandmother loved telling her. It was about the princess who was given a chest and offered by her husband to take what she considered most valuable and be gone from his castle by the morning as he wanted to remarry. The princess had drugged her husband and taken him with her in the chest. When he had woken up far away from his place, he was bowled over to see that it was him his wife had considered the most treasured. Grandma had always detested the blondie's husband and did not even come to the wedding, saying that she had more urgent business to attend and could always catch up as it was neither his first nor his last. The blondie wished she had listened to the old woman then. Her grandma had died since and running to her for advice was not possible. Remorse should be put in the bag for later, it was time to act.

Her manicure kit was in the bathroom and the blondie carefully got rid of her long crimson claws. She cut them almost to the base and removed every trace of red from them. Her hands looked so bare it was hard to believe that they belonged to her. The young woman glued on top of her naked nails a set of cheap red ones that were known to break easily. The effect was ugly, but would pass a cursory inspection. She collected the remnants of the procedure in a small pack and stuffed it in her bag also. Her cell phone battery was almost dead as she had calculated it to be, but she switched the ring tone off and slid the rhinestone encrusted machine under the sofa - close enough to be found but not enough to be just seen by a person

standing or sitting. The display's last flick was that the time was almost six-thirty. She slipped into the kitchen for a breakfast. The alcohol was making her thirsty and she started with a yogurt, then some hearty stuff as she had no idea when her next meal would be. At seven, she got the guard to call her a company car to bring her to the spa.

The driver was almost relieved when he saw that the blonde was alone. He could happily do without the morning temper of the boss; the moans of his drunken wife would not be that bad in comparison. It was well known that after a night like the one before the boss mood would be murderous if he was to be out of bed before the alcohol was half digested. His trophy wife was determined to be in best shape when he pried his eyes open, if she had made herself to wake up and go to the most expensive spa in town. The driver was only wondering how she would negotiate the last fifty-so meters from the street where he could park down the pedestrian zone to the spa's door. The woman was wobbly on her four-inches of heels, her make-up was the smudged one from the night out and her clothes were more suitable for the red light district than the town center. But the money talk should be heard over the soothing music of the health center for the people there to stomach her like that. At least she was not as hysterical as her predecessor and was not yelling on top of her lungs if someone had forgotten to empty her ashtray the moment she stepped out of the car. It was a definite improvement over the one before her predecessor also - the woman loved drinking but could not hold her liquor and the car was in and out of the wash more often than her clothes. At the moment the driver felt a vague sympathy for his passenger and asked when to be back to pick her up. It took her some time to shake herself up, but she slurred that she planned to shop in the downtown pedestrian zone. She would not need the car until probably five or six, but would call before that if she bought something big. The car stopped, the blonde exited and leveled herself at the door, then determinedly tossed her modern bag over her shoulder and meandered towards the spa. A car behind signaled and the driver reluctantly started, hoping that she would reach her destination without falling. It would be very hard to be glamorous on crutches and her husband may decide to treat her like a horse with a broken leg...

Almost the same thought was swimming in blonde's head until she reached her target - the public restroom right across the street from the spa. It was early and there was no one there yet, so she quickly pulled out a

bottle of lotion and wad of tissue papers to clean up her face of the running make-up. She splashed her face with cold water and used her halter top as a towel. From the broken mirror a young startled girl was looking at her, the only thing remotely glamorous her elaborate hairdo. She hurriedly tore at the pins and platted her long gold locks, then used her scarf as a turban. She discarded her minuscule skirt and changed into the drab long dress that probably had belonged to retired schoolmarm. The young woman took off her rings except the wedding band and put the tennis shoes on, lacing them tightly. She looked at the shard of mirror again and shook her head - she had forgotten her dangling earrings. With them, the last trace of the night fairy was gone; she was as plain as any office plankton would be. She crammed her former attire into a plastic bag and almost run to the cross street where she hailed a cab.

The first morning train to Sofia was not popular - usually the summer crowd was squeezing one more day on the beach and returned to the capital with the evening one. It was the train for the people living along the road as it stopped at many places and arrived in Sofia almost too late for business. The blondie reached the nearly deserted old-fashioned ticket office with only few minutes to spare but managed to get a second-class ticket, buy a pile of newspapers and board before the train manager blew his whistle. She found an empty compartment and hid behind her newspaper until the train was going full speed. Then she stood up and threw out of the window first her halter top, then her skirt, then the shoes with the plastic bag. While breaking and throwing out her fake crimson nails, the blondie allowed herself to genuinely smile for the first time in many days.

People boarded the train and left, some for few stops, some longer, some of them were nice and chatty, telling her about grandchildren they planned to visit and gardens they planned to plant, some of them were going home after a night shift and only asked to be woken up before their stops. The uniformed man that checked the tickets passed several times and she showed him her one again and again. She took it as a sign that she was finally what she had never dreamed to be - invisible, anonymous woman. Her stage persona had died with her marriage to be replaced with the made-up face of Mrs. Tanassova glaring at her from one of the yellow newspapers she had bought amongst the others before her departure. The blondie

looked at her former self as if she had never seen her before. The grandma sitting next to her looked at the picture and almost spat on the floor.

'If she were my granddaughter, I would have tied her home instead of being ashamed of such thing! A bought woman! Imagine her kids when they see her pictures! If she bothers with kids, that is it, or her husband keeps her long enough for one! You and I have probably used less make-up in our lives than she would plaster in a day! You are ten times more beautiful than her! Oh, that is my stop; let me get my stuff...'

As a precaution, the blond woman got off the train at the stop before the Central Station. She was pretty sure that nobody will be much concerned until five, but the leeway was only an hour and a half and she decided not to risk it. She took a bus, changed to another one to the center. The young woman blessed Tanas' talkative mouth - he had ground again and again about Mitzi and her house that the blondie did not need the address. She stood before the stately building and hesitated. What if the legendary Mitzi refused to listen to her, what if she threw her out at mere mentioning of Tanas' name? There was no way back, it was her one and only chance, thought the blondie and bit her lip before she pushed the bell button.

A young woman opened the door and looked at the visitor. Her quick glance evaluated the drab dress and cheap shoes contradicting with the expensive trendy handbag. Lilly was instantly wary.

"I need to see Mrs. Mitzi Spassova and I have important news for her!" said the young woman in a turban.

'May I know your name, please and I will ask if she would like to see you?'

'I am Mrs. Tanassova, the daughter-in-law of Mr. Tanas Tanassov! And please tell her that it is urgent!'

Lilly's skepticism raised one notch - she had seen the pictures of Mrs. Tanassova. The girl bore little resemblance with the bombshell that showed more length of legs than length of thoughts. May be she was an ordinary thief who was using a name that was sure to open doors. Her reluctance to let her in crept up her face, but the girl was somehow looking familiar, so Lilly decided to go to see Mitzi about the visitor before letting her go.

'Will you please wait one minute here, I will go and see what can be done!' without waiting for an answer

Lilly shut the door and locked it, then run to Mitzi's study.

'I am sorry to disturb you, but there is a young girl at the door who insists that she is the daughter-in-law of Mr. Tanassov and wants to talk to you. She does not look like the singer who was his last daughter-in-law though.'

'Ah, but it was long ago, may be his son had gone for the next jewel in his collection. I will come and see her!'

Mitzi was better at physiognomy and recognized her guest immediately. One look at the panic-stricken face was enough to let the girl in. She brought her to her study, on the go asking Lilly for coffee and some sandwiches to be brought there. Mitzi seated the blondie in one of the massive armchairs next to the fireplace and sat across.

'I have a bad feeling that I would not like what you will tell me, am I right?' she smiled encouragingly.

'You are right. But I hope you will also help me after that, please, I have nowhere to go.'

'I will do what I can. First let me know what prompted your visit, I doubt we have been introduced before.'

'No, we have not. But you need to know that your granddaughter is in great danger. Please believe me, please! Tanas is planning to kidnap her, drug her and make her somehow marry him, as he wants from you some kind of ring that he considered magical and he is sure you have it.'

'It is a pretty far-fetched scenario...'

'No, please, please believe it, I heard it yesterday again. They were discussing it in the car, they thought I was asleep drunk...'

'Who are "they"?''

'Tanas Jr. and my husband. They also planned to kidnap Valkuda.'

'He does not want to marry both, hopefully!'

'It is not a joke, he will kill her, he said that the pensive people were the easiest to kill, like some Milena he mentioned...'

'Milena?'

'That was what I heard, it sounded like Milena, but he was drunk and slurring. I think it was Milena though.'

'Why did you come to me?'

'Because I am afraid. He mentioned few times that the money that Mr. Tanassov had left me were not enough to be interested in and soon he would have much more than anyone so he would be able to choose. He says he will not bother with a divorce. I can't go to the house in Sofia as they will find me, I can't go to the office in Varna, as they will drag me out of there, probably shoot me on the spot first, I don't have enough money to run abroad. But I also don't want to be found in the gutters if anyone bothers to look for me at all.'

'What about your friends?'

The girl stiffened and her ashen face grew even paler. She thought that the old woman was trying to shake her off from her life and the terror made her voice hollow. 'Where I come from there are no friends. It is all buy-and-sell, something in exchange for another thing. But I understand if you don't want anything to do with someone like me. I would have called if I had your phone number, but you are not listed and I don't think that Valkuda will take me seriously either. I hope you will for the sake of them two. Well, I will go then.'

'Where are you going to go?'

'I will find something, it is a big city and if I am lucky, I won't meet anyone I know. I made it up to here in one piece, didn't I?' the blondie smiled bravely and sprang to her feet.

'Sit down, child! First of all, we had not drunk that coffee. Second, you just said you have nowhere to go, so a few more minutes will not make a difference. How about we start it all over? You know that I am Mitzi, but you also have a name, may I know it?'

'Mila. Before it all started, I was Mila after my grandmother Milka.'

'So may I call you Mila then? Mrs. Tanassova is somewhat strange to me, to be honest.'

'Of course you can call me Mila. I don't think I want to be Mrs. Tanassova any longer. But to file for divorce I have to go to court first and I have to state my address and they will get me good and through. I need to think it over how to do it, but I will start as soon as I can.'

'How about having few days to rest before that? Forgive me the blunt frankness but you look tired and in dire need of some sleep.'

'Thank you for the frankness, but I first have to find a place to sleep and then indulge.'

'Oh, I think you have found it, child! This is a big house and I hope you will like it. Now, here is the deal. Let us hope that nobody had seen you coming here - the chances of your husband looking for you at my house

are pretty low. I have no reason not to trust you, so I have to act, even if these were just blah blah blah on Tanas Jr.'s part. You cannot help me in it, so the best you can do is get some rest. I will not be around for the next few days but Lilly is here and she will take care of you. If you decide to take me on my offer, you will have to stay home though. If you need something, you will ask Lilly and she will fetch it for you. When I come back, we will discuss what we will do further. One condition - no alcohol, though, do you find it too restricting?'

'You will let me stay here?' that was the only thing that had registered with the girl.

'Yes, on condition that you stay sober and clean. Lilly is not a hospital worker or a nanny. Do you agree with me?'

'Yes, oh, yes, I will do whatever you say. Do you want me to help her with something?'

'No, thank you, you are invited as a guest, but if she needs some help, she will ask you and it depends on you how you will handle it. The offer does not have strings attached, rest assured.'

'I will need to find a job, I don't have much money and I don't know when I will be able to get my allowance but I will repay you what I can...'

'No need, I said you are a guest. Don't touch any bank accounts or you will be traced. You will lack nothing here, so take it easy for the moment.'

As if on a cue, Lilly appeared at the door with coffee and sandwiches. Mitzi smiled and said, 'How about you two go to the kitchen and indulge in this while getting to know each other and what Mila will need for the next week or so. Lilly, she will be my guest even if I am not home; I will talk to you about it later. And while you are there, you may discuss some real serious food. I will join you in half an hour, make most of it. Mila, you don't have a cell phone, do you?'

'Oh, it is in Varna, under the sofa!'

'Good thinking! Now go and eat, you are as white as paper!'

Lilly did not show a trace of confusion - she was used to Mitzi's sudden decisions that no reasonable person could call orthodox. It had taken some adjustment but she trusted her mistress with more than gut feelings. The maid did not flick an eyelash before addressing the girl, 'Please follow me!' and led her to the spacious kitchen. She carefully drew the curtains - although Mitzi had a one-way reflecting film installed a year ago,

she still felt better with the solid material. Then Lilly turned to the girl standing next to the kitchen table and grinned, 'Shall we start with a chicken soup and go from there? Take a seat, you look like you are going to faint, and I will bring everything.'

Mitzi was looking at her black coffee for a minute working on the details of her plan. She had told the truth - there was no reason not to believe Mila about Tanas, which meant that she should speed the events a little bit. Damn his timing, the brat could have waited for another week at least, but as she had no idea when he might strike, better be prepared. If anything, by the late evening the news of Mrs. Tanassova's disappearance should occupy his father. And how he did know about the ring? Tanas had not told his grandson, as he did not know himself, Mitzi was sure, as otherwise he would have at least tried to discuss it with her. It was either a strike of genius or a bad coincidence. It did not matter anyway. She was losing time and it was precious. The elder woman sat at her desk and started calling.

The first to answer was Georgi. In Switzerland, it was still just after lunch and he was in the relaxed mood that told her that his food and company had been excellent.

'I need you in Brashlyan tomorrow as early as you can, my dear!' Mitzi said after the greetings.

'Did something happen?' he did not waste words either.

'No, but if you want to be your brother's best man, you better hurry up. How fast you can be there?'

'It depends if we can fetch a flight directly to Bourgas or will have to fly to Sofia. Give me few seconds.'

There was a staccato played on a keyboard, few muttered words and then victorious "Yes!!"

'Mitzi, I am taking your word that it is not a joke! I have booked two seats for tonight arriving at Bourgas at seven in the morning tomorrow. I hope my brother will appreciate it. Is he going to wait for us at the airport?'

'I am afraid you are under your own steam, my dear, he still has no idea he is getting married tomorrow. I will explain when you are there; will you trust me that much?'

'Do you need something from here?'

'No, just bring that gorgeous photographer of yours!'

'She will not miss it for the word! I am calling her right now, she is not even here, I will have to pack for both!

Love you!'

'Me too, see you tomorrow!'

Georgi put down the receiver and went to talk to his boss. He stuck to the truth - there was a family emergency and he was required home, but should be no more than a week and he would be available online in case he was needed. His boss was a nice guy and was genuinely concerned. The man remembered that his prodigy of an analyst had lost both his grandparents on Easter and a family emergency so close to that was not a good sign. He offered help and an extended leave if needed; implored Georgi to be in contact and should he need anything - call immediately. The bank had branches everywhere and if not - a corresponding branch would do. The younger man shook his head and thanked, then sped to call his wife. Lorelei should have wrapped her shooting session by the previous day, but had decided to redo some of the frames and was still in Zurich, which was good as they would be flying from there. Few minutes later he pressed the cradle and smiled - the love of his life wanted only her jewels - she would pass by a laundromat and would be waiting for him at the airport.

Mitzi called Valkuda next. Sofia office informed her that the young woman had left for Varna the previous day. Varna office was confused as she had arrived and locked herself up with the stern instructions that nobody should be put through no matter what they said. Mitzi frowned - that was not typical of the young woman. She tried Valkuda's cell phone but got an answering machine. Mitzi's frown deepened. She left a message with a request to get back to her and called Sofia again asking for Dimitar. He was on vacation and had requested all his calls to be redirected to his manager. His cell phone was switched off. It did not bode well with Mitzi, who had a tingling sensation that something was not in order with the two of them. She called Varna again and left a no-nonsense message with the security that it was of utmost importance to speak to Valkuda before she left.

Getting hold of Vantche and Tantche was easy - Vantche had finished her shift and was preparing the supper waiting for Tantche to come home. They worked in the same town and had continued to share their living quarters which were not much bigger than the flat they had shared during their student's years. Rada had secured their promise to join her in Brashlyan for few days starting the Saint Elias day and had

promised a vacation time for as long as they wished. Mitzi was aware that they have planned to go on the eighteenth of July which gave them three days to spare. Hopefully they would be able to go earlier. Vantche said that the two girls had planned to take the next day off in order to get some rest and then start into the night to arrive on the seventeenth early in the morning, so technically they were free as birds already. No luggage was packed yet though. While they were chatting Tantche arrived and inquired what the commotion was about. Mitzi asked if they would be glad to be the bridesmaids at Rada's wedding and their squeals were heard as distinctly as they were in the room with her. When? The following day. Where? In Brashlyan. No time for dresses, no time for presents, Vantche ranted, but Tantche took the receiver and ask Mitzi how to get there by car, as they were driving her old Trabant 601 Kombi.

The elder woman had vivid memories of the car in question. The original beige of the cardboard German miracle was repainted a grass green. For a while one door had held on a duct tape after a truck had practically sliced it. At certain point the car had been dirty enough for passer-by to scribble on the dirt "Don't wash me, plant something!". Tantche had risen to the challenge - she had washed the Trabi and splurged on some paint to put flowers all over in the most outrageously vibrant colors. Lacquered ones! To the inquisitive Mitzi she said that it worked better than an alarm and was infinitely cheaper. The funny girl was right, a person who dared to steal such a vehicle was begging for a place in Tantche's psychiatric yard. The young doctor however had never been daunted by driving it - the local town police force was aware of who the driver could be and respected her for the knack of calming down the most hot-headed clients real quick. Vantche had named the car "The Green Fairy" and between the two of them the car was in perfect order. A year before Tantche had pulled out a kid from a deep drug overdose and had scared him into a clean life after that single handed. The grateful dad happened to be the owner of a vast garage which dealt with, to say it politely, modified cars. He had offered his son's savior money which she had refused. In a gesture of desperate gratitude he had stolen her car to put a new engine into it. The man had hands of gold so when the car was returned the next day, it could easily reach the speed of a sport car. Tantche had tested it to hundred and eighty kilometers per hour - she said she was afraid to try more out of fear that she did not have a license to fly. The little blondie had raced Rada's Jeep with success!

'How about if you pick me up on the road and I will serve as a navigator?' Mitzi offered.

'Well, we will have supper, toss some clothes in the back and will pick you up in an hour and a half, if that is OK with you!' Tantche was not the one to waste time.

'Hour and a half! I will be waiting for you, ladies! Sandwiches and coffee are on me!'

There were no messages on the answering machines and Mitzi tried again Valkuda's cell. Where was the woman, for Christ sake! The time was now ticking against them and she better call before the girls picked her up. The elder woman went to the kitchen, where Lilly and Mila were sitting completely content in each other's company. Mila had finished her second bowl of chicken soup and was telling Lilly about some funny tricks used backstage by almost everyone in the music industry. The maid was wiping her tears of laughter. Mitzi's entrance made them both sober, but the mistress of the house brushed the sudden silence away.

'Ladies, I need your help. I will need a bag of sandwiches enough to sustain three adults for a night, the biggest flask of coffee you can find and the big cooler that we used last year, the one you can plug in the car. You can pack the sandwiches in it with some ice and plug it to cool as much as it can for an hour and twenty minutes. I will go and pack and probably will not be back for at least two weeks. Lilly knows how to find me if needed and I will call regularly. Mila, you will be staying here during that time, I hope. Tomorrow Lilly will go and buy you some clothes, just let her know what you need and forget about money. I am really glad that you are almost the same size, it will not make any waves. You can rest, read, play domino or backgammon but stay away from my study and the windows, all right! In case something or someone pops up, call me. Now think of all your questions and keep them in your mind until I come back! Hour nineteen minutes to go!'

Mila waited until Mitzi disappeared up the stairs and asked, 'Is she always like that?'

'You mean like an avalanche - yes, but that is Mitzi, everyone knows her. If she says "Ten minutes!" that is what she means. If she were the boss of the railway company there would be no trains arriving late in this country, trust me! Now, how about if you start the sandwiches and I will go get the cooler!'

'What does she like?'

'Everything. Just make it a lot and don't forget two boxes of chocolates, first top left cupboard from the door.'

Packing was done in less than twenty minutes, then Mitzi went to the safe in her sitting room. She took the big portrait down and opened the heavy door. Mitzi took out an old Bible and two small packages, then carefully locked the safe and put back the portrait. She sat there for few minutes, looking at the two paintings that meant so much to her. Anna was smiling brilliantly and in the gray eyes of Iossif the same smile reflected softened by the wisdom of age. 'Wish me luck! I will need it!' Mitzi whispered and felt again like the young wife she had been when she had first entered that same sitting room. The portrait had been only one then but the same sense of protection had enveloped her. Everything would be fine, she could feel it in her bones, she could make it. She picked up the objects she had taken out of the safe and noiselessly closed the door after herself. Mitzi could swear that a male voice chuckled 'That's my girl!' behind her. She chuckled and there was a new spring in her gait.

The phone remained silent and the bad feeling in Mitzi's chest was growing. She was unable to reach neither Valkuda nor Dimitar and in view of what Mila had told her, neither one of them was in a safe zone. Her only hope was that Valkuda had a life of training to be on the safe side and was careful enough, which could not be said for Dimitar. The young sculptor had called several times after Tanas' death and under his always polite voice Mitzi was detecting the steel notes of his grandfather mixed with something else. Impatience? Jealousy? Tiredness? The shoes of his grandfather were difficult to fill, that was for sure, but nobody expected him to do that. At least not immediately. Last time she had met Valkuda over a charity project started by Tanas, she had observed the young woman's drawn face and tired look. Something was missing from the previous vibrant manager who never tired before. She should not run like that, Mitzi had thought, she would snap in the most inappropriate moment. Valkuda needed a break or at least a help. Before the complex Tanas' empire was run by Tanas and she was his right hand. After his death, she had remained the right hand, but the left one was missing. Mitzi regretted that she had not talked to Dimitar earlier. Well, she would call first thing in the morning from Bourgas. Mitzi spent the remaining few minutes with Mila and Lilly in the kitchen talking about the old custom that in the next three days there should be no work done, no fire started, as these were the three hottest days in the year and the traditions warned about grave consequences. Lilly teased that it was a perfect time to rest and tell stories and Mitzi heartily agreed with her.

Lilly helped Vantche load the cooler into Green Fairy's trunk and the two doctors went in for a short break. It was useless to compete with the evening traffic going out of the capital. Every person who had some chance was running out of the red-hot Sofia where the brick houses seemed to breathe fire and the air was shimmering even in the late evening. The five women sat in the cool kitchen, drank lemonade and talked girls' stuff. Around nine the bulk of the cars sipping out of town was gone. The doctors and Mitzi sat in the old Trabant and left. While Lilly locked the door, Mila had washed the glasses and was standing in the middle of the kitchen like a lost child.

'Fear not, we have an air conditioner!' the maid joked, but something in the expression of the former singer stopped her. 'What is it?'

'I am afraid. I know I should not be, but I am afraid!'

'Calm down! The house has an alarm system with panic buttons everywhere. Moreover, your husband has no idea where you are. I think you are just tired! If you like, I will put you next to me on the third floor.'

'Please! Ahem, I have nothing to sleep in, I am sorry; I did not think so far.'

'We will find something. I am not partial on satins, but there should be at least one new T-shirt somewhere. Let's go!'

When she was half through her pile of files, Valkuda looked at her watch and sighed. It was long after five but the work seemed never to end. She checked her messages and sighed again. Two small emergencies which had probably resolved by themselves and a call from Mitzi. It was one of the two - either something was going south with the orphanage project or Mitzi had spoken to Dimitar and decided to play good fairy. Neither warranted immediate attention but she was fond of the ageless dynamo! The woman could not be stopped by anything and a person standing in her path better be prepared to jump. Valkuda's grandfather had been very specific about the relationships and tragedies that Mitzi had fought during her early years of life, had mentioned her role in Dimitar's life and genuinely considered her one of the most exceptional women to walk around. She called Mitzi's private number and left a message that she would call the following day. The night security guards brought her a Chinese take-away and she took it up to the roof terrace. She needed a rest; that was clear. One could do only that much. The young woman thought that

she had to face Dimitar and get serious about whether he would take an active role in the day-to-day management of what was now his empire or she should consider hiring a vice-manager for real. The thought of facing him made her push away her just started fried noodles and under normal circumstances she loved it. Valkuda remembered their last conversation if it could be called so. The monologue of the sulky immature creature had been humiliating and insulting - deliberately at that. It was none of his business how she felt about his grandfather! It was none of his business to ask personal questions! It was his business to sit down and work instead of mopping, pull his part of the job and get a better grip at the responsibilities that he neither wanted to relinquish nor he wanted to act upon. Even she was getting tired of him frolicking around and playing the big boss without doing a thing. Dimitar was reading documents but never acting without her advice, which may have been a good sign if it was not so time consuming and nerve-racking. On top of all the work she was supposed to keep tabs on Tanas and his father, as despite the rumors that they were penniless they managed to keep afloat for another fiscal month. Valkuda suspected them that they have stashed some cash before and were on borrowed time, but she had no idea of their reserves and had to tread cautiously. Her two informants had called that the bosses had spent the night drinking and the day sleeping but that was such a regular event that did not merit much of attention. Valkuda put her Chinese supper in the fridge and went to her rooms. A good sleep always made the world look better. She wished it would not be so lonely though.

The idea of having some sleep was swimming in Tanas' head also, but he was upset by the absence of his stepmother. She should have been home long ago, yet some sixth sense was telling him she was not coming. His father had shrugged his shoulders - the hare-brained singer was probably starting the night early with some of her equally empty-headed friends and would join him later. Well, she was his father's problem, no doubt, but her timing was somewhat disturbing. He went to his father's floor and checked her stuff. That calmed his unease - the blondie would not go away without her truckload of make-up and minuscule clothing. Her baubles were also there, her spiky shoes were ready, her battery of sinfully expensive perfumes was intact. She had either lost her cell phone or most probably forgotten to charge the battery. If she had one brain cell more, she could ask one of her friends to call - or they were too occupied on discussing the length of their skirts for that. He looked at his watch - time to catch his night train and

show up at Rada's hospital at the beginning of the next day. He had the rings ready, Sofia office should wait for him with a decent car and a bouquet of roses at the train station. Tanas patted his inner pocket - the tiny bottle with small pills was securely zipped there. The doctor had no chances to cure herself that time. She was his for the taking and then the ring was his for the asking, he would make sure of that.

Sleep was for the back seat, where Vantche was curled to catch a few winks while Tantche drove with Mitzi as a navigator. The Green Fairy was gliding in the night along the cars also headed for the seaside. Around midnight Vantche had handed the steering wheel to her friend who was blessed with the ability to sleep in any position and due to her pint size had comfortably snored from Sofia until the Green Fairy had negotiated half the distance. The blond girl had offered Mitzi to have some sleep as well, but the older woman insisted that old people slept less and she was perfectly fine. After a quick hesitation the driver had asked if there was anything special to be known about such a speedy wedding. Mitzi chuckled - no, it was not a pregnancy test suddenly showing two lines. It was Mila who had brought ominous news. Tantche frowned - did Tanas know where Rada was? That thought suddenly occurred to Mitzi also. She had not asked about it, but if Mila had shown in Sofia, that meant better chances that he would show there also. The blond doctor was young but she was a psychologist to die for. She looked at Mitzi and grinned.

'I am so happy I always have my bag with me!'

'That is nice to know, but why would you need it, my dear? Rada already departed with so much supplies she could establish a hospital on her own.'

'She is in the surgical department, I am in the mental!' Tantche's laughter was a rippling sound like a brook in the forest. 'Mitzi, if this Tanas is what I think he is, he will not stop in Sofia. It will be a question of time when he will show up in Brashlyan. Sure we can overpower them and get the cops in and what not, but it will not sort the problem. That girl, Mila, she told you what she had overheard, but that does not mean that she knows a lot. We need him to tell us his plans.'

'You will hypnotize him, my dear? I don't see any other way to make him talk. He is not exactly the silent type, but to talk just because we asked him, allow me to doubt it!'

'Oh, no, I may hypnotize him if needed, but it takes time and he may get suspicious. Anyway, trust my word; he will talk for the asking. Remember I came to Sofia in December for a course? It was not advertised much,

but it was on the new drugs that are called "Truth Drugs". In fact, it was not me who was supposed to be at the course, but my boss. Unfortunately for him he caught a bad flu at the last moment and sent me. It was crazy interesting, the mechanisms of action and the doses and all. Imagine you are drinking a glass of clear water. Then you are asked a question that you do not want to answer under normal circumstances. You will, as your inhibition is lessened and your higher cognitive function is a little bit scrambled. And you will answer it correctly.'

'Tantche, this does not exist, you are inventing it!'

'If you pick up my handbag, you will be able to see the "invention" in one of its compartments that is not easily available. Mitzi, I am not joking, it is so powerful that it will knock the socks off of anyone! We tested it on one of the colleagues who volunteered and he said he could not do a thing - and he knew what had been used on him. He said it just loosened his tongue like a shoelace.'

'But that is terrible! It probably has five millions of side effects! I have read something like that in a spy book about Japan, I think, but the guy there was wetting his pants and could not stand after that.'

'That is probably an old spy book or the Japanese had used an outdated version. The one we were shown had no visible side effects in the next twenty-four hours. The guy who took it dropped asleep after for twelve hours and when he woke up he could not recall a thing. We had to show him the video that we made for him to believe that he had done it! Not a single shred of recollection of what happened after the drug was taken - it simply wiped his memory clean.'

'That stuff should be outlawed!'

'It is. That is why the course was given for a very small group of mental hospitals' heads and as I was substituted in the very last second, I somehow slipped in. The serum cannot be bought in your local pharmacy, rest assured.'

'That means that I should not ask how you got hold of it, but I will ask anyway. You may not tell me the truth though!' Mitzi was half teasing.

'In fact, I have not told you anything, as you know perfectly well,' there was the rippling brook sound again.

'Mitzi, I know you and I know that you will use the information wisely, otherwise I know when to shut up. But I may not be at the right moment at the right place or I may need help, so you better know it. Confidence for confidence. The woman who was leading the seminar was very cautious with her jars and demo stuff. Any

notes were prohibited, no photos, no cameras, no recorders except her one, she used a blackboard and a chalk to show the diagrams. At the end of the second and last day, she was visibly tired and wanted to cut the seminar short. She shoed the men out for a break and asked me to count the pills in three different bottles. I did that and told her the results, she said that she has more than there was supposed to be there and offered me some as a bonus for helping her. I knew that it was a trap, but I agreed anyway and packed my share. She gathered her stuff and called the guys in, did some final questions and let us go. I went to her after that and returned her the package, said that it was too dangerous and stuff. She was very pleased, as it had really been a trap and her security guys were waiting for me to step out to get me. I was singled as I was the only woman and they would not make a mistake getting the wrong man, plus the directors were older and who knows what they would have done. So we parted on best terms.'

'That does not explain how you got the pills, as far as I understand, my dear...'

'May be not. But the fact that she did not recount the entire number of pills may be does. I got mine while counting the three bottles initially. She was tired and she would not recall the digits. Plus, she had been showing us the time of dissolution in different liquids, the dissolution of more than one pill at a time, she hardly had kept tabs on every single pill that she had dispensed. She made sure they were dissolved, but she did not count them.'

'You stole them?'

'Only three and I promise I had not used them on anyone! I know that stealing is bad, but it was irresistible! And one never knows when it may become handy...'

Mitzi looked at the young blond woman who was steering past a sleepy old Lada. The mischievous flare in her expression could light up the road ahead:

'I am glad you did it! Do you want some coffee, I am pretty sure this one is not laced!'

The old and the young women tittered as not to wake up the sleeping Vantche.

After one more pit stop the three ladies arrived at the outskirts of Bourgas around six-thirty.

'Are we bypassing the town?' asked Vantche who was back in the driver's seat.

'No, we will need to enter if we want to eat something in the next three days at least! Remember, it is the first day of Goreshtnitsi...'

Mitzi was whistling a happy tune. Nobody could tell that the spirited

septuagenarian had just spent a sleepless night. 'How does she do that?' thought Vantche who had slept half of the road and would not refuse a pillow immediately.

'This is a port town, it should be opened early! Drive downtown and we will look left, right and center!'

'No need for so much head turns, my neck is sore a little!' Tantche emerged from the back seat. 'Drive slowly down 'Odrin', pass 'Struga' and go to 'San Stefano'. There is a great gourmet shop there, or at least there was last year when I was here. And they were big enough to open early if not round the clock; it is tourist season, for God's sake!'

'We will send you to negotiate to open it! Mitzi, tell me that is it not fair! I spent seven years living with her and tried on a daily basis to find out how one can look so good just out of bed - or car seat, to be precise! And I could not find a single shred of idea!' Vantche stuck her tongue to her friend in the back mirror.

'Sure you know it by now - we the lunatics are not required to wear that garish caps you the surgical staff sport. Mitzi, is Rada still making her own ones like she used to do at school?'

'She does, she says the standard ones are small for her brain...Now if you don't mind, you may take out the contents of that ice box behind you.'

'Well, I suspected that it was a bit bigger for the sandwiches only. Anyone for a bite while I am in that?'

Shopping with Mitzi was a form of entertainment the two doctors had learned to enjoy. A few seconds after she entered the empty store, all three vendors were occupied with slicing and cutting and weighing, while the shop manager was running up and down the shelves inside the storage room. Normally at that hour there were very few tourists around. His usual crowd of patrons was sleeping and would emerge around ten. It was good, as the grandma and her two granddaughters, as he could tell by the closeness of the trio, were about to empty his store. The two cutters at the deli would probably smoke by the time these three finished. He lugged the cardboard box with five different types of chocolate and put it next to the cashier.

'Be careful with the money', he whispered, 'This is going to be the daily turnover if they don't stop in five minutes...'

'I will pretend I did not hear that,' quipped Mitzi. 'Is it really that bad with the fake notes here?'

'You have no idea, madam! A day does not pass by that we don't see them. I even installed the ultraviolet at the cash, but in a high traffic it is hard to check every piece. I hope yours are clean!' he grinned.

'Rest assured, they are, unless the Central Bank had started faking themselves. And while you are here, how about if you add, say, five cans of that ham behind you, it will not be wasted anyway.'

'What are they planning - to feed a squad camping in the wilderness?' muttered the storeowner, recounting the wad of banknotes while his assistants were helping the girls to load the Trabi. It lowered considerably as the entire back was full with supplies. 'Listen, you will do without me for a while, will you not? I better go and pay some suppliers with this. Do you think we need anything from the meat exchange?'

'Well, the lady practically emptied the cold cuts section, she got all the dry salami and the sudjuk, there is no more blue cheese and no Edam, she got all the Babybel packs as well, same with the Laughing Cow. The fried egg plants are gone with the box, I hope you don't mind, and so are the zucchini in sour cream. She got them with the container also, said to weigh it together and not to bother with the calculations as she was in a hurry. Let me see, yes, you need to buy some kashkaval as well, she got six rounds sealed, we are lucky she did not want us to slice them. She got the entire stock of smoked chicken - breasts and legs and was not quite happy with the quantity. You should have seen her freezer box, takes half that Trabi and it was full to the brim, had trouble forcing the lid on it! The woman has enough for a three days wedding reception!'

Tantche was driving again and Mitzi was pushing her cell phone buttons - they were almost out of town and soon would be out of range. She picked up Valkuda's message, called Varna again and after being told that the manager is still asleep and no one dared to wake her up, left another stern message. Georgi and Lorelei had arrived an hour late and he was in the process of arranging the rental car. He promised to buy a trunk load of sodas and bottled juices, as well as bread on the road and hung up. Dimitar's cell was not answering. Mitzi called Lilly and got a report that apart from an occasional nightmare, Mila had done well and was in the process of making a cold breakfast. After that Lilly was planning to go shopping for her.

The Green Fairy was cantering slowly as its load was significant. They took the scenic route ninety-nine and it was almost patched, but here and there ragged gaps showed that the road service had preferred to remain in Bourgas. The company reached Varvara around nine and went directly to the house where Milena

and Vesselin had spent that part of every summer since they had married. Mitzi counted her lucky stars that Vesselin at least was not keen on baking himself under the morning sun and was still home. He listened to her somberly until she told him about the wedding that would take place as soon as they catch Father Ivan in Brashlyan, then he roared with laughter, his rich voice unchanged for decades.

'Now, dear, give me few seconds and I will fetch Milena to come home first, as otherwise she would come to the wedding in her Eve's suit that she is using at the moment. Are you going to wait for us or you will speed ahead?'

'We will speed. But you promise that you will follow us immediately, please! No pressing suits and all!'

'Mitzi, get real, when were we going to Varvara in suits - we don't have bathing suits for that matter, far less a tuxedo and bare back stuff. Go, I will run down and try to find someone to get her out of the ladies' section. If I go in it may cause commotion despite my venerable age!'

'You will hurry up, won't you?'

'Of course we will; no building sand castles as I gave you my bucket and the shovel when you married yourself. Now, are the quick marriages a family trait? I don't have a gift again!'

'Go away! No, I am going away and we will be waiting for you there! Don't forget to fill your tank before you get off the road!'

May be Tanas had not been the model grandfather Tanas Jr. may have dreamed of, but he for sure he had been a stunningly good looking man and had passed that to his grandson. While shaving in the sleeping compartment he had for himself, Tanas Jr. scrutinized his image at the mirror. His rather early gray hair gave his look more maturity, his black eyes were favorably outlined by thick lashes and dark brows, his nose could not have been better looking if his brat of a brother had made it himself. The cleft on his chin somehow distracted from the square of his jaw which was balanced by wide forehead. His lips were full but well defined, as the old aunties said "cut with a coin" and could curve from a smile to a snarl in a blink. Tanas looked at the puffiness under his eyes and frowned. He had to stop drinking. It was becoming a problem and he did not want to get to his father's level of running after the bar singers and *laisse-passer* attitude. He had wasted enough time already in the wrong direction while his snake of a brother had managed to get it right and get everything their grandfather had to offer. May be not everything forever, but

for the moment there were few options. Tanas Sr. had tied the inheritance well. The deeds were sealed with the stupid clause that if Dimitar died, all was going to that shark Valkuda and some charity in case she died. Well, the big boss had not thought that his favorite could transfer them willingly, had he? Once the ring was on his finger, Tanas would find a way to bend him. The kid was only interested in his so called artistic career - so he would get some money and blast back to his French connections. He would deal with him later. At the moment the goal was to look at his best when he cornered Rada at the hospital. Last time he had extracted almost a promise to have a dinner with him while she was treating one of his security guys, it was time to call it in. He pulled his pressed shirt and suit from the travel bag and started dressing. The train was entering Sofia.

An elderly woman was mopping the floors at the central foyer of the train station. Her hands were red from the cold water in the bucket and her feet hurt, but the meager excuse of a salary complemented her tiny social security income and allowed her to buy her grandchildren some presents at Christmas. She straightened her back to put the mop in the moving bucket and cried out. Few heads turned in her direction, but could not see anything wrong with the old cleaner who was clutching the long mop handle for dear life and staring at a young man coming her way. 'No, God, not him! That cannot be him!' her white lips were twitching in a silent prayer. Just like fifty years before she stood frozen, unable to escape the sight of the Black Cardinal. He had not been interested in her, his people had taken her husband and nobody had heard of him since except that she got a death certificate that he had been run over by a train and a note saying what had been left of the body had been buried at state expense as it had been too badly mangled to be recovered for the relatives. At the moment the same man was walking towards her - same dark suit, stark white shirt with silk tie, shoes polished to the shine of a copper pan, same determined gait. The same black eyes skimmed over the old woman as if she was not worthy being seen and the man passed her by, like fifty years before. She felt she was crying and found a crumpled handkerchief in her pocket, but it was not enough to stop the torrent of tears that had built up for fifty years. The ancient priest at her church had been right, it was the Devil who ruled the world and she had just seen him again. He had not aged, he had not changed, same ruthless detached half-smile on his lips, same disdain when he was walking as if he owned the place and the sea of people parted to make him a passage. The old woman wiped her nose one more

time and started mopping faster, she wanted to finish and go put a candle at her church before the heat of the day. It was early morning but it promised a sweltering hot noon.

The nurse at the information desk shook her head:

'No, sir, Dr. Spassova is not here today. If you have an appointment, I will try to find out who is taking care of her patients while she is not here, if you give me your name.'

'I am not a patient, I am friend of Rada and we had an agreement to go for lunch today, she probably changed shifts with someone.'

'No, in the chart it is written that she is already on vacation, in fact she had taken a personal leave, may be something in the family and she had forgotten to call you. So you should call her privately, I cannot do that for you.'

'That is what I will do, thank you very much!' Tanas was all smiles but the nurse was not fooled, there was no joy in his reaction. She knew who Tanas was; his father's conduct to the nurses had earned them very bad reputation despite the stellar performance with the young doctor. The nurse waited until the visitor was out of the door and clicked on the system for Rada's pager. It was technically a breach of the protocol but not unheard of to send the doctor a personal message. That one read: "Tanas Jr. said you forgot your lunch date. Will call home." She clicked "sent", saw the confirmation and changed screens.

'Mr. Nikolov, your appointment is for tomorrow, but if you wait for a second I will try to squeeze you in for today for not to go back in that heat!' the nurse looked wearily at the elder gentleman who kept coming always a day ahead of his appointments. Well, it was a miracle he remembered about them anyway, so better keep him close.

Calling Rada at home was easier said than done, as Tanas found out to his frustration. Her number was not listed, the hospital refused to give it even to the most cunning of his agents, not to mention her home address. It was already a late afternoon and his chances for a dinner with her were melting like the ice cubes in his soda. He hated the soda at the moment as well, but did not want to risk a bad breath in that heat. Probably his future wife was sitting in a spa somewhere near or had gone to one of the clubs with a swimming pool around Sofia. He was sure the nurse was not correct in her information - he had talked to

Rada less than a week ago and she was confident she would be spending the summer working, she said so. He decided to try his chances with the hospital's evening shift - it was too risky to stumble upon the same nurse twice in a day. His pride was not allowing him to call his father; he hated giving him any reason for that famous smirk that his parent was renowned for. Tanas clinked his ice cubes' remnants and yelled at the secretary, 'Damn, if we are that good at finding someone who is not even hiding, I wish to know what we will do to find someone who is! Tell the guys to move around!'

'Another one bites the dust' sang Tantche together with the radio as the Green Fairy turned on the obscure path leading to Brashlyan. The ground had been parched for days and there was a cloud of fine dust in their trail. The road was all potholes and sharp stones and the little Trabi was crawling along under its load.

"Mitzi, may be the village can negotiate a better road, this one is a total nightmare, nobody in their right mind will want to go this way and even less to wander around,' Vantche was holding tight on the tiered cake that was one of their last purchases. She was genuinely afraid that she would reach the village covered with more cream than the sweet.

'That is exactly why they are not negotiating it,' Mitzi was thinking with concern about the bottle of decent champagne in her overnight bag.

'At least the traffic is much better than in Sofia!' chimed their always optimistic driver. 'How long you said the road was?'

'I think around ten kilometers!'

'Now I know why you bought that much foodstuff - we will need to stop and eat and then have a rest and eat and then go again and if we are lucky - we will reach this mythical Brashlyan before midnight.'

'Nay, the cake will not hold that long, may I start on it now, please? I will not eat it, I will just lick my arms, but I am not sure how I will do right under my shoulder...' Vantche giggled.

'Well, if I remember correctly, the bad part is only the first three or four kilometers, girls!'

'So I stay corrected, we will be there around supper time!'

'Listen, how about if you concentrate on holding the steering wheel firm for me not to bounce like a ping-pong ball!'

'I am trying, but the Green Fairy is a lady and not a tank! Next time you shall save someone from the helicopter forces and we will get a propeller for the top, so we can come here easier!'

The nightmare of the first few kilometers gradually disappeared to be replaced by very decent stone road. Mitzi was telling them that it was an old Roman path made of stone plates put vertically so only the narrow sides were sticking close to one another. The path had been there for two and a half millennia and was in better shape than most of the asphalt roads of the country. The Green Fairy was still cautious, but at least the bouncing had stopped. They were going up and down some hills and after a sharp turn the entire village emerged as if from a magician sleeve. Tantche drew the car to a gentle stop and looked at Mitzi, 'You know, it was worth that road. More than worth it!'

Konstantin's house looked deserted but when Mitzi used the heavy metal knock, the fenced yard's ports swung opened. Behind one of the doors was the host himself, amused to see the Green Fairy again. The other was held by Dimitar, who was looking at the car with fascination.

'Now, if you two stop gapping and help Vantche out, it would be nice as otherwise we will have to put her in the fridge together with the cake!' Tantche was all business.

'And I hope that the fridge is working as well, as the cooler is full and there is stuff outside in the trunk! Where is Rada?'

'I was planning a plunge in the bathtub, but had that feeling that someone will spring today!' the young woman ran to hug first Mitzi and then Tantche, while the men helped the cake out first, then pulled Vantche trying not to touch her unnecessary.

'That is not fair - I am the sweetest one of all and I don't even get a hug!' the tall woman complained.

'Broadly speaking, a hug will glue the person administering it to you permanently, but I may give you a lick!' Rada was evaluating the amount of sugar on her friend. 'Come, I will put you in the bath first! There are enough burlaks to haul the barges, I think!'

The four of them hardly managed to unload the Fairy and stash the food in the fridge when Vesselin and Milena arrived, bringing a tray of barbequed sausages and meatballs as well as a beaten pot of boiled rice.

'You did what, took over a restaurant?'

'Not exactly, we even paid for the pot a deposit which still grates on my pride!' Vesselin was covering his eye in a very pirate way. 'The lemonade was garish, I did not risk it!'

'Now, something tells me that God loves triples, so you probably are not the last guests for today! Mitzi, do you have any idea who that might be?'

'Of course I have, Georgi is coming with Lorelei and he is in charge of the lemonade.'

'Wait a little, Georgi planned to have a vacation and did not tell me?'

'No, he did not plan it; I called him yesterday in the afternoon! You see, if we all sit down I can explain while we eat, right?'

The roar of a mighty engine interrupted her generous offer. The enormous black minivan narrowly fit in the doors, but managed to squeeze in enough for the men to close them behind it. Out of the driver's side Georgi emerged sporting dark sunglasses and waved at the company:

'We saw the dust cloud from Vesselin's car, but did not want to startle them with that Grizzly bear that should pass for a vehicle. I ordered a normal car, but the agency claimed that they had none left and shoved this monster on me. It guzzles gas like crazy, but was good for the road. One more good thing is that it loads tons, so we stopped and emptied the local shop in Varvara of anything that Kosta may need to stoke on. Good to see there are loaders in droves here!'

Rada hugged Lorelei, who used peppy German to tell her that she would not be howling one more two-grams pack of sugar even if she would be paid its weight in gold for that. She pointed at the back of the van, where the seats were invisible under stacks of soda cans of all varieties, bags of flour, sugar and rice, more stacks of jars and tins, one pack of which was a distinctive halva, huge square tins of olive oil. The funniest part was that all the bounty was literally buried under stacks of toilet paper rolls that a bounce had strewn everywhere.

'Now, my dear Georgi, please do enlighten me where you are planning to spend your vacation if you brought that much toilet paper!' Rada drooled in German.

'Hey, I don't know how much I will use on your get-away vehicle first!'

'What get-away vehicle?'

'The newlyweds are supposed to get a getaway vehicle decorated with toilet paper! Only wait until you see how much toothpaste I have stacked on!' Georgi stretched his hands like a fisherman telling tales.

'Now repeat slowly - which newlyweds' vehicle you are planning to decorate?'

'Yours! When we married I promised my brother that I would repay the kindness on the big day as he was the one to smear my car with all that stuff!'

'Dear little brother, who told you we are getting married?'

'Mitzi! And she said to be here as early as I can, so I report to duty. Just don't tell me you did it without us!'

Milena and Vesselin were leaning on each other for support while laughing their hearts out. Lorelei was trying not to drop her camera bag while snapping shots at everyone. Mitzi was torn between the laughter and the dreadful feeling that she should have called Konstantin earlier. The three remaining members of the company did not speak German and were waiting patiently for someone to explain the situation. Vesselin took pity of them and translated, so they joined the laughing part.

Kosta wiped his tears and said in Bulgarian, 'I cannot stomach that on an empty stomach. If I know my brother well enough, somewhere in this van there is a pack of cool drinks or drinks that had once been cooled. Let us haul them out and set the table, as the grilled stuff that Vesselin and Milena brought is cooling down. Then we will eat and Mitzi will talk.'

'It is nice to have an understanding older brother. There is a case of a decent Pilsner that was chilled in Varvara and a thermos bag with a mix of fuzzy drinks and juices, but I am afraid it is well buried. Let's dive! I am starving also, that plane food is disastrous!'

Everyone pitched carrying whatever they could into the kitchen. Mitzi got hold of Konstantin and asked where Father Ivan could be found at that time. Considering that it was the first day of the Hot Days, he should be at home, Konstantin suggested and went to invite him for the lunch with his wife. The three of them came in time to see the table ready and took the seats left. When there was food on every plate and a drink in front of every person, Mitzi asked everyone to start and to listen carefully. Thirty seconds into the story she had their full attention and one by one the forks were laid down. The only noise that was mixing with Mitzi's voice was Georgi translating to his wife in whispered tones.

With every sentence of the elder woman Dimitar grew redder and redder. It was his brother who was planning to kidnap his hostess; it was him who had led the bloodhound on the trace. Without him, Tanas would never ever think of coming to Brashlyan in a search for Rada. He had put at risk the life and the happiness of the people who had hid him for so long, who had saved his life. He felt like a rotten apple in a case of good ones, spoiling everything. May be it was what the Tanassovs were destined for - to spoil the life of the others. He had made Valkuda miserable as well. Now she was not taking his calls neither Mitzi's and she was right not to do it. She was a capable manager and many companies would offer her much better conditions. With his grandfather's death her greatest incentive had gone, she would be able to make her own choices. Her contract did not say she could not resign, only that she could not be fired. May be she had already made her mind and that was why she did not want to answer the phones, she was busy wrapping up. Was it too late? He could borrow a car or ask for a lift to the nearby highway, get to a town with a car rental service and drive to Varna, ask Valkuda for forgiveness and help to stop his brother in his foolish idea to marry Rada by force. Konstantin nudged him.

'Mitzi asked do you know which Milena your father had been referring to?'

'What?'

'You were supposed to listen, oh mighty Lyssipos! Your stepmother told Mitzi that your father planned to get rid of your manager like he had done with some Milena who was pensive type. Do you know who she was and what he did to her? Dimitar? What did I say? Hello!!!'

'You all wait here, OK, I will bring you something to read on the subject!' Dimitar was walking like a zombie. He came back clutching a cream envelope. He looked around the table and pleaded, 'I need a volunteer to read it aloud, but I am not sure it is something to be read at the table. I.. I cannot read it, I am sorry, I cannot!'

Vesselin took the letter and skimmed it over, then coughed. He looked at Dimitar and inquired, 'Are you sure you would like me to read it word for word?'

'I don't know anymore! But if it helps save someone's skin, it would be worth reading...'

'I think a selective summary will do for now!' Vesselin's tone was forced. 'Generally the letter says that when he was seventeen, Tanas' son killed his girlfriend in his home bathtub and made it look like an incident - that

she had slipped from a cliff and drowned in the sea. He was not even perturbed by a witness and managed to escape punishment. The girl's name is Vilena, not Milena.'

'Tanas covered for him?' gasped the horrified Mitzi.

'No, but trust me, that is not a story that you want to know right now! The question is answered, go ahead!'

'This question is answered, but do you want me to stay here is the other one!' Dimitar interjected.

'Why should you go - because your father was a teenage killer? What does this have to do with you?'

Konstantin was staring at him incredulously.

'No, but I had the letter for three days and did not go to the authorities!'

'If your grandfather did not have the chance, do you think you stand one? It is more than thirty years ago, nobody will reopen such a thing just because your grandfather left you a letter dated twenty years ago!'

'Yes, you better concentrate on the present for it not to be repeated, tfu-tfu-tfu!' Vantche spitted over her left shoulder to ward the evil.

Father Ivan looked at the suddenly somber gathering and insisted, 'God takes care of the ones who sleep in death, but He may appreciate your help with the living. Kosta told me that Mitzi had gathered you for a wedding and I will be glad to officiate if you manage to get to the point. How about one step at a time - we will finish this lunch, I will go ring the bell to get the people of the village to know and you will show at the church promptly at three o'clock. Does that give you enough time?'

Often in life the big questions come in small packages and their solutions may be sudden but somehow premeditated. Father Ivan hardly finished his last sentence when all the people around the table started talking at once. It was past midday and they needed to dress up and the girls wanted to freshen up and the guys needed a shave and where had Mitzi stashed the red wine and the bread that she had bought in Bourgas and... Hastily the drinks and food were finished, the order to the two bathrooms established among the ladies while the gentlemen had to be content with the garden tap for shaving and then a two-minutes shower each. Mitzi was motherly proud with her organized granddaughter - the rooms for Mitzi and the girls were prepared, bed sheets and towels there. Georgi and Lorelei got the top floor with the view of the sea, Milena and Vesselin took the one prepared for unexpected guests on the second floor. While waiting for their turn to the showers Vantche and Tantche managed even to wash the dishes - and to laugh at Mitzi's

surprise. They have been a team for so long, even when they were waiting tables in a cheap bistro at the beginning of their first year at the Medical Academy.