

A Belt of a Silk Peignoir

Andon Tsarev looked at Dimitar above his spectacles and softly asked again, 'Are you absolutely sure you want to open this can of worms, young man, it had happened before you were born! Last time I talked with him about it, your grandfather asked me to give it to you after the situation clears a little bit and you have had the time to get used to it. I think it is somewhat early for you to open that envelope.'

'Mr. Tsarev, I doubt there is something uglier to be learned for either my father or my brother, so it should not be that bad. I believe this is the last document that concerns family relationship, so let us do with it and clear the air, once and forever.'

'I wish it was so simple. Unfortunately, I cannot insist on waiting, otherwise I would. But I don't want you to be alone when you open it. Will you consider reading it in my office - I will arrange for a private room where you can sit comfortably. You may want to ask some questions later also.'

'You want to tell me that Grandpa has hidden there a Pandora box and all the miserable things will come out, so you want to confine me to a room. Let it be, I will sit and read it here.'

The library was truly a small room without windows and Dimitar shrugged his shoulders. 'I told you, you don't want the contents to see the light of the day!'

'I really would not want that, rest assured!' Tsarev was unnaturally grim, but handed him a soft cream envelope. On it in Tanas Sr.'s distinctive scroll was written one word: "Margarita". Dimitar tore the envelope open and out of it slid a silk belt, a pale cream ribbon that rippled into a tiny puddle on the polished dark table. The young sculptor did not touch it, he looked at Tsarev who had not left the room but was standing next to the door and looked like he wished he could blend with the shelf.

'Read!' instructed the elder man dryly, but did not move.

Out of the envelope came few yellowed sheets, which were addressed to him, but the date was when he had been six and Dimitar frowned but went on:

'My dear grandson,

If you are reading this letter, that means that I had not had the time or chance or courage to tell you this story myself. Even after so many years it is still one of my greatest shames and my greatest burden.

I don't know if by the time you open this envelope your grandmother Margarita will be still alive or not, but in her condition that does not make much of a difference. Please before you judge both of us, read it all.

You have never had a chance to meet the real Margarita, the sweet, artistic young woman who made a great difference in my life. The people who remember her considered her a gifted singer and talented pianist, but she preferred her role as a teacher at the Music School to pursuing a career as a musician which would have taken her away from home, from me and from your father. She always said that we were everything she lived for and was content with that instead of the glory of the world podiums. We never questioned her choice either.

She was the best wife and mother possible, taking care of your father's education and extra activities much more than me, who was constantly absent due to my position's responsibilities. Should I have been home more, may be I would have spotted your father's increasingly violent character, but I was not and I would go to the grave blaming myself for that. Whether I could have changed anything would remain a mystery forever, but I have missed the tendency completely. His duplicity made it possible for him to escape a lot, being a perfect son at home and a tug at the streets. Even then he managed to use my name pretty well and the very few times he was caught, he wiggled his way out claiming he had been forced by a bad company to do one thing or another. The authorities preferred to turn a blind eye instead of coming to me or to his school and we continued to be sure we had the most wonderful son possible, a future respectable member of the new society.

When your father was seventeen, he got involved with a daughter of your grandmother's friend and colleague. Vilena was a very nice girl, good student and pretty beautiful, and we were only happy for them.

Your father was a good looking boy and had the girls' attention easily. Initially the romance was blooming, but several months later Vilena's mother started gradually to withdraw from the friendship with Margarita without an explanation and the frequency of Vilena's meeting with your father decreased. We thought of it as the first crash of the first crush and hoped that there would be no bad feelings on either side.

One day at the end of the school year, your mother's last student for the day did not show up due to a sudden illness and she went home. She thought that your father was either out or studying in his room, so she entered in silence as not to disturb him. There was a noise in the kitchen and she said "Hi!" in the general direction of that noise, your father emerged from there and she told me he was terribly pale. Her first instinct was to run to the medicine cabinet in the bathroom which they reached almost simultaneously. Margarita opened the door and all she saw was Vilena's body floating in the bathtub face down, her hands being tied behind her back with the ribbon that is in this package. Margarita blacked out.

She told me that when she woke up she was in her bed and there was a doctor who your father had called. The doctor insisted that she had probably fell due to a sudden bout of high blood pressure, but luckily your father had been around and taken care to put her in bed. After he had seen that she had been unconscious for too long, he had called a physician. The doctor admired the quick thinking of your father to put a cold compress on the bump, even if he had used the first thing that he had grabbed, Margarita's peignoir. The doctor recommended few days of bed rest as a precaution.

When the doctor left, your grandmother confronted our son, who denied doing anything, even helped her to the bathroom which was clean and dry. He said that probably your grandmother had hit her head rather seriously if she could suspect her son of such a thing. He insisted that she had deeply wounded him and he needed some time out to think it over, then left. Soon after the calming drops that doctor had given your grandmother kicked in and she dropped asleep, waking up the next morning, when your father had already gone to school. He had left a message that he had called her director to report that she would be absent the following few days.

What woke your grandmother was probably a frantic call from her friend that Vilena had not come home the previous evening and the family was searching for her high and low. Your grandmother did not answer. She was still dizzy from the medication.

The militia found Vilena's body in the sea in the late morning. I had just arrived from a trip to Sofia and as the relationship between Vilena and your father was a common knowledge, I was told one of the first. My colleagues were concerned about what terrible blow it would be to the young lad, especially at such a sensitive age. Of course, I raced home, and as your father was not yet back from school, I decided to discuss first with Margarita how to break the news to him. Little I knew what would erupt - your grandmother poured to me her part of the story about the events of the day before. I was livid and had all the intentions to let him in the hands of the prosecutors with her help and had the bad judgment to say that aloud. Your grandmother cried that she would not live to be a mother of a killer as she could not face the people she knew. She asked for a glass of cold water and as she was still bedridden, I went to bring it. I remember that I let the water run until cold one come out of the faucet, few seconds probably, then returned to our room to find your grandmother hanging from the headboard on the same ribbon that is in front of you. What saved her life was that the silk did not tighten under her small weight enough to break her neck, so when I pulled her out I manage to resuscitate her. But that saved the life of her body, not the life of her.

Given the previous day "blood-pressure induced" fainting incident, the doctors concluded that she had suffered a massive stroke, probably first a mild one the day before, which may had caused her to hallucinate and fell, and a fatal one few hours later. They told me she was lucky as she was young and the stroke had affected neither her breathing nor her ability to see or move. A certain degree of recovery was to be expected.

By the time I was back from the hospital, the news had reached your father and he was such an epitome of grief, that even I was initially fooled. A neighbor had told him about Margarita and he had called the hospital, and had been given a full account, I suspect he used my name to get it. I questioned him about what Margarita had told me, but he played again the deeply wounded perfect son, repeating the story about his

mother's "fainting". I searched the house, but there was no trace of violence, no trace of something that should not have been there or something missing. Vilena has been a frequent guest so even discovering an item that belonged to her would not prove a thing. Around eight the prosecutor called me and told me that Vilena's death was considered a tragic incident. There were no indications of violence except a bump on the back of her head, she had drowned. Her school bag was found at the edge of the sea and the prosecutor suggested that she had probably inadvertently slipped, hit her head and drowned, as she was an excellent swimmer. The testimonies of her girlfriends were supporting the theory, they have said that she had been pensive in the morning and told them that she would like "to go somewhere alone to think". She loved sea, so nobody disputed her choice of a place to go and were profoundly sorry about the tragedy. The inquiry was considered closed, the case solved.

I was out of choices. Nobody would believe me and Margarita, the only person who could have testified, was unable to do so. Your father was playing the desperate Romeo and even Vilena's family was convinced he was devastated by the two personal tragedies so close in time. He knew I was not convinced to that degree. Unfortunately, Margarita did not recover and at the time I am writing this letter, her condition had not improved. I will continue to do whatever is possible to get her back, although I am not sure whether it will be a blessing or a curse for her. Because, you see, we are parents of a killer, whether exposed and convicted or not.

You may ask why I am digging old bones if I have been silent for so long. If you are given this letter, you are of age and I would like to ask you if Margarita is still alive, you to take care of her for me. I will do my best to provide the financial means for a respectable long term care but one never knows how life will turn. If Margarita is dead, you are given the letter because you need to know in order to protect yourself. Forewarned is forearmed! Your father is a dangerous man who you should not underestimate. He does not let go, so much like me. I wish I would know what I did wrong with his upbringing, which were my faults, in order to avoid them with you. For the sake of the woman I love I hope I will do better this time.

Once this letter is finished, I will give it to a friend of mine, who is a lawyer, Andon Tsarev. He will know its contents and will be the only one to know them. In case something happens "unexpectedly" to me, he can release the letter if he deems it proper. If I die naturally, he will give it to you. It took a lot to put this story on paper, I will not rewrite it.

Take care!

Your grandfather"

Dimitar looked at the ribbon and moved aside from the table, as if the pale band was poisonous snake ready to strike. He stopped when he backed into a shelf and jumped of surprise. The young man folded the letter and carefully put it back in its faded envelope. Andon Tsarev was watching the sculptor closely. The lawyer had known about the letter's content for more than two decades. The time had taken some of the sharp edges of the shock and pain he felt for the man he considered a friend unlike many others. But delivering the blow to his grandson had opened wounds he thought had been scabbed. The kid did not deserve it, but it was a necessary pain, like a vaccination to provoke the immune system to fight. A glass of cognac should help it slide in, he thought, went to the bar in one of the shelves and poured half a glass.

'No!' Dimitar said loud and clear. 'I don't need it!'

'You may not, but I do, sonny! I have lived with it longer!'

'I am sorry you had to be burdened with it!'

The lawyer looked at him strangely and said almost conversationally, 'Exactly that I heard from your grandfather! Yeah, blood is something special!'

'Does Valkuda know about the content of this letter?'

'No, nobody knew what was inside. My partner knows that there is a letter to be opened in case Tanas dies unexpectedly and unnaturally and foul play is suspected and so knows Valkuda, but I was the only one who knew about the contents and now there are two of us.'

The black eyes of Dimitar, so like his grandfather's, locked with the hazel gaze of the lawyer. The silence stretched and stretched and Andon felt how he was falling through time to another tête-à-tête with another Tanassov which was like in another life. Out of the dark orbs was flowing the same concentration, the same determination and he was their target again. And like then he closed his eyes and gritted his teeth.

'I have a feeling that there is more to the story that my grandfather wrote, do I stay correct?' the young sculptor tried to be as tactful as possible.

'You stay correct...' sighed Andon.

'So will you tell me why you did not run with the letter to the prosecutors or at least to Vilena's parents? They would have believed you at least and would have done something?'

'I will tell you what I told your grandfather when he gave me the letter and told me what was in it: what good it would have done to them to live the entire nightmare of losing a child again?'

'What do you mean - to live again? You mean to relive?'

'No, I meant what I said - to live again through the nightmare of losing a child! I doubt you will like what I have to tell you, but in for a penny, in for a pound.

Vilena's death was not the only trouble that hit her parents. They have been under suspicion that they were not exactly loyal to the regime. The relationship had served to some extent as a protection, as very few people in Varna wanted to get on the bad side of Tanas by tackling his future in-laws. Once Vilena was out of the picture, the hyenas pounced. Her father suddenly did not qualify for his job and was reduced in ranks to the base of the social pyramid. Some students of her mother started complaining about pressure and extortion tactics and arranged exams and not enough representation of the communist music in the school curriculum. Nothing was true and every unprejudiced person would see that it was a gang of least talented in music but highly skilled in manipulation students, active Komsomol people of the right origin. Her classes were less and less requested and she was finally fired from the Music School. She fought trying to go with private lessons as she was an amazing teacher, but her students were warned that their quarterly exams would not be as successful as they hoped and very few dared to sneak.'

'That is hideous! And my grandfather did nothing?'

'Don't jump before you hear everything! First, he was preoccupied with your grandmother and spent almost six months in Sofia going from one neurologist to the other one, tried everything. Second, Vilena's mother was friend of his wife and the families hardly knew each other - under the circumstances the contacts were practically severed. If they tried to contact him through your father, I don't know, but I doubt, they were too proud people for that. I also doubt that your grandfather's colleagues would have bragged about their "achievements". Your grandfather was not known as a man who forgets bearers of bad news.'

'So nobody uttered a sound?' Dimitar was trembling with rage.

'Someone did. When the news about what had happened reached that someone first through third parties' secret whispers and some hints that his place, however meager, may be at risk also, he picked up all his courage and went to talk to your grandfather.'

'At least one decent man! Did he manage to get to him?'

'Not on the first try, but yes, they met.'

'And what did grandpa say to the man, did he tell you?'

The hazel gaze flashed with strange flares, 'He told me exactly what you said few seconds ago: "At least one decent man!" Your grandfather was beyond angry about the situation. He was furious enough to get back to Varna almost immediately and he was far from nice there. Vilena's father was restored in his previous position, but he had been so bitterly disappointed both by the system and the many people who he had considered friends that he was a shadow of his previous self. The Music School was unexpectedly tough at the beginning but they had underestimated your grandfather. After few private talks with the director and several leading teachers Vilena's mother was restored in her previous position also, although the atmosphere around her remained poisonous. But the parents were content with that and terribly grateful to Tanas for the intervention.'

'How one can be content with that? Why?' more questions were bubbling inside Dimitar, but Andon lift his hand and the young man fell silent again.

'Because those were dark times and because even if their lives were ruined, they still had a son to look for and it was of utmost importance that his future was salvaged. The kids of the traitors were not faring well at those times, Dimitar, I believe you understand that.'

'That son did nothing while they were tormented? I don't understand how he was sitting quiet.'

'Don't judge him too strict. He was studying in Sofia and his parents kept him unaware of their troubles as much as they could. And it happened very fast, few months to the most. When he went back for his Christmas vacation he learned the real situation, came back and confronted Tanas.'

A black ball was clogging Dimitar's chest. It was a mixture of the revulsion that his father had ruined the lives of so many people, that his grandfather had had to be torn between his ailing wife and the ugliness of his colleagues' acts, a sorrow for the family who suffered silently in order to save their remaining kid while the flowers on their daughter's grave had not wilted yet. He could not imagine how their son had felt and what his feelings about his grandfather were then and at present. Did they ever meet after that conversation? How did Tsarev know so much about the follow up? Had Dimitar's grandfather told him? Did Tsarev know the guy somehow? He was about to open his mouth to ask those burning questions when he looked at the lawyer and shut up.

'Yes, it was me. Vilena Tsareva was my baby sister.'

Full glass of brandy was pushed in his hand and Dimitar gratefully swallowed half before he gathered his courage to look at Andon again. The man was cradling his own snifter and was waiting for him. The young man opened his mouth several times, but no sound came out.

'Drink!' advised the lawyer. 'Drink it all! I should not have told it all to you today, it is too much! It was not fair to you, I at least had the time to adjust and understand...'

'No, thank you for telling me,' Dimitar's voice was a cracking whisper. Andon felt bad about him, then thought that he had been younger when he had confronted Tanas and had survived. The boy was a tough nut to crack, he would survive also. A little pep talk would not harm.

'I want you to know that I am grateful for what your grandfather did for me and my parents. I cannot blame him for the crime his son committed although he blamed himself. He did his best to keep us out of the harm's way, he helped me a lot here in Sofia. His connections were extensive and where he lacked respect or fear, he used blackmail, but all the doors were opened to me when I needed it. Another man in his shoes may have shrugged and called his guards to throw me away and no one would have heard of me again, especially after the words I hurled at him when we first met. The time is not sand in hourglass; it does not

have an option to be reversed. When he gave me the letter, my father was already gravely ill. Tanas asked me if I would consider spilling the beans. I told him I would not. Imagine my parents' horror if they were to learn that the almighty mentor of their son, who had been guarding his career and had his full trust, was the father of their daughter's killer, moreover, he had known about it and had not acted upon that knowledge. Imagine how they would have felt that the boy who had cried all over their daughter's coffin was the one who had actually put her there. I could not do that to them. I could not do that to Tanas. I could not do that to me either. I did not have more proof that the letter and a silk ribbon in it. Nobody would reopen a case closed long ago upon such evidence, especially pointing at Tanas, even indirectly. To the best, I would have been considered a liar. To the worst they would have disbarred me and prosecuted me for blackmail or extortion or defamation, there were enough articles for everyone if needed. None of that would have woken up my sister and I doubt there is a punishment that will reform your father. All I could do was - when the possibility arose - to strip him of everything that he held dear like he stripped Vilena of her life. That is my revenge, Dimitar, for me and for her, and for our parents. I hope you understand.'

Understanding was one thing, acceptance of the facts completely different. Dimitar was glad that he had someone to drive him home; he would not have trusted his own judgment to do it. He had taken the envelope and its grim content with him, but was not sure if he really wanted to share it with Valkuda or simply put it in the safe next to his other documents. May be not immediately, Dimitar needed time to absorb it himself. He did not have any reason not to believe that Vilena was his father's only victim, but an hour before he had not had any reason to believe that his father was a killer either. If a seventeen years old one managed to kill his girlfriend and dupe the entire police force, plus checkmate Tanas, he was not to be underestimated. It was not a question of luck; it was premeditated and executed in a blood so cold that even the presence of a witness had not deranged him. Dimitar's father was not a stupid man, so chances were that his deadly skills would be deadlier with the years, despite his taste for blondes and ugly music. Valkuda was thinking of him as a pickled cucumber, but she was wrong. Why did his grandfather not tell her about the killing? Was he planning to do it? Or may be not, he did not want to look bad in the eyes of his favorite girl. Was it his vanity or another feeling that prevented him from telling her? She was straight as a die, how

would she react to the news that her suitor had been covering for his son the killer for so long? That was probably what was keeping him silent, the fear of rejection from the last good thing he had had.

The thoughts did not improve the young sculptor's mood. He hated the possibility of his grandfather being a manipulative snake to get Valkuda's full acceptance. He hated that Grandpa had probably succeeded. Well, he could use it to his advantage and make her see the man for who he was rather than pretended to be. She should know, she should see in what web of deception she had fallen, despite her huge brains and devotion. The closer he got to home that they almost shared, the more Dimitar's determination grew. He would give it to her and would wait for her reaction. Valkuda would be mad, of course, but may be she would renounce at least part of the worship for his grandfather. It would be a start.

It was lunchtime and Valkuda has slipped for something outside. Dimitar could not swallow a crumb; he thought he would explode as he was. He paced and paced the big drawing room until one of the guards politely asked if he would prefer to go for a session in a gym or swimming, which the young man rightly understood as a note that he was troubling the work of the others. He retreated to his grandfather's study, which was now his study and sat behind the custom-made desk. The sculptor tried to read some documents, but could not concentrate on anything. His mind was playing the picture of the coiled belt of soft cream silk and intertwining it with the image of Laocoon and the snakes. He felt like the secrets of the past were coiling around him, suffocating his creativity and forcing him to make decisions that he detested. He might have been rich as Midas, but he was equally miserable, he could not go out when he wanted, could not do what he wanted, could not even pace around his own office without restrictions. Dimitar realized that he was sulking, but it felt good for the moment and he continued to mop.

There was a quiet knock at the door and Valkuda entered, carrying a sandwich on a plate and a glass of soda.

'The guys told me that you did not go for lunch, so I brought you something.'

'Thank you very much but I will pass. I had to swallow something big today after breakfast. Are you in for grim news?'

'What happened?'

'You may read for yourself and then I may ask some questions just as Andon Tsarev suggested,' Dimitar handed her the envelope. First slid the silk ribbon, then the letter. Valkuda opened it and looked at the first line, then closed it.

'It is addressed to you...'

'If you look at the date, you will see that it would not have done me much good at the time it was written. Go ahead, I want you to read it.'

The young woman opened the yellowed pages again and started reading. The expression fixed on her face was one of concentration, nothing different from the way she read documents. Dimitar was waiting for a reaction, but not a single tremble betrayed what she thought. Valkuda finished reading the letter, folded it and placed it back in its envelope then slid the ribbon inside.

'So?' prodded Dimitar.

'I am sorry you had to find that but it helps shake off some misunderstanding I had about your father.'

'And that is all? You have nothing more to say?'

'Maybe I do, but I won't. Andon Tsarev has had enough pain with it, your father would not reform, nothing will return Vilena, or your grandmother, or your grandfather. You have not come to terms with it yet, so I better wait with the talking.'

Her words were reasonable yet exactly the reason in them made him burst. She should not be that logical, that detached. No, he did not want her to be logical or detached; he wanted to see the woman, not the computer. Then it bugged him, 'How do you know about Tsarev?'

'Grandfather once upon a time mentioned that should his sister have lived, Andon would have been your grandfather's in-law. I pushed a little bit, but he was reluctant to speak. He mentioned that she had died young, before finishing high school and mentioned her name. Andon Tsarev never speaks about her.'

'You are not surprised that Grandpa never spoke about her either? Even to you?'

'No, I am not surprised. Your grandfather was entitled to his privacy like anyone of us, don't you think?'

'This is not privacy, this is an outright murder! And you support his decision! I should have known that you would. You did everything he asked for, didn't you! You would have killed for him; he had only to ask, hadn't

he! What did he have in his grip over you? Another dark secret? His or yours, that is what I want to know... Or maybe shared one that I am not supposed to know about for another twenty years!

'Dimitar, you are yelling!'

'I know what I am doing! It is nice to yell for a change as for the last two months I have been only listening, no, I have been listening to him all my life and even after he died he stays on my way and makes me listen when I don't want to. I am through listening only!'

'He did not stand on your way, he ploughed the boulders out of it for you, you ungrateful thing!'

Her yell stopped him dead in his rant. Valkuda had never raised a voice since he remembered. Gradually the contents of her phrase sunk in and unlatched the doors of hell that his good breeding had kept in check.

'Oh, you know that as well, when did he tell you that? Before or after he bedded you? Maybe he was the one who was drawing my sketches at school in Varna, he did my homework in Paris, he worked with Stoyan Debarski as his only apprentice ever? Sure, there was nothing impossible for the mighty Tanas Tanassov, the Black Cardinal could do whatever he wanted, cover murderers and then wash his hands by throwing some bones to their victims, kill people himself and not bother with the bones in those cases, pay for your grandfather's life of service by making you his lover. And he had the chutzpah to write me a letter that you have been in love with me forever and he hopes that we will marry and he will bounce our children on his knees. Nice picture, I would have never known if he would be bouncing his child or mine, they would be alike, would they not? What did he write - all is fair in love and war. He forgot to tell me what he considered love and what war, as they seem to be so intricately woven for him, that he had forgotten the difference. I am telling you, I am going back to Brashlyan and will stay there until it clears in my head! You may go on as you like, go to Varna as planned, do whatever you want, you are the manager! So manage it!'

Dimitar was seeing red. He needed a vent and had sloshed on the young woman the pent-up emotions that were gnawing him for months. He expected that she would pick up the fight and then the atmosphere would clear. Instead, Valkuda stood up, straightened her cuffs and said, 'Would you please put this letter in the safe yourself, I have a train to catch!' and left.

He was so confused that for few minutes he did not move. The young man was still seething when he put the envelope in his private safe within the safe and locked it, then thought that he should have not said a fraction of what he had poured over her. He took out the letter again, together with the rings' package and put them in his pocket. The guilt and remorse fought with his stubborn streak. To his chagrin the battle was long enough for him to miss her train heading for Varna by few minutes. He did not bother to return home, just bought a ticket for the sleeping car to Bourgas and went shopping for toiletries and a change of clothes. He called Tsarev's office and left a note that he needed a break and that all his mail or documents requiring signature should be re-routed to Valkuda. Dimitar killed the remaining time by wandering around the town, bought loads of chocolates for Rada and jumped in his train with a wave to his distraught bodyguard. Life was miserable dish that all the salt of the Black See would not make more palatable.