

Crystal Night

At quarter to eleven Dimitar activated the second floor alarm and went to his room. He was shaking the last vestiges of the jet-lag, his biological clock urging that it is a quarter to nine and the evening was just starting in Paris. He thought about calling some friends, but decided against and pulled the white envelope. It was one of the famous highly resistant ones, and he had to pry it open. Out of it came a letter, a small box and a big notebook which looked ancient. He took the notebook and turned few pages. It looked like a diary, but there were few dates and practically no names that he would know. He flipped some more pages, the handwriting seemed to change a little bit, then changed completely, then again - all the scripts neat and easy to read, although the first one still used the letters that were extinguished good half a century earlier. The last few pages were definitely his grandfather's scroll, well-rounded, same size letters finished without urgency, carefully calligraphic one after the other with the necessary links and curves, row after row of a text referring to something called "it". The object was probably described earlier in the diary but it was big and would take time to read it all from the beginning. Dimitar decided that it will be a fascinating reading for some other time and took the box instead. It was a jewelry box and contained a set of rings - small size wedding band and what looked like an engagement ring - a flower-shape carved fire opal with a diamond for a center. Tiny diamonds adorned the band on both sides of the flower which sparkled under the bedtime light. The sculptor in him was intrigued by the carver who created the masterpiece - the lines were not mathematically precise, it was a free form and for that much more alive. Dimitar took the wedding band and was not surprised to see his grandfather's name engraved in it. So it was his grandmother's ring and now he had the entire set. He took his grandfather's ring out of his pocket and put it together with the two small ones in the box.

'Now I am all set if I need to get married fast!' he said aloud and squirmed at the thought. If a fraction of what Valkuda had told him few hours ago was true - and he had no reason to believe it was not - not marrying, even dating would be a chore. Not for the lack of candidates, the amount of money he represented already would compensate if he were missing a limb or two and was as old as Methuselah. He had never thought much before about the weight a wealth would represent. His grandfather had sheltered

him like a flower in a hothouse. Dimitar had never lacked funds, luckily he was thrifty by nature, but he had learned to earn them himself after graduation and the amounts that Tanas Sr. was regularly depositing in his account remained there untouched, it was a question of personal integrity. He thought of it as a cushion for going on extended vacation or what-not, but the amount there was not comparable with his grandfather's wealth, of course. Dimitar thought about the magnitude of responsibility that came with it - Valkuda was right, there were so many people along the food chain and they deserved the security, however fragile, it provided for them and their families. He felt grateful to his grandfather for not burdening him with it before, for allowing him to explore his talent and his own world, no, for actively helping him to do that. Along the line came the guilt that he could have been closer, do more, know more, be better prepared. Instead he had left Tanas Sr. to lean on the shoulder of a young woman who was not even his blood relative. Dimitar knew how much importance his grandfather had put into family ties, how much pride he had in his ancestry and how painful it was for him that his son and Tanas Jr. had turned what they were. His old man had been excruciatingly lonely since the incident with his grandmother, but he had put the needs of Dimitar before his own, he had worked alone, fought alone and nearly died alone. It was pure coincidence that Dimitar had been in Sofia, with his week-long stints once a year. The young man felt a new gratitude about Valkuda, no matter what her role had been in his grandfather's life. Even if the most outrageous gossips were true, it would have been worth it, as Tanas Sr. would have had someone to be close to. Dimitar remembered her tears after everyone had left, the outpouring of grief which was not witnessed by anyone but him. She was either a better actress than Sara Bernard, or she was plain devastated by his grandfather's death. Neither choice was sitting well with the young sculptor. If it had been a show, he hated to think what a gifted manipulator with a dead grip and everything to gain was sleeping a floor above and was in charge of his security. If she was affected personally as a woman by Tanas Sr.'s demise, well, he hated even the possibility of having his grandfather's paramour comparing his every step to her idol, who had entrusted her with the care of his useless but harmless grandson as the least of evils. It would have been a good idea to ask more than whether Valkuda was married but would his grandpa have answered any differently if they were involved? He had been an enigma all his life, why change at the end.

Then came the dying wish that Tanas Sr. had managed to saddle him with "Listen to Vale!" What did she know that could not be heard from someone else? The most puzzling part was his last words to that Vale and that mentioning of Todor. Who was that Todor, dead or alive, and where were they going? Dimitar tried in vain to remember any Todor in the family, but came blank. Why did he ask Valkuda not to forget his coin? His last deal had remained unfinished and he wanted to close it? It was too late to ask Tanas Sr. so listening to Vale looked like his heir's only option.

Dimitar looked at the small envelope that had been the last to come out of the package. It was not sealed and looked like it had been opened several times. Dimitar shook the few pages out of it. Four pages, three of them printed and one handwritten. The handwritten was different in color also and looked older. The young man opened it warily.

"This is to confirm that my earnest wish and desire is that after my death, my wedding band, as well as the engagement ring featuring fire opal and diamonds and wedding band previously belonging to my late wife, become sole property of my grandson, namely Dimitar Tanassov, if he would like to keep them. Should he not desire to own these family heirlooms, I wish them to be sold at a public auction and the proceeds to be delivered to the institution where my wife had spent her last thirty-five years."

It was signed and dated few days after the death of Dimitar's grandmother. He had been in Sofia at that time, why was he not given the rings then?

'Yes, Sherlock, where would you have put them safely?' he reprimanded himself. Tanas Sr. had thought about it also. What irked Dimitar most was that his grandfather had not even mentioned his intentions and had used the situation to trick him into giving him the blasted power of attorney to transfer properties without his knowledge. Grandpa had been a grand manipulator for ages and it explained his attraction to Valkuda. Talk about pots and their covers.

The other three pages were also a letter although it was not signed in handwriting. According to the date, it was only a week old and Dimitar was instantly suspicious of Valkuda's comments that Tanas had repeated his instructions over and over. He frowned and started reading.

"My dear grandson,

If you are reading this, I am already on the road to meet the Creator or whatever you would like to call dead. My wish about seeing you before that event may have or may not have been granted, we may have been able to talk or not, but I would like to use my last chance to have a few words with you, no matter how one-sided this conversation may be.

Hopefully by the end of this letter your sense of confidentiality will allow you to take it to the bathroom and burn it, and then flush it down the toilet few times. I would hate even the possibility of it ending at the hands of the wrong people and if I had learned something in my long life it is that they will try. No, don't shake your head, they will and before you know it. That is why Valkuda is instructed to hand you this letter before my will is opened and give you some time to read it before the gates of hell swing.

Long ago I had lost any illusions that either your father or your brother may change for the better. They will remain the selfish limited greedy people whose best hours are spent calculating how to squander their future inheritance. I do not know why they became what they are but I am reluctant to be blamed for that. At certain point it became a personal choice which I am tired of trying to influence. Time and again I have fought to bring some sense in their wasted lives to no avail. The other thing I am reluctant to see is how the efforts of generations of Tanassovs could dissipate through the grubby fingers of my son or Tanas. Do not get me wrong - it is not the money that I am concerned about. Together with them our name will sink to new lows if people who had been loyal workers start not being paid, lose their jobs and cannot support their families. Their life should not depend on two irresponsible immature men with questionable taste in many things.

In an attempt to prevent all this I did what I thought best. Inshallah, by the end of this week, the operation of transferring all that has been mine to you will be completed. As you will see, the transfers were done by different notaries - with the sole aim of preventing the news to reach anyone. There are few people who know the scope - Valkuda, Andon Tsarev and probably his partner, Milen Velev, and my chief accountant Spas Nedelin. For the sake of their security I implore you to burn the letter after you finish reading it. I have complete confidence in them and so should you. Throughout the years they have proven trustworthy. Each one of them can help you shed whatever naïve ideas you may still harbor about your father and brother.

Of the four people I mentioned you can trust, there is one that has suffered most from what I have asked to be done during the years. Valkuda Martinova is the granddaughter of Tane Martinov, who you may or may not remember. Tane saved my life in 1947 for the first time and since then had been one of the few people who understood me. We have never been bosom friends but trusted each other and in the times as they were that was more than friendship. Martinovs are very special people as I hope you will learn and I was glad that Valkuda chose to come to work for me. Far from me to tell you about my angelic character and ease of communications, but she took it all like a soldier and I am grateful for that. Shortly before he died, I visited Tane and promised him I would take care of her. He sighed and told me "Tanas, you have not understood anything. She will take care of you and of Dimitar after that". I asked why you were singled and he told me under oath that I would never mention it to her that she had been in love with you since forever. It had been long ago and I do not know whether you are still in her good graces, but if I were you, I would do my best to find out and restore the status. With all her workload, I doubt she had had much time to socialize but this is an outsider observation and may not be true. Forgive me my old man's fantasies that you would be the one to marry her and I would bounce your children on my knee - if you are reading this letter, it had not happened, as I have been updating it whenever a part of the information changes. You will have however plenty of opportunities to meet Valkuda and work with her. She is markedly competent manager, a proud woman and the hardest thing I have ever done was to convince her to accept the condition that should you die she will be the one to inherit what is yours. You see, I do not have a back up option and she

is my last attempt to prevent misery from being spread fast. Valkuda agrees that the need of the people she is responsible for comes before her want-s and don't-s. I am well aware that I had put her in the worst of the situations - she would be the one who will have to protect the person whose death will make her immensely rich and immensely miserable. It is not a fair play, but nothing is fair in love and war, n'est pas? It will ease my conscience if you right the situation for her; I trust you will find a way.

I dare to hope that you will understand my motives to do all the transfers "behind your back" and entrust Valkuda with the management. You have what the old people would call "God's sparkle", that enormous talent that you will never finish to explore. Your grandmother would have been so proud of you, of the fact that at least one of her grandsons had inherited her gift to turn the mundane into a fairytale. For you and for her I tried to give you a chance to develop it - you be the judge if I have done it right. I wish she would have been the one to guide you but you were deprived of this chance due to circumstances beyond her control. Andon Tsarev will give you her file when the noise around me lessens a little. I don't want you to have all this in one shot, it is too much. I have lived with it for decades and it still hurts.

Maybe at your age it will be hard to believe that we come to the world with our destiny cut for us, but just roughly, and it depends on the combination of Fate and chance how we will fare. Sometimes people come with everything on a silver platter and manage to mangle their chances into twisted piles of useless garbage. Sometimes people start with only the will to change the world - and succeed. I have been cursed with the ancient craving of Tanassovs - the power. I have spent my young years lusting over it and after the death of your great-grandfather I continued where his father had left. You will find in the envelope his diary of the search for power. You know the ancient legend about the ring with a small stone, which if turned towards your palm, will fulfill all your desires? My grandfather and his father, and his father before that believed in it and tried to find this elusive ring. It does exist and at one point I was within a grasp of it, but it managed to get away without trace - you will be able to read about it in that notebook that no living soul knows about. I can see your skeptical scowl while reading that - my old man had finally lost his mind. I would like to assure you that I had not. The ring is real but I was young and naïve to understand its power.

Whatever I have comprehended later - it is in the notepad. I trust you will understand it when you read it. Please, do it for me, if even only out of curiosity what your ancestors believed was around them. After that you are free to decide what to do. May be you will be luckier than I was.

Whatever you decide, I want you to be happy with your decision as you will have to live with it for the rest of your life. We are the choices that we make and I am not proud of many of mine. I will not hide behind "the times were different" and "I was ordered to do it" although in some cases it was so. I did whatever I could to repair the damage where it was my fault but that will not wash the blood from my hands. Yet these are my sins and you are not responsible for them. If you choose to continue what I started, I will be glad if you remember me not only as the monster you will read about in the newspapers and hear from some who did or did not meet me along the road. I dare to hope that you of all people will understand and forgive.

Before you decide that the old age had made me a mellow sentimental old man, crying on your shoulder, I wish you to know that in order to counter the most outrageous of news I am leaving you my archive. There are dossiers on my most prominent successes and faults; there are documents, most of them original, for you to make up your mind before you answer. From where I will be at that time, it will not make a difference to me, but you may need them. Valkuda and Andon know how to reach them and they will guide you in understanding some of the oldest and the most recent. They are not exactly a nice reading before bedtime, but they were not intended as such. You will decide whether these files will see the light of the day and I hate to burden you with that but once again, I have no back up. The times change, but the nature of people does not or at least I do not believe in it.

One thing also will never change - how grateful I am for all the light and hope you brought in my life. Your existence made my existence worth it. Your art will touch many and will make them happier and I think it will be indirectly my repayment for what I have done to make the world more miserable. There are not accounts that had not or will not be paid in life when it comes to the important things and you know I am not talking money. I paid what I could. It is your turn, my boy.

With all my love

Your grandfather"

Dimitar read the letter again, then again and again, until he realized that he was not reading it anymore, as he knew it by heart. He stood up and went to the sitting room where he knew there was a humidor. Even a non-smoker knew that around cigars there was bound to be something to light them, and he picked up the beautifully carved heavy crystal ball. He went to the bathroom and skimmed over the letter one more time before setting it ablaze above the toilet bowl. When the flames almost reached his fingers, he dropped it and flushed several times, until the last particles had gone into the whirling water. His grandfather had got his wish, he thought through the sound of shattering glass, followed by the blare of an alarm.

Before he managed to return to his bedroom, a bodyguard emerged at the door and deactivated the alarm. Valkuda ran in, on the go smoothing her hastily pulled over dress, her feet bare. Her stark white face relaxed visibly at seeing Dimitar, but she asked the guard first. 'What happened?'

'Someone threw a stone at a window, got on a motorcycle and disappeared.'

'Which window?'

'The guestroom where Mr. Tanassov is.'

All the three of them looked at the door and the guard withdrew his pistol before entering the bedroom. Under the pale light of the night stand the glass pieces were glinting around the window, over the seal, on the polished wooden floor. On the pillow laid the reason for them - a boulder the size of a man's fist, rough dark rock which could hardly be found in the middle of the town. Should Dimitar had lain in his bed, it could have caused if not a serious, but annoying injury. The sculptor looked at Valkuda and saw on her face the same weary expression that Tanas Sr. was trying to hide when talking to his son. She smoothed the few wisps that had escaped her plate and said, "I forgot that the windows are bulletproof only in Mr. Tanassov's

bedroom. That will have to change, but would you mind sleeping there tonight, we will clean up all this tomorrow."

It was past midnight and he was too tired to argue. Dimitar scooped the remaining contents of the white envelope in it and took it with him. He did not bother to undress before dropping on the plush sofa across from his grandfather's double bed. His last thought before he fell asleep was that another letter had changed the course of his life forever and he loved letters.

'It was not a teen!' Valkuda looked at the guards. In front of her the security cameras records were rerunning.

'No, Miss Martinova, it was not. But calling the police is a waste of time!'

'I know, nobody is hurt, damage is minimal, the usual story...'

'Do you think that it has something to do with Mr. Tanassov's death today?'

'I am sure about it, and I am also sure there will be no way to prove it, so we will replace the window tomorrow with a new one and put a bullet-proof film on the other ones. I did not expect it so soon, though. I will reactivate the alarm and go catch some sleep. Please leave the cassette on my desk, will you!'

Before Dimitar woke up, Valkuda managed to go home and dress. She hated black but the obligatory suit was glaring at her from the corner of her wardrobe and she sighed. It should have been her day in PJ, after a night out with Dimitar. Correction, a night out with her present boss and her future boss. In few seconds the present boss had turned into former boss and the future had turned into present. The death of Tanassovs' patriarch had robbed her of a choice much the same way as the death of her grandfather had robbed her of illusions several years ago. Until Tane had died, she did have some ground for maneuvering, some hope that the things would turn otherwise. Her grandfather had taken with him in his coffin her liberty to choose and whatever remained of her youthful dreams. Rarely someone had wished more fervently for a brother or sister, at least one, to share her family's curses or blessings. Valkuda brushed her angry tears and remembered Tane's favorite line: "There is no use crying!" No use, he was right. She looked at the picture of the young handsome man on her nightstand and smiled. It had been good while it lasted and it

was a time to make the leap. Better check the equipment. She took her bug black handbag and carefully scrutinized its contents and their locations, then swung it over her shoulder and set her alarm before she left.

Few hours sleep and a black coffee made the world an almost agreeable place. Dimitar was thinking more clearly and was more inclined to give Valkuda's concerns about his safety a second thought. The small night incident had given him new prospective of the dangers lurking in Sofia - and he was not famous yet, he chuckled. He agreed that he would be civil to the bodyguard that the Tanas' security company would assign to him and would not try any childish disappearance tricks on the men who did not crave extra excitements in their lives. He agreed that he would carry his mobile phone everywhere, yes, bathrooms included. He agreed that he would not open his mail himself. The young woman in front of him smiled contentedly and looked at her watch. Tsarev's office was ten minutes away so it was time to drive there. She was paranoid, Dimitar was convinced that his grandfather's training had done that to her - or it was an infectious disease and she was already suffering from too much contact with the dark side of the human nature. Yet she had the most enchanted green eyes and he still wanted to go to dinner with her, despite the cries of the common sense.

'I thought of something' Dimitar started conversationally. 'Why are you not concerned about the safety of my father and brother?'

'First of all, they are not going to get that much money to be interesting. Second, they will probably spend what is given outright in few months. Third, you father runs his own security company and you brother works for him. It will not be a good business move to have an outside company deal with their personal security, don't you think?' She sunk deeper in the leather seat and silently added 'Fourth, I don't care if they finish in the gutters where their rightful place is waiting for them!'

It was bad manners to make the clients wait if it could be avoided - Andon Tsarev had soaked the instruction as a young trainee in the lawyer's office where he started as a courier and raised to the position of leading

partner. It had been decades ago, but he kept arriving first, even when he was not anymore responsible for kindling the stove. It was a quiet morning, the capital relaxing after the Easter feasts in the last day of the extended holiday. The rare trams were carrying their scarce passengers with more noise than usual. Andon turned around the Palace of Justice and approached the building where his offices occupied the first two floors. He glanced at his watch - the bodyguards would be there in an hour, enough to open the door and deactivate the alarm, and even to let some fresh air - he had closed the office for a week that year, giving his hard working staff some respite before few big cases at the beginning of May. He pushed back his spectacles, took out his keys and looked at the first lock. Then he put the key ring back and pulled out his cell phone, flipped it open and called the cops.

The police arrived almost immediately as Tsarev was a name well known with their bosses. The representatives of the state took photos of the door before they pushed it opened. The alarm did not sound but nobody expected it to do so after a cursory glance. The elegant office was looking as if a tornado had hit it directly - there was not a single file cabinet not overturned on the floor, the desks' doors were torn and carelessly thrown aside, the contents strewn around, some drawers were ripped apart. The books in the library were heaped on the floor, the shelves bare. The heavy old safe was ajar, completely empty, stamps and seals scattered around it like child's toy soldiers. Files were everywhere, the piles around the sofa and the two armchairs in his study somewhat bigger. Most of the files were not open and Tsarev felt vindicated for all the bland jokes about using the old files with three-side bindings. The office would be operational in a day or two although a heavy back ache was guaranteed for everyone. He should see if any of the summer interns would be willing to come and help. Before him the round sweaty face of the patrol chief came into focus.

'I don't know what to say. It is definitely a professional job, the locks and the safe, and the alarm. Was there a lot of money or anything else of value that we should start looking for?'

'No, I don't keep money here, especially if I close the office for a week, and it is well known.'

'So you don't know when it had happened? I mean, if the office was closed for a week...'

'The office was closed but I came yesterday to pick up a file around six-thirty. The office was immaculate. I called the alarm people when I put back the alarm before I left, as is the protocol.'

'Do you think that the neighbors would have seen something?'

'I don't know. The front faces the Palace of Justice; there should hardly be a living soul there on Easter. The back faces some more offices and some apartment buildings further, but as you see the curtains are drawn closed as usual. We often work quite late, so I doubt anyone paid attention to the lights. The top floors are offices also, nobody lives in the building, it is too expensive. May be you should send someone to check if there are breaks on the other floors? There is a separate entrance; this one is for our offices only.'

'Yes, a second car is coming soon. Mr. Tsarev, do you have any idea what is missing?'

'I am not sure if anything is missing yet. I see all the paintings are in their frames; some of the furniture is valuable, but not that much and as far as I see it is there. No, I don't think the people who broke in were after money. They were looking for a document probably.'

'Any idea what document they were looking for?'

'I have been known to be a leading lawyer in few very scandalous processes recently. It might be any of them or none at all. Until I leaf through all this page by page, I will have no idea, and may be even then I will not be able to tell, I am afraid.'

'Well, then we will dust around for some fingerprints, then we will go to the alarm people.'

'Officer, you said this is done professionally. Do you think that there is any sense in looking for fingerprints? To the best you will know the fingerprints of my staff. A person who can open seven hundred kilos safe will not come that unprepared, let be frank. What is more, I have clients coming in few minutes and would be glad to clean some space for them.'

'You work on Easter?' the disapproval was hardly hidden in the officer's voice. He had hoped for a quiet Easter Monday patrol, some drunkard to the most, and he was facing the trashed office of a very high-flying lawyer barely after breakfast. Why not the shift on Tuesday!

'Not as a custom, but my clients do not choose when to die. The will of my client shall be read as soon as possible after his death, these are his instructions, and his relatives are in town for the holidays anyway, so I

made an understandable exception.'

'I am sorry, this is sad. Do you usually have bodyguards at readings?'

The officer was smarter than his bosses had given him credit.

'No, but the parties may not take it lightly and as I am alone, I opted to hire someone outside the office instead of bothering my staff. You know, a lot of them left for vacation and are not expected to return until tomorrow or even Wednesday; why bother them?'

'That is so considerate of you! Are you sure you would not like me to leave some of my boys here also, under the circumstances?'

'That is very generous, but I think that it will not go that bad! I would rather not upset my clients more than they have already suffered.'

'Well, then, I think we will be going, my people will check the rest of the building and ask around and I will send you the protocol for the insurance people. I will go and see the records of the alarm company, in case they have some information and will keep in touch, you know.'

'I will be most grateful, Officer!'

The police confirmed that the other entrance was untouched as well as the back stairs and departed. There were still ten minutes left till ten and Tsarev sat behind his desk. As expected, his top drawer was pulled out but the person who did it had not been interested in the few pens, pencils and erasers stored in the front. Someone had pushed them carelessly aside and rummaged further. Normally the drawer could not be fully pulled out as a small glass Eifel tower was blocking it. The tower laid now next to the erasers, overturned. It was a battered old replica of the famous iron symbol, one that would be kept out of sentiment in a drawer as it was not worth displaying it. Somehow its tip and little parts of the second floor had been broken long ago to razor sharp edges. Few of them were just a bit bloody, as if the person who had rummaged the drawer had impatiently pushed in his blind search for the obstacle preventing the drawer to open. Andon Tsarev looked at the small souvenir and smiled. It always worked the trick with the old drawers. Sometimes it was worth to defend pro bono old apartment robbers, one got priceless advices. He knew perfectly well what the clumsy night visitor had been looking for, but he had been late. Andon would have underestimated him, but

Tanas Sr. knew his blood and his stern instructions were that immediately upon his death, Tsarev should go to the office and remove his file. The lawyer had joked that hardly an overnight visit was necessary, but Tanas Sr. had been unmoved - immediately meant no more than a trip to the bathroom before the file was secured. It concerned Tanas Sr.'s current file, everything completed was stored in the private vault that his own people guarded better than the Central Bank treasury. Tsarev pulled his briefcase closer and had enough time to school his features before the door opened and Valkuda stepped in, followed by the bewildered Dimitar and two men in dark suits of somewhat loose cut.

'Good morning, Mr. Tsarev! Would you like us to wait outside?'

'No, my dear, it will be all right if you don't mind the chaos here. Luckily we do not keep anything in the conference room and it survived the carnage, so we will move there as soon as the other parties arrive. Did you manage to reach most?'

'Well, Mr. Tanassov and Tanas Jr. will be present as well as Mrs. Tanassova, I managed to reach five of the main beneficiaries and they promised to come, one more is supposed to get the message and I am pretty sure one fund will not be represented, the answering machine is full and nobody answers. Is that a problem?'

'Oh, you have done better than I expected, I can always meet the missing one in private, it is in Sofia, isn't it?'

'It is. When did it happen, do you know?'

'Yesterday night or today in the morning, I am not sure.'

'It is going to be a lot of work; would you like me to help until we wait?'

'Thank you, but I doubt we will have a lot of time to wait. I hear the bell. Please go to the conference room and I will let the others in.'

Valkuda pulled Dimitar's hand and he followed her. The bodyguards politely nodded at their colleagues and went after the pair.

'It is not happening to me, it could not be happening to me!' Dimitar repeated as a mantra in his head. If he stopped, he would have to face the ugly truth that in fact it was happening and with him. Within few hours he had seen an attempt on his life or at least on his health, the office of his lawyer had been trashed, he had a bodyguard and the sun had not set twice since his grandfather had died. At the same time the previous day he was musing over what shirt would impress more an old lady and whether he would be able to convince his grandfather's manager to dine with him. Since then the old lady had been almost forgotten and the manager happened to be the person most interested in seeing him dead. Talk about irony, he thought that it would be a fun day to spend. He thought that he had to postpone his return ticket to Paris, he was supposed to fly on Saturday and with a funeral in Varna to attend it was not feasible. The young man looked around at the somber faces and dark suits. He had to go shopping the next day, he had to buy an appropriate dark suit himself. He had not had one since his prom night and even that one would not pass for formal attire. Four men and a woman were standing around the big table unsure of what to do. The lawyer came and introduced them to each other - the five representatives were surprised to find that Mr. Tanassov had had another grandson and promptly delivered their condolences, coming closer more out of curiosity than of sympathy for his loss. Then the small group remained standing, evidently waiting for who they considered the main players. At twenty minutes past the hour the trio emerged flanked with four sour-faced men. They looked surly at the two silent guards on the sides of Valkuda and Dimitar, but did not extend any pleasantries. In the meantime, the five funds directors extended their sympathy to the newly arrived Tanassovs and took the places at the furthest side of the table, pulling notepads and pens. Dimitar stood to greet his relatives but neither side was too enthusiastic, compared to the behavior of Tsarev.

The lawyer stood out of his chair at the helm of the table and approached the Tanassov's son, daughter-in-law and Tanas Jr. He practically cornered them, preventing his visitors from sitting and effusively expressed his sorrow for the untimely death of their relative. With both his hands, he shook the right hands of everyone for so long that Tanas Jr. winced. Andon Tsarev was looking at his face at the moment and his gaze slipped at the hand he was still shaking as if he was seeing it for the first time. Then he remembered his manners of a host, apologized for being under the influence of the moment and lead the trio to the chairs opposite

Dimitar and Valkuda. They sat and glared at her, but caught themselves that they were in a public view and calmed down.

The young woman was holding a small folder in front of her. Her sharp green gaze had not missed a thing - she knew Tsarev long enough to know that he was playing drama. He was neither so emotional, not so intent to be a bosom buddy with Tanassovs, so the act was not for their benefit. Andon's usual handshake was brief and polite, so that was the second inconsistency in his behavior. Grandpa Tane had always cautioned "Many can watch, few can see, look, child, look and see!" Valkuda pretended to lower her gaze at her papers, while she was scrutinizing the hands of the trio. The meaty chubby fingers of Tanassov's son were clamped together, the manicured nails of the latest Mrs. Tanassova were forming a pretentious hut in front of her pretty face, and the strong, carefully tended hands of Tanas Jr. were clutching the end of the table as if he was going to overturn it, their knuckles white. The tips of his three middle fingers were graced by minute fresh cuts. They were at different angles, not likely from a razor blade touched on the wrong side, but something really sharp had bitten into his flesh. May be they were not the only cuts on his fingers, but Valkuda had no way of finding that. She classified the fact in her memory drawers and prepared to listen to Tsarev.

The lawyer's preliminary lament about the dreadful event that had taken place in his office earlier set the tone moody enough.

'I expected that you would have called off the meeting under the circumstances, how do one manage to navigate in such a mess!' muttered Tanassov's son.

'I assure you, this is not the way this office operates normally, Mr. Tanassov. But upon hearing about the demise of your father, I came to pick up his file to refresh my memory, so it escaped the destruction. One can only imagine how disappointed you would have been to have to wait for days until my staff restores the order and finds the file among the hundreds that had been displaced. It is a very unusual break-in, I still have no idea what the robbers had been after. It is a common knowledge that no decent lawyer will store money in his office, I wish to think it had been a random attack by non-professionals, otherwise it is even more ridiculous!' Tsarev sighed dramatically, untied the thick file in front of him and looked at the people

gathered around the table. All the eyes were on him, except Tanas Jr. who swiftly looked at the curtained window, avoiding his gaze, and Dimitar, whose head was resting on his hands. Both of them sported some red blotches on their necks, their adrenaline masks almost identical.

Dimitar was staring at the blank notepad that Valkuda had shoved in front of him. Few more minutes before the gates of hell would swing, as his grandfather had aptly put it in his letter. "...and before you know it". Was it possible that the three people across the table could be part of the "wrong people" that the old man had warned him about? They were his flesh and blood, well, at least two of them, was it possible that they have drifted so far apart? Given that they have never been exactly close - his father always in pursuit of one thing or another which during the last few years had turned into the pursuit of a new wife while his wedding ring had not got too tight at its place; his brother, although only few years his senior, had had his own crowd and was not interested in his milksop of a brother drawing in the corner unless he had an art project to be completed. Their mother, the first Tanas Sr.'s daughter-in-law, had gotten pregnant with Tanas Jr. and bended under the joint pressure from her parents and her future father-in-law, who had been implacable that his grandchild could not be born out of wedlock. The lock, however ill-conceived, had wobbled for six more years as the word "divorce" was not in his grandfather's dictionary either. After one of his parents' never ending parties, Dimitar had been conceived under what his father had described as a temporary insanity. When the sanity had returned, his mother had sought an illegal abortion, as the law prohibited her from going for it legally. The doctor however was more scared by what Tanas Sr. might do to him rather than the law, had spat on the doctor/patient's confidentiality and ran to his grandfather with the news. The livid Tanas Sr. had threatened to lock the young woman at home for the rest of the pregnancy and she had pretended to agree to keep the baby. Oh, she had tried twice more to find a doctor to do an abortion, or at least someone to do it, but even the most otherwise careless abortionist knew who she was and who would be angered most, so they preferred to skip the case. Dimitar's dear mother had tried everything in her reach to get rid of him; his father was doubling with laughter imitating how she had been trying to jump from a table without smudging her freshly lacquered nails. Dimitar's guarding angel had had one hell of a job, the young man thought, but had succeeded. Maybe the too much jumping had put the baby in an awkward position

and he had to be delivered by a C-section, which put the last drop in the bucket of his mother's feelings for him. She had refused to feed her baby, claiming that he had done enough damage to her body already and the desperate Tanas Sr. had been the most regular visitor of the breast milk bank until he managed to hire a wet nurse for him.

Dimitar's luck had improved sufficiently when his grandfather had caught a whiff of how much Tanas Jr.'s nanny hated her new charge for the extra work associated with him and had hired a second woman to take care of the surprisingly healthy baby. Nanny Vessela had been a kind soul who had been fresh from the Pedagogical Faculty and full of new methods for developing the genius in a child. She had taken her job horribly seriously; he had learned to read at four, to write at five and to draw before he even remembered. She had plied him with books, reading to him aloud since he was in his pram, had spent hours to teach him holding properly spoons, knives and pencils. When he was still one year ahead of the obligatory school age, Vessela had insisted that Tanas Sr. obtain an exemption for him to start earlier and was so determined to push through the idea that she went to apply for a teacher's position and taught him from first to fifth grade. With hindsight, Dimitar understood that such luck had been heavily padded by Tanas Sr. on many sides - private nannies did not land permanent teachers' spots out of the blue, good nannies came with high prices and his grandfather had called in many favors to get him the security and quality of his childhood. The young man owed him big times and he was not the only one in the room about it!

Tanas Jr. and their father had never been neglected, it was known for ages who paid Tanassovs' exorbitant bills - for the feeble excuse of a security company and some newspaper was just the screen to claim legal means and some semblance of work. The name alone worked miracles and many people had preferred to bypass the police and go to Tanas Sr. for a judgment and compensation. Yet the ugliness leaked from time to time - who could blame the illegal gambling about how long the current Mrs. Tanassova would hold her ring on the right hand and who the next Mrs. Tanassova would be.

A polite cough from the helm of the table announced that Andon Tsarev was about to start. He pushed back his spectacles and braced himself:

'First of all, I need to tell you that the original will of Mr. Tanassov is kept in our office vault in the bank. As today is a holiday, I will read it from my certified copy which is identical to the original and tomorrow I will distribute copies for all involved for the transactions that need to be done.'

He made a pause and opened the will:

"I the undersigned Tanas Tanassov, born on"

It was a mercifully short document which finished fast and left in its trail a thick silence. Tanas Sr. had willed to Dimitar his house in Varna and his collection of fine art . He had established two trusts - one twice the equivalent of Dimitar's part for his son, and one equal to Dimitar's share for Tanas Jr. Smaller trust was set to pay a reasonable monthly alimony to "the legal spouse of my son at the time of my death" for the rest of her life, regardless of whether she remained Mrs. Tanassova or not. Upon her death or if there was no legal spouse at the time of reading of the will, the remaining money if any was going to the institution where the late wife of Tanas Sr. had been cared for. Seven funds had received considerate sums of money. Personal possessions went to Dimitar. The furniture from Sofia office was left to Valkuda. As she had mentioned the day before, Valkuda was the executor of the will, replaced by Dimitar in case of incapacity, or by the company of Andon Tsarev in case he refused. The clause about the management of the estate was also there and so was the clause about one penny for dispute and or association with harm done to another beneficiary. The definition of "association" and 'harm" was left to the reasonable judgment of the executor of the will jointly with Tsarev's council of partners and was irrevocable. Any disputes of it lead to the proverbial penny again.

The first to speak was Tanas Jr. 'And how about the rest of grandpa's properties? There is nothing in the will about them. Do you want to tell me he had forgotten them?'

'There are no other properties that belong to Mr. Tanas Tanassov,' Tsarev started, but Tanas Jr. interrupted him haughtily 'May be you have no idea what were the properties of Mr. Tanassov?'

'I beg to differ. But what you suppose to be the property of Mr. Tanas Tanassov, had been transferred during various years to Mr. Dimitar Tanassov. That includes the Sofia office, his businesses and immoveable associated with them or not. It is evident that the will of Mr. Tanassov reflects the current

situation of his financial affairs as it was done after he announced the gift to Sofia University and the document is taking this important sum into account.'

That took few seconds to sink. Tanas Jr. jumped and pointed his finger at Dimitar. 'Bastard, you utter bastard! You stole everything right under our noses! But think twice that it will pass like that! You will not live to enjoy what was rightfully ours! You better run back to your fancy pictures in your bloody France or else! You think you have outsmarted us, but wait, Mr. Big-Shot-Sculptor, just wait! We will run you in circles for that! And the smelly old rat, he thought he will strip us of the money, spit in our faces and we will be quiet? Tough! He will pay for it also, mark my word! Oh, you and him, what a pair! Did he teach you not only how to rob, but how to kill also? He was good at both, but you know that, don't you! All his donations - he was trying to buy himself a place with Saint Peter, but it does not work that way. Tanas Tanassov, the great donor, who cheated his own son and grandson! He was always a manipulator; we knew that, the question is where you fit in the picture? Cheating is one of your talents also?' Tanas Jr. was pressing his both palms on the table, leaning heavily on the polished surface, his breathing rugged, foam at the corners of his mouth, his face, puffy with the early signs of alcohol abuse, now a mask of anger.

Dimitar felt how the bodyguard on his side slightly shifted. He looked at his brother and said firmly, 'Tanas, it is not what you think!'

'Oh, no, it never is, isn't it?'

'Enough, Mr. Tanassov, please calm down!' Andon Tsarev glared at Tanas. 'I understand your feelings, but this is the last will of Mr. Tanassov and we all have to respect it.'

'Yeah, sure, you can say so, you get your money anyway and I am a pauper! Last will, my ass! And come to think of it, the old hat was all smiles yesterday, family gathering, you see, oh, now I know what he died of, he died of laughing when he gloated that he had outsmarted us. But we will see about it, you have not heard our last will! I am out of here, but we will meet again, brother dear, now that you are so dear indeed!'

Tanas Jr. pushed back his chair and pulled his father's sleeve unceremoniously. He in turn pulled the speechless blondie and they all headed to the door. The four burly men followed muttering something between them. From the corridor a woman's shriek was heard and then the Tanassov's son yell:

'What did you do to him to leave you the money, you bitch? How you are on the will, tell me! When did you managed?'

'Let me go, it is not me, it was about your current spouse, he did not know who it is going to be, he did not put a name, idiot, let go of me!' then a door slammed.

Andon Tsarev shook his grey head:

'I am sorry' he turned towards the funds representatives, 'you have witnessed such an ugly scene, but stay assured it is not as uncommon as I would wish it to be. However, I do not hear so many threats in such a short time outside court; I must admit that I would fear for my safety if I were the object of such tirade, Mr. Tanassov. Of course, I hope that you brother had said all that in his state of distress and when he calms down he will apologize to all presents for his violent outburst. Considered the situation he is in, I would be very careful around him until he does so.

I doubt that the funds are planning to dispute the legacies, please let me know whether you prefer to come and pick up the copies of the will tomorrow, as I know that the period of the summer vacation is almost there and you may want to process the documents before that. I have the assurance of Mr. Tanassov that should you choose to use the services of our office, all the costs will be paid by his estate, which is very generous of him.'

Where Tanas Jr.'s sweaty palms had pressed the table two big spots remained. Valkuda was looking at them. His hands had left not only grease and sweat which was quickly evaporating. The young man's right hand had oozed few tiny drops of blood, where in his rage his fingers had tried to dig in the solid wood. She jotted the pattern in her notebook, a sketch which would pass for inconspicuous doodles to the non-suspicious mind. Andon Tsarev's enigmatic ghost of a smile assured her that the room had one unsuspecting mind less and she demurely smiled back while he continued to politely drill into the heads of the five fund directors what they had heard and the danger of the hardly veiled threats. He was laying a ground in case he needed witnesses later and she would not spoil it. She looked at the hunched shoulders of the young sculptor next to her and felt pity for what had been lashed at him without his knowledge. Then she reminded herself that the lack of knowledge had given him some free time and bit her lip. His

grandfather's death had trapped him much like Tane's one had trapped her earlier. He had yet to grasp that notion though...

The directors left in a group, probably thinking that there was safety in numbers. Andon left the room to talk to the alarm company's director who has brought his team to try and find how the alarm had been disabled. The man's jaw was so tightly set that one could hear his teeth grinding. The lawyer patted his shoulder 'It is not your fault, Mr. Stefanov. These were professionals and skillful ones at that. If I were you, I would look a little bit more carefully at the shift that was taking care of the alarms between my last call yesterday and today around eight. I was here at eight-thirty and the office was deserted already and the street was quiet.'

'You think I employ a mole?'

'Unfortunately that is the only conclusion that I can come up with for now - it is a voice-activated alarm and you know the procedure. I don't doubt your integrity, otherwise I would not be your client, but we are all human and some might be tempted or threatened. At least we have the time frame to start with.'

The face of the director relaxed a bit. 'There are only two shifts to check. Thank you, Mr. Tsarev! So you will stay with us?'

'Of course I will stay. We may add some more features though. What will you say about a lunch tomorrow to discuss it?'

The conference room was quiet. Dimitar was resolutely looking at his untouched notepad. Valkuda was scribbling some notes in hers. One of the bodyguards stood up, went to the window and opened the curtain a little. His colleague unobtrusively joined him in scanning the backyard.

'Do you think he meant what he said?' the sculptor's voice sounded hollow.

'Yes.'

'What shall I do then?'

'Nothing dramatic. Stay away from them. Listen to your bodyguard. Use common sense. That about sums it up.'

'And Grandfather did that all the time?'

'Yes.'

There was the silence again.

'Tanas did not say a word about you.'

'Give him some time. He had not seen the deeds of transfer yet. I regret to say that, but your brother is a single-minded person. Oh, he can be persistent as a bullterrier when he pursues something, but rarely bothers to look at the complexity of a problem.'

'And Dad?'

'If he did not try so hard to pickle his brain in alcohol he is not a bad man himself. However it is Tanas who leads the pack at the moment. We need to hide you away somewhere after the funeral, I would say, for a month or so.'

'Why for a month or so?'

'By that time the rumors that they have no money to speak of will reach everyone. Probably here in Sofia it will be out by tomorrow, when the funds will have to have at least one joint press conference to express gratitude, which means that the media will hound you also. You may have been used to think of Mr. Tanassov as a grandfather only, but even you are aware of what importance he held once and what had happened recently. There will be memoires, interview requests, biographies - you name it, it will be in the news. And of course, the will is quite... unexpected, to say... The more noise, the better. Dimitar, your father and brother had been living on credit for so long it is unbelievable. The creditors were willing to wait as the presumption was that your dad will get everything. The moment the hyenas will grasp that the tap has been closed - they will run after them. Then you will be somewhat safer.'

'And when do you predict I will be completely safe, dear Cassandra?'

'Not in your lifetime, if that is what you are asking...' Valkuda's voice sounded amused 'You will never be safe again and you will never be free again. You may as well get used to it.'

Dimitar was looking at her probably with the same expression the Trojans had been wearing when the ancient Cassandra had been telling them that Troy would be defeated. The young woman was about to take pity of him but it would not do him any good at the moment. She gave him some breathing space. He was Tanassov, he would survive and accept.

'You have been dramatic. I have been a free man since I finished school. All the money that Grandpa sent me are intact!'

'I am not dramatic and I am not talking about money. And you have been free because your grandfather chose so and bought you the time to be free. Don't you think that he would not do with the extra pair of hands and the bright head of someone he treasured around him? He was not exactly a young man and your brother and father were not exactly helping him. He chose to fight alone, he chose not to brag how successful you are on your own not because he was not proud of you. He hid you, Dimitar, he did what he could for you to be free as long as he could go. He would have loved to stage an exhibition of your work, to show what a Tanassov has achieved, but he knew that no matter how great you are on your own, the titles will be "Murderer's grandson and a son of a drunken admirer of folk-divas is searching for something else" and it will hit you. He took your work seriously, Dimitar, back in the office you will find several files with anything anyone said about you, photos and even two works he purchased anonymously.'

'If he took my work as seriously as you said, then why he did not let me continue with it?'

'He did not have a choice. He could not throw away what came back from restitution to four winds, could he? He had a great knack for business as you know and it was growing like a snowball down the hill and before he knew it was too difficult to stop it. He did not need a fraction of what he earned, the office in Sofia was his only capricious purchase and even it turned to be a great investment at the end. You know how much money he had donated, no, you know only the highly publicized cases, but Mr. Nedelin will fill you in about this part also. Mr. Tsarev will fill you in about your brother and father, I think, whenever you are ready to listen to him.'

'He could have given it to you - you anyway are going to manage it'

'I am not Tanassov and blood is thicker than water'

'Right, my own thick blood just promised to make me run and told me that I will not live to enjoy what is his...'

'I will do whatever I can to not allow it, but I will need your cooperation!'

Before Dimitar managed to answer, Andon Tsarev entered the room and picked up the file he had left.

'Would you mind if we move to my office? I would like to have few words with you in private,' he suggested. Dimitar and Valkuda followed, the two bodyguards went to the front office to wait for the locksmith who was about to come. The two bodyguards that Tsarev had hired had put their time to a good use - the files that had not been ripped open were gathered in neat piles along the walls and the men had tried to pick up what could be salvaged from the scattered papers. The guards relocated to the library waiting for Tsarev to finish. The lawyer motioned to Dimitar to sit at the sofa or the armchairs and went behind his desk. He looked at Valkuda and said:

'Miss Martinova, I will need your signature, would you mind coming?'

Valkuda approached warily, she was not sure what she had to sign, and stood next to Tsarev, in front of whom a completely blank page lay.

'I have a pen somewhere here, let me find it,' the older man opened his drawer. He carefully pulled first a glass trower that had seen better days and put it on the page, then continued to rummage into a box overflowing with pens and pencils. The woman looked at the chipped memento and saw the traces at the edges.

'What a charming piece of history, may I look at it closer?'

'But of course, it had been in the drawer forever, sometimes sticks if forgotten upright.'

The woman took it delicately and twirled it around, then returned it directly to the drawer. She took the pen and wrote on the page. That was not her name and signature, but Tsarev had not expected it to be. He looked at the page and said:

'Now this one is cleared and we may go on.'" He turned the page and they joined Dimitar at the table.

They needed not to bother with the small conspiracy. Dimitar was so absorbed in his thoughts that Valkuda had to tag on his sleeve before he returned to reality. They discussed briefly the transfer to be done in Varna and Tsarev suggested he to contact Tanas Sr.'s lawyer there for the signatures to be arranged the day before the funeral. Valkuda asked for the invoice to be send to the office and the lawyer smiled at Dimitar:

'You have not told me if I will be in charge of your legal battles from now on, Dimitar.'

'You are not planning to resign, aren't you?' -the sculptor looked surprised.

'No, but you see, formally you have never been my client. I would be glad to know what your plans about legal representation are, may be not immediately, but in due time.'

'Thank you for the time offered, Mr. Tsarev, I seem to be in constant zeitnot recently. I will not need it - I can confirm here and now that you will be taking care of my interest as you have been taking care of Grandpa. You see, he left a letter to me and in it he said that you were aware of the scope of the work, that you are trustworthy and that you may help me shade whatever naive ideas I have about my father and brother, his words, not mine. I trust his judgment.'

'Thank you. It is very kind of him. I hope you keep a letter like that well hidden, you understand what may happen if it gets in the wrong hands.'

'Please rest assured that it will not get in any hands, right or wrong. I burned it yesterday night and washed the ashes down the drain. That is why I was in the bathroom' - he looked at Valkuda.

'Wise decision, you see it already saved your head.' the young woman shook her head.

'What do you mean, saved his head?' -Tsarev was instantly alarmed. Valkuda told him briefly about the window incident and promised to let him know if the inspection of the security tape yielded some information. The lawyer contemplated something for few seconds and looked at Dimitar.

'I don't want to scare you or to badmouth your next of kin. I also don't want what your grandfather worked so hard to go down the drain either. Whatever you decide, please take into consideration that the blood ties will not stop your brother or father. What they have decided to do, they will act upon their own judgment, their own interest. It had been like that since long ago, for your father even before Tanas was born. Be very careful! After the funeral, we will talk about a lot of things, it is too much to take in one shot. We all have our limits.'